

REBRANDING THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN: A STUDY OF ZAYNAB ALIKLI'S *THE COBWEBS AND STORIES*

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Abstract

Apart from women suffering the injustice of oppression; ignorance, illiteracy and unemployment are also destructive agents that relegate them to the background. They have accepted a marginalized position in the society because they are left with no other alternative. They are ascribed with the roles that revolve round house work and unpaid jobs and which further diminish them. Thus there is need to address the definite right of women in the society in order to have a rebranded woman. Therefore, education and gainful employment become imperative as both will not only uplift the image of the woman, but will also play emancipatory roles in redressing the inhibitive status ascribed to her. In this paper, selected stories in Zaynab Alkali's *The Cobweb* and other stories would be employed to buttress the subject of Rebranding the image of the woman.

"Literary expression has been one of the processes in which social issues are portrayed" (Bature Umar). Literary expression has thus provided a platform and opportunity to address the issue of uplifting the plight of the woman. Nigerian female writers like Buchi Emecheta, Zulu Sofola, Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali etc have used their literary works to give woman a positive image; an image that is far from the picture painted by Mama in the title story "Cobwebs". She soliloquises:

...A woman is not meant to work. She is meant to remain quietly at home and look beautiful for her husband. She is meant to have as many children as she can within the period of child-bearing. Work means

hustling and bustling which brings stress and stress means hard features and premature wrinkles (18).

The above quotation shows that the values of a girl/woman are not measured by her potentials and achievement rather by her services and the gains from her; such as bride price and child bearing. Their life of misery starts from their father who forces them into abusive marriage. She is married off to the highest bidder even when the man is old enough to be her father or grandfather. Moreover, nobody cares about her feelings or consults her in choosing her life partner. After all, "...women did not have to think. The men always did it for them"(17). Ali Mama's father is therefore proud to be the father in law of the chief of Beta without caring whether the main player (Mama) likes her supposed husband.

Major Challenges of Women in *The Cobwebs and Other Stories*

The stories in the collection are set in the northern part of Nigeria. The work is an exposition of the plight of Muslim women in the north through the creative mirror of the artist. The situation of near absence of food, lack of basic education, early marriage and access to health stare the women at the face.

In the story titled "Saltless Ash", Amsa at thirteen years has already been married off to Hassan, "the man was almost as old as her own father "(84). Amsa has no choice because it is only her father that knows what is best for her. Her own mother suffered and accepted the same fate without question and as a result of

this, marriage which should be by mutual agreement becomes a nightmare. Hassan at seventy has two wives and still wants to take a third wife; a child-bride who is an age mate of his grand-child. Yabutu condemns this and states that a third wife is not needed at a time like this “when money is scarce and the children always go hungry” (85).

The issue of early marriage comes with a catalogue of problems. Bibi in the story titled “Vagabond” is married off as a child-bride. She is described as “... young and fragile. Bibi didn’t know the first thing about being a woman” (103). She is young, naïve and immature for marriage and pregnancy. Her pregnancy resulted in complication. Though she carried the pregnancy to term, she had stillbirth. In the complication she is left at the mercy of the local midwife who is obviously a quack. Caesarian section is turned down because of the belief that at her age she does not need surgery. Bibi at seventeen years is maimed for life. She passes faeces and urine through the same passage way without check. Her marriage that is barely three years is already burnt out. She has been operated upon three times to correct the dis-order but all was without success. The major cause of Bibi’s problem is early marriage.

Again the girls’ education is cut short because of marriage. Hildi makes a confessional statement to Panna when she says; “I never put any of my girls in college... I feared learning would rob women-hood of my girls”(102). Apart from this, the general belief is that for a woman to be educated means her going to work. A woman is not supposed to work but is “to remain quietly at home and look beautiful for her husband”(18). Right from birth, the female child is prepared for this heinous task of being a wife. Mama in “The Cobwebs” overcomes all odds and acquires western education. Initially Ali (her father) did not support her being educated because girl child education is unheard of and if he does it, it will be setting a bad precedent to the

rest of the young girls in Beta. Of course he is not prepared to be a bad father. Mama’s education caused her to be alienated from her family, husband and children. This alienation became subject to different interpretations. Hassan terms it rebellion and the senior wife calls it arrogance. It is neither rebellion nor arrogance but lack of understanding on the part of Hassan and others. Mama refers to it as growing up and she concludes that she is “...a grown woman from a different world... only a woman her generation will understand” (48). This statement simply shows she is not expecting anything better from her family since they belong in opposing camp. No one cares that she has been married for six years to a man she detested and also studying a course she is not interested in. Every major decision concerning her was taken by someone else; the idea to marry is her father’s and the choice of course to be studied is also someone else’s too. These women’s experiences owe its peculiarity to the Muslim society. The low status of Islamic women is evidenced by the repressive masculine dominance. According to Chioma Opara; in such societies women “have little or no say in the family where the father is the male authority figure ... a sex segregated community where the female gender is viewed as a tabular rasa”.

Selfishness of Male Characters in the Short Stories

Male characters in the stories are portrayed in negative light. They all have one weakness in common and that is selfishness. Selfishness of the male characters is the striking force that propelled the women into taking various decisions that are meant to change their pattern of life and plight as women.

In the story titled “House of Dust”, Abdu-Zak is presented as a selfish man. Maaya’s marriage to him lasted for thirty five

years and the marriage produced two male children. Abdu-Zak's sudden death led Maaya to discover a lot of things about him. He is a man that has a driving ambition to build a business empire. Through Maaya, it became obvious that Abdu-Zak loved only those that made it possible for him to expand his business empire. She soliloquises:

Abdu-Zak has this driving ambition to build an empire and he paid attention only to people who could in one way or another help him achieve that. Often she had this ungracious thought that Abdu-Zak valued her for her role in keeping the home front in perfect state (73-74).

Maaya devotes her time and life to taking care of Abdu-ZAK's extended family while he has all the time to travel around expanding his business empire. His sudden death makes Maaya realize that his company has sunk and most of his landed property has been mortgaged. The shocking revelation came to Maaya when she discovered that her husband was living a dual life. He had a wife in Abuja who is a medical doctor (a gynecologist), who has five children for him and all the children are professionals unlike Maaya's children who are rascals.

Again selfishness is also found in the story "Saltless Ash". Hassan at seventy years has two wives and is planning to take a younger wife; another child-bride who is an age mate of his grandchild. His reason of wanting a second wife is because Yabutu his first wife who is fifty years is no longer attractive while Amsa the younger wife is either pregnant or nursing a baby. Hassan forgot that Yabutu was one time the village beauty. It was rumoured that he married her to "compliment his diminutive stature" (90). Hassan's selfishness brings Yabutu and Amsa together as allies. They teamed up to thwart their husband's plan.

Selfishness is also detected in the title story "The Cobwebs". Ladi is purdah bound and is described as;

... pleasant, easy-going, uncomplicated woman...dutiful and sincere and took whatever it was that was given her in good faith. She had tried to be a good wife (54)

She suffers lot of verbal abuse from her husband who considers her a failed woman because she does not have a child. She has been so maltreated by her husband that the pleasant, easy-going and uncomplicated woman complained to Mama that she does not expect laughter or kind words from her husband. Maama finds all these absurd because Ladi has sacrificed her youth, education and freedom (because she is purdah bound) for marriage. Maama voices out her disappointment;

... ten years you have cooked and washed for him, served him in many ways. You have denied yourself daylight only to be humiliated, you gave up your education for this. (55)

From the ongoing, it is clear that the men have ended up exploiting and expropriating their women whose major works consist mainly of rearing children and taking care of the family.

Re-Awakening and Re-Branding the Woman's Image

The women encountered in the stories were driven to speak out by desperation and anger and not by empowerment. What Alkali did is to raise the consciousness of women to the existing condition in the past and present, make them aware of the future possibilities and then allow them to take decisions themselves. Ladi the voluptuous humorous woman who thrived on laughter lost her cheerfulness and happiness. Alkali has been able to use men's

short coming as a means of opening the women's eyes and gingering them into taking resolution about their situation. Ladi's desperation pushed her to regain her freedom. She declares;

... I no longer feel bad about it. Imagine me out in the world at last; free! ... I go to Lareri to join a sewing institution. I am determined that no man will ever consider me a burden and a useless mouth to feed any more. I am determined to make it in life even though my education is little (55).

This is a decision to be gainfully employed. She is not educated and she categorically states that education is not going to be a stumbling block in her decision and journey to self-actualization.

Again, just like Ladi, Maaya too resolves to free herself from bondage. She reports that:

She may be old, but was not dead and it is never too late to be freed from bondage. If she had only a few years to live, she would live them as a free woman. Within barely twelve hours; she had been made to see what she had not seen in thirty five years (81-82).

Maaya's assertion to live as a free woman is an indication that she has come to terms with the reality that there is need to free herself from the social and religious roles assigned to women. It is also a vehement refusal to be distracted by the type of life her husband had lived. The men's selfishness not only opened the women's eyes to the fact that they have been harassed, intimidated and seduced into submission and acceptance of men's superiority (Gimba: 2006), but also bring them together as allies. Yabutu and Amsa teamed up to thwart Hassan's plan of getting a new wife. Hassan entices Amsa in order to destabilize her alliance with Yabutu but it did not work. This form of alliance is contrary to the belief that a woman's

world is; "a narrow world of competition with other women over a man's favour for the sake of money, children and occasional satisfaction" (19). Alkali uses this act between Yabutu and Amsa to comment on the need for women to unite in their cause in order to form a formidable force. When Hassan told Amsa that Yabutu is going she told her husband that if Yabutu goes she too would go.

The women's resolution to be free irrespective of age and educational status and the co-operation among them even when they are married to the same man show that women have come to realize that there is need to re-brand their status. Even with the disappointment from their husbands, they refused to wallow in self-pity. The whole scenario is captured by Helen Chukwuma when she says that women:

... adopt a positivistic view in crises and do not just fold their arms in tears and self-pity. Rather they think, plan, execute and concretize. Through this maze of self-assertion, the female individualism and personality shows. She appears in another light as a person capable of taking and effecting decision (4).

The above quotation presents women as human beings who are also capable of taking decisions and this is contrary to the general belief in the title story. "The Cobwebs" that "the men always did the thinking for mankind" (17).

The female characters' resolution to be free from the type of life mapped out for them (irrespective of age and educational status) and the co-operation among them even when they are married to the same man show that women have come to realize the need to re-brand their status. This explains why Alkali herself describes her works (*The Cobwebs and other stories* inclusive) as; "emotive expression triggered by ... urgent and anxious need do

correct certain injustices perceived in the society” (2012:). Female writers thus use their work to expose the injustice against the women folk. Since they are at the receiving end, the story will be better told by them. They use their work to re-assess and re-order women’s positions and roles. This re-ordering and re-assessing is what Alkali refers to as “awakening” (2012); but I term it RE-BRANDING. Alkali gives reason for this rebranding:

If the founding fathers of African literature over-glorify Africa and Africans to counter the negative presentation of Africa by Adventurous strangers – a necessary measure in the excising of malignant growth, the same could apply to feminist writing (18).

Alkali, using *The Cobwebs and other stories* has been able to demonstrate her commitment to the cause of women in Nigeria.

Summary

Alkali’s *The Cobwebs and other stories* explore the challenges facing women in Nigeria generally and northern women in particular. The female characters’ resolve to move away from what has been pinning them down was spurred by men’s weakness/selfishness. Their resentment and rebellion against the structure that makes them docile and passive have propelled them towards the resolution to be free. They resolved not to be a burden to their families and the society at large. This is essentially re-branding their stance.

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