

# **CREATIVITY AND FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION: TEACHING FEATURES OF THE MDGs/SDGs IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S NOVELS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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## **Abstract**

*In recognition of the reality that all over the world, far too many people, particularly women and children are vulnerable to poverty, deprivation, unemployment, violence, poor access to health and education facilities and so on, the United Nations General Assembly in the Millennium Summit September 2000 adopted the Millennium Declaration through two resolutions of the assembly. The resolution is referred to as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) now also known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is meant to implement the MDGs so as to achieve a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and deprivations in the world's diverse population. This paper took an in-depth look at how the challenges of the MDGs/SDGs can be met in Nigeria through the effective teaching of English language through the reading of the novels of one of Nigeria's foremost female author Zaynab Alkali, who on her own ever before the MDGs/SDGs were enunciated, encapsulates the vision of the MDGs/SDGs as reflected in the matter of her novels. Alkali's novels are particularly useful in this regard, more so that the things she wrote about are situated in a cultural milieu familiar to most Nigerian students and she conveys this in English language that is not only the official language of communication in Nigeria, but also an internationally accepted global language.*

**Keywords:** Creativity, Functional, Education, MDGs/SDGs, Literature, Empower

Literature is a reflection of life written in the medium of one language or another, thus the need for students to fully comprehend the language of the texts they come across in their literary courses and relating the lessons learnt to current national and international paradigms of development such as presently subsists in the widely publicized Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be over emphasized.

In Nigeria, the official language of communication, hence of studies is the English language. There is no doubting the fact that English language is an international

language and, a passport to educational advancement and employment among other positive attributes, therefore Nigerian children must be given maximum encouragement and opportunity to learn it effectively in institutions of learning. One of the effective ways of learning English Language is through the teaching and learning of literary works that are written in English. In Nigeria, most of the literary works are written in English Language.

Scholars are generally agreed that literature as language in use needs to be approached as corpus of materials for investigation and deep reflection (Akoshi 2006; Jiboku 2007; and Emeribe&Njoku). Literature, is also viewed as an important artifact of society in that it is a tool that can be used to deepen and extend the consciousness of an individual to the richness of life. Literature has the capacity to imbue people with the resourcefulness of imagination to tackle unfamiliar problems, to analyze them and to propound feasible and coherent solutions to the issues of life. Literature also has the capacity to mould the thoughts and personality of an individual and influence their actions for life. According to Agbo (2014), literature enriches human understanding, develops the mind of the individual and satisfies the curiosity and deepens a reader's knowledge of social political and historical issues that relate to the society mirrored in the "piece of art" (123).

It is for reasons such as cited above that this paper examines how the goals of the MDGs/SDGs which are aimed at freeing people from poverty can be actualize through the effective teaching and learning of Zaynab Alkali's novels in which the author displays her creative abilities using English Language.

### **The Author Zaynab Alkali**

Zaynab Alkali is one of the leading female novelists from Northern Nigeria whose novels form part of the core curriculum for students at secondary and tertiary levels. The challenge for the literature teacher is how to successfully teach the novels of this renowned female writer to the understanding of students to enable them relate such lessons to the MDGs/SDGs for both personal and societal growth.

Zaynab Alkali has a corpus of four novels which include *The Stillborn* (1984), *The Virtuous Woman* (1986), *The Descendants* (2005), and *The Initiates* (2007). Her other prose works include a collection of short stories *Cobwebs and Other stories* (1997), *Vultures in the Air* (1995) co-authored with Al-Imfeld, *SalzolozeAsche* co-authored with Flora Nwapa and Gracify Osifo; and other literary works not mentioned here. Most of Alkali's works are written in English language within the framework of the feminist concept known as womanism.

Alkali's novels can be taught from many language perspectives such as for example grammar, reading and writing, lexis, semantics, syntax and so on, in imparting knowledge to students. However, the area that is of interest to this paper is how Alkali's novels can be used vis-a-vis the challenges of the MDGs/SDGs. This paper undertakes an appreciation and textual analysis of the relevant parts of her novels which have

bearing to how paradigms related to MDGs/SDGs can be creatively taught to students. Before that, there is need for an understanding of what the MDGs/SDGs are all about.

### **The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were endorsed at the United Nations general Assembly of the Millennium Summit in September 2000 where the largest gathering of world leaders in history adopted the UN millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty, setting out a series of time-bound targets, with a deadline of 2015 and are known and tagged as the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs). The objectives of MDGs are aimed at addressing extreme poverty in its “exclusion” which includes promoting gender equality, education and environmental sustainability. The third group of goals cover basic human rights such as the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter and security (Millennium Project 28/09/09)

A summary outline of the MDGs is as follows:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
- Goal 2: Achieve Universal primary education
- Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality:
- Goal 5: improve maternal health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

The MDGs declarations were endorsed by all the 191 member states of the United Nations through resolutions GA resolution A/54/2000 and GA resolution A/56/326 in September 2000. During the meeting, agreement was reached among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on key elements of a framework of this global agenda in the context of goals, targets and indicators referred to as the MDGs. The Millennium Declaration mainstreams among other things, a set of inter-connected and mutually reinforcing goals into the global agenda. The UN General Assembly through the Millennium Summit also gave the secretary general and the UN system the important mandate to support national governments in the implementation for the Declaration. Consequently, it was expected that the UN family of member states, international organizations, funds, agencies, programmes, the private sector and civil society are expected to join together to meet the commitments that are embodied in the Millennium Declaration (UN System Millennium Declaration 28/09/090)

According to a Wikipedia source entitled: “Millennium Development Goals”, the MDGs derive from earlier development targets of the United Nations, where world leaders adopted the United Nations millennium declaration. The declaration asserted

that every individual has dignity; and hence, the right to freedom, equality, and a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence and encourages tolerance and solidarity.

To accelerate process, the G8 finance minister agreed in June 2005 to provide enough funds to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the African Development Bank (AFDB) to cancel \$50 and \$55 billion in debt owed by members of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) to allow them to redirect resources to programmes for improving poverty. Although developed countries aid for achieving the MDGs increased during the period, more than half of it went for debt relief, national disaster relief and military aid, rather than further development. Progress towards the goals has been uneven among the developing nations. The Nigeria 2015 Millennium Development Goal End point report: Abridged version show that the MDGs attainment were weak in most of the sectors targeted. Some of the challenges identified in Nigeria as hampering the full attainment of the MDGs include the rapidly growing population of the country at a rate of 3.2% per annum, initial poor grass roots outreach, non-inclusive and jobless economic growth, high level of income and social inequality, escalating insecurity of lives and property, and constrained implementation of the MDGs at the sub-national level as a result of lack of institutional capacity, weak governance, inefficient resource utilization, poor funding, weak absorptive capacity when funds were available, low participation, ownership and sustainability.

Some of the criticisms leveled against the MDGs programme include a perceived lack of analytical power and justification behind the chosen objectives. The MDGs lack of strong objectives and indicators for within – country equality; the MDGs uniquely focus on donor achievements, rather than development successes. The MDGs were also attacked for insufficient emphasis on environmental sustainability and the non-mention of agriculture specifically in the MDGs even though most of the world's poor are farmers. However, there is evidence to suggest that some progress has been made in the MDGs globally. With the inability of the United Nations to fully realize the MDGs, a Post-MDGs development framework known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the MDGs in 2016. This gives hope that interest in sustaining development across the nations of the world have not been given up.

In a world where most world leaders pay greater attention to feathering their own nests and engaging in lavish display of ego massage, to the detriment of the less privileged, the MDGs and SDGs are a crucial intervention by the world body in the fate of the poor and hungry of the world. This paper is therefore a modest contribution to meeting the challenges and goals of the MDGs and SDGs.

### **Connecting the Matter in Alkali's Novels to the MDGs/SDGs**

A reading of the novels of Zaynab Alkali, show that she has addressed issues of the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals even before they were officially inaugurated. The teachers of Alkali's work have to adopt certain

strategies toward enhancing the understanding of her students and enabling them to relate such understanding to the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals.

In teaching literary texts like the novels of Alkali, the literature teacher must aim at eliciting critical and creative responses from the students. The critical response has to do with the formal structure of a prose work. This involves knowledge of key prose elements such as structure, pattern, character, plot, point of view, setting, language, tone, style and so on. The creative response has to do with the students' personal understanding, relation to personal experience or knowledge and a living imaginative ability to recreate and personally recognize aroused feeling to the work in question. In the next few sections an attempt is made to use Alkali's novels to relate to each MDG/SDG goal and to demonstrate how students can learn lessons from the novels in meeting the challenges raised with particular reference to each goal.

***Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Hunger and poverty***

Most of Zaynab Alkali's characters are portrayed as fighting against social obstacles in their environment in order to rise above their circumstances to a better and an enhanced status in society. This they mostly achieve through education. Major Characters like Li in *The Still born*, Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* and UmmaSeytu in *The Descendants* all scale through social obstacles of patriarchy, poverty and society convention using the ladder of education to achieve social security for themselves and their families through the means of education. The literature teacher can use the success of these characters to teach students that education is a major key to eradicate hunger and poverty.

***Goal 2: Achieve universal primary Education***

It is significant that on the very first page of *The Stillborn*, Li is recorded as being "Happy to be going home after completing her primary seven in a neighboring village" (1). Most of the characters in Li's novels are presented as being educated up to the primary level and even beyond. Even Li's father, Baba Garu who is portrayed as a harsh and an unyielding patriarchal minded household head is pictured as reading a book on page eight of *The Stillborn*. In *The Descendants*, AjiRamta the only surviving son of MagiraMilli (who is the matriarch of the Ramtafamily), is pictured running informal adult literacy classes for his kith and kin from Ramta for who he provides shelter in Makulpo their new home. In return, they work on his farms during the rainy season and on his vegetable gardens during harvesting time. AjiRamta himself had acquired a little formal education in Borno (3, 4, 35). MagiraMilli herself though uneducated is a wise elderly woman. Described as "yesterday's woman" ( 13), she is a character quick to notice the changes in society and take hold of the opportunities such changes provide. Thus, seeing that education is a master key to opportunities for better life, for opening doors, and for providing options in life, MagiraMilli makes sure she grabs those options for her grandchildren, and she acts as a propelling force in ensuring the education of her second

generation. These are the types of concrete literary motifs abounding in Alkali's texts that students attention should be drawn to in order to take cognizance of the significant fact of the educational aspirations of Alkali's characters. This will help the students to appreciate the importance of encouraging those around them to aspire to at least the minimum level of primary education. As potential future policy makers, being aware of this particular MDG prepares them also to support the sustainability of the goal in future responsibilities that they may be opportune to hold.

### ***Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women***

Several Alkali scholars are agreed on the fact that one of the central themes of Alkali's novels which keeps recurring often is the issue of female empowerment and gender equality (Ojinma and Egeya, 2005; Shehu 2007). Explicating on this point, Ojinmah and Egeya for example, in the book *The Writings of Zaynab Alkali* opine that Alkali's new advocacy is for a male and female union where the couple walk side by side, *not the man in front and the woman straggling behind like an appendage. The emancipated woman in Alkali's new fiction: educated, working and independent, is definitely not cut out for life behind the curtain* (Egeya&Ojinmah 2005: 160).

In a similar assessment of one of Alkali's works, (*The Stillborn*), Halima Shehu (2007) writes that:

*The novel ends advocating neither the supremacy of one sex nor the submergence of the other but struggling instead for a partnership between men and women... The Still Born 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 micro level variables of intellect courage, resourcefulness vested in the individual women that will enable her to influence her possibilities. ("Women, Islam...." 267-668)*

Alkali's belief in gender equality and women empowerment, leads her into creating women characters as the major protagonists of her novels. These females characters are portrayed in rounded terms and students of literature should be encouraged to engage in intensive character studies of Alkali novels so as to understand their motivations and view them as role models to be emulated. This is a further step to promoting gender equality and women empowerment as proffered in the MDGs/SDGs.

### ***Goal 4, 5, 6: Reduce Child mortality, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease***

MDGs 4, 5, and 6 are inter-connected and have to do with the issue of health with regards to child mortality, improvement of maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Alkali uses her extensive experience in the public health sector to portray the plethora of health problems afflicting the people of Northern Nigeria in her novels. In *The Virtuous Woman*, the protagonist of the novel Nana Ai is afflicted with polio in her early childhood after losing her two parents in a fatal accident. It is only the loving care she gets from her grandfather that saves her life but

the sickness leaves her left foot shorter than the other, and this becomes a source of shame in her adolescent years (*The Still born* 36, 37). In a moving and vividly electrifying episode of *The Descendants*, Alkali using flashback and the omniscient present point of view, recounts the deadly affliction of measles on Hawwa, Seytu and Shaibu (16-20, 102-105). Shaibu, Aji's son, falls a victim of the deadly disease in their ancestral village Ramta. Seytu is lucky to survive the ordeal. To escape a deadly scene of disease and death is the main reason why MagiraMilli the matriarch of the Ramta dynasty departs Ramta community for Makulpo which has a hospital, hence access to better health facilities. When Hawwa faces a similar threat, AjiRamta reassures his niece Seytu, Hawwa's mother that, "it will not happen again... Seytu., things are not the same. Eleven years ago we were Ramta, in a village where there was no hospital and no vaccines. This is Makulpo" ( 20).

This incident is very important in conveying to a reader the importance the author places on the lives of children. That Seytu the heroine of *The Descendants* eventually overcomes a health disability of vesico-vaginal fistula to win the award for the best students in paediatrics, the best paediatric doctor in the specialist Hospital Garpella, and finally the Chief Medical Director Garpella State Specialist hospital after her mentor and friend the Egyptian Prof. Zaki departs, is no accident ( 97). By portraying such important health events in her novels, the author no doubt is literally promoting MDGs and putting health issues on the front burner of student psyches. What such influence will have on the future lives of students and ambitions can be better imagined.

#### ***Goal 7: Ensure Environmental sustainability***

Bashir Abdu partly captures Alkali's concern with the environment when he writes that Alkali employs the journey motif to describe what life is like in Northern Nigeria. Writing further on the issue, he states that:

*Readers are shown the deplorable government services, untarred roads which are full of potholes, becoming death traps during the rainy season, abuse of power at various levels evident in the way a male secretary victimizes the young girls refusing a ride from him and later, a police man extorting bribe from a lorry driver after accusing him of overloading the vehicle. ("Feminism and..."166)*

First of all, the teacher needs to familiarize students with the setting of Alkali's novels. Most of her novels have familiar settings, located in a usual village landscape typified with farmlands, streams, thatched mud huts, dusty roads, and a few zinc roofs and so on. The author succeeds in her evocation of the peculiar milieu of the Northern Nigerian atmosphere and environment. This milieu is present in all her novels from the first novel *The Stillborn* to the latest *The Initiates*. Such village milieu is usually interspersed with the nearby district headquarters which is more urban than the village and which usually accounts for a rural-urban migration. The landscape Alkali describes

portrays an underdeveloped environment which is badly cared for as a result of social factors such as corruption and mal-governance. In Alkali's latest novel *The Initiates*, it is an effort to redress such wrongs that an unsuccessful coup takes place.

The teacher has to draw the students attention to the abysmal state of the environment and possibly invigorate students creativity in imagination by getting them to write essays on identifying the types of negative environment portrayed in Alkali's works and proffering imaginative solutions on how to engender a more viable and sustainable environment. Such a teaching strategy will contribute to meeting the challenges of the seventh MDG through the literary and creative avenue.

The eighth MDG goal which is developing a global partnership for development is considered rather out of the scope of this paper since the author under consideration has not reflected this aspect in her works therefore the paper will not delve into that MDG.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the linkages that exist between language and creativity in literature, as literature is language in use. The importance of the teaching and learning of English language can be enhanced through the study of novels written in English. The author whose text has been used as exemplar is Zaynab Alkali. Her writings demonstrate social concerns which preview the UN's MDGs and SDGs. Features of MDGs and SDGs reflected in Alkali's works are used to demonstrate how students who are leaders of tomorrow can be taught empowerment through functional education such that they can become prepared for meeting the challenges of the MDGs/SDGs in their future lives. Furthermore, the paper has made an important revelation which is that though the 2015 deadline set for the MDGs has come and gone, the programme is still being sustained through the SDGs. Many persons who were hitherto not aware of this important development can now be aware of this through this paper. The paper concludes on the note that creativity in literature is an aid to enhancing functional education such that a comatose economy is revived through enhancing and awakening latent creative prospects in readers.

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