ISSUES AND INSIGHT IN TO WOMEN EDUCATION: A STUDY OF ALKALI'S THE STILLBORN

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Abstract
The Mexico Program of Action adopted at 1975, International Women Year Conference emphasized that the status of women in society is closely related to national development. Women education in Nigeria could be seen to improving at a very slow pace. What are the problems facing the girl - child education in Nigeria? The answer to this question forms the basis of our discussion in this paper. The three girls discussed in the paper all have their dreams around marriage. All sec marriage as a way of escape from the problems they face at home. Unfortunately, all of them have their dreams aborted. Thus, The Stillborn as presented by Zaynab Alkali

Introduction
Research has shown that there is a correlation between the development of a country and the level of women education of the country. In a male dominated society, women are presented as being inferior to men. Such societies orient their women to accept male supremacy and female inferiority. De Beauvoir (1949), in this vein, argues that women themselves further internalize the supremacy of male over female.

At various levels of development of Nigeria, various reasons were given against women education. For instance, women education during the colonial era was seen as unnecessary as she is supposed to stay at home and take care of the family, the children and her husband alike. Therefore, the few that went to school learnt courses like home economics and needlework. As time went on, fathers started to feel that the husband realizes the dividends of female education. They see training a female as a case of one person working for another to ripe the fruit of his/her labour. Because of these perceptions and others like them, women education suffers in many communities. In some societies, there exist proverbs that help to promote non-acceptance of women education. Sulaiman (2004:109), worked on Ebira Proverbs that are gender biased. One of such proverbs is: Eeyi irezi araka, aasi one zube, If there is no male dog, one could go hunting with a female one.

Women by the analysis of this proverb can only go hunting when there are no males no matter how skillful they may be in hunting. Sulaiman, claims that if women are exposed to certain skills that are erroneously seen as being male preserves including education that the women are very likely to excel. She advised that the cultures that make women feel that they are inferior needs to be changed.

Zaynab Alkali is a writer, a teacher and a mother. She is the author of The Stillborn (1984), The Virtuous Woman (1986) and The Cobwebs (1989). She is the first female novelist from the Muslim North. She represents the emerging vision of the Northern Nigerian woman who for many decades has lived under restrictive Islamic laws, prior to Western education, which changed things. Women can now read religious scripts in a language they understand. But in spite of these advancements, Zaynab (2002:19), claims, "The picture has not changed much, in that the right of women are still not yet enforced at best they are grudgingly recognized." Women education faces a lot of challenges in Nigeria. Some of these challenges as portrayed in The Stillborn forms the hallmark of our discussion in this paper.

The Stillborn opens with Li and Faku, in a lorry with other children traveling back from school to the village. The two are especially happy because they are going home after completing their primary seven educations in a neighboring village. In the midst of clapping, singing, shouting. And the joyful interacting, Li’s Mind wanders to thought of seeing her parents, brothers and sisters. She becomes unhappy. "For a moment she thought of her parents and a dark Shadow crossed her mind, threatening to dampen her happiness."

Under the Islamic laws and Hausa traditional culture in which the novel is set, the woman is silenced under the veil and she dares not protest her experiences in anyway. Sometimes, she is not even concerned if something is wrong with her status quo. So, the mother of Li is not the cause her unhappiness. Conversely, Islamically and traditionally, the words of the man are not only power but also final, no matter how unintelligent it may seem or sound. This setting gives the man a great deal of authority.

Baba is the father of Awa, Sule and Li. The three children live with their parents. The picture of Baba we see in The Stillborn is that of a stern, unloving husband and father in the name of discipline. The children, particularly the female, and their mother fear him to a fault. He blames his wife for any misbehavior of the children. He humiliates and insults her for offences that she has not committed. Alkali succinctly pictures this in the novel when she says:

Only the other day, he had said to her, '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 civilized you, you still behave like heathens. Of course, the lion cub takes after Us mother (p.13).
The couple quarrels at night always. Thus, the woman unleashes her tension on the child in question the next day. The inquisitive Li is aware of this detail, which gives her concern. But whom does she turn to? "She thought of talking to Awa, but quickly dismissed the idea. Awa had a mortal fear of Baba, a fear which made her humble and submissive beyond reason" (p. 13).

While Awa the eldest of the children could be beaten whenever she errs, the case is not the same with Sule the only male child in the family. The children soon get to know about the differential treatment their militant father gives to Sule. Li capitalizes on this and escapes a punishment. She has gone out in the night to watch the funeral and has to break the fence to come in. She does just that only to discover that Sule is awake, hiding to smoke. Li thinks that she will wake up early in the morning to mend the fence before the others wake up. But she could not. Baba discovers this and as usual, calls out all the children in order to find out the offender. At last, Sule owns up. He says that all his friends were there; so, he could not sleep. Therefore, he goes to attend the funeral. The atmosphere becomes tensed and charged. "There was a charged silence. No one moved or spoke. Finally, Baba moved in Sule's direction. He stood and faced his son and they stared at each other" (p.23).

At this Juncture, many thoughts flash through Baba's mind. He thinks of Li being the culprit; he thinks that Sule can do such a thing and he also thinks that a lie is seriously in place along the line. He becomes worried. But what are these worries about?

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

Baba resolves his puzzle by giving Sule a chance to apologize. That way, both son and father are able to maintain their pride.

Zaynab Alkali introduces Habu, another male character of our consideration, in Chapter Two of The Stillborn. Li meets Habu at the village dance she has crept out through the broken fence late in the night, to attend. From the onset, Li likes Habu Adams and builds her dreams around him. Habu Adams is handsome, flamboyant and has a dream of training as a city medical doctor. Li has been unhappy about her father's high handedness that does not allow her have the kind of freedom she had in her boarding primary school. Now thirteen, she yearns to escape from her father's domination in the home. The home she describes as being "worse than a prison" (p.11). Freedom and gaiety, her greatest desires, suddenly seem fulfilled in Habu Adams when she meets him at the village dance. Habu gradually finds his way to Li's home, under the disguise of being a friend to Sule, Li's brother.

Two years later, at fifteen, Li gets married to Habu and he leaves for the city immediately. The first shock comes when Habu abandons Li in the village for four years, shortly after their wedding. She is finally taken to Habu. She flashes back her mind at what the villagers said during their courtship:

Truly, Ihab in the city by one of Habu's relatives whom Habu blames so much for bringing Li. Even before the journey, Li has started wondering what kind of a man or a husband Habu was nothing but another passing stranger, who had come to her when she was ripe for love and deceived her. The villagers were right after all Habu was a good-for-nothing stranger who wore a tattered shirt and washed out shorts that had lost their seat (p.63).

In the city, Li sees a new and strange Habu from the Habu she loves and who love her so dearly. Habu goes out; he does not return until nightfall the day after drunk and violent. Thank God for his drunkenness for it is through it Shuwa the only child of the entire marriage life is got. That night Li has a flicker of happiness, which ends up in a flash back again. In tears Li asks many questions:

Where is my man? She waited, silently, ' that boyish man with an incredible smile and a mischievous twinkle in the eyes? Where is that proud, self-confident, half-naked lover (hat defied the laughter of the villagers and walked the length and breadth of the village just to see me? (p.70).

Li soon finds out shortly after their wedding, that the Habu she has clung to with the dream of being married to a medical doctor, as a Grade I teacher, living in a big European house full of house boys and servants, with a smooth body and a silky long hair, is nothing but a salesman instead of a doctor.

Habu keeps a second wife (or is she a concubine?) in the city. Li takes the advantage of the father's sickness and returns home from the city. From there, she goes to school to pursue her dream of being a Grade I teacher. There in school, Habu visits her twice and even speaks to friends to help him beg Li to accept reconciliation with him. Habu finally has an accident on one of his journeys and gives up the will to live. At this juncture, Li comes up again to help him live. She says in answer to Awa's disapproval to her going to Habu uninvited: “We are all lame, daughter-of-my-mother. But this is no time to crawl. It is time to learn to walk again. I will just hand him the crutches and side-by-side we will learn to walk” (p. 105).

Dan Fiamma, the village headmaster, who is popularly called HM, marries Awa the elder sister of Li in her early twenties. In fact, the three girls get married almost at the same time to their various dream husbands. Awa is contented with staying back in the village, unlike the other two who have their reasaka's eyes have failed him and the HM has lost his head in the bottles” p.82.

However, Awa and Dan Fiamma have many children they can hardly cater for. When, Li teases the sister about the crowd in the house, referring to the house looking like the house of a chief. Awa replies though mockingly: Of course it does. It is the house of the chief alcoholic p.87.Awa also explains to the sister that the household saving grace have been Mama and
Alhaji Bature, one of the new suitors of Li during her period of abandonment.

I would not have known how to cope without Mama. We live on the proceeds of her farm. The woman would go to the farm at cockcrow and won't come back until the chickens have gone to roost (p. 87).

Li certainly feels guilty, as her only child is one of the children under the care of Awa. Awa noticing this quickly chips in. "Alhaji Bature has helped a lot these past years, on your behalf p.87. Another concern of Li helps to expose Dan Fiana further. Her concern is if Awa, her big sister, has been telling Shuwa anything about her father Habu? To this Awa says: You need not worry daughter - of my mother. Shuwa, like the rest of the children in this house asks no questions. For them, there is only one father,

Kaka. The HM is just some drunken fool who comes home from time to time to harass their mother for drink money (p-87).

Garba, the husband of the third dreamer Faku also lives in the city. Faku like her friend Li loves to go to the city. For her, marriage is a route of escape from the life of loneliness and suffering she and her mother are into. Faku is the only youth among the six that speaks in favour of polygamy when it is discussed. She says:

What was this love the rest of you are cracking your heads about? When a man cared for his family, fed and clothed them properly, what was it if it wasn't love? She would like to be Garba's only wife. What woman wouldn't? But if the man could afford to feed a dozen other wives, who was she to object? (P.46).

Garba has two wives of whom Faku is the second. Barely six years after their wedding, Li visits her friend Faku on her way back to the village. Li wonders how Faku will look. Fat? Modern looking? Rich and sophisticated? Li is now face-to-face with Faku. She wonders again if she is in a wrong room. But as soon as Faku smiles, revealing her once beautiful dimples, now wider and more set into a thin haggard face, Li recognizes her childhood* friend. Faku has one child, although Garba has ten children all together. The only child of Faku is the one she had shortly after her wedding. Although Faku tries to keep many things from Li, she cannot help reporting that she does not see her eldest of the children could be beaten whenever she errs; the case is not the same with Sule

Baba is the father of Awa, Sule and Li. His perception of discipline creates fears in the children particularly the female children. Since the mother of these children herself fears the husband, she would not be able to correct the man where necessary. This kind of high-handedness in the name of discipline makes the female children in such home environment yearn for an escape. Marriage is always the first escape route that girls in this kind of home think of. Thus their attention and interest is shifted from education to marriage. Even in non-Islamic areas where early marriage may not be encouraged, the female children in this kind of a home would normally not go beyond the secondary school educational level at best.

Discrimination against the female in African traditional societies generally, starts the very day the child is born. Okoh (2002:63), asserts that in many cultures the male children enjoy greater importance than the daughters because they are the only ones that can perpetuate lineage, while the daughters are married off to propagate their family of procreation.

The birth of a male child does not receive the same ovation as that of the girl in the family. The MTN jingle of a young man reporting the birth of a child to the mother shows this clearly. Fie said, "Mama, Mama, na boy." He is so happy that all he could say is Mama, Mama, na boy. The joy on the mother's face knows no limit. Why does MTN not make the young man report the birth of a baby girl? They probably, think that the birth of a baby girl is no news at all. They may also be reacting to the cultural value of their consumers: the Nigerian value that places a boy over and above the girl in the family. Esekonk in Okoh 2002:63, succinctly observes that

The quest for male children has been a nagging issue in the African Society. The African in desperation will do anything to get a male successor—bloodshed, deceit, incest, baby trafficking and other sorts of morally abominable practices.

Baba is portrayed as a stern disciplinarian, who meets discriminatory discipline to the children. While Awa, the eldest of the children could be beaten whenever she errs; the case is not the same with Sule, the only male child in the family. This kind of discriminatory discipline helps neither the parents nor the children. Not even the favored so called male child. Parents should let the children, male or female know why a certain action is bad and be made to apologize for their actions, if they were doing that for the first time. It is not only the male child that should be given this kind of opportunity. The parents that indulge in discriminatory treatment only teach the children to tell lies unknown to them. Li quickly hides under the male child privilege and refuses to own up that she is the culprit. The male child who knows this discriminatory disciplinary arrangement takes advantage of it to misbehave most of the time unpunished.

Issues and Insights into "The Stillborn"

This segment discusses some of the important issues that need to be considered as Nigeria presses forward towards an increase in the girl child education, for development in the 21st century.

Why must a girl become unhappy going home from school? Could it be that the home atmosphere is unpleasant to her? What is it in the home that the thought of makes Li suddenly unhappy? From the mother of Li's perspective, she is expected by her tradition and religion to be seen and not be heard. She is sometimes not even concerned if something is wrong with her status quo. Conversely, Islamically and traditionally, the words of the man are not only power, but also final no matter how intelligent it may sound. This setting gives the man a great deal of authority.

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Another issue of concern in *The Stillborn* is the case of promiscuity. While the females' are condemned for promiscuity, the society is silent about males' promiscuity. Sometimes, they are even praised for being potent. Sule who enjoys discriminatory discipline soon becomes an embarrassment to the family. He impregnates a girl before marriage. When Baba dares to rebuke him for this action, Kaka, the grandfather of Sule sees no reason why Sule should be blamed for what he calls a "show of potency." Sule runs away from the village completely. He abandons the child and the mother, and goes in search of greener pastures. He succeeds in marrying and raising children there in Niger Republic. Awa takes over the care of the abandoned child, with her own children that her drunken husband cannot care for. Nothing is said about the girl Sule impregnates in the novel any more. Once married, Awa could hardly talk of forwarding her education again. The immediate family responsibility is so much that she could hardly think of going back to school to read in order to improve her educational status. In addition to playing the role of a father and a mother to her children, she adds to her already heavy burden, the care of her brother's abandoned child and Li's child too.

At fifteen, Li gets married to Habu who lives in the city. Habu abandons Li in the village for four years, shortly after their wedding, she is finally taken to Habu in the city by one of Habu's cousins. Habu blames his cousin so much for bringing Li to the city. In the city, Li sees a new and strange Habu from the one she loves dearly and wishes to escape from home to live with. The home she describes as being "worse than a prison." The freedom and gaiety, her greatest desires she feels would be fulfilled in Habu, suddenly becomes nothing but a mirage.

Li, takes the advantage of her father's sickness and returns home from the city. From home, she children as do her sister Awa, she would not have goes back to school to pursue her dream of being a grade 1 teacher. With more education, Li becomes the richest in the family. She performs Sule's responsibilities during the burial of their father and grandfather. Li is able to take advantage of her period of abandonment for the good of the extended family. The education of the female child is portrayed as not only being of advantage to her, but also of advantage to the entire family members. With only Shuwa as the only child of Li, she is able to have focus and to realize her dream of becoming a grade 1 teacher. Probably, if she has had many been able to realize her dream of being a grade 1 teacher.

Faku, the third dreamer has her own need for going into marriage. She sees marriage as a way of escape from the life of loneliness. She is not bordered even her husband to be has other wives, provided he can feed her and clothed. She sees this as care and love from a man. The difference between Faku and her senior mate is that the senior mate is economically independent of their husband. Throughout her years of stay in Garba's house, she could not think of going back to school to better her lot. She sees herself in a different kind of loneliness. The husband is never available for her to relate with.

The concept of women abandonment by their husbands seems to be a common issue in many female African Writers' works in the recent time. For instance, her husband for her Daughter's friend in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Aishotu. Efuru and Idu are heroines created by Flora Nwapa in the novels *Efuru* and *Idu* respectively. The two characters also suffer abandonment. Okoh (1997:87-88), through a parallel plot in *The Mannequins* depicts the plight of the abandoned wife, and the ruthlessness of the male adults towards the female youngster whom they ought to protect. *The Mannequins* is an overt appeal to the Federal Government of Nigeria to make a firm legislation to protect women' rights in the country. In the epilogue of the play, facing the spectators, the narrator declares:

> Fellow countrymen and women
> This country is sick
> Not from any foreign illness or invasion
> But from excessive pursuit of pleasure
> Which we should try to measure
> For until a firm law is fixed
> To protect our female youths...
> If we are to rebuild our society,
> Let's begin from home,
> Cradle of every human community.
> So go home and think.
> Think of the good ways
> To protect our female youths
> Future mothers of our nation.
> If not, who knows...
> Tomorrow may transform us all
> Into hideous monsters too.

*(Culled from The Mannequins pp.87-88)*

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the discussion above that our three female characters long to marry because the home environment is not conducive for them. They perceive that it is only marriage that can save them from brutality and loneliness respectively. However, Li who is able to escape marriage 'punishment' only achieves that through abandonment. This should be a concern to the Nigerian communities: if life outside marriage is "better" for a woman than inside it, then something drastic needs to be done about the marriage institution.

**Suggestions and Recommendations**

Parents of female children should try to make the home conducive for the children to live in, so that the children will be happy to come home for holidays. In fact, the children should be happy to be with parents during the holidays. Parents of female children should be happy with their children so that children could trust them and be able to discuss any issue with them instead of the children's peers. While we believe that children should be disciplined when they err, we condemn brutality that makes the girl-child hates the home environment. Our three female characters see marriage as escape from their various family problems. In this respect we suggest the following:
1. Meeting of parents and teachers of female children should be held once in a while to educate the parents of the girl child on how to handle the children. The school’s guidance and councilor will be very relevant in such meetings.

2. The male children should not be worshipped, as is the case in many homes. They should face the same disciplinary actions, as do the female children in the family, when they err. The idea of discriminatory treatment in terms of discipline or upbringing creates problems for the female children either as wives or as sisters to the indiscipline male husbands or brothers respectively. The case of the three female characters discussed in this essay bear testimonies to this point.

3. The issue of wife abandonment comes up very frequently, in the works of female African writers. The plight of the abandoned wife only herself understands. She faces psychological, social, economic, spiritual and even political trauma. The writer of this paper agrees with others that the federal government of Nigeria should ratify and implement the document on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), of which Nigeria is a signatory since 1979.

4. Female teachers at the primary and secondary school levels in the Local Government Areas of every state should form themselves into associations. These associations should among other things address the problems that the girl-child face both at school and at home. The association should from time to time organize seminars where successful women and men who are interested in women education come as guest speakers.

5. Female students should try to attain at least first degree or its equivalent before marriage, as early does not pay them. By this time, they would have been mature enough to cope with some of the problems of marriage. They should also have to work hard to see that they earn their comfort and that of their children with their economic powers.

6. Nigeria young girls should be educated by their parents or other women organization that marriage is not the answer to any problem they may have in their parents' homes. They may soon find out they only running away from problem into another. Young girls should therefore learn to discuss their problems with their parents and other elders in their extended family. They should ensure that they become obedient to their parents/guardians, so that they can continue to stay with them until they reach maturity physically and educationally.

7. Young girls who managed to read up to a higher level of education should be offered jobs at the various tiers of government. This will help to encourage the others who are still in school. Similarly, more and more women who have excelled in their various disciplines should be given positions of responsibilities. This again will encourage both the parents of the girl child to send their children to school, and the child herself to want to go to school. Not only going to school, but also to read up to a higher level.

References


