

**WOMEN, ISLAM AND TRADITION IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S THE
STILLBORN**

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ABSTRACT

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The general impression conveyed about West African literature especially in the field of literary criticism is one of a cultural activity that is largely a mixture of Christian and indigenous African traditions. Yet to a considerable extent, Islam has influenced the way some important writers define themselves and their art. Certainly, Zaynab Alkali's writing speaks of the Muslim experience but it is also carefully situated within the boundaries of what is acceptable to Islamic notions of good writing. She elaborates a vision that incorporates Islamic ideas of individual responsibility, through her depiction of tensions which exist between essence and appearance, and between ethics and external behavior ^{in Muslim} ~~in Muslim society~~ ^{scenery}. This paper will attempt to situate Alkali's *The Stillborn* within orientalist discourse which sees the Muslim woman as the "other", backward, victimized, and imprisoned in seclusion. It will argue that misconceptions about the passivity of Muslim women are challenged by the portrayal of them in this novel. Furthermore, it will suggest that while Alkali's emphasis on family relationships and the part women play within them is directly connected to the prominence given to both in Islam, the orientalist tendency to homogenize Muslim women regardless of their cultural background is questioned by the struggle for ascendancy between Islamic beliefs and traditional practices found in the novel's referent society.

WOMEN, ISLAM AND TRADITION IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S *THE STILLBORN*

Published in 1984, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* is remarkable for being the first Nigerian novel in English to be written by a female writer from an Islamic background.⁴ Welcomed with opened arms, it was immediately seen as an important addition to the multiplicity of literary voices emerging from Nigeria. Yet in an interview with Adeola James, Alkali is reported to have said apparently without irony, "I don't feel any special responsibility towards my own culture". Here she appears to be referring to the indigenous culture of her people because in the same interview she went on to reiterate her allegiance to the Islamic religion. Certainly, while Alkali may prefer to claim her place in literature purely on the basis of the literary merits of her writing, it is likely that her novel was awarded the Association of Nigerian Author's prize because it speaks of the culture of Muslim women, a section of society rarely represented in Nigerian literature. The novel remedies what had hitherto been absent from the Nigerian literary landscape not so much because it can be labeled 'authentic' having been penned by a writer who comes from a cultural background similar to that of her characters, but because it exhibits an informed understanding of the complexities inherent in the lives of Muslim women.

Maryse Conde (1972) observed that 'the inner personality and inner reality of African women have been hidden under a heap of myths, so-called ethnological theories, rapid generalizations and patent untruths'. This is particularly true of Nigerian Muslim women whose lives have in fact elicited very little serious academic interest. Dismissed as passive and backward, and often consigned to the margins of contemporary Nigerian society, women from Northern Nigeria are more often than not shrouded in silence, or prey to grievous misconceptions. This neglect is especially evident when compared to the level of attention women from Eastern and Western Nigeria have received in all kinds of studies be it anthropological, sociological, historical, or literary studies. Anthropologists hired by the British colonial regime during the early part of the 20th century concentrated their efforts on feeding a European preoccupation with the exotic past of 'pagan' African societies against which their patron's 'civilizing' mission could easily be measured. Their researches into the indigenous social arrangements of the Ibo and Yoruba peoples were

possible because among them traditional practices^{less} furnished by foreign influences were still accessible for study. On the other hand, Muslim societies in Northern Nigeria which had adopted Islam as far back as the 11th Century did not provide the same curiosity value.

Indeed the earliest descriptions of West African Islamic societies given to us by the traveller and scholar Ibn Battuta who sojourned in this part of the world in 1353-1354, as well as those of the German Heinrich Barth who later followed in his footsteps, paint pictures of communities that were highly prosperous, literate, and more advanced in many respects than the coastal people British colonialists first encountered. What emerges from the accounts of both travellers is the conviction that Arabic Islamic culture had impacted greatly on the development of West African Muslims. However, in spite of ethnocentric tendencies on his part, Ibn Battuta nevertheless noted traditions and practices regarding women, marriage, and inheritance that were distinct from what obtained in Islamic societies in other parts of the world. While there was strict adherence to many Islamic precepts, African Muslim societies retained some of their own concepts, practices, and traditions particularly those that had to do with the status of women. To some degree these have not been completely eroded over time and the position and concerns of West African Muslim women today reflect some of these differences. Nonetheless, contrary to evidence, contemporary scholars such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie insist that Muslim women in Northern Nigeria have completely discarded traditional roles and rights as well as the will to initiate compromises that will benefit their position in present day society. This kind of reductionism and disapproval is typical of discourse on Muslims the world over.

To better understand this prejudice, it^{is} pertinent to refer briefly to Edward Said's theory on orientalism as it provides a useful analysis of contemporary attitudes towards Muslims. It will similarly provide a basis for examining the critical reception accorded Akali's *The Stillborn*, issues raised in the novel and by it. (First Said) calls for a reinterpretation of history if we are to understand Western responses to the Islamic world. He argues that since the crusades, the Orient and Islam have become synonymous terms which stand for 'ultimate alienation from and in opposition to Europe, the European tradition of Christian litany as well as its cultural community'

(Orientalism, 1978). In his powerful critique, Said draws attention to the dynamics of power by which the Arab/Muslim or 'oriental' person is appropriated by inherently authoritative modes of writing - what he refers to as 'technologies of power', which include Western ownership of the production, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas which have resulted in the creation of a certain image of the oriental/Muslim person. The Muslim is too often treated as being incapable of representing himself. The task is then appropriated by others but only to suit their own preconceived notions of what he is. The West, Said insists, sees the oriental/Muslim as an essentially primitive human being who is in need of civilising control. Rendered silent and dehumanised, he is furthermore dispossessed of history.

In continuation of this reductive view, the Islamic religion remains firmly tied to Arab culture and language regardless of the fact that 85 percent of Muslims ^{today} live outside the Middle East. The orientalist concept of Islam as a timeless monolithic (a view, sometimes encouraged by Muslims themselves in an attempt at projecting a unified front) persists in spite of evidence to ^{the contrary} and has led to sweeping characterizations which transform different groups of people into a homogenous body. As S. P. Mohanty notes, notions of "otherness" tend to imply that other people are the same, that to study one aspect or one group is know the whole. The fact that West Africans have over several centuries assimilated Islam and made it their own is completely negated.

Interestingly, more than anything else, it is Muslim women who have come to symbolize the "otherness" of Islam and of Islamic societies. Where this religion is concerned no other subject has attracted more curiosity, yet proven more susceptible to stereotyping than the Muslim woman. The concept of her as an enslaved person whose life is subordinated to that of her male kin is carried to extremes when she is also of black African origin at which point, discussions refuse to go beyond comfortable generalizations.

Perhaps this is why in *Beyond the Veil* (1987) Fatima Mernissi writes that 'the discourses people develop about themselves respond to the need for self-representation and identity building'. Evidence of this is Zaynab Alkali's

narratives which are peopled with characters and focus on preoccupations that are distinguishable as emerging from a peculiar background unlike what may be found in the Middle East. In the Nigerian literary scene, her declarations notwithstanding, Alkali appear to be placed in a position of not only having to reassert her Islamic identity but also of renegotiating her traditional cultural background. Her focus on Islam is undoubtedly an attempt at coming to terms with a significant force which has shaped her outlook as well as that of her society. Kenneth Harrow writes in the seminal text *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991) that Islam has come to:

Occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people - psychological spaces, governing first the territory of the mind, at times motivated by economic or other self-interested concerns, and then larger, external spaces of an increasingly political and social nature.

Certainly in the light of recent world events, we know that Islam as a religious doctrine exerts strong influence on the imagination of those who profess and this includes writers of fiction such as Ousmane Sembene, Mariama Ba, Ibrahim Tahir, and of course Zaynab Alkali all whose works 'testify to a growing desire to focus entirely upon comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos' (p60). However it is important to note that while their creative works willingly challenge people's behaviour, a line is drawn against the irreverent treatment of sacred Islamic texts, saints, and laws. It is in this very separation between what is permissible for use as literary material, and what is not that, lays the difference between Western and Muslim approaches to the novel.

In *The Stillborn*, Alkali is clearly concerned with the subject matter of the female presence, the strengths, weaknesses, and potentials of Muslim women. However she avoids describing their lives solely in terms of the creed they profess because to do so would be to impose non-existent boundaries on ^{their} multi-textured lives. Instead, the stance she ~~adopts~~ ^{adopts} is that at any given time, multiple forces are at work influencing both attitudes and choices of women. For as long as Islam has been in West Africa it has had to contend with indigenous traditions which sometimes permit actions that are contrary to its precepts. In addition, western education has also

effected changes in the social arrangements. Combined, all of these factors have necessarily contributed to the complexities and contradictions in women's situation in Northern Nigeria. But the novel's particular concern is the status of daughters in the parental home, the need for viable relationships between husbands and wives, and the re-education women's perception of themselves.

From the state of perpetual conflict that exists between men and women in the in *The Stillborn*, Alkali at first appears to join the struggle for equality that has concerned a number of African women writers. A preoccupation which Anthonia Ekpa blames on an uncritical acceptance of 'a western concept of a world divided along gender lines.' Consequently even in criticism, when novels by women writers are examined, issues are polarised on gender lines. In the dialectics of sexism there appears to be little room for mediation between male and female. The situation is simply one in where the rise of one translates into the subjugation of the other. Where one side strives to maintain its position as the other ~~strives~~^{struggles} to change it.

Ekpa's claim that African women writers become so embroiled in the battle of the sexes they end up glamorising ideas and practices that are contrary to traditional African values maybe true of Flora Nwapa's depiction of Amaka who rejects the institution of marriage in *Once is Enough* but the same cannot be said of Zaynab Alkali. On the contrary, Alkali shares Catherine Achonolu's view that:

It is impossible, almost suicidal, for African women to adopt western feminist ideologies without regard for the basic fundamental historical, cultural, and ideological differences in the experiences, world-view and *raison d'être* of both cultures.

In fact Alkali's concerns in *The Stillborn* demonstrate a keen awareness of the implications both tradition and religious values have on society. Her women characters never reject their world but attempt to solve their problems within it. Therefore, since marriage is a vital part of the cultural milieu she writes about, the novel exhibits the respect normally accorded to it among Nigerian Muslims.

I will suggest here that a large part of her inspiration comes from a source closer home, one that is familiar to Northern Nigerian scholars. Rather than the Western feminist ideas African women writers are said to have embraced, it is likely that Alkali has looked inward to a move for social change which predates Western Influence in Northern Nigeria. That is the one initiated by the Islamic reformer Usman Dan Fodio in the 18th century. In defence of the rights of women Dan Fodio criticised what he termed the 'oppressive customs' of married men:

.....they fail to dress, house and feed their wives adequately, they show favouritism between one wife and another and make unwise and hasty marriages without due thought..... They revile their wives and beat them excessively... they do not educate them and if they divorce them they spread malicious tales about them thereby ruining their chances of remarriage...others refuse to divorce unhappy wives..... My goodness! All these are evidence of ignorance.

The treatment of marriage and trials of women in *The Stillborn* mirror the concerns raised in the above to a degree that suggests Alkali has been influenced by Dan Fodio's teachings after all, his ideas are still an integral part of Northern Nigerian social consciousness. Certainly a sense of continuity is projected by the similarities between the experiences of women during his time and of those in the present day Nigeria. Importantly serves to emphasise the depth of Alkali's connection to the religious aspirations as well as traditions of her people both which are the most powerful determinants of women's place in society.

The narrative of *The Stillborn* is structured around Li, a young woman whose attempts at defining a place for herself on her own terms brings her into frequent conflict with traditional expectations and with her father who is depicted as the main upholder of Islam in the novel. Other characters and events are seen and assessed through her eyes even as Li herself goes through a process of personal development which spans her childhood, adolescence, womanhood and her old age (if her dream is taken into account). We first encounter her as a young girl just returned home from boarding school and witness the first indications of resistance against stifling male domination when she initiates various escapades in direct challenge to her father's authority. Marriage at the tender age of fifteen to the flamboyant Habu

affords her escape from the confinement of the parental home and the constant criticism of a village community which regards her spirited behaviour as the result of being 'badly trained'. The long period of waiting she endures before she joins her husband in the city is spent naïvely daydreaming about happiness and mutual achievements for her and for him. He would become a doctor while she would train to be a teacher and they would live together in a 'big European house full of servants, the smooth body, the long silk hair.... There was no end to the luxuries the city could offer'. During this stage of her life, Li seems to be drawn to average middleclass notions of feminine beauty and social status. The city represents for her an environment where usual religious and traditional restrictions would not apply. However these hopes are stillborn because she eventually finds her desires and ambitions constrained by the non-cooperation of her husband. In the course of the narrative, we see Li learning from personal disappointment and from the trials of women closest to her, her sister Awa and best friend Faku whose stories both run parallel to her own. From their combined experiences she learns not to rely on anyone but herself. The strength, determination, and resourcefulness she exhibited since childhood come to her aid as she struggles fiercely to change the course of her life. Despite of its title, the novel ends on a positive note with Li making a triumphant return to her father's house and to a newly acquired eminence in the affairs of her family.

As Stewart Brown notes, *The Stillborn* grows out of a finely observed recreation of a culturally and religiously 'mixed village', one that is akin to Alkali's own personal experience of living in northern Nigeria. Instead of propagating the common myth about the entirely Islamic nature of this particular part of the country, the novel demonstrates a firm grasp of the situation by depicting the reality of co-existence among the Muslims, Christians, and those who continue to venerate ancestral gods thus offering a legitimate explanation for the blend of attitudes and practices we find in the novel.

The place and effect traditional beliefs still have on the consciousness of people in Alkali's novel is represented by the compassionate figure of Li's grandfather Kaka. Faith in ancient gods housed in a cave in nearby woods, as well as belief in the existence of an unbroken link between the past and the present that is demonstrated

by traditional celebrations of the major events of life and death is comforting for some people who find more harmony in them than in the tensions generated by foreign forces symbolised by the Mission Memorial Hospital, and the Muslim prayer house. Tolerance and accommodation of all creeds and all people seems to be the overriding principle of this old belief system which also appears to invest ardent followers like Kaka with an understanding of human relations that is absent in adherents of other religions. Alkali deliberately informs the reader that the old way also enfolds within its embrace women who understand the 'language of the gods' (p. 37). Significantly, Kaka's fondness for Li and his evident admiration of her spirit is in turn acknowledged by the girl who respects his views although he is neither of Muslim nor of the Christian religions. With some regret she sees him as a 'lion among men. A man without equal, the last of his kind' (p. 10).

It is a testimony of Alkali's artistic skill that although she does not make frequent use of Islamic phrases as found in the works of other Muslim writers like Tahir or Kane, but Islam nevertheless maintains a strong presence in *The Stillborn*, colouring the attitudes and affecting the lives of its main characters. The few references to the Islamic faith which separates its adherents from those Baba scornfully refers to as 'heathens' and 'unbelievers' are occasional mention of 'Allah', the Islamic term for God. In its unwillingness to adapt to certain traditional practices that the villagers in the novel are accustomed to, the foreign nature of Islam is indirectly highlighted. For instance, the passage below hints at Baba's disapproval of traditional social gatherings where men and women mingle freely:

Today was the end-of-year-festival and the village would be in a festive mood from dawn to dusk.....It had always been a joyous occasion for the healthy, the strong, the men and women of hot blood. No one would remain at home except pregnant women, the infants, the infirm and the eccentric. Li knew her household fell into the last category...But fate has its own way of dealing with things. Baba was away from the village and would not return for the next three days (p48)

Right at the beginning of the narrative when we encounter Li's trepidation at the thought of returning home from boarding school, the focus seems to be on the repression of women in both family and society. However, with regard to the segregation of the sexes, Alkali appears to suggest that the degree to which it is practiced is not determined by the demands of Islam alone but that other factors such as history, tradition, education and personal inclination come into play.

As the main upholder of Islam in the novel, Baba's rigid ideas conflict with what normally obtains in his society where many tolerate the existence of other beliefs and practices. Traditional rituals which involve gatherings are vital to the cohesion of society; hence, his refusal to allow his daughters to participate in traditional communal activities is represented as an aberration that can rupture the social fabric. An indication of that breakdown is immediately evident in his interaction with members of his own family, especially the women with whom he shares a relationship that is nothing less than acrimonious. Of his relationship with his stepmother who the children refer to as Grandma, the novel says 'they shared a hatred for each other though this was thinly disguised under a veneer of polite tolerance' (p8). However, such pretence is not practised where his wife is concerned; instead he heaps abuse on her for the misdemeanours of the children:

A heathen woman can only have heathen children. Why I married you is what I can never understand. There were many believing women in my village, but I had to end up marrying from a heathen village. And even after I have civilised you, you still behave like heathens. (p13)

Aside from the disrespect evident in the above speech, a firm belief in the superiority of Islam over traditional forms of worship is conveyed. What is particularly significant is that it emerges from a mentality that sees man as being in a position to confer legitimacy on a woman's relationship with God. Baba's sense of superiority is hinged on the hierarchical structure Fatmah Sabbah attempts to explicate in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*(1984) where God occupies an exclusive position at the top of a pyramidal order followed by man whose the sole purpose is to worship Him, and at the bottom of the ladder, woman, man's handmaid.

Fatna Sabbah goes on to convincingly elaborate the concept of surrender in Islam to which women's position in society can be directly linked. According to her a woman's obedience to her husband is not just a marginal device in Islam but a central element necessary for the viability of the whole system:

The believer is fashioned in the image of woman, deprived of speech and will and committed to obedience to another (God). The female condition and the male condition are not different in the end to which they directed, but in the pole around which they orbit. The lives of beings of the male sex revolve around the divine will. The lives of beings of the female sex revolve around the will of believers of the male sex.

Where such an ordering of the sexes is accepted or taken for granted as in Tayeb Saheh's *Season of Migration to the North*, men then reserve the right to describe and prescribe what appropriate behaviour is for women. However, contradictions inherent in this stance become evident on closer scrutiny. For example, it is ironic that although in *The Stillborn* Baba positions himself as the head of the family who by virtue of his male gender is naturally vested with the responsibility of moulding his family to Islamic ways; he in fact relies on the women to carry the heavier burden of that Islamic identity. Fatima Memissi, Fatna Sabbah, Camillia Fawz El-Solh and Judy Mabro in their various works point out correctly that it is women who are charged the task of figuring Islam's cultural 'difference'. The practice of segregating the sexes and in other instances, insistence on the veil, enables Islam to render visible the difference between those inside the religion and those outside of it. Women are therefore the border without which Islam would not appear as clearly as it does. Consequently, no matter how ardently Islamic Baba himself is, he finds no satisfaction until the women in his household behave in a manner he deems appropriate for Muslims.

However, although Alkali does not make this distinction, all the blame for Baba's attitude towards women cannot be laid on Islam. Thus Deniz Kandiyoti sounds a pertinent warning when she writes that:

Different systems of male dominance and their internal variations according to class and ethnicity, exercise an influence that inflects and modifies the actual practice of Islam as well as the ideological constructions of what may be regarded as properly Islamic.

This is amply illustrated by a significant incident in *The Stillborn*. In an instance of rebellion against her father, Li persuades her older but more malleable sister Awa to join her in a village dance. Reminded that her father considers it a 'heathenish' practice, Li retorts, "Let me be a heathen, I'd be much happier. At least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been" (p.3). Her father's desire to thrash this defiance out of her is only checked when his son Sule, under pressure from Li, confess to being involved in the same escapade. As on other occasions when Alkali explores the minds of her characters in order to press home a particular point, this incident triggers a train of thoughts which vividly illustrate not Baba's views on religious obligations, but thoughts on male privileges that have their roots in a traditional patriarchal past:

What worried him now was what was he to do with this man-child? He was a man now; it wasn't just his age, but what he stood for. He could beat Awa easily if she erred, no matter how old she was, but not Sule, firstborn male child. And to beat a man for going out to dance at night was outrageous. (p.23)

This is revelatory glimpse into Baba's thinking coincides with Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's view that the traditional idea that men are naturally superior to women in essence continues to permeate social structures and arrangements in contemporary Nigeria.¹⁷ Baba's character, unattractive and motivated by deeply held prejudices is deliberately used to communicate the novel's insight into patriarchal notions which underline both traditional and Islamic views of women.

The inner strength or weakness of the women in *The Stillborn* and the extent to which they challenge male authority stems from the degree to which they have internalised these modes of perception regarding masculine privilege and notions of their own subordination. Here Alkali appears to be in accord with Ogundipe-Leslie's

suggestion that perhaps the biggest barrier standing in the way of the African woman is her own self-perceptions. Ogundipe-Leslie believes that 'women are shackled by their own negative self-image....Her own reactions to objective problems therefore, are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self assertive actions are needed'.¹⁸ The different reactions of Li and Awa when confronted with their father's anger illustrate two ways of handling male dominance. Overcoming her initial trepidation, Li is quick to note of her father's hesitancy when her brother comes into the fray. She 'no longer looked fidgety. Her eyes grew bold.... Sule had covered for her but Li knew very well that Sule's heroism was on his own account' because she had caught him smoking, and, 'she was not one to take any beating alone' (p23). He may be her favourite sibling but she is not blinded to the advantages his male gender affords him and therefore dispassionately weighs the value of his support. Her evident awareness of the unjust reasons behind Baba's forces him to back down. The question the novel intends the reader to ask because the whole premise of the narrative is based on it, is why Li's reaction so different from that of her sister ?

Although raised in the same family where their parents have made vigorous attempts to inculcate similar ideas into them, the sisters nevertheless display diametrically opposed responses to male dominance. The same is evident in the attitudes of the older women in the novel, Grandma and Mama. Awa's conciliatory replies to her father's inquisition illustrates not only Ogundipe-Leslie's observations about the diffident nature of some women, it also repeats a pattern of female behaviour towards men that is inherited from her mother.

In same vein Alkali appears determined to explode the myth of the sacred mother figure that critics are fond of identifying in literary texts. In *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981), Filomena Steady confident assertion that motherhood is crucial to women's status in African society because 'even in patrilineal societies women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of their husband's lineage' is challenged by the experiences of the women in Alkali's novel. Whether they have or not provided their husbands with numerous offspring as Mama and Awa have done, or just the one child as in the cases of Li and Faku, all appear to be equally traumatised by their relationships with

their husbands. In fact Mama exemplifies the kind of woman Ogunjipe-Leslie again refers to in her article, a woman who once married becomes a mere possession, voiceless, and without rights in her husband's house. She is submerged by a deep sense of inferiority that is palliated only by her right to labour for her family (p87). Her inability to exert her will prevents her from enjoying the advantages both tradition and Islam believe should accrue to her through her children. However, in a novel that is obviously devoted to examining the condition of women's lives, an incongruous note is struck by the brevity of the narrative where this mother figure is concerned. Depicted as the stereotypical African woman and mired in an unchanging perception of her low status, Mama is marginalised by the author as much as she is by her family. The only time she speaks out directly in the novel is to rebuke Li for her forward manner towards the master of house. Such insubstantial involvement of the mother with what happens in the novel is at odds with Alkali's own stated views in that interview with Adeola James regarding the presence of women in African Literature:

I can confidently say that in African Literature, women are not even adequately presented, not to talk of being treated in one way or another. With very few exceptions, women are minor characterizations to give the story life-likeness.

Through their attitude of meekness and self-sacrifice, women like Mama, Awa and Ladi in Alkali's other novel *The Virtuous Woman*, project dutiful conformity with societal expectations. The dissatisfaction they feel about their marriages does not drive them to seek solutions. Indeed members of their own sex who desire change as seen problematic, their alternative ways of coping with their situations a betrayal of traditions which will bring confusion to women's roles. As far as Awa is concerned, there is no escape from a woman's duty. Her attitude is that men can break down but women must learn to cope with whatever is thrown at them thus perpetuating the double standard that is the bane of women's lives. Her compliant nature and the fact that she does not take recourse in the provisions set out for her benefit in Islam, ensures that she is seen as a willing victim of her circumstances.

The Stillborn certainly makes its strongest impact on the reader when it represents women who refuse to buckle under the combined pressure of traditional and religious demands which conspire to limit their activities. Catherine Achonolu(1986) observes further that, '*The Stillborn* is essentially a vehement registration of a feminist discontent, which is at once dynamic, fiercely radical, positively revolutionary and progressive'. Desiring to highlight women whose response to the situations they are faced with is strong, courageous and opposite of Mama's and Awa's, Alkali deviates from a folklorist depiction of a gentle and wise Grandmother. Of Grandma in *The Stillborn*, Adeola James notes that 'she has a vibrancy that is unique in African literature'. A fact that is entirely due to Alkali's portrayal which takes into account the old woman's personal dilemmas and struggles, not against external forces, but against intimate adversaries such as fathers, husbands and sons. Mildred Hill-Lubin(1986) rightly asserts that the grandmother provides a useful example for other women because, 'she has participated in kindred subjugating experiences and has survived' and therefore provides an alternative example of female behaviour. These older women, hardened by time and circumstances, have looked life directly in the face and have not wavered. It is they who speak the language of perseverance and survival, to younger generations of women. It is interesting to note Grandma recognition of Li's independent spirit in spite of the fact that her attempts at camaraderie are rebuffed by the young girl who is not immediately aware of how much she has in common with the old woman who has mastered the art of how to be an individual, survive criticism, and perhaps even thrive on it. 'Li liked her funny stories but disliked her dirty habits and foul language' (p.8). However, language is a well-honed tool that Grandma employs in retaliation to the threat of male physical violence that is regularly issued to the women in the novel.

Indeed, in Alkali's novel, other damaging methods are used more actively to subdue contentious women. Here a woman who refuses to succumb to its rules can in retaliation castigated and treated like a malevolent presence. Because the witch is seen as the most deliberate violator of social norms, everyone from her own immediate family to the villagers accuse Grandma of being one. The society appears to move with ease between ancient theories of perverted feminine power and the Islamic religion they profess without radical changes in its attitudes towards women. This is perhaps because in the Quran (Surah *Al-Falaq*), the believer is encouraged

to seek refuge in God from 'the mischief of those who practise secret arts'. According to Abdullahi Yusuf Ali, the renowned translator and commentator of the Quran, this refers to the feminine identity of those who practice witchcraft but he carefully adds that chapter is actually intended to warn against the danger of believing in superstition. Unfortunately, the same is often interpreted by those who retain traditional ideas as Islam's acknowledgement of the existence of witches. Perhaps more to the point here is idea that Carole Boyce Davies points out, if the witch appears wicked, it is simply because such a woman poses a real danger to patriarchal society.

Grandma's ability to voice her opinions the way she does contradicts the stereotype of male power and female impotence favoured by Western discussions of African/Muslim women. She speaks the language of a defiant woman who would rather run the risk of being labelled a witch or a troublesome woman than submit to the coercive tactics of male gender oppression. As Trinha Minha points out in *The Moon Waxes Red* (1991), 'an enunciation is only defined in relationship to its verbal surroundings'. Therefore, the derogatory terms Grandma employs in her criticism of the hypnotic influence men exercise over women, and women's own culpability in the situation inspires great dismay in those who listen to her because they are taken from within a social context that is familiar to them.

On the occasion of a fierce outburst, from Grandma, such is the power of her words 'the men went about their business nervously, not daring to walk in the old woman's direction' (p53). Their natural wariness of female rebellion that has the potential of overturning a social system which privileges them especially when the rules of marriage, traditional and Islamic, are contravened by Grandma's absolute refusal to be part of a polygamous arrangement, is skilfully captured in the novel. 'She drove three other wives from the compound' and as if this is not enough, adamantly refused Kaka's several attempts to divorce her. Such an unapologetic resistance to polygamy is rarely recorded in fiction because the practice is usually treated as the norm in African society. Certainly, as a woman who has no 'feminine' fear of appearing aggressive in making her demands known, Grandma in *The Stillborn* is unrivalled.

As far as Alkali is concerned, subversive action by women is not only inspired by examples they have before them or how much they are conditioned to certain responses by either tradition or religion, but depends to a great extent on the mettle of individual characters. In the difficult struggle they are involved in women need to have visionary qualities, the ability to predict a future with acceptable conditions of life. This explains why dreams are an important element in the novel. BUT as John Mbiti notes In *African Religions and Philosophy* (1988), many African people do not always distinguish between witchcraft, sorcery, the evil eye, or other methods of employing mystical powers, all are simply held in awe. Hence Li's gift for prediction is feared and disapproved of by her father because of its supernatural potential but also because of the advantage it gives her over him. However while this ability is given prominence in *The Stillborn*, Alkali carefully resists the temptation to glorify it as an aspect of African tradition, preferring instead to treat it as an integral part of her heroine's psyche from which she draws strength and confidence.

Both tradition and Islam seem to collude with each other to perpetuate the idea that in order for women to gain in esteem they have to enter into marriage. Consequently Alkali goes to great length to meticulously represent women as striving to survive within marriage in spite of the obstacles they encounter in the form of negative masculine behaviour. All the young women in the novel aspire to the marital state because they have internalised their society's preference for it (p.6). However, in due course they are all forced to change their ideas about the emotional and material support they expected from their husbands. The higher the expectations, the more disillusioned with the reality they are faced with. Some of women e embittered by their experiences and give up on the institution, others who are more resourceful refuse to be swamped by the challenges it poses and work to remould it to suit their individual needs.

The absence of arranged marriages in *The Stillborn* challenges one of the most widely accepted notions about the lives of Muslim women and cautions against totalising presumptions about people of the same faith regardless of the peculiarity of their cultural backgrounds. Similarly, neither monogamy nor polygamy is considered a precondition or recipe for happiness in the novel. The prevailing attitude towards polygamy is summed up by Faku who pragmatically declares that if her husband

'could afford to feed a dozen wives who was she to object'. Only on this issue are the three men cast opposite Li, Awa, and Faku allowed to express individual opinions as Alkali carefully acknowledges that not all men are in favour of polygamy. Dan Faima's position is 'He didn't consider himself a suitable candidate for polygamy' (p.46). On the other hand, Habu's belief that it is not possible to love more than one woman at a time is later on confirmed by his own behaviour when he neglects Li for another woman.

Throughout the novel, Alkali handles the women's awareness of their predicament with considerable artistic skill. For example, by means of an evocative tale included in the novel, she deals with one of the most difficult obstacles women have to overcome. That is, women's self-policing tendencies which persuades them that the very values which oppress them are necessary to their identity as women. Since they themselves are often involved in perpetuating hegemonic discourses of femininity that values them only in terms of their productivity as child bearers, and as labourers, the village women in the tale not surprisingly applaud alongside men when Manu claims to have nothing to offer his bride but hard work. Even when his impotence eventually comes to light, there is still no recognition of the injustice done to his young wife who through no fault of her own suffered the ridicule meted out to infertile women. Rather, 'They regretted asking deep questions. Without meaning to, they had stripped their clansman naked for all eyes to feast on' (p.55).

The use of the device of the song above to articulate the young woman's difficult position achieves two goals. First, it mediates a way around the reserve that is expected of women on such a delicate matter, and second, it maintains her right to speak of her problems. This short tale of courage, resourcefulness, and self-help manages to encapsulate Alkali's ardent wish that women take the initiative in negotiating the course of their lives rather than allow themselves become captives of flawed traditions. The rigidity of social expectations where women are concerned and the double standards in operation in this society are skilfully captured in the novel's examination of Li's and Habu's marriage. Alkali's heroine falls outside normative paradigms and is therefore severely criticised for leaving her husband to occupy an indistinct zone without the definite boundaries circumscribed by male authority. But images of ruin, despair, and abandonment conjured up in her dreams

caution against placing too much reliance on husbands. Awa sadly laments their shattered illusions: 'None of our dreams seem to have come true, not even Faku. I learnt the world has collapsed on her head' (p.93). So desperately did all three women want their romantic illusions to come true they had chosen to ignore the other voice of their people that is audible in the adage 'a woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan' (p.85). However Li's act of reclaiming an aspiration to train to become a teacher which she had set aside for marriage acts as a balm for her matrimonial wounds. Filomena Steady once wrote, 'True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and the determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of the black women in Africa ... have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice'. Phoenix-like both Li and Faku rise from the ashes of their marital disappointments as education and waged employment bring about the triumph for them. Certainly, when Li returns for her beloved Grandfather's funeral she is held in higher esteem than before. The accolade Awa bestows on her clearly defines her sister's new status: "You are the man of the house now", she tells Li as the assembled mourners await directions.

Indeed by exploring the dynamics of modern Nigerian society and using it to construct an eminent position for her heroine Alkali is able to challenge the prevailing patriarchal belief that the destiny of the family and by extension of society resides in men alone. There is subtle irony in her representation of the favoured son Sule in whom Baba had invested all his hopes choosing to abandon both father and home so that it falls on the undervalued daughter to take up the mantle of leadership in the family. The villager's acceptance of role reversal in this family is a reminder that traditions inscribed in common memory are not as static as they are often rendered, but are mutable and in flux.

But most important of all, the conclusion towards which the narrative of *The Stillborn* is directed becomes apparent when it does not end at the point of Li's triumphant return to the village. Rather, Alkali goes on to write: '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' (p102). The reader is left to wonder about where this discontent springs from? Now an independent woman of thirty-three, she chooses to have another go at her marriage despite the fact Habu is now crippled

from a terrible car accident and abandoned by the other woman (p.105). The novel ends advocating neither the supremacy of one sex nor the submergence of the other but suggesting instead partnership between men and women. While this is an overt expression of the writer's optimism about the future, this ending also validates and reaffirms something Alkali has never doubted for one moment, and what Islam as well as tradition totally approve of, that is, the institution of marriage.

The most important message of the novel is conveyed in the last dream in the novel her old age when Li pass the wisdom she has acquired to a new generation of women:

It is well to dream child.....Everybody does, and as long as we live, we shall continue to dream. But it is also important to remember that like babies dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn. (p.104)

Through the metaphor of its title, the novel calls upon women to purge themselves of romantic illusions. It is as much a warning against the false consciousness that they induce in women as it is a rallying call for them to have confidence in their own abilities to construct the kind of lives they want. Ultimately, *The Stillborn* is a reminder that while women have to negotiate their roles and status within the boundaries prescribed by the powerful forces of tradition and religion, in the end it is microlevel variables, of intellect, courage, resourcefulness vested in the individual woman that will enable to influence her possibilities.

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