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## **New Perspectives on Women and Community Empowerment in Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants* and *The Initiates* (Pp. 172-184)**

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### **Abstract**

*Modern fiction in its attempt to address the woman question is re-focusing attention rather than on simply continuing to bemoan women's subjection in society to actually, depicting them as striving actively, to overcome such subjection. The raging crusades are all aimed at women's emancipation and have helped in bringing about the emergence of the new woman in control not only of her situation and destiny, but also of the opportunities hitherto denied her, for self-fulfillment. In this regards, this paper examines Zaynab Alkali's portrayal of women as vibrant crusaders in bringing about tangible developments in their immediate environments. With insights into the development of female characters in two of her most recent works, *The Descendants* and *The Initiates*, this paper hopes to highlight Alkali's new generation woman who is ready to offer her services thereby, re-defining the old roles played by women in Nigerian Literature.*

### **Introduction**

Over the years since the publication of her award winning, first novel, *The Stillborn* (1984), Zaynab Alkali has bestride the landscape in Northern Nigeria, like a Colossus. She has without doubt, remained to-date, the dominant voice in the region, even though other, relatively younger, but no

less ambitious female writers like Nana, Aishatu Ahmed, Asabe Kabir, Aishatu Gidado Idris, Razinatu Mohammed, Binta, Salma Mohammed to name a few - have emerged after her, blazing the trails she had charted. Coming from a region until lately, not adequately unrepresented in the English fictional world, a region holding firmly still to the ethos and values of a patriarchal order of life (Yakubu, 2005) these writers have been united in their common concerns with issues affecting the woman and the odds constraining their efforts to self and communal development.

The debut therefore of the present works - *The Descendants* (2005) and *The Initiates* (2007) after almost a decade since her last publication of *The Cobwebs* (1997), will put to silence, those likely to speculate, about the possible death of the writer's creative spirit. Thus like new features added to a blossoming tassel, the new titles have proved after all, that the spirit is still alive and lingers on. The period of silence therefore, can be seen as time taken for sober, introspective contemplation over vicissitudes - already existing or new - untouched in earlier fiction, but calling presently, for urgent attention.

That the thought above is nursed about writers observing stretches of time in between creative profusions, is not entirely a new thing. The same has been thought of Achebe when, since the publication of *A Man of the People* in 1966, he remained relatively in the doldrums, until 1987, after more than two decades, when he came up with *Anthills of the Savannah*. Yet like all great writers the stretches of time which have elapsed as phase of creative discontinuities, have not passed in vain. For the works which issue forth from their pens after the recesses, have proved, as much in their concerns as topically, great contributions, in our search for insights into the understanding of the problems of contemporary society: of these two selections, one centers on gender relationship in a patriarchal, but changing society while the other, on the issue of political responsibility versus tyranny in state rule. The two works above are intended to be examined, in the light of the appraisals Alkali has offered on the woman question in her society, and the strategies women are adopting to change their condition.

In her over two decades of literary participation, Alkali's works have enjoyed the attention of critics and reviewers around the globe. Full textual studies have been conducted in areas that presuppose that she is a feminist writer. Of particular interest here is Chioma Opara's "*The foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novels*" where she examines the

attempts by Alkali's female characters to extricate themselves from patriarchal holds through a metaphoric analysis of the foot as a means by which the female characters walk out of bondage imposed upon them by society. In most of her works, except perhaps in *The Virtuous Woman*, where the leading character is incapacitated by a physical deformity, Alkali portrays the male in most circumstances as the lame gender and therefore, incapable of wielding homogeneity in family or community matters while the female protagonists like Li, Magira Milli and Sheytu often come in like the supper woman character and make amend for the overall good of family and community.

In *The writings of Zaynab Alkali* (2005), Ojinma and Egya examine the chronology of the themes in all her writings and conclude that Alkali's message in all her creative works is "that the female child should not be eternally dependent on marriage as an answer to all her needs" (P.1). Without necessarily suggesting that most female African writers like Alkali, take up the issue of marriage from the traditional point of view as an inhibition on the path of the new woman image, they contend that female characters in her works attain some goals only by dint of hard work and indeed, the rejection of established norms which have become common features in African Literature. Examples can be cited in *Woman at Point Zero*(1974) by Nawal El-Saadawi where Firdaus walks out of a crippling marriage in the same way that Esi, in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* is willing to change her marital status because the husband makes what she considers undue demands of her person.

### **The Descendant Paradigms for the New Womanhood and Community Transformations**

Given the density and complexity of its plot - structure, and the powerful profundity and depth of its message, *The Descendants*, is indubitably, Zaynab Alkali's most accomplished, longer - prose fiction. It has taken care certainly, of the rupture in terms of thematic continuity and narrative depth which Okereke (2007: 61-67) observes makes *The Virtuous Woman* an unlikely natural sequel, to *The Stillborn*. For this novel, has in offering, in an epic like fashion, the evolution of a particular family from a humble to a dynastic status, shown a grasp of the processes - creative and developmental - which go into play, in the making of great fictions. Alkali's rendition of the growth of Ramta - Makulpo communities from a largely rural - rustic settlements to a sprawling metropolis can be likened to the growth of Ngugi's Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood*, in early post colonial Kenya. The difference being in the

facts that whereas in the later case, Ngugi is concerned with transformation processes accentuated by the incipient exploitative capitalist forces in neo-colonial Africa, in Alkali's, it is a reflection of the growth to eminence, of the Ramta - family dynasty personified by Magira Milli, Seytu, Justice Hauwa, Abbas and Aji, as the family's leading personages.

If the quality of any work or the achievement of any writer actually resides in his work's ability to capture realistically and faithfully the tenor or tempo of his time and situation, Zainab Alkali's *The Descendants* can be said to have achieved that, in relation to her treatment of the woman question in contemporary northern Nigeria. Emeniyi's optimism in the closing remark to the study of Alkali's early novels states the hope that time "will reconstruct her vision... to unfold another dimension in her craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (2007: 70) can be said to have been a prayer just readily answered. For this new dimension is obvious in the character and bent of the new womanhood Alkali has painted in *The Descendants* in tune with the prevailing trends and challenges, not only in northern Nigeria, but the country as a whole.

Reading *The Descendants* closely, one appreciates the writer's deep understanding of the structures, supportive of women subordination, in her environment. For the north where these structures subsist at so many levels, we can identify among others, two that are standing, most conspicuously or prominent: the normative or value - laden precepts which consist of the ensemble of all those values - cultural, religious ideological with which women's lives are constrained, and the institutional which represents the home in all its derivations - parental and matrimonial. It is the dialectical operations and impacts of these two, which determine woman's life, shapes her future, and the character generally, which inter and intra-gender relations as aptly theorized by Mohammed (2005) takes in the region, as a whole.

The impacts of traditional norms and values therefore, start showing their imprints on woman, very early in her life, in the society of *The Descendants*. First, apart from the gender - biased moral and ethical codes, boys and girls are predisposed to differential opportunities for self realizations, in life. Girls who are, in contrast to boys, nurtured for marriage - often times prematurely or with partners other than ones they chose, are barred from education or its pursuit, to some unreasonable extents. And since the marital institution holds ambivalent prospects for woman-stability or its inverse - which can be in the form of divorce or death of the husband, it means in the event of either of the

two eventualities occasioning, woman becomes and remains the most pitiable victim.

As a keen observer of her northern environment, Alkali is aware of all these sordid facts. Her rendition of the wreckages - partial or complete - in which many women in the novel find their lives trapped after a traumatic relationship, are testimonies to this observation. Examples are Peni with Madu Chimba, her mother Dala in the hands of Aji after the death of her first - husband Abdullahi - his younger brother, the lead character Seytu, and the District head of Dam, before herself emancipation, Meramu - Mal. Isa, Mero - Usman and many other couples in the novels, living each, in their separate hells. In thus, parading women under conditions of varying torments - physical and psychological and by specifically, offering this seeming dossier of failed or frustrating marital relationships. *The Descendants* appears to be Alkali's study on how men's treatment of women under the institution of marriage, especially, given the structures of power in their hands, could naturally produce conditions which will make the search for alternative ways of living by women, appear exigent.

To accomplish the feat above, it will mean over hauling the order of society as women are naively made to accept it. This invariably, presupposes the deconstruction of the old ideology and the creation in its stead of a new one, which in practice, may simply mean the art of inversion - transforming women into new personages assigning to them, new roles and new identities. This means re-valuing all those notions which associate women with failure or inferiority, and making them succeed, in spheres hitherto believed to be men's exclusive preserves.

The first act of disruption effected on this notion of female inferiority to man, in making the pillar, the propelling power, genius and think-tank behind the rise and consolidation of the Ramta dynasty and family, a woman - in the person of Magira Milli. Until her death at the end of the novel - with mission accomplished - Magira Milli literally, dominates the novel's plot or entire narrative. And where she is not specifically mentioned, her spirit - towering and imposing - throbs on the pages, compelling her presence. Her depiction thus as an iron lady, in full control of everything and everyone in the large, supra - extended Ramta family, her carving in a larger-than-life image, her infusion with rare, unequalled super-ordinate, sterling qualities, are Alkali's deconstruction of the myths, infusing positive human qualities, as traits, native alone, to the masculine sex.

In line with her vision therefore to review or recapture the dwindling fortune and ancient glories of the Ramta clan, we see this great character, Magira Milli, in action. Early in the novel, the author tells us of Magira Milli's interest in education, especially the girl-child, as a tool, not just for self-emancipation, but for relevance in the modern world:

She knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. She may have missed those options, but she wanted those options for her grand children... (p.13).

In thus epitomizing her person, the synthesis of the old values of the past and the modern, Magira Milli represents for us Alkali's link between the passing generation and the budding, up-coming one which Seytu her grand-daughter embodies. For one, it is owing to Magira Milli's view regarding education, that Emeniye (2007) refers to as a "librating force" coupled with her unwavering support and encouragement, that Seytu - early orphaned, prematurely married and divorced - rises by sheer dint of hard-work and dogged exertion - to become, not just a medical doctor on returning to school, but an accomplished consultant pediatrician at par with the men surgeons in the Hospital where she works.

It is also by virtue of her attainment to this height, that the Ramta, community witnesses a sudden, swift and all-encompassing transformation in the health sector. Thanks thus to her growing intimacy and rapport with the CMD of the hospital, Prof. Aiman Zaki, the Ramta community has to its credit a comprehensive health centre with electric generator, a borehole, VIP latrines and stupendous donations by way of drugs, equipment and money - running into millions of naira (Yakubu, 2005: 142). The way others too - both native and non-native - offer various other helps, are Alkali's perception of exigency of self-help and joint efforts in the task of building our communities or the empowerment of our people.

From thus, the array and dynamic resilience of the characters Alkali has paraded in *The Descendants*, it is appropriate to infer that models of the new woman have emerged as 'descendants' of the generations, bidding farewell to the old ways. And with the baton of power in their hands these new women as enlightened successors, would be trodding courses, not chartered for them by anyone else, as were for their predecessors, but by themselves. Therefore, with their hearts pulsating with the spirit of their times, they neither wish to suffer themselves, the kind of complacent despair, frustration or helplessness,

which Peni and her likes for instance, epitomize nor give in, to the ascetic kind of self-denial that is personified in *The Stillborn* (Koroye, 1987, 47-51).

And rather than keep vociferously clamouring for places in the “men’s worlds”, women in Alkali’s view should battle through for themselves, as Seytu does. For honour, is not simply given to, or trusted on someone but is achieved through deliberate efforts. Hence the plots of each of Alkali’s fictions, is a world of its own: a world constituted of women who, independently like Seytu or Glo Medina, or by collaborative partnership as in Meramu – Mariya - Magira Milli’s business pursuits are poised to harnessing their full potentials, to leading fulfilling, meaningful lives, while also affecting those of their communities.

It is in this wise, that *The Descendants* can be seen as offering on the printed page, a working manifesto or blueprint, for the new woman, in tune with the spirits of the modern times. And although not at all calling for or propagating the abandonment of the family institution, Alkali suggests nonetheless that women have no cause hanging onto relations that are unbearable and oppressive. Like Seytu, having been divorced and twice suffering disappointments, at all levels women should explore alternative avenues for turning, their lives around, as insurances against the uncertainties of marriage in particular and life in general.

### **The Initiates: The Individual and the Challenges of Social Responsibility**

Grace E. Okereke’s observation of Alkali’s ideological and narrative rupture in *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* can similarly be applied to Alkali’s recent works, *The Descendants* and *The Initiates*. Taking these recent novels in the sequential order of their publication, Okereke’s framework of evaluation can conveniently soothe the likely rupture in these new works. This is to say that Okereke would again bemoan as in the later works, the rupture in ideological and narrative continuity between these works. That whereas *The Descendants* focuses on women’s efforts at the discovery of their own potentials, and starting life a-new after initial failures, *The Initiates* explores the conflicts between the claims of individual identity and the demands which social responsibilities - at both the communal and national levels - impose.

Thus unlike *The Descendants*, which is more decidedly a feminist fiction, *The Initiates* is more of a political novel, capturing at a metaphoric or meta-symbolic degeneration to despotism and tyranny of a given country’s leadership, presumably Nigeria’s. It also depicts how the attempt through

coup de état by some over zealous young army officers, is met with dire and surmounted consequences. The novel can therefore be said to be Alkali's attempt at crossing over the fence, to explore the possibilities of political fiction, beyond the more accustomed concerns of her earlier writing, addressing the woman question.

Hence, even though women actually feature in *The Initiates* the central focus and action revolve around men, in relation to whom, most of the women are defined. In other words, women who feature preponderantly are as mothers, wives, sisters or daughters, who find their bearing largely, in their relations with men as sons, husband's brothers or fathers, even at the point of asserting their individualities.

The novel centers on a given community - Debro - and a particular family - the Batancha's - whose fortunes affect considerably, the rising or declining prosperity of the community. This family, which is the most, famed of the three influential families in the community - the other two being the Batapchi's and Bamusa's - distinguished itself owing to the fact that it has produced children who have become marvels of the community. One of these is a Colonel, Samba, in the army, whose position in the government of the day and exploits, have been sources of pride not only to his immediate families, but the entire Debro Community. The others are his younger brother-Salvia who, along with his twin-sister Avi-Dayyan, also in their respective, peculiar ways, give their parents additional ground for pride, as they too serve their people.

But when the novel opens something is amiss with the Batancha family. A growing fear and anxiety are gnawing the family, especially, the father - Batancha - over a rumour peddled in town, hinting about his son-Samba's-involvement in a military-coup. The penalty in the event of a foiled coup attempt is death; on this basis the family is anxious. Hence at the beginning of the novel, we are made to encounter the growing perplexities of a father divided between the need to dig deep into this rumour with a view to discovering the truth and to keep mute and indifferent, in which case risking the peril and sordid eventualities inaction might likely cause.

However, there is a limit to which Batancha is able to keep this secret. When ultimately, the rumour becomes widespread, Batancha, consulting his friends Bamusa and Batapchi, resolves to send someone to the city, to find out about the facts of the case. When it becomes apparent that nobody remote to the family would be ready to make the sacrifice the investigation requires, it is

resolved that one Sergeant Musa who knows the ways of the city very well, should go for the assignment, escorted by Salvia, Samba's younger brother and Barka, Bamusa's son respectively. Their mission thus, is to uncover the riddle about Samba's involvement in the alleged coup. They are to find out whether or not he (Samba) is involved in the coup and then to investigate his condition at the hands of his captors before he is court martialled or executed.

The story of the group's search for Samba in the capital city-Garpella - constitutes not only a sizeable bulk of the novel's content, but as well as the rarest aspects ever, of the character, of Alkali's fiction. For the strangeness of the plot handling, the search episodes, consists not only of the difficulties and tribulations the group suffers in the process, but also the bizarre and weird character of the experiences and forces they encounter before accomplishing their mission. One may observe that no sooner than their arrival in the city, in the very hallowed precincts of their search, than the boundary separating the normal and the abnormal, the real versus the surreal, the concrete versus the abstract become sharply drawn for them as seekers of the truth. The reader sees himself transported to planes or realms of existence, bordering on the *fantastical* or *cultish*. Samba, it is ultimately discovered, had indeed been involved in the coup "he was gravely wounded and would have been killed, but for the swift intervention of Brigadier - General Hussein who, as his officer, patron, and family friend, worked out his evacuation out of the country, to save his life", (Pp. 179-180). The story of the search, the encounters, the awe-inspiring, terror-evoking, the intimidating image of the military ruler, Magogo and his cohorts posing as security aides in state defense, the mytho-ritualistic depiction of power in its wanton abuse and nakedness are as rare in their evocation, as unsurpassable in all fiction especially, by women, in recent times.

Magogo's depiction in an ambience suggestive of a fortress, a dream-like floating, unearthly, mythical world, and surrounded by combat-ready, spirit-like, enigmatic, blue-clad figures, poised continuously to either initiating new disciples into the fold or subduing all opposed to Magogo's rule are Alkali's allegory of the clash and perpetual conflict between the forces of evil and those of good, in human society. The forces of evil are those that Magogo and his aides represent; those of good are the timeless human values, depicted in human forms as faceless, floating and mesmerized.

Magogo's recourse to repression and tyranny however, is not surprising in the least. It accords inevitably, with the laws of all despotic regimes, the

world-over, as they seek in frenzy, to maintain their grip on the slippery reigns of power. It is to Alkali's credit however, that although depicting in garbs having Islamic connotations the anti-regime forces which Salvia and his group joined in their struggles against Magogo, they have nonetheless, universal relevance in man's search for principles or values to guide his quest for the establishment of a viable political order, in society. These are Ab-Haqq, representing Truth, Ab-Adll - Justice, Ab-Wadud - representing Love and their tripartite analogues - the three sisters - Sabura - Patience, Salama - Peace, and Afuwa - forgiveness, all trapped in their quests for the restoration of order, in the fallen political system.

Now no political system built on the principles of truth and justice, or a social order unregulated in its complex dynamic by love, tolerance and mutual forgiveness, will ever aspire to be stable and peaceful. The necessity for 'truth' and 'justice' sub-serving as cornerstones for the insurance of sustainability of society, is pointed by Ab-Adll, as he explains Ab-Haqq's significance to the group "that man is my unequaled brother - Ab-Haqq: the truth. He holds the key to our survival, if he dies, we are doomed" (p. 115).

The search therefore, is enough for the discovery of Samba or his rescue; it is one dedicated to the rescue from Magogo's captivity at the extended frame, of the nation, represented in those more humane qualities and ennobling values of humanity, which he holds to ransom. So when in the end Magogo is toppled, and his terror - empire collapses, the euphoria which greets the event is a thanksgiving, commemorating not just the return of Samba to the country, but the triumph generally, of good over evil, the return of order and normalcy, whose strangulation in the intervening period of his misrule, almost emasculated the entire nation.

So, for Salvia, who before the journey was allergic to city life and its ways, the journey becomes a sort of pilgrimage into the self. He has become a new person as he experiences a rebirth, having discovered thence, a Jot about human nature, the laws and dynamics of social as well as political life. He would thus use his experience to continue the task of community - building, which his life had been about before his historic sojourn in the city.

Henceforth, he sacrifices his earnings and whatever accrues to his purse, to changing the face of his community. Acquiring since adolescence his penchant for community service, Salvia is said to have single - handedly:

Without government's intervention, mobilized the youth in all the local government areas of the state, and had build culverts, filled pot-holes in the roads, cleared drainages, dug drinking water holes, renovated dilapidated schools, repainted health centers, and encouraged corporative shops; they had also helped in rebuilding burnt markets and donated books, to primary schools (p. 181).

Like her twin brother, Salvia, Avi-Dayyan is committed to helping her immediate community. Almost like her brother, she has lived a taciturn, eccentric kind of life style. At an advanced age, she is married to her profession as a geologist in one of the big oil companies (p. 151). This position helps her to play a very important role in the life of her elder brother Samba and his family in their times of need.

Additionally, Avi-Dayyan's commitment to her people is revealed in her love for children, especially abandoned children. She is described as one who goes around picking babies from the gutter and bringing them up all by herself: (p. 31). This singular action and activity of Avi-Dayyan implies that she runs a sort of NGO for the community unlike most NGOs, Avi-Dayyan's is funded solely by her own earnings.

This image of the new woman who decides the turns in her life is Alkali's idea of empowering the woman to attain the optimal within the society like Seytu in *The Descendants*; Avi-Dayyan is poised to serving her people and making a difference.

Zaynab Alkali's portrait of women, is one that teaches them to, in the midst of their career pursuits, in their search for solid edifices on which to construct their future lives, should keep all men and society at bay, until time is auspicious. This accords well with the wisdom in the Hausa saying "Ba a Gudu ana susar takashi" i.e. two nuts cannot be cracked at a time.

Avi-Dayyan thus has exploited to the fullest, the liberal - aristocratic leanings of her family, especially her father, who unlike Li's in *The Stillborn* or Peni's in *The Descendants* has no business meddling in matters to do with his children's marriages. Samba - a Muslim marries Augustina - a Christian from the south. Both Salvia and Avi-Dayyan are thus spared the trauma not only of premature marriages but also that of hanging on to partners other than their choices as indeed some families do. In the freedom Alkali accords her heroines we see there is an expression of the principles of empowerment for

women, which Hajjo Sani (2001: 233) opines consists in their rights to self determination, i.e. “control over their lives personal and social” as also unfettered access, to opportunities which make that possible.

Women however, Alkali seems to suggest in both works, should be cautious in their utilization, of these newly acquired rights. They should be insightful and calculative as Avi-Dayyan is, in their choice of partners for marriage, when the time is ripe. Not only is it regrettable but suicidal for a woman to saddle herself with a nonentity in life. Hence Avi-Dayyan chooses when her time came, a man who is not only an achiever (being a Brigadier General), but someone already close to her family as life-long associate. And even where a woman finds her self like Samba’s wife, Augustina - in a family hitherto unknown to her or unrelated, members of such families should endeavour to show capacity for accommodation and integration of each other - as seen during her stay with in-laws in her moments of trials.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the two works can be said to be passionate studies into the difficult but ennobling processes of women’s immersion (initiation) i.e. preparation for the onerous roles of service to their communities -national and local. The writer seems to trumpet the capacity and courage which the young women possess, in engineering the reconstruction of their societies alongside the renewals they direly need. In the lives and conducts of such characters as Seytu and Avi-Dayyan, exemplary models are served of responsible self-affirmations and selfless service for one’s society, which the present and successive generation, should hope to emulate, as paragons of excellence.

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