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MATRIARCHY THROUGH CULTURAL CHANGE IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S THE STILLBORN AND THE DESCENDANTS

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Abstract

*Alkali's society is deeply patriarchal in nature and women's position does not go beyond a mere feeble and second class figure. In Northern Nigerian society, women have no say in whatever matters that may arise in the family. The men are the ones to decide, even if the matter affects the women. With this picture of Northern Nigerian society, Alkali has the boldness and courage to come up with questions on women's role in her literary writings. In the novels, *The Stillborn* and *The Descendants* Alkali established matriarchal society through cultural change which means supporting and encouraging gender conflict to continue. The objective of this paper is to examine how cultural change in Alkali's society is used in establishing matriarchal society using her female characters in the two texts. Textual analysis is to be conducted as the methodology, in order to discover how cultural change and female characters are used in establishing matriarchy. Nego-feminism is hoped to be the tool for bridging the gap created by Alkali in the two texts.*

Keywords: Nigerian society, gender conflict, matriarchy, nego-feminism

Introduction

Alkali's society (Northern Nigeria) is a society that values patriarchal life with Islam as its dominant religion. The common notion among the people in Nigeria is that women in Northern Nigeria have no say and their lives are handled by men. With such type of society in Nigeria, Alkali has the courage and boldness to discuss women's plight in her literary works. In most of her literary works, Alkali portrays women suffering from patriarchal shackle and their attempt to free themselves from such oppression. In *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Descendants* (2005) Alkali sets to establish matriarchal society through cultural change and the role assign to selected female characters.

Literature Review

Alkali's literary writings have attracted many researchers and reviewers. Most of the works conducted on her literary writings were on women oppression and their struggle to emancipate themselves. For instance, in an article by Okereke (1996) entitled, "Women's Quest for Autonomy in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* sees women as insignificant, inferior sex, just considered as part of the male with no identity of her own apart from her father and male relations in the family. She is also unachiever in the social structure especially, education and economy (P.97). Also in another article by Alu (2007) entitled, "Dynamic of Power and the Face of the New Woman in Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*" examines how women are oppressed especially through the institution of marriage (P. 1-16). This paper intends to highlight that, Alkali in her struggle to establish

matriarchal society, ends up supporting and encouraging gender conflict that had been going on for many centuries ago. By creating a society where women dominate men, Alkali's literary writings seem to appear as a retaliatory works. This is because feminist writers accused male writers for failing to portray women in a positive picture in most of their literary works and so, they delved into writing in order to present a true picture of womanhood. And that what Alkali intends to do in the two selected novels.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to examine how cultural change and the female characters are used to establish matriarchal society in the two selected novels. As the picture of the situation shows that, gender war could remain unresolved issue this paper seeks to use nego-feminism as a reconciliatory tool for resolving the gender war or at least reduces it.

Methodology

This paper aims to conduct textual analysis on the two selected novels of Alkali (*The Stillborn* and *The Descendants*) as its methodology. A thorough reading of the two texts would be made, in order to see how cultural change and the use of female characters help in establishing matriarchal society. And by establishing a society where women dominate men, Alkali supports and encourages gender war to continue. Here nego-feminism theory is hope to attempt to bridge the gap between the sexes.

Theoretical Framework

Nego-feminism theory is to be used in this work. It is a new theory created by a Nigerian Obioma Nnaemeka in her article (1999) entitled, *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way*, in which she defines it as, "feminist of negotiation; "no ego" feminism" (p. 360). Here, Nnaemeka seems to be advocating that gender conflict that has been going on for centuries could be resolved through nego-feminism theory. The theory encompasses issue of negotiation, cooperation, reconciliation and establishing peace. So, the issue of men oppressing women in almost all spheres

of human life could be settled using this theory. What is required of the two disagreeing parties is to agree that they want to resolve their problem(s) amicably. In this way, they can sit down to discuss and bring out their grievances and resolve them without even a third party coming into the process. This theory appears to be non-confrontational in approach, contrary to almost all the other theories established by feminist writers. Nnaemeka is inspired with the idea of forming this new theory through her wide experiences from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the grassroots constituencies in Africa from literature, health, human rights in some nations like, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, and to ethnicity, peace conflict and resolution in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone. The article she produces, entitled, *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way* reflects what she learned from men and women she worked with, and have helped her to ponder on.

Matriarchy through Cultural Change in *The Stillborn*

In *The Stillborn* Alkali uses education and economic aspects as the two potent weapons to change the established culture of her society which is patriarchal in nature to a matriarchal one. In *The Stillborn* Alkali sets Li to go through rigorous and difficult path in order to acquire education and economic independence as the tools for establishing matriarchal society. The path is classified into three stages. The first stage is the childhood period, then the puberty period, and third is the adulthood period. Li's little primary education had enlightened her to feel the life at her home uncomfortable and unbearable. "She felt trapped and unhappy. Already missed the kind of life she had lived at primary boarding school, free and gay" (p. 3). This life is what Li rejects and sets to fight, which is regarded as her childhood period. Li plans to marry Habu Adam, her boy friend and go to the city so as to escape her father's patriarchal restrictions. She dreams to be a grade 1 teacher and her man a medical doctor and live in the city like, "the white men in the village mission hospital" (p. 55). This is also considered as Li's puberty period. After their marriage, Habu excuses himself to go to the city and prepare for Li to join him later. Unfortunately for Li, the reality of marriage and the city life becomes an illusion, contrary to

her expectation. Habu abandons her in the village for four good years waiting. Finally, when she is conveyed to the house of Habu in the city, she “found an unsmiling welcome awaiting her” (p.69). As Li is anxious to escape her father’s patriarchal rules and unnecessary orders, she also dreams of marriage that is attached with love. But her dream of marriage to Habu appears contrary to her expectation. She doubts if really this is the Habu she knows in the village. Li nostalgically quaries:

Where is my man? ...That boyish man with incredible smile and mischievous twinkle in the eye? Where is that proud, self-confident, half-naked lover that defied the laughter of the village and walked the length and breadth of the village just to see me? ...This man wasn't the man she used to roll with on the sand in front of her father's compound (p. 70).

The reality here is that, the marriage Li considers as her redeeming factor from her father’s patriarchal oppression now turns out to be another oppressive structure. Alkali here attempts to show that, the solution of a woman’s plight does not depend entirely on any man. Therefore, with the emptiness of her marriage exposed, and the recognition that her solution lies within herself not from any man or marriage, Li dusts her primary seven certificate and proceeds to a Teacher’s College. She states her ambition which is to read Advanced Teachers’ Certificate and be the most educated woman in the village and beyond. Only then would she assume the role of the “man of the house” in her father’s compound” (p. 85). After her Programme, Li becomes “the man of the house,” not by changing her sex, but by performing those responsibilities that the head of every household ought to do. Her elder sister Awa informs her (Li) as she says: “the mourners are outside waiting for you. You are the man of the house now” (p. 101). This is how Alkali uses education and economic aspects as the tools for establishing matriarchy in *The Stillborn*.

Matriarchy through Cultural Change in *The Descendants*

In *The Descendants* Alkali presents a powerful and enlightened woman who not only dominates educational and economic sectors in the society she

initiates, but also dominates and control all in such society. Such character is Magira Milli, a wife to Lawani Duna, a great chief of Ramta village. She is an enlightened woman who sees education as such a tool that provides options in life, and as such, she sees to it that everybody acquires education. She does not want to repeat the mistake of not educating themselves and their children, which as a result, they lost their sons, except Aji Ramta who is fortunate enough to gain some knowledge in Borno. Milli nostalgically narrates:

*She realised, belatedly, that her late husband the great Lawni Duna, and herself had made a mistake. The paramount chief of Ramta had believed in royalty than education. He had not allowed his sons to go to school and so, they had not ventured out of their father's domain. One by one, they had perished in the land of ignorance and superstitions, a land of poverty and disease. Only Aji, who travelled out of Borno to pursue an education, had escaped. She was ready to make amends by seeing that her grandchildren did not walk the path of their fathers. They unlike her sons would have options, and only education can offer those options. That is why Magira Milli had seen to it that everybody went to school, including Seytu (*The Descendants*, p. 19-20).*

Apart from seeing her as an advocate for education, Milli is described as a woman that tries to dominate all. Dala the wife of late Abdullah reveals Magira Milli as a dominant woman who tries to control everybody in the family. Dala reveals:

Magira Milli had taken it upon herself to run the affairs of her sons' families single-handedly. No wonder, they died from being oppressed; Abdullahi, her dead husband, and all her children had been under Magira's control. Abdullahi had been incapable of stepping into her hut without going into his mother's first and now Aji and the children (p. 32).

Abbas also, describes Milli as a woman who for long controls and commands everybody in the house. She was “a field marshal.....” (p. 152). Other names given to her are, “the indomitable Magira Milli.... (p. 160),” “.....magnificent woman.....” (p. 229). The roles and

names Alkali gives to Milli portrays her as the dominant figure in Ramta dynasty. To add to this, Seytu tells us that, Milli is the initiator of Ramta dynasty. So, Alkali uses Milli with such endowed power to build a matriarchal society which is confirmed by a dirge singer who sings in honour of Milli when she passes away. Thus: "Behind T.K., [the head teacher], the traditional dirge singer sang in honour of the oldest matriarch in the village" (p. 282).

Nego-Feminism as a tool for Bridging the Gaps

Basically, looking at Alkali's two texts, she clearly creates gaps that need to be bridged, which is the exclusive work of nego-feminism. Through reading the pages of the two texts gaps are noticed as the selected female characters in *The Stillborn* and *The Descendants* are portrayed playing the role of domination and as negotiation is the concern of the theory, this paper attempts to bridge such wide gaps. For instance, in *The Stillborn*, Li is portrayed as a female character that plays the role of dominance which led to the establishment of matriarchy. Here Alkali should have elevated Habu, Li's husband with same level of role. In *The Descendants*, Milli is given a role that portrays her as the overall commander, controller of everything in Ramta dynasty as discussed earlier. Alkali here creates a gap between the sexes and supports gender conflict. As nego-feminism is out to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner, it suggests that, Alkali should have created another male character with such role assigned to Milli so as to have an equal

treatment and opportunity, and also have cooperation be established between the two, which could reduce conflict.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses Northern Nigeria as a society that is entrenched with patriarchal life, and how such society views women is discussed. Literature review is discussed, citing some examples of previous works on Alkali's literary writings which is mostly on women question. Then objective of the paper, methodology and theoretical framework are discussed. Finally, nego-feminism is used as a channel to reconcile the sexes.

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