

Women and Patriarchy in Recent Feminist Writings: A Study of Selected Works by Zaynab Alkali

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Abstract

Patriarchal moulded structures inhibit the growth and self-actualisation of the woman. In most societies, the woman is seen as the 'the Other Sex' who is meant to behave in a circumscribed way. However, in recent times, women have broken the wall of patriarchy and have moved from the margin to the centre where they control and take full responsibility for their actions. Thus, using the selected works of Zaynab Alkali, this paper discusses the position of the women in modern African society. Adopting the African feminist theory as the framework –

which is geared towards entrenching partnership, harmonious living and complementarity between the sexes – the paper examines the aspects of patriarchal society that inhibits the woman and the conscious efforts she makes toward breaking the barrier. The study concludes that although the women in the texts challenge the norms and beliefs that are detrimental to their emotional and physical wellbeing, they still partner with the men in ensuring mutual and peaceful co-existence.

Introduction

A major feature of postcolonial African society is its patriarchal nature which is reflected in every aspect of the society. This feature determines the social relations between men and women and gives men the leverage to dominate the women. Hence, women are reduced to second-class status and conditioned by societal practices to accept this status. Women are indoctrinated to be contented with their roles as wives, mothers, care-givers and nurturers. In patriarchal societies, women are not permitted to question certain practices that are detrimental to their well being such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, unwholesome widowhood practices and preference for the male child and other issues. The generally perceived notion in patriarchal societies is that women are incidental beings; hence they are unable to make meaningful contributions to the development of the

society.

Patriarchy as a term is normally used to describe the power of the father as the head of the household. The power enables him to control the productive resources, labour force and the reproductive capacities within the family. However, the term has been used within the post 1960s women's writings to refer to the social mechanisms that reproduce and exert male dominance over women thereby encouraging and entrenching male supremacy and female subordination. Makama (2013) elucidates the concept of patriarchy, thus:

patriarchy is a broad network or system of hierarchical organization that cuts across political, economic, social, religious, cultural, industrial and financial spheres, under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men. Thus, any system that operationalizes an order that accords men undue advantage over women is considered patriarchal. (117)

The *Encyclopaedia of Sex and Gender* defines patriarchy as 'an old general term for the disproportionate holding of power and authority by

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males. (xxix). According to the *Women's Studies Encyclopaedia*, 'most feminists would agree that patriarchy entails efforts by men to control women's bodies.' (1049). In the *Concise Encyclopaedia of Sociology*, patriarchy is described as 'originally used to describe autocratic rule by a male head of a family, patriarchy has been extended to describe a more general system in which power is secured in the hands of adult men.' (441) Kramarae refers to patriarchy as 'the systematic organisation of male supremacy and female subordination.' (2) Carole Pateman, a feminist and political theorist writes that 'patriarchy is an unjust social system that is oppressive to women.... The patriarchal construction of difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subject' (207).

In as much as the woman's access to certain opportunities is inhibited by the belief systems which are determined by the patriarchal nature of the society, she strives to carve a niche for herself within her limited space. Some of Buchi Emecheta's and Flora Nwapa's early novels depict the subordinate role and inferior status of the woman in traditional African society. For instance, in situations where the woman is the breadwinner of the family and the members of the community are aware of the fact, the society expects her to relinquish control of the finances totally to the man. Ma Palagada in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1985) is an industrious woman whose wealth is acquired by sheer dint of hardwork. However, she does not exercise control over the finances of the Palagada family. Although it is common knowledge within the community that she is singlehandedly responsible for the family's upkeep, her husband, Pa Palagada determines the day-to-day running of the affairs in the home. Ma Palagada does not question his actions and decisions. Even when she notices that her husband is having a sexual relationship with one of the servants in the home, she condones his infidelity until the servant gets impregnated by him. Her inability to challenge him stems from the erroneous belief that a woman belongs to the man including her wealth and it is uncultured to challenge the man.

However, a study of the novels subsequently

written by women writers shows a gradual but dramatic shift of women from the subordinate position to position of authority. The woman is no longer the unseen and voiceless human being, rather, she ensures that her voice is heard and she airs her views about situations that affect her and also the happenings in the society. The woman is assertive and bold to challenge practices and beliefs that are detrimental to her emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing. Zaynab Alkali's earlier novels such as *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Virtuous Woman* (1986) portray female characters that acquiesce to male domination and accept their subordinate status. Although Li, Awa and Faku try to make the best out of their unfavourable situation by getting an education and ensuring that they are financially independent after the sad experiences with their husbands in the cities, they do not possess the boldness needed to challenge the selfish actions of their men. Alkali's recent works however portray women who are bold and challenge age-long practices which are condoned in patriarchal cultures. For instance, in *The Descendants*, she portrays a society 'that is not just girl-child and development friendly but actually celebrates the phenomenon. There is a remarkable portrayal of a visionary society peopled by men that think and see beyond gender chauvinism. (Ojinma and Egya 3-4) In Chioma Opara's 'The Foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novels.', she examines the attempts by Alkali's female characters to extricate themselves from patriarchal holds through a metaphoric analysis of the foot as a means by which the female characters walk out of bondage imposed on them by society.

In the same vein, Ifeoma Okoye's works mirror the struggle by women in creating a space for themselves in male dominated societies, amidst the challenges encountered and the successes achieved. This section discusses the steps taken by women in contemporary novels to challenge patriarchal domination thereby giving them a voice in the society.

Challenging Patriarchal Systems

The girl-child, in patriarchal societies, is deemed a property whose ownership will eventually be

transferred to her husband. Therefore, in most cases, she is married off at an early age, since it is perceived that the resources that will be expended for her upkeep and education should be channelled towards the grooming of the male-child who will ensure the continuity of the family name and welfare. The girl is usually not given the opportunity to marry the man of her choice, rather, she is, in most cases, forced to marry an older man, especially in Islamic societies. In this regard, Salami asserts that:

Child marriage is an attempt to prevent promiscuity and a way of protecting family honour by preventing teenage pregnancy. In as much as there are cultural reasons for child marriage, it has a lot of negative effects on the health, psychology and social well-being of women and girls. (27)

Magira Milli in Alkali's *The Descendants* (2005) is aware of the dangers of child marriage and resolves to put an end to it in the Ramta family. When she discovers that her son, Ali, plans to stop the education of his seventeen year old niece, Peni, and get her married to Madu Chimba, the village butcher, a man old enough to be her father, she vehemently opposes the plans. When Ali Ramta informs Magira of his intentions, 'Magira Milli was totally outraged. No one has ever seen her this upset before. Her voice rose and fell, as she argued with her son over the young woman. She insisted Peni should wait for a better offer or, better still, continue with her education' (*Descendants* 14). Although Ali succeeds in his plans, Magira boldly expresses her misgivings and the fact that she 'abhorred the idea of interrupting Peni's education for her to be married to a man in what she described as the 'meat business' (*Descendants* 17).

Alkali adds another dimension to this argument by indicting the men and making them regret their actions in marrying little girls. The men see the failure in their lives, businesses and unexplained ill health as retributive justice for their wrong actions. Usman decides to marry his friend's daughter shortly after Maina's demise. Later in life, he is tormented by a debilitating and terminal illness, he

concludes that God is punishing him for marrying Mero who was as good as his daughter. He says:

I was wrong I have wronged the people I dearly love. In doing so, I have wronged my soul. I have never succeeded in looking at her as a woman.... I still see her as a daughter. The little girl we brought up together, Maina and I. I made a bad mistake. Almighty God will pardon me. (*Descendants* 85, 97)

He then prays for Mero's life and the forgiveness of his wife.

In patriarchal societies, violence against women, especially in marriages, is condoned. Women usually shy away from reporting cases of violence against them because of the general perception that the man has the right to treat his wife as he pleases. Even when the woman brings her problem to the attention of the members of the extended family, her case is treated with levity. The physical and emotional pain of the woman is not taken into consideration; rather, she is expected to see it as a normal occurrence in marriage since a typical patriarchal society treats the wife as property to her husband and he has the right to beat her as penalty for insubordination or her perceived wrongdoing.

In Alkali's *The Descendants*, Peni is physically abused by her husband and when she goes to report to Aji Ramta, he surprisingly expresses his displeasure at her inability to bear the beatings from her husband. He sees Peni's actions as a disgrace to his family and sends her off with a delegation to her husband the next day. Aji's wife, Dala, also complains about Peni's 'unwarranted' reactions to what she calls 'small beatings from a generous husband' (*Descendants* 34). Magira Milli, however, refuses to accept such an opinion about wife battery and challenges Aji Ramta for regarding it as normal. She berates him and his wife for asking Peni to tolerate such irresponsible actions from her husband. Magira goes ahead to Madu Chimba's home and confronts him. She makes it clear that she cannot be cowed into silence when such blatant injustice is done to a little girl. Little wonder that

Magira eventually succeeds in ensuring that Peni leaves the abusive marriage barely three years later.

The woman, at different stages of her life, is said to belong to a man. First, she belongs to her father as a daughter, then her husband as a wife and then her sons at old age. This perception is encouraged by the patriarchal belief system. Hence, any property or wealth that she acquires as a result of her hard work belongs to the man. She is not allowed to manage the finances and even when there is a mismanagement of the resources by the man, she is not given the opportunity to question such excesses.

Binta, Meramu and Magira in Alkali's *The Descendants* decide to start separate businesses that eventually metamorphose to a successful family enterprise. Although the women are not educated, their diligence, sound business acumen and steadfastness lead to the success of the business. They also become employers of labour in the Makulpo community. However, Ali tells them to open a joint account in his name so he can manage the finances. He is of the view that they are uneducated and will not be able to comprehend the paper work of the business. When the women begin to notice Ali's extravagant spending and his nonchalance in making them privy to the decisions he makes on the finances, they do not relent in expressing their displeasure. When the women discover that the finances are rapidly depleting and at the age of 67, Ali is planning to marry a 25 year old girl as his third wife, they challenge him and demand that he hands over the total management of the investment to them. The women, in spite of their illiteracy are determined to learn the nitty gritty of the records and management of their business. Peace is only restored to the Ramta family when Ali obliges their request.

In addition, Amsa and Yabutu in Alkali's 'Saltless Ash' in *Cobwebs and Other Stories* challenge the patriarchal notion that a man can do as he pleases without taking the opinions and feelings of the women into consideration. Hassan, their husband, decides to take a third wife without taking into cognisance the family's lean resources and his inability to provide the basic needs of the family. He is not perturbed by his numerous children's malnourished look which is largely due to poverty.

His wives, Amsa and Yabutu try to augment the family's income by engaging in petty trade. Hassan's desire to satisfy his male ego hinders him from seeing the welfare of his family as top priority. Since Amsa and Yabutu know that their culture does not permit an outright confrontation with a man, Amsa subtly threatens to walk out of the marriage if he goes ahead to send the first wife away and marry a third wife. The threat works in their favour thereby curbing Hassan's excesses and self-centredness.

Society expects males and females to behave in prescribed stereotypical patterns. The woman is traditionally conditioned to reflect her role as a subservient, obedient, passive and docile person. On the other hand, the man is conditioned to exhibit his manliness by being domineering, aggressive and resist any form of affront to his authority by the woman. The woman is perceived to be incapable of making any meaningful contribution or sensible decisions for the family. 'Women did not have to think. The men always did the thinking for mankind' (*Cobwebs* 17).

According to Maas and Arcuri:

A stereotype can be described as a form of thought process created in our own mind. It is an oversimplification or categorisation of a certain group's traits and behaviour. This oversimplification is based on previous experience with people belonging to the same group. Stereotypes are not merely images in a single person's mind; through language, they are shared and maintained by many. Because language is culturally shared, it provides an ideal means of collectively defining and preserving stereotypical beliefs. (194)

Also, Gamble remarks that 'stereotype can be seen as an ideological discursive strategy which demarcates an us/them binary which functions to reinforce the dominant discourse.' (323) Crawford and Unger posit that 'stereotypes are culturally determined pictures that intrude between an individual's cognitive faculties and his or her perception of the world. Gender stereotypes are therefore consensual beliefs about the different

characteristics of men and women' (49).

Motherhood and wifehood are regarded as a good career that the woman should be contented with. Therefore, she is not expected to aspire for any other ambition. 'To be educated means to want to work and a woman is not meant to work. She is meant to remain quietly at home and remain beautiful for her husband. She is meant to have as many children as she can within the period of her child-bearing' (*Cobwebs* 18). Contrary to these expectations, Mama in Alkali's 'Cobwebs' expresses her desire to go back to school because she is 'completely bored with the idle life of a woman kept in seclusion' (*Cobwebs* 18). Her husband and father reiterate the need for her to accept her role as mother and wife because they are of the view that her quest for education is breaking the already established norm of the society and the 'new development' will 'set a bad precedent to the rest of the young girls in Beta' (*Cobwebs* 19).

Mama succeeds in challenging the stereotypical role of a wife and is eventually allowed to go to the university' but on the condition that she did not study law or medicine. Those professions were too masculine' (*Cobwebs* 19). Mama's exposure to university education affords her the opportunity to view life from different perspectives and realise that she also has the right, just as the man, to make critical decisions for herself.

Also, it is generally perceived that it is the man that has the sole prerogative to terminate a marriage. 'A woman did not reject the man by the ways of the ancestors. It was the other way round' (*Cobwebs* 56). The man has the right to divorce his wife when he pleases and when it occurs, the wife is blamed for failing in carrying out her duties as a wife. However, Mama in Alkali's 'Cobwebs' challenges this belief through her actions. First, on returning from the university for a brief holiday before her final year, she goes to stay in her father's house instead of her husband's. When Amsa, her step mother, tells her that it is improper for her to stay in her father's house, she only goes to her husband's village to see her sons. During the course of Aliyu's brief visit to her family, he notices Mama's 'mark of rebellion' and 'set therefore to curb her excesses by asserting unnecessary authority

over her' (*Cobwebs* 24). From every indication, it is apparent that Mama has resolved to quit the marriage considering the fact that she is pregnant for her university lover, Imam. In the same light, Seytu in Alkali's *The Descendants* walks out of a marriage that she feels is self-centred and aimed at massaging her husband's ego. Alu posits that:

... radical and affirmative, a clear indication that the new woman in Alkali's fiction is prepared, if need be, to discountenance both marriage and any traditional institution that is inhibitive to her self-realisation. Seytu particularly abnegated male protection and determined to be resourceful and self-reliant'. (11)

The actions of these women are unAfrican considering the patriarchal nature of the society. Nevertheless, these women assert themselves and challenge the stereotypical views about women. It is however imperative to note that Alkali is:

not at all calling for or propagating the abandonment of the family institution, Alkali suggests nonetheless that women have no cause hanging onto relations that are unbearable and oppressive. Like Seytu, having been divorced and twice suffering disappointments, at all levels women should explore alternative avenues for turning, their lives around, as insurances against the uncertainties of marriage in particular and life in general. (Mohammed and Kurfi, 178)

Alkali's study on how men's treatment of women under the institution of marriage, especially, given the structures of power in their hands, could naturally produce conditions which will make the search for alternative ways of living by women appear exigent.

In addition, Magira challenges the stereotypical role of a woman as a docile person. Being 'a dominant figure, she had the tendency of undermining male authority' (*Descendants* 232). Interestingly, all the members of the Ramta family recognize the fact that she is bold and that she expresses her feelings concerning any issue without

fear. Her attitude is not mistaken for arrogance or being domineering but the members of her family respect her decisions whether it is convenient for them or not. The members of her family try as much as possible to avoid any form of confrontation with her.

The woman is usually perceived as the weaker vessel in patriarchal cultures. The weakness is expected to be exhibited in her passivity. Interestingly, virtually all the male characters in Alkali's works do not display the strong will, stamina and confidence in conduct that are usually expected in men. Ironically, the female characters outlive their men and thrive better after the demise of their husbands or severing the marital relationship. The women include Meramu, Binta Yawanki, Mero, Dala and Magira Milli. Ali Ramta is a mere male figure who is subject to the control of Magira Milli. Contrary to expectations, the women succeed after the demise of the men in their lives. They become more resourceful and enterprising thereby debunking the erroneous view that women are weak. Magira Milli literally, dominates the novel's plot or entire narrative. And where she is not specifically mentioned, her spirit – towering and imposing - throbs on the pages, compelling her presence. Mohammed and Kurfi aver that:

Her depiction thus as an iron lady, in full control of everything and everyone in the large, supra - extended Ramta family, her carving in a larger-than-life image, her infusion with rare, unequalled super-ordinate, sterling qualities, are Alkali's deconstruction of the myths, infusing positive human qualities, as traits, native alone, to the masculine sex. (176)

It is generally misconceived in patriarchal societies that certain professions such as engineering, law and medicine are 'masculine' courses while the 'feminine' courses are nursing, teaching, home economics among others. Women are encouraged to engage in such professions because of the belief that it will boost their femininity and sharpen their role as mothers and wives. However, in recent years, there has been a steady rise in the number of women

who have ventured into the fields that were hitherto considered to be the sole preserve of the men. Women have proven their mettle in these perceived 'masculine' professions thereby debunking the notion that women do not have the capacity to perform their duties effectively.

Professor Zaki in Alkali's *The Descendants* was initially of the view that Seytu will not be able to work effectively as a paediatrician. His conclusion was based on Seytu's physical appearance and the fact that she is a woman. He was actually expecting a male doctor after his request for an additional doctor in his department. But over time, Seytu earns his admiration, respect and dependence by exhibiting professionalism and hard work. At the end, Prof. Zaki says that 'She was the one person that he could assign a job to and go to sleep.' (*Descendants* 135). He also confesses that 'he could not believe he almost sent her back, one of the best paediatricians he had ever come across in his long years of experience.' (*Descendants* 119) Also, Avi Dayyan in Alkali's *The Initiates* (2007) is a successful geologist. She also contributes to the development of her community as a result of the financial benefits of her profession.

Conclusion

Women have over the years, stepped out from the margins to the centre in patriarchal societies. Unlike the depiction of female characters in the early novels written by women, such as Buchi Emechata's *Slave Girl*, there is a clear indication that women now challenge certain belief systems and expected behavioural pattern that are inherent in male dominated societies. This change is not aimed at confronting the men or usurping their positions. Rather, the actions of these women are geared towards tackling the systems and beliefs that tend to inhibit the development of the woman thereby encouraging an attitudinal change in the society.

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