

*Feminism and The Nigerian Female Question:
A feminist Appraisal of Zaynab Alkali's Stillborn*

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Abstract

This paper examines feminism as a literary ideology which attempts to win for women a status of recognition and parity in a male-dominated society like Nigeria. This article deals essentially with the emergence of the ideology and literary personalities behind it. It focuses sharply on Zaynab Alkali's brand of feminism as demonstrated in the delineation of her female characters vis-à-vis her male characters. The woman's destiny, this paper believes, lies in her hand, and that true emancipation of women can only be realized through education and hard work.

Introduction

The concepts “feminism” or “feminist” came to fore first in France and the Netherlands in 1872, Great Britain in the 1890s, and the USA in 1910. Before its emergence, woman’s rights were possibly the term used generally by people who are sympathetic towards the plights of women.

Though it is quite challenging to define feminism, a general understanding of it includes the acting, speaking, writing, and advocating on behalf of women’s issues and rights and identifying injustice to females in the social status quo. This implies then, that, all movements that work to obtain women’s right should be considered feminist movements, even though they did (or do) not apply the term to themselves.

Feminism is a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women’s position in culture and society. It began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men.

The history of modern feminism is divided into three phases or waves. Each of these stages is described as dealing with different aspects of feminist ideas.

- The first wave refers to the movement of the 19th through 20th centuries, which dealt mainly with suffrage, working condition and educational rights for women and girls.
- The second wave (1960s – 1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities and the role of women in society.
- The third wave of feminism (late 1980s – early first decade of the 21st century), is seen as both a continuation of the second wave and a response to the perceived failures.

Feminism blossomed during the era of enlightenment. This period was characterized by intellectual reasoning, and the emergence of philosophical writing devoid of religious insights. Enlightenment thinkers including Marquis de Condorcet, Jeremy Bentham and most probably, Mary Wollstonecraft were among those who defended the rights of women.

Bentham (1781) spoke for a complete equality between sexes including the right to vote and to participate in the government, and opposed the strongly different sexual moral standards for women and men. In his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, Bentham strongly condemned the common behaviour in many countries to deny women’s rights because of their allegedly inferior minds.

Marquis de Condorcet (1790) a human right activist was fierce in defense of the equality of women. This is contained in his article For the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship for Women where he advocated women’s suffrage for the new government. It is an obvious fact, devoid of any ambiguity than the place of a woman in Condorcet’s era was that of an inferior being, relegated to the backdoor of history, hardly seen, not even heard.

Mary Wollstonecraft who is often regarded as the first feminist philosopher is perhaps the most cited feminist writer of the age. Her work, A Vindication of the Rights of Women

published in 1792, by all standards can be called feminist. Her comparison of women to the nobility, the elite of society can be seen as the first feminist argument. Wollstonecraft's work remains a foundation stone of feminist thought. She opined that lack of education and upbringing of women was their bane. For necessary changes in social attitudes to take place, there is the need for women to speak out and tell their story.

In Nigeria, what can be linked to feminine struggles has anchorage first in the activities of Mrs. Kutu, Fela's mother. She mobilized support for women against what she called political marginalization of women in the '70s. By this time women in Nigeria were not granted the freedom to participate in politics and electioneering campaigns.

Shortly after, a small band of very determined women in Nigeria began to emerge within the cannon of our political, economic and academic lives. Academic giants like Zulu Sofula, Alele Williams, and Zaynab Alkali, found their ways to the apex of their career not by privilege but by dint of hard work. Similarly women abound who have reached positions of influence at the levels of local, state, federal, and public services.

The female question cannot be said to be a new phenomenon in Nigeria. Since the times of Queen Amina of Zaria and Moremi of Ile-Ife, attempts have been made to change the role of women both in text and context with regard to sex, gender and ideology. Negating patriarchal argument as Birk (1986) puts it, that women are passive victims of their biology in ways that men in general are not, the *new woman* storms the epicenters of industries, academics and politics, occupying not the middle row, but the front seat of arguments.

The biological nature of women has ever been used as a limitation of their innate potentials. Such notions, Birk continues, are frequently employed by those opposed to feminism: the idea, for example, that women are naturally less capable of intellectual endeavors than men – because of the biological demands of child-bearing was employed in previous centuries as argument against extending opportunities for higher education to women

The thesis this paper advances is that, gender imbalances are evil and inimical to meaningful development. This paper therefore believes that for meaningful development to take place, the female child should be given equal opportunities to develop her innate potentials.

Subsequent regimes have made efforts to improve the condition of women in Nigeria. The Better Life for Rural Women programme of Late Mrs. Miriam Babangida did a lot to bring good life and improved education to rural women. Pet projects of first ladies of each regime tend to benefit and advance the interest of women.

The fourth international conference of women held in Beijing in 1995 indicated that women have come of age and are no longer prepared to take it lying low. The then first lady Mrs. Abacha led a powerful Nigerian delegation to the confab where a platform for action was signed. This involved an affirmation to achieve gender equality and the

empowerment of women. The most vital method to realize this was said to be gender mainstreaming which incorporates both equity and equality, that is, that both women and men should “experience equal conditions for realizing their full human rights, and have the opportunity to contribute and benefit from national, political and cultural development.

The aftermath of Beijing (1995) witnessed great upheaval of feminist assertions. Many very determined women have and are beginning to assume top management positions in areas that hitherto were considered restricted areas – male domain. The current wave of demand by women for the actualization of the 35% affirmative action is testimonial of series of women related confabs across the globe.

Feminism therefore offers women an outlet through which they are not only seen but also heard. It seems an alternative to patriarchal philosophy as Marylyn French affirms in Ewvierhoma (2002) that:

Feminism is the only serious, coherent, and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures...feminists believe that women are human beings, that the two sexes are (at least) equal in all significant ways, and that this equality must be publicly recognized.

In line with the above, feminism as a literary movement attempts to win for women a status of parity and recognition in a male-dominated society like Nigeria. The Nigerian female question over the years borders on marginalization and suppression of women’s rights with regards to job fixings, cabinet appointments, admissions and recruitments. A commentator puts it jokingly: who is suppressing who? While the man is the head of the family, the woman is that powerful neck that twists the head which ever direction it pleases. Women however, have found themselves guilty of (feminism) the same offence for which they accused their male counterpart – chauvinism.

Zaynab alkali – a feminist?

Zaynab Alkali was born and brought up in the northern part of Nigeria. She had her early and higher education all in the north. This gave her the privilege of knowing in detail the society she lives in and which she writes about with every vividness and precision.

In her write-ups, she is mostly concerned with the woman: who she is, and what she is capable of achieving with or without the support of the man. Alkali no doubt, is a stark supporter of the pro-feminine doctrine of the independence of the woman, the innate potentials of the woman and a proof that a woman can be successful in anything she likes and achieves greatness without necessarily being dependent on man.

This philosophy is advanced through the female characters she portrays in her works. She negates the popular belief that a woman is only capable of bearing children, doing such odd and menial chores as fetchers of water and hewers of wood, washing clothes and dishes, preparing the family meals and in recent times taking the children to and from school. As a writer and member of the Nigerian society, Alkali has freedom to portray

her female characters to suit her authorial objectives, or what Ekwierhoma (2002) describes as the prerogative of making her women conform to the active radical group, or presenting her as docile and submissive.

It is only from an ideological perspective – the opposition of male hegemony or patriarchy in society, the search for goals, which are feminist that Alkali is considered to be a feminist. Besides this, she believes in the enduring qualities of a woman which are child bearing and training.

In *Stillborn*, Alkali (1984) shows through the personality of Li that determination; strong-will, courage and achievement are not the exclusive preserves and features of the man, that the woman has all these attributes and more if she does not involve herself in illusions and day-dreams. Alkali shows through her character, Li, short form of Libira: needle – thin and sharp – that the modern woman is liberated, sympathetic, humane, courageous; as strongly determined as the man contrary to the traditional, religious belief of a subservient, cringing person and an object ready to answer the call of the man without question.

The book is made up of one main plot and two subsidiary plots. The main plot is that of Li who after spending some years in a boarding primary school where life is free and gay, returns to her father's house that is suffocating, trapped and unhappy, a house she describes as "worse than prison". Li desires to live in freedom, according to her, "I would be much happier" and "at least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down on me, demanding to know where I have been to". This has always been the ambition of every woman to be independent of patriarchal control, accountable only to her.

It is in her search for freedom and gaiety that she breaks through a fence in the night to attend a dance. Li, true to the idea of the liberated modern woman breaks a rule (a tradition), a thing unheard of and dare not to be done by a woman in the north – a purely Islamic community. In the dance she gets attracted by Habu Adams. There and then, Li begins to have dreams (ambitions) if her dreams were anything to go by, she should be dreaming about paradise. Li's dreams are summarized on p.57 of the novel; to get married to a qualified doctor, get a Grade 1 teacher's certificate. Li's dreams were almost shattered as Habu Adams instead of qualifying as a doctor in the city turns out to be a salesman and abandons Li in the village for years after their marriage, subjecting her to pestering and great temptations.

Even after Li is eventually taken to the husband of her dream in the city, Habu abandons her, does not love her and regards Li as one of the village "casts off" (p.69). Li finds to her utter disbelief that it is an unsmiling welcome awaiting her (p.69). In the city, Habu turns out to be an unloving and unlovable husband, quite irresponsible and a drunk. This makes Li to conclude that "men are utterly shameless and callous these days" (p.23). Li has to retrace her steps and learn not to dream dreams that are stillborn. Li learns the hard truth that a man can only profess love from the lips, not from the heart. And for a woman

to be a complete being, she does not need to live on illusions and false dreams. This, no doubt is the authorial voice.

The subsidiary story of Faku, the childhood friend of Li and Awa Li's elder sister are similar to that of the main story – of Li, the heroine. Faku falls in love with Garba and eventually married him. The life of luxury and contentment in the city which Garba promised became a mirage. Faku, a once plump, beautiful and hopeful village girl before marriage becomes a thin, rake-like woman “famished in body and no doubt in soul” (p.72). To compound her problem she is a second wife, she becomes frustrated and disillusioned, almost taking to a life of prostitution, as she has little to tell about her life as Garba's second wife (p.79). She retraces her steps from the verge of moral degeneration; she heeds the voice of wisdom and becomes a social welfare worker.

Awa, Li's elder sister also had her own bitter dose or overdose of unrealized dreams. Awa marries Dan Fiama, the village headmaster hoping that she will be the wife of the principal of the new village secondary school, but it turns out to be a hopeless dream. The story of Awa as Dan Fiama's wife is the same as that of Li and Faku. Dan Fiama instead becomes a drunk, irresponsible and demoted to the rank of an ordinary classroom teacher.

When all dreams become unrealizable, Alkali's heroine Li decides to live a life of reality in the village, not depending on any man or husband. She goes back to school, picks her Grade I Teacher's certificate. She rejects fresh suitors and men even when Habu Adams sends for reconciliation, Li refuses to accept. Alkali however, brings her feminine philosophy to bare when Li surprisingly accepts to take Habu Adams back after his leg has been broken and amputated as a result of an accident. Li now becomes the man of the house, caring for a hopeless and helpless man who has lost the will to live.

Alkali however, is not agitating for supremacy of the woman but partnership and parity. This is summed up in the conversation between Awa and Li towards the end of the story.

“So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way?” asked Awa.

“No”, answered Li.

“What then, you want to walk behind and arrest his fall?” asked Awa.

“No”, I will just hand him the crutches and side-by-side we'll learn to walk”, answered Li (p.105).

Alkali's brand of a woman is that of a patient, enduring, sympathetic, humane, loving woman who is ready to forgive a man that oppresses, brutalizes and sets her on psychological and emotional derailment in order to walk/work together not behind him nor before him but beside him as partners.

Alkali however is guilty of gender bias. This is evident in the delineation of her characters. The three principal female characters in spite of their frustrations and psychological distresses were endowed with enabling qualities to wrestle themselves free from despondency and despair to a state of financial independence and stability.

The male characters on the other hand are created as bunch of failures, brutes, drunks, and highly irresponsible family men. It is so lop-sided that Alkali does not see any quality in even one of the many male characters delineated in her work.

Conclusion

This paper conclusively suggests therefore, for feminist aspirations to be realized, and possible answers like a level play-ground for women in the economic, social, and political life be found to the Nigerian female questions. These questions bother on the suppression of and discrimination against women, and denial of their basic inalienable rights. The Nigerian feminists should cease fire on the gender war by placing more emphases on the education of Girl Child and de-emphasize the supremacy of the female child. By this, they could walk/work together for a larger picture.

Suggestions

Government should show beyond political promises, the commitment to make education for women a priority.

The female child should stop living a life of illusion, that is, dreaming of being the beautiful wife in a beautiful house of one 'big man' and engage in a proactive and sustained training through regular schools and curriculum.

Government should stop playing politics with the 35% affirmative action and make it an issue of policy.

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