

The Paradox of Gender Discourse in Rural-Urban Spaces of Postcolonial Northern Nigeria: The Case of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates*

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Abstract

Zaynab Alkali is a distinguished northern Nigerian writer who engages with gender relations in virtually all her works. In her earlier works she privileged the female gender over and above the male gender. Education is presented as the most important strategy for female empowerment. Alkali always equips her female characters with the power of education, and this comes to the fore in their experiences in her novels as they face the challenges of patriarchal hegemony that nourishes and legitimizes itself through the dominant ideological structure of Islam and other oppressive cultural practices. Although Alkali critiques the cultural codes and conventions that perpetuate male dominance in society in most of her works, she is however unable to transcend the manipulation of religious and cultural values by the status quo that deny the women any opportunity for self-actualization. This inability to see through the power game hidden under the guise of religion and "sacrosanct" traditions of the people is identified as the most important factor responsible for Alkali's ambivalence and inconsistency in her gender discourse. This paper therefore seeks to evaluate Alkali's latest novel, *The Initiates*, with a view to highlighting her abandonment of her earlier clarion call for resistance to the conditions of women in northern Nigeria in her peculiar gender discourse.

Background

Zaynab Alkali is a household name in the literary firmament of postcolonial northern Nigeria and its writers who write in English. Her works are

an important testimony to the fact that the novel genre is one of the most effective means of cultural representation in an existential milieu that is predominantly nourished by a mixture of traditional values and a steadily encroaching modernity. However, few works have been produced in this category of literature that focus on the imaginative reconstruction of human experience in pre-colonial, colonial and, to a lesser extent, post-colonial historical epochs of Islamic northern Nigeria. The dearth of literary works in English in northern Nigeria can be traced to the point of contact between the traditional-cum-Islamic society and the system of colonialism. However, in the southern region of Nigeria there has existed a wealth of literary works in English that detail the experiences of individuals in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial political economies and in social relations. The differences in modern literary output between the North and the South of Nigeria are usually attributed to the cultural insulation of Islamic northern Nigeria from the direct influence of colonialism in the earlier decades of the 20th century (Jibril 1; Liman 185). The situation remained almost unchanged until the late 1970s when western educated individuals from different states of the region began to take up the challenge to write using the medium of English.

It is also in the above problematic that the dearth of writers and literary works couched in the principles of realism is located. As a consequence, fewer works by northern writers still pay attention to that aspect of realism that stresses the importance of creating typical characters in the context of realistic experiences (Asso 17). An interrogation of realism is present in the works of the few pioneers who write in English and are concerned with the realities of colonial and postcolonial periods. Writers such as Zaynab Alkali, Abubakar Gimba, Ibrahim Tahir and Labbo Yari have mostly concentrated and directed the tenor of their works to the erosion of old sociocultural values that bound family and society together, and to the social decay and corrupt leadership in modern society. Society in the works of these authors is no longer cohesive consequent upon the gradual institutionalization of colonialism. Thus, Islamic northern Nigeria has ceased to be the indivisible cultural entity it used to be before the emergence of British colonialism. If anything, Islamic society of northern Nigeria has become culturally disoriented as a result of modernity and the endemic social and moral corruption brought about largely by neo-colonialism.

However, the wealth of literature produced in Hausa language, paradoxically the stuff from which fairytales are made in terms of its feudal and folk orientations, its adaptations of mythological and legendary figures of ancient Hausa city States and other climes (Malumfashi 66) is distinctively in a class of its own. Even contemporary Hausa *soyayya*

(romance) novellas, currently very popular in the society, are largely couched in similar mythological frame. The only difference between the earlier and current works in Hausa language is individualism in love and romance. This important distinction of Hausa *soyayya* literature is perhaps a reaction against mainstream Hausa-Islamic culture of northern Nigeria in which the concept of romance is virtually non-existent. From the popularity of the Hausa *soyayya* novellas in northern Nigerian society it can be inferred that the appeal of this popular literature to youths is in its function as an escape from the socio-cultural status quo.

Ontologically however, postcolonial literature in Nigeria and indeed in the rest of Africa has remarkably distinguished itself through its pervasive obsession with the contradictions that are manifesting out of our dual identities as Africans and as colonized subjects (Munoz 181). Dual identities in Africa are not only a function of the historical contact between traditional Africa, the Eastern (Arabian) and the Western worlds, but also the result of class orientations and individualism that human predisposition and inclination that post-colonialism has fostered. These are of course the psycho-social factors that shape our spiritual and material outlooks, values, ideas, preferences and choices in life. Somehow, these necessary factors of human orientation manifest themselves at both the level of the individual and the larger society. African writers have treated the duality of essences and existences differently in their works; in the specific case of Zaynab Alkali, her textual strategy is mainly to interrogate the realities of the rural and urban milieus of north-eastern Nigeria where she sets most of her works. These realities are scrutinized in the context of global currents of history such as colonialism, imperialism and globalization which impacts significantly on the socio-economic, political and cultural wellbeing of Nigeria.

Duality of essences and existences in African literature is presented mostly through the unending conflicts in the social milieus inhabited by the rural and the urban folks, with their conflicting orientations and values. There is always the presentation of the village milieu as *the other* of the postcolonial African city. The traditional rural milieu is characterized by its Arcadian spirit while the postcolonial African city, despite its modernity, epitomizes mostly evil and corruption. This dichotomy is alluded to throughout *The Initiates*. The sole purpose of bringing out contrasts and contradictions inherent in postcolonial societies is to vividly highlight the various levels of oppositions between tradition and modernity, Africa and the West, and all the tensions and contradictions that these dual spaces and identities signify. The dialectics of the city and the village milieus have been a recurrent motif in Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, *The Descendants* and *The Initiates*, respectively.

The antagonism of the opposites is elsewhere identified as the conflict of forms and values which have inevitably locked horns in an unending struggle for the soul and destiny of Africa (Davidson 197). Going by the contradictions highlighted by Alkali in her works, it is evident that African societies, endangered by both pre-colonial and colonial experiences, have not yet discovered the necessity to resolve the geographical and historical contradictions militating against their spiritual and material development amidst conflicting cultural influences, local and global.

Colonialism as a historical causality has hermetically sealed the fate of Africa into an effective tributary of the western world by turning a cross-section of its populace into cultural mongrels in the arena of contemporary world civilizations (Rodney 246). Furthermore, the neo-colonial elites who have been saddled with the responsibility of navigating Africa out of the ensnaring yoke of its state of underdevelopment have not yet fashioned a developmental model or a realistic trajectory to propel Africa away from the doldrums of its historical strictures. Unfortunately, despite this debilitating situation, many an African character in post-colonial African and Nigerian novels themselves do not seem to understand either the promises or the problems of their dual existence as polyvalent subjects of an increasingly globalized world (Munoz 181). Indeed, old and new generations of African writers have sought to highlight the fundamental questions of duality of existence and essence, albeit differently in their works. This is the context in which gender discourse and the dialectics of rural and urban spaces in Zaynab Alkali's works are evaluated.

Gender Discourse in Alkali's Works

While Alkali's previous novels and novellas (*The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, *Cobwebs and Other Stories* and *The Descendants*), were characterized by a subtle criticism of patriarchy and the socio-cultural conventions that ensnared women, especially in their path to self-actualization. It was argued in (Liman, 1998: 23) that in *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* Alkali had, despite her criticism of the values that encourage male dominance in society, advocated equity and egalitarianism between the male and the female gender in the distribution of social roles as society transits to modernity via the acquisition of western education. In her criticism of society and its conventions in *The Stillborn*, for instance, she questions the totality of a patriarchal order that is responsible for the subjugation of women in northern Nigeria:

Alkali is interrogating her society in respect of the status of women vis-à-vis the social and cultural conventions legitimating their subordination through especially the experiences of her main character, Li. This she has strategically called out by tactfully foregrounding the ordeals she has subjected Li, and indeed other female characters in the text. In the process of Li's tortuous ordeals, Alkali also carefully enlists her critical assessment of the marriage institution, polygamy and family, and how these institutions and values facilitate the subordination of women in the society. In fact, the subordination of female children to male authority, as exemplified by Alkali, starts from the home. The home is the hub and space in which a man exercises his power and authority; a place where the opposite gender is conditioned to recognize and uphold the dominance and superiority of the male figure, either as a brother, father, uncle or husband (Liman, 1998: 24).

In this novella, all the male characters are projected as irresponsible people who vent their frustrations with the world and their socio-economic conditions on women. The female characters are presented as victims of their male partners and the structures that make it possible for the men to lord it over them. While Alkali is very critical in her identification of the socio-cultural strictures/structures (the institutions of marriage, family, polygamy, culture and religion) inhibiting female self-actualization, she is however not radical enough in proffering solutions to the predicament of northern Nigerian women. Alkali herself has not transcended the dictates of the dominant ideological structure that legitimizes the perpetual subordination of her female characters. Clearly, she does not subscribe to the type of measures advocated by radical feminists. Her ideal situation is therefore not in the perpetuation of antagonism between men and women, in a form of harmonious co-existence prescribed by the dominant ideology and the values that sustain the socio-cultural institutions she represents in her works. Therefore, Alkali is not in any respect advocating a radical solution to the problems she is highlighting in her works. This position is evident in how Alkali reconciles Li with her husband in the resolution of *The Stillborn*. Li had been separated from her husband for a very long period because of his drunkenness and womanizing in the city. Reconciliation on the basis of mutual respect is an uncommon and almost unrealistic palliative for the antagonism and gender conflicts that intersperse the narrative.

The subject of harmonious co-existence is elaborated on in the subsequent novella, *The Virtuous Woman*, where harmony rather than conflict is advocated between her male and female characters (Liman, 1998: 27). One major issue *The Virtuous Woman* shares with *The Stillborn* is Alkali's

interest in the socio-cultural context that promotes patriarchal values (male dominance) and negates women's self-actualization. The intensity of the people behind this social orientation is to the extent that men bemoan having female children for being socially useless and irrelevant to their parents. Even when they are educated and gainfully employed, they are still said to be only useful to their husbands (*The Virtuous Woman* 1987: 47). After the attempts at revisionism that characterized *The Virtuous Woman*, Alkali has returned to the motif of northern Nigerian woman as a victim "in the cobweb of male domination" and patriarchal hegemony in the society in her collection of short stories, *Cobwebs and Other Stories*. All her female characters in the collection are presented as, "helpless victims of repressive conventions". The plight of the woman is blamed on the "social and religious (Islamic) norms that stand in the way of women's self-actualization and wholeness" (Jatau, 2007: 198).

Polygamy, which in *The Stillborn* is blamed for the woes of women, is in *Cobwebs and Other Stories* presented as a source of strength to women, especially when the co-wives discover the virtue of forging a formidable alliance against the excesses of a domineering husband. However, *The Descendants* is an elaboration on the issues raised in *The Stillborn*. The fundamental difference between the two novels is that in *The Descendants*, Alkali's heroine, Seytu, is imbued with courage and strength to make her own choices after her terrible ordeal as an abandoned child-bride and as a victim of vestico-virginal fistula. Alkali transforms Seytu into a strong and highly educated physician who henceforth takes charge of her destiny, despite the regulations and inhibitions of Islamic patriarchy in northern Nigeria. In any case, Alkali adopts a similar textual strategy in the two works. Thus, despite the problems associated with the patriarchal order in predominantly Islamic northern Nigeria, western education is offered as the veritable means for women liberation. This can be glimpsed in the constitution of Alkali's heroines. In virtually all her works they come as serious, purposeful, promising and hardworking rural folks who become socialized by the dint of modern formal education and become gainfully employed in the city. These female characters always start out from the rural milieu and, of course through struggle and hard work, gravitate to the city in their quest for education and upward social mobility. They always end-up with a decent means of livelihood. For Alkali therefore, the northern Nigerian Muslim woman is the product of both Islamic and western cultural influences. This new woman carefully negotiates her existence by means of a delicate balancing act as dictated by conflicting values and worldviews in society.

The Initiates

The *Initiates* assumes a slightly different trajectory from Alkali's typical gender representations. Although the novel shares some of the textual characteristics of her other works, its thrust is however tilted towards exposing political corruption and its attendant implications for society. The novel explores socio-political, economic and cultural conditions in postcolonial northern Nigeria and how individuals and communities fare in the system. It is set, as indeed all the previous literary excursions by Alkali, in north-eastern Nigeria. It is set amongst the Babur ethnic group of "Southern Borno and Adamawa States" (iii). The novel specifically highlights some of the typical problems associated with postcolonial African states. The problems include the collapse of traditional values, political instability, military dictatorship, failure of development agenda and the attendant social decay. These fundamental issues are dramatically captured in the text through the experiences of members of an extended family at Debro, an isolated rural community locked into and stiff in its age-old traditions. In the opening chapter of *The Initiates*, Debro community is described as a community located in an imaginary Ramta Rahi State:

Both Christianity and Islam reside in Debro, but hang like a coat on an emaciated old man. Deep at the core of the people's heart, traditional culture and communion with nature have a strong hold. If you live in Debro, you speak, walk, gesture and communicate only in Debro. Debro, a close-knit community, live like one big family where members care and look out for one another (1-2).

Interestingly, for the first time in her literary career, Alkali has encapsulated her narrative within allegorical devices and symbolism. The initiates and the non-initiates are allegorical categories used in the construction of the power-play between two social groups; the political elites, military and civilian, and their supporters, and those opposed to exploitation and oppression in the name of governance and leadership. The conflict generated in the text is presented in terms of the age-old binary oppositions of good and evil, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, right and wrong. Alkali's characters in *The Initiates*, irrespective of where they exist in the duality of rural-urban spaces, are streamlined along this Manichean divide.

At a more abstract level, Alkali has animated the ninety-nine attributes of Allah (the names of God in Islam). The initiates, nay, the attributes that have been mentioned in the text include Ya Mumini (the faithful), Ya

Adal (the just), Ya Wadud (the forgiving), Ya Haqq (the truth), Ya Hakam (the arbitrator), Ya Hasib (the provider), Ya Karim (the great), Ya Awal (the first), Ya Sabur (the patient), Ya Salam (the peaceful), Ya Afuww (the pardoner), (113-125). These are otherwise the initiates that are set, from the Islamic point-of-view, to guide human existence, even though these values have been currently side-lined in human affairs. And this appears to be the central motif of the novel. According to Baba Dogo, a maternal uncle of the patriarch named Batanncha, "there are two groups of people in this life, the initiates and the non-initiates" (149). To a certain degree, Alkali has attributed one of the names of Allah to Salvia. Through a personification strategy, the attributes of God are animated to underscore the social implications of the abandonment of spiritual values in the affairs of the people. In the eerie dimension of Salvia's reverie, he is named Ab- Mumini (the peaceful); and with his other spiritual siblings, one finds in them the core of human values; the initiates who have been in existence right from the inception of human society but who are now neglected. In their conversation, these entities highlight their own significance to humanity;

"We the initiates have been here with the people since the beginning of time. We are the nails that keep the structure of existence in place. Without us, no one who is here today can live a normal life". (120)

These are of course the "saviours" of the people. Moreover, the initiates are said to be responsible for peace, order and stability of society. In the logic of Alkali's argument, "the smallest and the most fragile of the ninety-nine" is important and "that his absence among the people was the reason for the chaos out there" (123). Therefore, Muslim faithful are exhorted to imbibe the values embodied by these attributes. These are the attributes signifying God's perfection. From the point-of-view of Muslims, human beings, irrespective of racial, ethnic and religious differences, are expected to approximate to these attributes in their day-to-day existence and interactions. The health of society is measured on the basis of the approximation of individuals to those essential attributes.

The grand pavilion in which the show of shame presided over by the despicable Magogo, the head of government, and the spectacle of "dancing masses" is symbolic of Nigeria's postcolonial social predicament, a country that is serially abused by its ruthless leadership cadre. On the stage of the pavilion are the gluttonous leaders - clad in gold, diamond and other gilded paraphernalia - who display their ill-gotten wealth before the mammoth crowd of poor and hungry masses. Unfortunately, the masses are oblivious of the role of their leaders in creating the

conditions of “drugless hospitals and empty classrooms, empty because the local government teachers have not been paid for six months ... the fuel scarcity and the rising cost of living” (13). The leaders in the world of *The Initiates* do nothing to the people but organize rallies to deceive the people with false promises. In the process, they mesmerize the people through occultist spells to the extent that they are viewed as messiahs. This disruption of people’s senses through political jingoism and occult practices is obvious as the populace dance to palpitation and exhaustion and chant the praise of the great leader, “calling on Magogo to govern the country forever” (142), “Long live Magogo ... Let Magogo live forever, the greatest ruler of all” (107). The great Magogo is the leader who institutionalizes massive corruption and self-aggrandizement by public officials. Out of sheer ignorance, the people are led to believe that Magogo is a great leader “who has made life better for all” (107). From a more figurative sense, Magogo is “the shining one” on stage, a metaphor for the material orientation that negates spiritual values. The group of people in blue who personify truth, justice, knowledge and peace are assembled before the grand pavilion. In his reverie, Salvia got entangled in the perpetual tug of war between the forces of good, represented by the names and attributes of Allah, and evil, represented by Magogo, the symbol of human greed, materialism, vice and corruption, which manifests itself in the disposition of Nigerian leaders:

Ab-Haqq is as real and tangible, as Magogo is unreal and intangible. He is as lasting as Magogo is fleeting. He sees while Magogo is deaf. Ab-Haqq speaks with the voice of authority and his words cannot die, while Magogo is dumb. The two cannot stand each other, just as we here cannot stand that creature on the stage. Unfortunately, things are beginning to change. Look at us, look at our number. The seductive power of his ‘shine’ is leading some of us to his side (116).

In the reverie, the skin-heads located behind the stage at the edge of a precipice and whose numbers are swelling are those elements in society who either remain indifferent to or covet the life-style of the oppressive leaders. Apart from being materially disposed in their choices and preferences, the skin-heads also represent people with little or no regard for religion and spiritual values:

You, Ab-Mumini the faithful, were the first to be oppressed. The people no longer have any need for you. You are an abstraction, a fiction, a concept conceived by men of old, used flippantly by rulers to deprive the ruled. “What is faith?” They asked. They prefer something concrete, like

the creature on the stage, because they can see and feel him, even though he is deaf, dumb and blind. It does not matter to them. They believe in him and worship him because it does not demand anything from them except their souls, and that, they say, is easy to give. (117-118)

In short, religion no longer serves any purpose in society other than to kowtow to the interests of the ruling elites who manipulate it for their own ends. The characters dancing on the stage are the incarnation of evil. Bako, one of the three young men sent from Debbo on a mission to Garpella to source information on the fate of Samba, has admitted to knowing the people dancing on the stage. According to him, they are the associates of the great leader, Magogo. Their names include "Potka, then next to him is Kiyaya, Harwa, Dampara, Bwani, Kamangar, Azaba, Hilaa, Shamta, Munafiki, Kulasili, Karwa". (107) These are clear allusions to all conceivable vices in the society, including oppression, exploitation, greed, treachery, hatred, dishonesty, inhumanity and suffering. Similarly, the teeming masses that thronged the pavilion are divided along the lines of the initiates and the non-initiates. (149) The initiates are the few people who resent the obnoxious situation in the country, while the non-initiates are of course those individuals who, perhaps due to complacency, consent to the corruption and the mismanagement of resources by the leadership. The initiates are presented as 'the blue-clad' individuals whose number is "fast dwindling" at the grand pavilion. The grand pavilion and the different types of characters are a metaphor of a country groaning under brutal conditions and leadership. This is a situation in which only a clear-sighted person like Salvia, Batanncha's gifted son, can fathom:

Salvia looked into the eyes of the men and women standing with him. He saw Love, but there was also Fear lurking behind Love. He saw Hope accompanied by Despair. He witnessed Purity of purpose, but Frustration tagged along. Will was overburdened with Doubt to the point of breaking. Strong forces enveloped the group, as invisible hands groped for victims and converts. As the light in the eyes of the Initiates grew dim, Fear reared its head and took prominence, Courage failed and Hope fled. (121)

Also, the leadership is bereft of the necessary vision and ideas to move the country forward. The failure of leadership is indeed at the root of most of the problems in the society. The spiritual and material aridity that engulfs the land, especially under military dictatorship, has led to series of coups d'état by different sets of military officers before the eventual handover of power to democratically elected civilians.

Democracy is therefore providing the people with the opportunity to contemplate electing selfless and visionary Salvia into a position of authority. The following statement is a confirmation of the fact that Salvia is also Alkali's ideal personality for selfless leadership. He is from the onset prepared to take up the challenge of providing the type of leadership that postcolonial Nigeria is yearning for; a visionary leadership capable of providing good governance through a sustainable democratic culture:

Now two years into democracy the people of Ramta-Rahi State remembered a young man who, some years back had, without government's intervention, mobilized the youths in all the local government areas of the state, and had built culverts, filled potholes in the roads, cleared drainages, dug drinking water holes, renovated dilapidated schools, repainted health centres and encouraged cooperative shops. (181)

All the social issues raised in the text are carefully woven around the anxiety and apprehensions that grip the village of Debro over the actual whereabouts of Samba, the benevolent army officer son of Batanncha and by extension the entire Debro community. The community-wide angst is typically informed by the age-old logic of African communal ethos and extended family system where a distinguished personality is always considered as the sibling of the entire community rather than simply belonging solely to his biological parents. *The Initiates* opens up on a note of suspense and parental anxiety amidst the conflicting rumours circulating in Debro over the fate of Batanncha's soldier son. Is Samba really dead or is he languishing in jail as is being rumoured in the village? However, the main characters whose actions the narrative revolves around are indeed an old patriarch called Batanncha. He is physically described as a tough "toad-like looking man" (3); and variously as "a man of the people". (7) He is also a generous man who is loyal and dedicated to his friends. Batanncha is the proud husband of two wives and father of three children; Samba, Avi Dayyan and Salvia. Batanncha is also widely known as the "father of successful children". (2) Samba is the first son and the only offspring from Batanncha's first wife, Yamusa. Samba was a colonel in the army before his alleged involvement in a coup which led to his detention and early retirement from a promising career as an army officer. He later on metamorphosed into a successful businessman.

Although Samba is at the centre of the narrative, he is however given less visibility in the text. Issues concerning him are always reported by other major characters. Indeed, he has virtually no concrete presence like Salvia or Batanncha and his friends, Batapchi and Bamusa, until of course the point of the denouement of the narration. Even at that point, Samba is

reported rather than seen or heard. The two other children, Avi Dayyan and Salvia, are from Batanncha's second wife, Yelwa. Avi Dayyan is a well-trained female geologist who occupies an important position in one of the biggest oil companies in the country. Apart from her official engagement as a geologist, she does other humanitarian services to her community. She is consistently reported as a very humane individual who raises orphans in the manner she will raise her own children. She is in all respect a carbon copy of her father - tough, reliable and independent minded. At the most crucial point, she becomes strategically involved in the search for her imprisoned brother, Samba. She is kept constantly informed of developments through her close association with Samba's friends such as the seasoned solicitor, Hashim, and Brigadier-General Hussein. Salvia, Avi Dayyan's twin brother, is a bona fide graduate of Accountancy who first works with the Federal Ministry of Finance before he returns to Debro to engage in community development projects in conjunction with other youths from Debro and neighbouring villages. In fact, it is the pervasive corruption afflicting his department that forced him to quit his job unceremoniously. Consequently, he leaves Garpella, the capital city, amidst its stinking corruption:

Where he had worked as a principal accountant in the finance department, he was made to do things against his conscience and better judgment. He was made to sign fake receipts – monies that he had no idea how they were spent. When he protested, muted threats and subtle harassments began until such blossomed into open hostility. One day, the assistant director asked him to bring up financial records for the year in preparation for external auditors. He worked for days and came up with a deficit of thirty-five million naira. The assistant director took one look at the report and asked him to reconcile the deficit. He asked for receipts. He was directed to use his head. The next day, he submitted a fresh report to his superior. He could not reconcile the difference of thirty-five million naira from his head. The job was passed on to his immediate junior, a senior accountant. Two weeks later, the external auditors came to the agency. At the end of their auditing, they left smiling and full of praise. Nothing had been found wanting in the agency. (92)

This state of affairs has considerably disillusioned Salvia. It can be recollected that Salvia and his two friends, Bala and Dan, had been dreaming and hoping for the chance to do something about the corruption suffocating the public sector. They were indeed eager to graduate from the university in order to reform society. (89) After two years of work in the Ministry of Finance, Salvia resigns his appointment because

he “did not want to either lose his soul to the devil or his life to the wicked”. (92) He returns to his village where he started a community based organization. Salvia mobilizes the young men in Debro and six other villages to engage themselves in mobilizing finances from philanthropic organizations and using direct labour to build culverts, fill potholes, rebuild markets, construct water holes, introduce drug revolving scheme and supply furniture and instructional materials to schools. (39) Salvia is the one character that is fully developed in the novel. The conflict between his innate spiritual purity, moral qualities and the corruption of the existential world around him are handled with a high degree of maturity. This form of character development has never been seen in Alkali’s previous works. Salvia actually grows and develops with the flow and the ebb of the narrative.

The other memorable character is Sergeant Musa Ture, alias Saji, a Nigerian civil-war veteran who has undergone personal transformation. None of Ture’s virtues is known to the people of Debro except that he is a drunkard, a hopeless and frustrated village ragamuffin. It takes the intervention of an outsider, the decisive and thoughtful Baba Dogo, to bring out Saji’s sterling qualities as an honest and trustworthy person. These qualities promptly manifest themselves when he is saddled with the responsibility of sourcing information on the whereabouts of Samba. He turns out to be very reliable and dependable, unlike the friends that were until now trusted by Batanncha. In his period of apotheosis, he becomes the unexpected confidante of Batanncha’s family in their hour of need. The resolve by Baba Dogo, Batanncha’s maternal uncle from Ramta, to entrust Saji with the task to find Samba turns out to be the key to solving Batanncha’s predicament. Saji’s handling of Baba Dogo’s trust goes a long way in lifting Batanncha’s spirit out of the doldrums. There are also Samba’s most reliable friends, Hashim and Brigadier-General Hussein. The two have been very supportive of Colonel Samba’s family while the latter is under state incarceration. However, General Hussein is eventually arrested and detained falsely for complicity; “for aiding and abetting coup plotters”. (151) The situation has become very difficult for both Avi Dayyan, Samba’s wife Sissy Augustina and his children to handle. The situation deteriorates very quickly for the good characters; in a matter of time, Avi Dayyan, Samba’s wife, and his children, are monitored closely by security agents.

There are other interesting characters in *The Initiates*; there are, for example, Batanncha’s long-standing fair-weather friends, Ba Ali the tailor, Batapchi and Bamusa. The three men prove to be unreliable, especially at the inauspicious time Batanncha needed the counselling and guidance of good friends. Ultimately, Batanncha realizes that his friends “had tongues

that leaked". (71) There is the nagging old hag, Mama Tata, hated by people because of her "acid tongue" and her capacity to poke her nose into people's affairs. Her stock-in-trade is spreading petty gossips around Debro. She narrates her bizarre tales about the misfortune of others to whoever cares to listen. She is especially noted for her rumour-mongering on the trials and tribulations of members of the closely-knit Debro community, and particularly members of Batanncha's family. There are also Bako and Barka, the children of Batanncha's unreliable friends, who had earlier on accompanied Salvia on a mission to the city to source information about the fate of Samba from his friends, after a purported failed coup d'état. Apparently, their trip was not borne out of genuine concern for the plight of Samba, but rather out of the desire to get 'reliable' information to source their juicy gossip among members of Debro community.

With this variety of characters and sub-storylines, *The Initiates* marks a clear turning point in Alkali's treatment of gender. While in the chronology of her earlier works, gender discourse occupies a central position; in the current work, Alkali is somewhat ambivalent on gender relations. In fact, an overwhelming preoccupation with political problems has led Alkali to almost abandon her brand of gender discourse which seeks to empower and privilege women as in the cases of Li in *The Stillborn* and Seytu in *The Descendants*. This type of approach is virtually non-existent in *The Initiates*. The male characters are for the first time foregrounded over and above the female characters that hover in the background. In other words, characters such as Batanncha, Batapchi, and Bamusa and their sons, Salvia, Bako and Barka respectively, have more visibility than the women such as Batanncha's wives, Yamusa and Yelwa. Yamusa, for instance, who is given more presence and visibility than any other female character in the novel, operates surprisingly as a sneaky housewife who always snoops about. Her major role is to supervise domestic chores and the upbringing of Batanncha's children, whether they are hers or her co-wife's. The position of a woman has already been decided by cultural conventions and the patriarchal order within which she exists. As a wife, her main responsibility is to provide comfort to her husband. Yelwa is always "a pretty woman" with a "pearly sense of humour and gentle femininity" to Batanncha. (72) In the traditional world of Debro, a woman is stereotyped. Basically, her role is etched out in the area of domestic chores, such as going to the local market to buy cooking ingredients, fetching water from the village well, as in the case of Yelwa (38; 48), or engaging in petty gossip with other women, as the old woman Mama Tata, elsewhere described as "the village talebearer", is noted for. (43; 45)

Outside the institution of marriage, any other form of social role played by a woman in society is generally frowned upon, particularly in a rural community like Debro where patriarchal values reign supreme. This is even worse for non-married women; Avi Dayyan, Batanncha's daughter, is berated by men and women alike for not picking a husband at her age. (41) Avi Dayyan and her twin brother, Salvia, are considered "not normal children" (31), because they did not marry in their teens in such a traditional setting. (67) Batanncha too is critical of his spinster daughter and cannot understand how a woman can befriend a man outside the institution of marriage:

His children were good at forming strong bonds of friendship, Samba and Brigadier-General, Hashim and Avi Dayyan. He could not understand why these last two people were not yet married. For years they had been close friends, and Dayyan insisted they were just good friends, nothing else. What kind of friendship was that between man and woman which does not blossom into marriage? Could a man and a woman become so close, as they were, without the other business interfering? (155)

In fact, despite Avi Dayyan's strength of character, Batanncha is uncomfortable with her simply because she is "still a woman", an unmarried one for that matter. Therefore, because she is a woman he cannot possibly go to her for advice or solicit any form of help from her. (152) Contrary to the position of radical feminists who reject marriage as a strategy for men's domination of women in patriarchy, Alkali clearly stresses the significance of the institution as an indispensable seal of human relationships and regeneration. Therefore, by way of denouement, Avi Dayyan is to marry Brigadier-General Husein; Nina, the half-caste daughter of Hashim, is marrying Salvia; and even Mama Tata is planning to marry Baba Dogo.

Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be inferred that Zaynab Alkali is ambivalent in handling gender issues in her novels and novellas. This ambivalence started manifesting itself from the very beginning of her literary creative endeavour, in *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*. In another instance, in *The Descendants*, she assumes the posture of a radical feminist in narrativizing her concerns. However, she completely retraces her steps in *The Initiates* where she reaffirms the values of patriarchal hegemony. In the novel, she privileges men over and above women. She also negates completely, the processes of self-actualization for women that she

explored in her earlier works. Although education is argued to be the ultimate guarantor for female empowerment, its vital role is however neglected. Unlike in her previous works, emphasis is here placed on marriage rather than on education as the source of security for women. In addition, the institution of marriage is upheld as the cornerstone of human and community existence. The resolution of *The Initiates* with three surprising sets of marriage propositions between her major characters indicates as much. Clearly, the message Alkali seems to be propagating in this novel is mutual respect and peaceful co-existence between the genders. This is, of course, the sense in which this paper sees a clear-cut paradox in Alkali's handling of gender discourse in *The Initiates*.

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