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## FROM PATRIARCHY TO MATRIARCHY: A NEW SOCIAL ORDER IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S THE DESCENDANTS AND THE INITIATES

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### Abstract

Northern Nigeria is a region that is mostly known as a society that has respect for patriarchal values and Islam as its dominant religion. In this region, women are exclusively under the control of men and they do not have any say in whatever the issue raised. The men take the decision even if it affects the women. In terms of literary discourse, women are not presented in a positive picture. Seeing this, female writers delved into writing in order to represent women in a positive picture. Zaynab Alkali is one of the female writers that have the boldness to come up with women question in her literary works from the region that is deeply entrenched with patriarchal life. In *The Descendants and The Initiates*, we see Alkali warring patriarchy through cultural change. Alkali uses education, economy, and role switching as the weapons to change the established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society which depicts a new social order. By establishing matriarchal society, Alkali supports and encourages gender war to continue. The objective of this paper is to explore how Alkali strategically uses such potent weapons mentioned through her female characters in the selected novels to change patriarchal society and established matriarchal society with a new social order. Textual analysis is to be conducted on the two texts with examples extracted as evidences to show how education, economy, and role switching are used in changing the established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society. Nego-feminism theory is to be used as a tool to bridge the gaps created by Alkali between patriarchy and matriarchy in the two texts.

**Keywords:** matriarchy, new social order, patriarchy, matriarchy, role switching

### Introduction

The position of women in Northern Nigeria, a society that is more deeply entrenched with patriarchal life than in other parts of the country does not go beyond a mere feeble second class figure, as Soyinka opines through his character namely, Lakunle, in *The Lion and The Jewel* (1963) that "women have smaller brain, that is why they are called weaker sex" (p. 4). In another text by Aliyu Abdullahi Jibiya (1982) entitled, *The Hunt Begins* says, "the role of women is that of satisfying the male sexual urge. They are also considered goods for sale to the rich people, top government officials and royal heads in the society. Zangi for instance, is said to have married out his daughters to people of substance" (p. 8). Also, in an article by Ibrahim (2002) entitled, "Growing Wings: A Feminist Critique of Alkali's [The] *Cobwebs and Other Stories*," explains that, "in Northern Nigerian society, men are superior and women are considered as inferior beings whose roles are tied to mostly domestic chores in

nature (p. 282). Generally, Northern Nigeria is a society that values patriarchal life with Islam as its dominant religion. The common belief among the Nigerians is that women in Northern Nigeria have no voices of their own. Their destinies are handled and still handling by men in most of the Nigerian societies. To sum up, Northern Nigeria is one of the most patriarchal societies in the country, and it has such attributes as:

Women are not heard; they should not be seen either (purdah) their God-given responsibility is that of wife and mother (early marriage/child bride). They are sex objects with little or no intelligence (almost complete absence of female children schools). Right from birth, they are to pattern their lives after rules by men (these rules are given the coating of "legality" through religion and tradition) (Yakubu, 1999: p. 115)

With the nature of the Northern Nigerian society, Alkali surprises almost everybody, having being bold enough and courageous to come up with women

question in her literary works. Alkali is the first female to write a work of fiction in English from Northern Nigeria. Like her colleagues, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zulu Safola and others, whose literary works are mostly on the plight of women, Alkali's literary work seems to show that she is all out to fight patriarchy too. In most of her literary writings, she portrays women's plight and their struggle to emancipate themselves from the patriarchal appendages. In *The Descendants* (2005) and *The Initiates* (2007), we see Alkali changing the established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society through girl-education empowerment, economic development and role switching by the characters.

### Literature Review

Alkali's literary works have received attention from critics and reviewers. As earlier mentioned, most of the works conducted on Alkali's literary writings have focused on the roles of female characters. For instance, in an article by Mohammed and Kurfi (2011) entitled, *New Perspectives on Women and Community Empowerment in Zaynab Alkali's The Descendants and The Initiates*, sees *The Descendants* "as a literary work that Alkali portrays how men oppress women under the institution of marriage, especially, giving the structure of power in their hands. As such, this could force women who suffer oppression in the hands of patriarchal society to search for alternative ways of survival" (p. 176). In Kassam's article (1997) entitled, *Behind the Veil in Northern Nigeria: The Writing of Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali*, analyses the selected novels of Alkali and Ali and concludes that, women are excluded from participating in literary writings in Northern Nigeria, and also gives reasons that prompt them to delve into literary writings in the region. She also discusses early or forced marriage, which denies the female-child equal opportunities with their male counterparts in order to discover her capabilities in the *Destiny* (1988). In *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, Kassam says, Alkali's main concern is the place of a girl-child in a patriarchal African setting, a society where only acquisition of meaningful education and economic independence can free her from

such patriarchal shackle, and assert her freedom. In another article by Chioma Opara (1990) entitled, *The Foot and metaphor in Female Dream: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novels*, examines "the attempts by Alkali's female characters to extricate themselves from patriarchal holds through metaphoric analysis of the foot as a means by which the female characters walk out of bondage imposed upon them by society" (p.158-166). This paper intends to highlight that Alkali succeeds in changing her established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society through the use of education for a girl-child, economic development and role switching in *The Descendants* (2005), and *The Initiates* (2007). By establishing a matriarchal society which portrays women's dominance over men, Alkali supports and encourages gender war to continue; as such we see her society with a new social order, a society that female dominance is ubiquitous. In both the two texts, Alkali's incessant advocate for education, especially for the girl-child is pervading. Her main goal is to see that women generally acquire education which is one of the potent weapons to change the established culture (patriarchy society) and assert their autonomy in such society.

### Objective of the Paper

The objective of this paper is to explore how Alkali strategically changes her established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society through education for a girl-child, economic development, and role switching by the female characters in the selected novels. As the situation now remains unresolved; from patriarchy to matriarchy, meaning that gender conflict is not resolved and it continues in this manner, this paper hopes to use nego-feminist theory as a tool to bridge the gap created by the author between the sexes.

### Methodology

This paper hopes to conduct textual analysis on the two selected novels of Alkali (*The Descendants* and *The Initiates*) as its methodology. A critical reading would be done on the two selected texts with examples extracted as evidences in order to show how Alkali uses education

for a girl-child, economic development, and role switching to change her patriarchal society to matriarchal society. By establishing such matriarchal society, Alkali supports gender conflict. So, nego-feminist theory formulated by Obioma Nnaemeka would be used as a tool 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-feminist 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 (male and female) 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 the possibility of creating a new theory. Through these, Nnaemeka sees an unfolding African feminism and finally, comes up with what she terms as Nego-feminism.

### **Role of Culture in Transforming Patriarchy to Matriarchy in the Selected Novels**

This paper discusses the role played by culture in transforming the patriarchal society to matriarchal society through the use of education for a girl-child, economic development, and the role switching by the characters in the selected novels.

### **The Role of Education on the Characters in the Selected Novels**

Alkali uses the most potent weapon, which is education to bring change; patriarchy to matriarchy in the selected novels. For instance, in *The Descendants*, Seytu marries Lawani Dam (district chief) who abandons her when he discovers that, she sustains an injury (virginal wall damage) at birth. After her successful oppression, her grandmother (Magira Milli) encourages her to go back to school, which Seytu accepted. Fortunately for Seytu, she comes out with an excellent result which also gives her a chance to go further and read medicine. Finally, she becomes a medical doctor and later a chief medical director in the hospital she works. She becomes highly educated and economically independence. Now Seytu does not need any man to depend on, she can stand on herself and have voice to be heard. She is incomparable to her former husband. Also, with her economic power she takes the responsibility of supporting Peni, her cousin and her children by providing them with shelter, feeding, education of her children, which Peni's husband, Madu Chimba (the butcher) could not take care of. In conclusion, Alkali is changing her patriarchal society to matriarchal society through education as one of the weapons of change. Avi Dayyan is another female character and a twin sister to Salvia belonging to Batanncha as the father that Alkali portrays as highly educated and economically independent in *The Initiates*. Avi Dayyan is as a very rare geologist who secures a very lucrative job and holds a very important position in a very big oil company. With her economic power she is able to take the responsibilities of the grown up children of her brother, Colonel Samba who involves himself in an

aborted coup during his absence. Other female characters that are portrayed as highly educated and economically independent include, Glo Madina, a medical doctor and friend to Seytu who is also a medical doctor, and Justice Hawwa, Minister of Justice all in *The Descendants*.

In conclusion, Alkali uses education for a girl-child as one of the aspects discussed; education for a girl-child, economic development, and role switching by characters in changing her patriarchal society to matriarchal society. We see female characters dominating in their society in the selected novels.

#### **The Effect of Economic on the Characters in the Selected Novels**

Economic aspect has played a vital role in transforming the established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society. Alkali strategically uses economic development for a girl-child to transform her patriarchal society to matriarchal society. Seytu is a female character in *The Descendants* that suffers abandonment by her husband, Lawani Dam (a district head) when she needs his medical assistance. She had vaginal wall damage when giving birth to his child, but amazingly, he abandons her. After her successful operation her grandmother, Magira Milli, the advocate of Western education, especially for a girl-child advises her to go back to school, which Seytu heeds to that. She successfully finished her secondary education with an excellent result that secures her admission to read medicine. Finally, she finishes her study as a medical doctor and later becomes a chief medical director in the hospital she works. Seytu reaching this level becomes highly educated and economically independent. Seytu now can stand on herself and does not need any man to depend on. She can walk abreast with any man. Other female characters that acquire higher education and become economically independent include Glo Madina, a medical doctor, Justice Hawwa, Minister of Justice, and a daughter to Seytu all in *The Descendants*. Avi Dayyan is a female character in *The Initiates*. Avi Dayyan is a very rare geologist who secures a very lucrative job and holds

a very important position in a very big oil company. With her economic power she is able to take the responsibilities of the grown up children of her brother, Colonel Samba who involves himself in an aborted coup during his absence. In conclusion, Alkali uses those aspects discussed; education, economic development for a girl-child, and role switching by characters, in changing her patriarchal society to matriarchal society. We see female characters dominating in their society in the selected novels.

#### **Role Switching by the Characters in the Selected Novels**

In *The Descendants*, Alkali portrays Seytu, a female character also playing the role switching, which affects Lawani Dam, a district head. Lawani Dam marries Seytu at the age of fifteen. Two years after, she had vaginal wall damage when giving birth to his child. Unfortunately, when Lawani Dam discovered her condition, he abandoned her. Luckily for Seytu, she successfully underwent a surgical operation. Aji Ramta, Magira Milli's only son advises that Seytu should reconcile with her husband when fully recovered and go back to her matrimonial house. Hearing this Magira Milli instantly rejects the idea and reminds him of what Lawani Dam has done to Seytu.

Magira nostalgically narrates:

Did you know that Lawni Dam abandoned the girl as soon as he discovered she had been damaged in childbirth? Your uncle Heman, my only brother may God bless him a thousand times, without reproach, sold half of his herd of cattle and all the money went to the herbalists in Ramta and the surrounding villages. When I went home and told about the hospital in Makulpo, he quickly sold the other half of his herd to enable Seytu come to Makulpo for treatment (p. 93).

So, when Seytu fully recovered, Magira Milli advises her to go back to school, which she agrees. Fortunately, Seytu comes out from secondary school with an excellent result that secured her admission to read medicine in the University. Finally, she finished her study and becomes a

medical doctor, and later a chief medical director in the hospital she works. Seytu now is a highly educated and economically independent woman. She does not need any man to depend on. She is matchless to Lawni Dam now. Magira Milli is another female character that Alkali portrays having played a vital role in changing her established culture (patriarchal society) to matriarchal society. Magira Milli, a wife to Lawani Duna, a great chief of Ramta village is an enlightened woman who sees education as a tool that provides options in life. Though Magira Milli is not opportune to acquire education, and educate their children, she sees to it that her grandchildren acquire education. This is one mistake she will not want to make again; believing in royalty and neglecting education, which as a result all her sons died in the land of poverty and disease, except Aji Ramta who is opportune to acquire some knowledge in the land of learned people. Magira 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 of being an enlightened woman, she is also indirectly economically buoyant, for her control over all in the Ramta dynasty. Dala the wife of late Abdullah reveals Magira Milli as a dominant woman who tries to control everybody in the family. This happens when Dala is accused of causing the removal of Peni from the school and marries her out to a butcher. Dala could not contain herself and she 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, while discussing the situation of some members of their family in Makulpo with Seytu, describes Magira 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 Magira Milli qualifies her to be the dominant figure in Ramta dynasty. The dirge singer confirms this, and sings in honour of Magira 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). So Magira Milli being portrayed as enlightened woman and indirectly economic buoyant have significant role in changing the patriarchal society to matriarchal society. General, the role played by other female characters in the selected novels had some negative effect on other male characters. Such female characters whose role switching had some negative effect on male characters include Glo Madina, a medical doctor, and Justice Hawwa, Minister of Justice all in *The Descendants*, and Avi Dayyan, a rare geologist in *The Initiates*. In other words, their role portrays them as dominant figure in their society, which shows a clear transformation of patriarchal society to matriarchal society with new social order and the support of gender war to continue by Alkali in the selected novels.

#### **Bridging the Gap between Patriarchy and Matriarchy through Nego-feminist theory**

Basically, looking at Alkali's two texts in which she establishes matriarchy against patriarchy clearly creates a wide gap between the two, and indicates the need to bridge such wide gap, as it is the exclusive work of nego-

feminism. As a reconciliatory tool, through reading the pages of the two texts under study gaps are noticed as the selected female characters in *The Descendants* and *The Initiates* are portrayed playing the role of dominance over the male characters, and as negotiation is the concern of the theory, this paper attempts to bridge such wide gaps. For instance, in *The Descendants*, Magira Milli is given a role that portrays her as the overall commander, controller of everybody and everything in Ramta dynasty as discussed in one of the preceding paragraphs. In doing this, Alkali creates 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 assigned equal roles to sexes to avoid feeling of dominance of one over the other. Equal treatment and opportunity should be given to sexes so that mutual understanding and also cooperation could be established between them, which could bridge the gap. This should not only be on Magira Milli, but should also be extended to other female characters, such as Glo Madina with a high qualification as a medical doctor, and Justice Hawwa, Minister of Justice who are portrayed as very important and prominent personalities in Ramta society. Again, Alkali creates another gap between Seytu, a grandchild of Magira Milli and her husband Lawani Dam. Seytu suffers oppression through marital ties, and narrowly escapes death from a second operation. When she had successfully under gone the second operation, Aji Ramta suggests that, as soon as Seytu fully recovers, she should reconcile with her husband and go back to her matrimonial house. But Magira Milli instantly rejects such idea. She points out that, her husband abandons her when he discovers that she has problem. Here Alkali ought to allow such reconciliation to take place, so that peace and harmony are established again between the couple and later, Seytu can continue with her educational pursue with the consent of her husband. This is what the theory is advocating; resolution of conflict between the disagreeing parties in an amicable manner not through confrontation. Yamusa is another female character that Alkali portrays her playing the role of dominance over her husband,

Batanncha in *The Initiates* (2007). Batanncha himself admits that his wife always dominates him: Yamusa sees Batanncha's two close friends as he claims, as his worst enemies and tries to alert him. Unfortunately, Batanncha could not see, until later when his great son; Colonel Samba involves himself in an aborted coup that Batanncha sees the true colour of the two friends and admits that his senior wife; Yamusa dominates him. Batanncha himself admits: "... in his seventy-seven years this had been his major trial, and Yamusa scored the full marks." (p. 157). Also in another incidence, Alkali portrays Yamusa, not only playing the role of dominance, but also decreeing her husband to carry out her instruction without complain. Yamusa instructs:

"... now back to the business of the gowns. You wear the white now, and receive the children and their friends", Yamusa ordered. "I prefer the light green one," he argued like a child." "All the same, you will wear the white Yamusa decreed and the other two shrugged their shoulders in resignation" (p. 165-66).

This is done when the issue of choosing the clothes he should wear first during an occasion coming up in his house. So, what Alkali should have done here is to at least give equal and fair roles to both so that cooperation, peace and harmony are established in their society, which nego-feminism theory advocates.

Finally, with Alkali's matriarchal ideology, as discussed previously, in which she succeeds in transforming her patriarchal society to matriarchal society through the use of education for a girl-child, economic development, and the role switching by the characters, seems to realize that such retaliatory and confrontational approaches would not be the best as the tools for resolving the gender war. Alkali seems to say or depict how she wants to see her society in the selected novels. Alkali wants a society that gives equal opportunities to both sexes in order to develop at their own pace and establish understanding, peace harmony and cooperation between them, as we see in the two selected texts. For instance, female characters like Seytu, a medical doctor who rose to the position of a chief medical

director in the hospital she works, Glo Madina also a medical doctor, and Justice Hawwa, Minister of Justice all in *The Descendants* are portrayed as having developed themselves through acquisition of meaningful education that leads to their economic independent, and at the same time assist in the development of their society ; Ramta dynasty, couple with the cooperation of their male counterparts. Here we see both male and females contributing immensely to the development of the Community Health Centre. What is most important and interesting here is the mutual understanding between the sexes; how they come together, cooperate and perform such wonderful project in their society. Some examples would suffice here; it was a commissioning of Professor Aiman Zaki's pet project – a Community Health Centre. Even though he is a foreigner, he has the intention of establishing the centre which now comes to be a reality. It is during the occasion that we see the depiction of cooperation and mutual understanding of the sexes as some of the characteristics of nego-feminist theory. Donations by both sexes during the commissioning of the Community Health Centre in the text depict characteristics of nego-feminist theory. For example,

“Engineer Abbas, the head of Ramta family.....a man of few words, gave a brief speech before announcing Ramta family donation. A huge sum of money, enough to train and pay token wages for the village health workers for five years, had been donated by the following: Colonel Hassan Sulayman, his wife Dr Seytu Iliya, Engineer Abbas and his wife Dr Glo Madina Kayes” (*The Descendants*, p. 275).

Another donation from Professor Kayes:

“Professor Kayes donated three wheelchairs for the handicapped, and Colonel Batancha, Hassan's close friend donated money to help set up a small handiwork centre for the blind in the community” (p. 276).

The highest donation came from the following:

“The largest family donation however had come from Justice Hawwa Lawani. She had undertaken to

construct two bungalows, one for a doctor of the centre, and the other for the man who would head the health facility. In addition, she would construct a block of two-bedroom apartments to house ten village health workers” (p. 276).

Finally, a donation came from young Binta:

....“the young Binta, daughter of Usman, now in Malaysia, had sent money to purchase ambulance for referral purposes, the crowd stood as one, and cried for sheer happiness” (p. 277).

Similar picture is given in *The Initiates* where Alkali depicts female characters that acquire high education and secure a very lucrative job and cooperate and help others in need. For instance, Avi Dayyan, a twin sister to Salvia and both younger brother and sister to Colonel Samba is portrayed having cooperated with Hashim, Augustina, Brigadier-General, and Saji to help Colonel Samba who involves himself in an aborted coup, and disappears. This people help in taking care of his family which is also one of the characteristics of nego-feminist theory (cooperation, and assistance). So, here Alkali seems to portray how her society should be; a society that cooperation, peace and harmony exist between the sexes; a society devoid of any feeling of dominance of one sex over the other.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses the position of women in Northern Nigeria, and how some male writers generally portray women in their literary writings. Also, female writers that delved into writings to give a fair picture of women as a challenge to male writers for failing to do that is also discussed. Literature review is discussed which most of the previous writings on Alkali's works discussed women question and their attempt to emancipate themselves from patriarchal shackle. Then Alkali's transformation of her patriarchy society to matriarchy is discussed. Objective of the paper, methodology, and theoretical framework are discussed in the paper. Again, nego-feminism as a reconciliatory tool is used to bridge the gap between the sexes in the selected novels. Finally, Alkali's portrayal of some of the



characteristics of nego-feminist theory which seems to show Alkali's turn over from her retaliatory and confrontational approach to gender issue to cooperation, reconciliation, mutual understanding, and the establishment of peace between the sexes are discussed in the selected novels.

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