

Gender And The Quest For Female Self-Realization: A Focus On Zaynab Alkali's The Stillborn

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ABSTRACT: Over the years, there have been literary works on the emancipation of the female gender, but most of these works, especially those by contemporary female feminists, have failed to encourage the womenfolk to continue to respect and recognize their husbands as heads of the family. These works are rather enthusiastic about gaining total freedom for women from the perceived oppression of the menfolk, thereby forgetting that the woman has to work hand-in-hand with the man to make a perfect society. Thus, this study aims at creating the possibility of a society where the man supports the dreams and aspirations of his woman, as she continues to recognize him as the head in the family, using Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* as a guide. An attempt is also made to look into the African culture and how the female gender can make her voice to be heard in the society. In pursuance of this objective, we will find out the possibility of women gaining recognition and self-realization in a patriarchal society and how she can make an impact without being viewed as the man's rival. We will also try to validate the belief that the feminist theory is not practicable in the African setting as we present the womanist approach as an alternative to tackle the gender question.

Key words: Gender, Self-Realization, Feminism, Womanism and Patriarchy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a male dominated (patriarchal) society, such as we find in Africa, America and in different parts of the world, it is the general belief that women without men are nothing and therefore, cannot realize their lives' goals and aspirations when left alone. This is why in recent times, women around the world have gained consciousness of their oppression and marginalization and have taken pragmatic steps to address these issues.

The gender question has become a recognized phenomenon. Perhaps this is why Binitie (2009:18), considers 'gender' as 'a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse'. Gender is the variable cultural interpretation of sex. It has influenced, defined and oriented much of feminist discourse in the last three decades. Gender is actually the significance which a society attaches to the biological categories of male and female. Binitie (2009) further explains gender as "what role our anatomy plays, and what it means to be socialized as man or woman".

Gender issues are mostly viewed as women issues. This is understandable because in most societies, women are subordinate to men and perceived to be inferior. Many women do not accept this stance and therefore challenge the way their culture and societies have ascribed unto them an inferior status and roles.

In discussing the gender question and struggle, it is pertinent to consider the concept of feminism. Sotunsa (2008:3) defines feminism as "an attempt to describe and interpret women's experiences as depicted in all kinds of literature". Thus, it is inter-wined with the question of women liberation. This is a movement that started in Europe in the late 18th century and claims as its goal the emancipation of all women from sexist oppression, but it fails to tackle the issues of black females and women of color. In practice, feminism concentrates on the needs of middle class white women in Britain, America and Europe while posing as a movement for the emancipation of women globally.

Asigbo and Emeka(2008:56) opine that :

Feminism as practiced in most Third World countries especially in Nigeria is a confused and a confusing movement. This confusion is predicated not just on socio-cultural peculiarities of Africans but also on the penchant for the sexes to see themselves as checks on the excesses of each other.

The African culture does not permit the woman to see herself as a competitor with the man. Therefore, the African variant of feminism does not call for the total freedom from men or equality with men. The African woman, because of her culture, only asks for her voice to be heard even as she co-builds the society alongside the man, as she continues to be obedient, and faithful to the man. This is the reason why feminism has become a confused movement in the African setting. The African woman cannot stand up to claim equality with the man

even when she enjoys a higher social status in the society. The African culture frowns at any successful woman that is not under any man's roof. She is considered as arrogant or a prostitute. To further explain this, Crawford and Unger (2004:61) state that:

Women worldwide, especially the African women are confronted with social, political and historical realities. In as much as they are to yield the call of the International Women's Movement and their feminist consciousness, the African woman has to respect the African culture. In fact, she is in a particular situation as she tries to balance the International Feminist Values with the African Traditional Values. She has to take what is of value to her from both sides.

The African woman believes so much in her culture. By culture, we mean the way of life of a group of people—their norms, values and beliefs. Olaniyan (2016:28) defines culture as “the way of life of a society and its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation”. Hence, the ideas and habits of the African woman, which she learns, shares and transmits, do not permit her to see herself as the man's rival or competitor.

The ideology presented by the feminist agenda and the cultural practices in Africa have made feminism to be unpopular and rejected in the Africa setting and another theory which is perceived to be suitable and practicable in African situation has been formulated. According to Sotunsa (2008:17):

The deficiencies of feminism as practiced by middle class white women and the need to involve a theory or an ideology that caters specifically for the needs of black womenfolk, later led to the development of another variant of feminism called Womanism.

This theory can be said to be African women specific. The womanist disposition is that which sees the woman not as the man's rival but as his complement and helpmate. It is the mental disposition which sees the woman's husband as her crown. Hence, it is her duty to respect and protect that crown. This means that the African woman can still reach her goals in life and make her voice to be heard in the society while she is under a man.

II. FEMINISM: THE ROOT OF GENDER DISCOURSE

The concept of feminism is controversial. It has no concise universal definition. Since feminism means various things to different people, it is paramount to note that it is always probing the question of the female gender. According to Sotunsa (2008:4),

Feminists do not agree among themselves on one all-inclusive and universally accepted definition of the term...what feminism means to various people depends on one's political or sociological observation and goals, —one's understanding or interpretation of the word 'woman'.

In an effort to suggest a schematic account of feminism, Gyimah Miriam (2013:58) characterizes feminism as being variegated in meaning. She opines that feminism is:

... grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some ways illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization, there are however many interpretations of women and their oppression. So it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine or as implying an agreed political doctrine.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, feminism is described as “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men” (542), The Cambridge Dictionary in the same vein, defines feminism as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and chances as men, and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state” (512).

Scholars have divided the origin of feminism into three waves. In the mid 1800s, the term 'feminism' was used to refer to the qualities of female and it was not until after the first International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the French term 'feminism', was used for the belief in advocacy for equal rights for women based on the notion of equality between the sexes.

The first wave refers to a period of feminist activities during the 19th and early part of 20th century. It focuses on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women, opposition of chattel marriage and ownership of married women and their children by their husbands. However, by the end of the 19th century, the focus changed to gaining political powers for women.

The second wave is especially associated with the period of 1960s till the 1980s. It was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism. The movement was especially vocal in matters like civil rights, sexual liberation, child care, health, welfare, education, reproductive rights, including rights to abortion. The movement campaigned against social and cultural stereotyping of women. It should be noted that the first wave focused on rights and suffrages while the second wave was largely concerned with issues such as equality and ending discrimination.

The third wave is a continuation of the second wave, beginning from the early 1990s and it focused on the perceived failure of the preceding waves. This wave placed emphasis on the experiences of the upper middle-class white women. Feminist leaders involved in the second wave like Bell Hooks, Maxine Hong

Kingston and other black feminists leaders called for a new subjectivity in feminism. The third wave also involved debates between different feminists, such as Carol Gilligan (who believed that there are important differences between the sexes) and some other feminists like Russell and Firestone who believed that there are no essential differences between the sexes.

All these do not mean that feminism or feminist movements did not exist prior to this period. In fact, in the Sixth Century, B.C, there were women writers in Greece who ran girls' schools. Women also had a major role in the 18th century French revolution. This was the time when women tried to assert themselves in France by propagating that every woman is born free and her rights are the same as those of any man.

Many forms of feminism can be identified. They include Marxist/Socialist Feminism, Humanist Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Analytic Feminism, etc. Each of these has its own specification, characteristics and ideology, but they are all directed to women issues. Feminism has now become the foundation of gender discourse and has become prominent among contemporary literature.

III. WOMANISM: THE AFRICAN VARIANT OF FEMINISM

The term Womanism first appeared in Alice Walker's (1983) collection of essays titled "In search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose", in which the author attributed the word's origin to the black folk expression of mothers to children.

The argument that African women cannot identify with western doctrine of feminism comes with cogent force because the knowledge and experience of African women have been ignored or marginalized by a feminism that reflects only the perspectives of white western middle class women.

Although feminism borrows critical tools from other emancipating theories like Reformation, Liberalism and Marxism, it does not put itself forward to challenging other forms of subordination like slavery, colonialism, racism and their accompanying prejudices and complexes which affect woman as well. Its exclusiveness to the western middle-class woman's experience undermines objectivity and therefore puts to serious doubts, its relevance to the African women of the same era. If feminism was not able to fully account for the experiences of black women, it would be necessary to find other theories that could carry the weight of these experiences. It is in this regard that Alice Walker's 'Womanism' intervenes to make an important contribution. It is also in this light that Hudson Weems (1998:1) says that:

Women who are calling themselves womanists/black feminists need another word to describe what their concerns are... women of African descents who embrace feminism do so because of the absence of a suitable existing framework of their individual needs as African women.

A similar term, 'African-Womanism' was used by Hudson Weems. She opines:

African-womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African woman. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminists, the black feminists, the African feminists and the 'African Womanists.

The term womanism can also be referred to as Black Feminism. It can be viewed as part of feminism but as that which brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism and compels the expansion of feminist horizons in theory and practice. The womanist agenda does not believe in the battle of sexes, but it sees the woman as a helpmate to the man rather than his rival. It works in accordance with the African belief and culture which place the man as the head of the family but assign to them the specific roles and duties both in the immediate family and the society at large. According to *Womanist Bibliography* (2008), the womanist agenda is:

... opposed to gender separatism that bedevils feminism. Womanism presents an alternative for black women by drowning their survival in the context of the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are inextricably linked.;

It could be said that Alice Walker's construction of womanism and the different meanings she invested in it, is an attempt to situate the black woman in history and culture and at the same time, rescue her from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that she is made in the society.

Many black women view feminism as a movement that at best, is exclusively for women and at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men. Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking men. It holds the belief that the emancipation of black women folk cannot be achieved apart from the emancipation of the whole society. Womanists therefore believe in partnership with their menfolk. So central to womanist writings is the focus on family relationship and the importance of motherhood. Feminism on the other hand, tends to derogate the woman's role as mothers. For example, radical feminists view motherhood as limiting imposition on women. Womanists celebrate motherhood while insisting that women should be treated with more respect and that motherhood should be valued rather than derogated. The womanist is more concerned with her entire family than just herself and sisters, even though genuine sisterhood is also very important to her reality.

In a nutshell, the major reasons that brought about this variant are the shortcomings of western feminism and the need for the African women to derive a more specific nomenclature to be identified with and one that will take into consideration her peculiarities. Womanism is still essentially aimed at alleviating women's multiple oppression; this feature, it shares with feminism. However, the issues addressed here concern mainly for the black womenfolk.

IV. AFRICAN GENERAL BELIEF ABOUT GENDER

Gender, according to Blier (1987) cited in Olaniyan (2016:106), is "a set of attributes socially or culturally constructed on the basis of birth assignment as male and female". Binitie (2009:17) in the vein, says that gender "is the non-physiological aspect of sex, a group of attributes and behaviors, shaped by the society and culture that are defined as appropriate for the male sex or female sex". These two definitions suggest that gender attributes (roles, identity, beliefs, etc) are highly influenced by two major factors –culture and society. Culture is often referred to as the way of life of a people. It defines beliefs, as it refers to everything that people create overtime. One's culture plays a vital role in ascribing attributes to one's gender.

African culture is not homogenous. It is as varied and diverse as the number of ethnic groups which make up the continent. Each ethnic group has a culture that is peculiar to it. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects that are generalized; especially when it comes to gender, marriage and family issues. All these have cultural backgrounds. For example, in the general traditional African setting, the number of wives a man has, is used to measure his success and achievements.

Ann Oakley (1972) cited in Olaniyan (2016:104) says that feminine social roles such as housewives and mothers who care for children are not an inevitable product of female biology nor does being a man makes it inevitable that men will be breadwinners. To these authors, the culture of a society determines the behavior of the sexes within it. There is this notion of masculinity and femininity in Africa, such that if a boy or a young man is seen to be feeble, the elderly ones would call him a woman and probably other names that connote femininity. This is because women are expected to be emotional, submissive, gentle, illogical, quiet, dependent and home-loving, while men are expected to be strong, competent, emotionally tough, aggressive, physically and sexually assertive.

Men and women act differently because they fulfill different positions in institutional settings, work places and families. They take on gendered roles that are consistent with the role requirements of that position. It is important to note that the differences in power between men and women are institutionalized by culture and are expressed in their everyday relations, particularly in the family.

There are particular roles that are ascribed to each gender in the African society. The adherence to these traditional gender roles is particularly prominent among those with a traditional orientation. Bashira Sherif (2006:87) opines that:

Women, especially after the birth of the first child, continue to perform most of the housework and care giving, despite working outside of the home in record numbers. Men on the other hand, continue to define their primary roles as economic providers for their families.

All these are evident in the division of labor. Women in African society are confined to domestic occupations which are marginal to the society's main economic task. In order to maintain their femininity, they tend to refrain from taking on a more powerful role in their families and instead, adhere to traditional roles. Many women deliberately make efforts to protect their husbands' masculinity by working to appear that their husbands are in control.

A story of Arobo-Islamic women's writings reveals what Chidi Amuta (1989) cited in Nkealah (2008:59), terms as a reactive stance towards gendered differentiation in North Africa. He says:

Muslim women encounter different forms of gender oppression. The degree and intensity of which differs from country to country and from region to region and the choices they face are influenced as much by patriarchal social arrangements.

The African society is a patriarchal one and it is important to note that patriarchy is indispensable to the analysis of gender inequality in the society. Men are generally seen as being able to perform leadership roles because they are stronger, more domineering and more competitive while women are considered feeble, gentle and fragile.

V. PLOT SUMMARY OF THE STILLBORN

Li, the shortened form of Libira, meaning 'Needle', is the leading protagonist in the narrative. Barely a teenager, she is vibrant and bubbling with life, ready to accept what nature has in store for her. She wants freedom from the "suffocating prison" of her home. She will do all that are contrary to the expectations of the society for a woman, like breaking through her father's fence to attend a village night dance. It is during one of such escapades that she meets Habu Adams, who becomes her lover and whom she decorates with illusions. One of such illusions is that she will escape from her 'prison home' in the village to live in the freedom and

luxuries of the city with her husband Habu. She dreams that Habu will become a qualified doctor, and she, a Grade I Teacher and together, they will live in a big European house, full of servants and there will be no end to the luxuries that the city will offer them. Unfortunately, all her illusions turned to disillusiones shortly after her marriage to Habu. For four years, Habu abandons her in the village. When finally he sends for her, she gets to the city only to discover that “she has lost her man to the city” (P.57). She becomes an unwanted wife, burdened physically with pregnancy and emotionally with despair. Her dreams are shattered one after the other. Li finds an escape back to the village when she is sent for to see her dying father. Two years after the delivery of their daughter, Shuwa, she becomes an abandoned wife again. She is not only being wooed by other men, but also being humiliated by the wives of these suitors.

There are two sub-plots, involving Awa and Faku, Li's elder sister and friend, respectively, which accentuate the poignancy of the theme of shattered illusions in the narrative. The three young women are all traumatized by their marriages as each husband turns out to be not quite the right choice. The husbands are seen to be in their different ways, both unloving and unlovable. Though Li and Awa are born of the same parents, and are brought up the same way, they are different characters with different personalities. While Awa is level-headed, Li is vibrant with youthful exuberance.

At the age of 20, Awa is given in marriage to Dan Fiama, the village Headmaster, a man, who is described by some of the villagers as “every woman's dream of a son-in-law” (P.58). Awa's dream is to do something big in the village, including being the head of adult education; a position the Headmaster promises her.

Four years later, the story takes a sad turn for Awa too, just as it does for Li. With a set of twins, Hassan and Hussian and another baby on the way, Awa is often seen sullen and unfriendly, the reason being that her dreams, just like Li's have been shattered and the splinters leave some wound on her. Dan Fiama is rarely seen at home. Worst still, the Headmaster loses his head to the bottles after the government takes over the primary school which he is heading and demoted him to teach in the junior class because he is not educated enough to head such a big school.

Instead of Awa becoming the head of the adult education classes for older women as she has dreamt, she makes a choice of leaving the school to stay back at home and take care of the children and the old people in the village. She refuses to be humiliated by other people's children in the school, but unfortunately, she receives a greater humiliation from her husband who spends all his money on drinks and neglects his family. Awa joins hands with her mother who will go to the farm at cockcrow and will not come back until night. She continues to live on the proceeds of her mother's farm.

Li, Awa and Faku are childhood friends who know what they want for themselves in life. While Li and Awa are brought up in a proper family setup; with their father and brothers around them, Faku on the other hand, grows up with just her mother. Her father dies when she is age six and three years later, her two brothers get drowned. So, she is left alone with her mother. In addition to all these tragedies, the villagers brand her mother a witch.

Hence, Faku and her mother have to work hard to feed themselves. These are the main reasons Faku jumps at Garba's offer of marriage though the man is 32 while she is only 13. Faku's marriage to Garba means freedom from poverty, suffering and hardship for her mother, and above all, a dive into Garba's wealth and into a glamorous life in the city. She wishes for a man's presence in her life- any man that would build a relationship with her. In her words, she yearns for:

A man's muddy shoes outside my door, a man's commanding voice in the early hours of the day and the late hours of the night. Where indeed is the lord of the house who brings in food for his obedient wife to cook (PP. 99-100)

In essence, Faku yearns for the vacuum created in her life by the death of her father and her two brothers to be filled by a man she would marry. But unfortunately for her, she makes the wrong choice of a husband when she marries Garba. His account of the pleasures of the city and the availability of free women, easy money and idle living, gives us a good idea of the kind of man, he is. Six years after being married to Garba, Faku's once beautiful dimples are now wider and deeply set into a thin haggard face. She becomes famished in body, and no doubt, in soul as well. Faku grows thin, with one child and living in a shabby apartment within Garba's compound. She is Garba's second wife and seldom sees her husband because he is hardly ever around and his first wife is the mother-of-the-house.

VI. THE QUEST FOR FEMALE SELF-REALIZATION IN THE STILL BORN

Having seen the illusions and shattered dreams of these three women, let us now focus on their achievements: Li had visited her friend Faku in Kano, only to be bewildered at the devastating situation of her friend in her marital home. She finds her friend faring very badly as Garba's second wife. In the two dreams Li had in Faku's house, she is able to confirm, through symbolic representations, the bitter import of her meeting with Faku: “Li had felt cold and lonely, but here was someone who she sensed felt much colder and lonelier” (p.

79). She senses that Garba no longer sleeps with Faku and also that Faku is conscious of and yet unable to do anything about the futility and horror of her marriage. This is the turning point for Li: the point at which the spirit of independence she has shown since her childhood assumes the form of a steely, feminist determination to rely, not even on her husband, but on herself for the fulfillment of her dreams.

Armed with virtue and determination, she successfully resists the advances of fresh suitors and completes her studies at teachers college. She also refuses to go back to her husband, Habu, although the latter has visited her twice at school and sent friends to plead for a reconciliation. Eventually, Li becomes a grade I teacher living in a big European house, built by her and full of servants. She accomplishes her dreams, though, it takes about ten years for her to do this. According to the Narrator:

She then vowed to go back into the world and make an independent life for herself. Darning her class seven certificate, she had fled from the village, leaving her daughter behind. ...Now five years later, she was ready to read for her Advanced Teacher's Certificate. She intended to be the most educated woman in the village and four miles around (P.85)

Li's triumph, almost an apotheosis, is the subject of the Epilogue. When their grandfather dies, Awa tells Li: "The mourners are outside and waiting for you. You are the man of the house now"(P.101). She becomes the man of the house because she builds the huge modern house, where not only she and her daughter Shuwa live, but also accommodates her sister Awa and her whole family. In addition, she provides for the upkeep of the family. At 33, she has accomplished her life goals. She becomes a self-made woman because she realizes her life's dreams, all alone.

Awa, the second female character also realizes her life's dreams and ambitions of doing something big in her village to some extent. Though, it does not come the way she expects or she has hoped, such as being the head of the adult education class for older women in the village rather, the dreams are realized through toiling and pains. Through farming and caring for both young and old of the family, she keeps the home together. She contributes her own quota to the growth of the society. She does this by meeting the needs of everybody and caring for members of her family. She gives her happiness for the happiness of others. This brings her fulfillment and joy as she feels accomplished.

Faku, the third character becomes free from poverty, suffering and hardship that characterized her childhood days. After her disappointment from Garba, she is inspired to be a social worker by another elderly woman. At last, she finds meaning and fulfillment in life too.

VII. CONCLUSION

Most Africa plays and novels by female writers have shown that women can become professionals and economically independent with or without their men. This work presents the experience of African womenfolk and their struggles within the society which they find themselves. Alkali presents the central character, Li, as a young girl in her prime age. As a teenager, she is pregnant with dreams. All of these dreams almost become dead after being married and abandoned by her husband. Then she has a sort of self realization and encourages herself to become what she has always dreamt of. Also, Faku, (her friend) who has also lost her dreams with the help of another woman picks herself up and tries to improve her means of livelihood as she becomes a social worker.

Alkali has shown us in this work the possibility of the emancipation of the female gender. Not only has she done this, but she also reminds us that the successful and emancipated woman is incomplete without a man. Although Li later fulfils her dreams and becomes a self-reliant woman, she does not find absolute fulfillment. This, the narrator reveals in this statement:

Li ought to have felt fulfilled, but instead, she felt empty. It wasn't just the emptiness of bereavement, but an emptiness that went beyond that...

... She wished there was something else to struggle for, for that was the only way life could be meaningful (P.102).

Her emptiness is as a result of her loneliness. Hence, she decides to return to her repentant husband despite his incapacitation. So, at the end of the novel, when Li decides to return to Habu, her husband, her sister Awa is shocked to the marrow:

Why, Li? The man is lame" said the sister.

We are all lame, daughter-of-my- mother. But this is not the time to crawl. It is the time to learn to walk again".

"So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way?"

Awa asked.

"No" answered Li.

"What then, you want to walk behind and arrest his fall?"

"No, I will just hand him the crutches and side by side, we will learn to walk (P.105).

Li is not ready to lead the way while her husband follows her, because this is not the concept of marriage in Africa. The woman is expected to complement the efforts of the man. This is why she is referred to as the "helpmate". This implies that it is very important for the woman to work together with the man, though commitment on the part of the man too is required.

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