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WOMAN'S QUEST FOR AUTONOMY IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S
*THE STILLBORN*¹

Grace Eche Okereke

The search for the independent 'self,' however, should not stop at finding the 'self' but should extend beyond the 'self'... A total rejection of the marriage institution, an establishment of 'alternative living arrangements,' a world of 'women without men,' are no answers to our social problems. If anything, such a stance is a compounding of our already deteriorating social conditions. We need each other, men, women and children.²

On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness, but in her strength, not to escape herself, but to assert herself, not to abase herself, but to find herself-- on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger.³

Autonomy in this paper is defined within the African context of woman's quest for self-extrication from the entanglement of the thicket of patriarchal society's sexist norms. These sexist norms view woman as a male appendage, a male adjunct with no identity of her own apart from her father, husband and male relations in the family, and as unachieving in society's power structures, specifically, education and the economy. Thus, the quest for autonomy here is woman's search for self-expansion and self-realization within and outside the family unit,

¹ This paper is largely a part of a chapter in my Ph.D dissertation (Dec. 1991). The original chapter is entitled "The Independent Woman in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*."

² Zaynab Alkali, "Keynote Address" (Delivered at the 2nd Annual Conference of the West African Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (WAACLALS), University of Calabar, 7 December 1989), p. 10.

³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 679.

even while recognizing the legitimacy of filial and marital ties in the life of the African woman.

The heroine of Zaynab Alkali's debut novel, *The Stillborn*, set in Northern Nigeria, is Li. Alkali plots Li's torturous route to independence through three major stages-- the incipient stage of domestic revolt, the adolescent stage of marital subsumption and revolt, and the mature stage of self-assertion and reconciliation. These various stages constitute the literary and symbolic landmarks of woman's growth (physical, emotional, social, economic, psychological), and are explored in chronological sequence. The various stages traversed by Li on her journey towards independence become rites of passage not only from childhood to adulthood, from girlhood to womanhood, but also from naivety to experience, romantic ideals to shattered reality, relative passivity to revolt and self-assertion, and from the immanence of traditional norms to the transcendence of autonomy.

It is a mark of Alkali's creative achievement that she does not dwell on the boring details of each stage. Rather, Alkali glides her creative kaleidoscope across years, focusing on a significant event marking each stage in woman's growth, analyzing and describing it in detail with telescopic intensity, and then gliding over others leaving blurred images and gaps, which are later concretized and "sutured"⁴ into completeness through flashback. This has a cinematic effect and complicates the chronological sequence of the narration. Although the landmarks plotting woman's growth are explored in time sequence, the plot of the novel transcends a linear structure. It shuttles forward and backward in time, locating events in woman's life in appropriate structural positions through reminiscences, dramatic monologues and dialogues. The entangled, complicated nature of the plot reflects the complexity of the heroine's self-definition as she grapples with the obstacles in her path to autonomy.

⁴ Brian Finney, "Suture in Literary Analysis," *Literature Interpretation Theory (LIT)* 2 no. 2 (Nov. 1990): 131. Finney defines "suture" thus: "[I]terally it means 'to sew together.' The term is most frequently used in surgery where the lips of a cut or incision are sutured or stitched together. All forms of narrative necessitate sewing over discontinuities-- jumps in time or location, switches from one consciousness to another, changes from one plot-line or another." This device is exploited by Zaynab Alkali in *The Stillborn*.

When the story opens we meet Li at thirteen, just out of primary school, rejecting restrictive parental authority and full of romantic dreams of a luxurious life. The Northern Nigerian woman is at the starting point of her quest for self, for autonomy. Like the village setting still largely devoid of external modern influences in its "clusters of thatched mud huts,"⁵ Li is still very much a "virgin" to self-assertive, feminist influences; she is still very much defined by traditional values and expectations. But just as incipient modern influences are obvious in the village as indicated by "the few zinc roofs that were scattered among the clusters,"⁶ so too Li's exposure to school has introduced a new awareness that will soon manifest in her revolt. Thus, education is shown, even at the primary level, to have a consciousness-raising influence on woman.

Li's initial quest for independence is defined within the context of her home which becomes a microcosm of patriarchal society. Home and parents become the first obstacles on the path of liberation that woman must confront and surmount. At this stage, the restrictive traditional norms that chain woman are personified in Li's parents, especially her father whose rules she "consider[s] stupid and unnecessarily rigid."⁷ Li thinks of her father in antagonistic terms and vocalizes her revolt against domestic confinement when she desires to "go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been to."⁸

Despite the euphoria of homecoming, Li easily tires of her home, which to her is a concrete symbol of her lack of freedom:

[a]fter a few weeks at home, Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound *suffocating*. She felt *trapped* and *unhappy*. Already, she missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, *free* and *gay*. At home the little ones were too young to understand the *restrictions* and the older ones too dull

⁵ Zaynab Alkali, *The Stillborn* (Lagos: Longman, 1984), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

to react... 'It's worse than a *prison*,' Li complained.⁹

The words suffocating, trapped, restrictions, and prison create images of entrapment and asphyxia which aptly describe Li's claustrophobic feelings about her home and the stifling effects of restrictive traditional norms on woman. This echoes the nineteenth century heroines and female writers whose asphyxia, both as characters and as human beings derived from their destinies as "angels in the house."¹⁰

As a result of her awakening consciousness, the budding independent woman (Li) is unhappy with the status quo which symbolizes her immanence in the tradition. Her contrast of the claustrophobic life in the home with the "gay," "free" life of the school is already a pointer to the liberating influence that formal Western education, away from the village and its restrictions, has for woman. This early apprehension of education as a redemptive factor in woman's destiny, offering her transcendence from the immanence of tradition, becomes a foreshadowing of later higher education as an instrument for woman's self-assertion and liberation from the stifling patriarchal marital relationship which is another dimension of tradition. Li cannot, like her sister, Awa, acquiesce to the status quo, because unlike her sister born and bred in the limitations of tradition, Li has achieved awareness through exposure to education away from the village.

While Li has travelled to go to school, Awa has never moved out of the village. The traditional woman, as exemplified by Awa, is made to mature precociously in bearing family responsibilities, but her personality and psyche are stunted as she is socialized into accepting her limitations in the village as her destiny. This establishes Alkali's and other African female writers' contention that movement is a radical ingredient which equips woman for autonomy, for it affords her mental, social and psychological expansion through a view of life from various vantage points, whereas her not-so-privileged sister has a narrow and myopic perception of life based on patriarchal traditional dictates.

Having established Li as an iconoclast, Alkali proceeds to

⁹ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 83.

explain the source of her non-conformity. Everything about Li, right from birth, is unconventional signifying that she is an unusual and unconventional woman. The reader is told that Li was born with the bag of waters intact; she did not cry at birth like other children, thereby refusing "to adhere to this all-important tradition;"¹¹ she also had adult features. In addition to this, Li has prophetic powers that allow her to see into the future through dreams. Alkali exploits the dream motif in plotting woman's growth in *The Stillborn*. The dream trait confers on Li the status of a visionary, a clairvoyant, and this symbolically raises the assertive woman to the status of a pace-setter who iconoclastically heralds the dawn of a new era in the Hausa woman's destiny; it is an era of autonomy. Li's dreams are revelatory and meaningful. They add a supernatural dimension to her already unconventional character, thereby making her special and placing her ahead of the other female characters. Unlike them, she "sees" into the future beyond the ordinary, beyond the present. Her dreams are ominous and the disasters they presage always come to pass.

All these traits confer upon Li a strength and a destiny which is different from woman's traditional image. Li, the conscious woman, sees herself as "no ordinary child" and as "a super being."¹² But Awa, the traditional woman, sees her as "some kind of monster" exhibiting "stubborn streaks"¹³ because everything about her is iconoclastic. Even Li's name (we are told that it is short for 'libira,' meaning "needle") expresses her iconoclastic role as the feminist instrument for puncturing and deflating patriarchal assumptions of woman. It is a role she plays effectively in the novel.

As woman is expected to learn from her seniors through socialization, Li is contrasted with Awa and her mother in this early domestic stage of her revolt. Thus, through character pairing (Li and Sule, Awa and Mama), and character contrast (Li and Sule versus Awa and Mama), Alkali establishes the polarity between the values of the assertive woman and those of the traditional woman.

Li's mother is everything that Li does not want to be. She is a

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Ibid.

symbol of woman's fate in the immanence of tradition. Li thinks of her mother's authoritativeness as "monotony" and of her step as "mechanical." On top of this, she is "hard of hearing." Li sees woman molded in tradition, as symbolized by her mother, as sapped of life because she has been socialized into repeating the same boring domestic activities that Roslyn S. Willett describes as the "lubricating trivia"¹⁴ of the home. This, as Simone de Beauvoir contends, offers women "no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality."¹⁵ She becomes a robot fired into the clay of immanence by lack of variety and lack of freedom. She has no prospects for growth, for transcendence. It is then in place that she shuts herself out of a world that confines and stifles her by being half-alive to its sounds and movement. This is especially pertinent because she is damned in her relationship with her patriarchal husband, and for her there is no escape except in retreat.

Thus, while woman in tradition is shown to luxuriate with fulfillment in most complacent male-authored African novels, she is ironically distanced from reality and shrivels up inwardly from "unfulfillment" in female-authored novels such as Alkali's *The Stillborn*. This explodes the myth of the fulfilled traditional woman and affirms Judith K. Gardiner's assertion that "...for every aspect of identity as men define it, female experience varies from the male model."¹⁶ To depict this difference as Alkali has done, female writers exploit what Annette Kolodny refers to as the "inversion" device of giving new meanings to traditional images.¹⁷

Li's self-assertiveness which her mother describes as her "forward and tactless manner,"¹⁸ becomes a source of conflict between Li and her mother. This is because her husband, Baba, blames her for Li's refusal to conform to traditional norms in the vein of the "like

¹⁴ Roslyn S. Willett, "Working in a Man's World": The Woman Executive," in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, V. Gornick and B.K. Moran, eds., (New York: BasicBooks Inc, 1971), p. 368.

¹⁵ de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 470.

¹⁶ Judith K. Gardiner, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry* 8 no. 2 (Winter 1981): 349.

¹⁷ Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 2 no. 1 (Autumn, 1975): 80.

¹⁸ *The Stillborn*, 12.

mother, like daughter" adage:

...[t]heir mother was very happy. Whatever faults the children committed, especially Li and Sule, Baba would punish them and afterwards lash at their mother with words. 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 And even after I have civilized you, you still behave like heathens. Of course, the lion cub takes after its mother.'¹⁹

This is in consonance with the traditional conception that when the children turn bad their mother is to blame, but when they follow the right path, their father gets the glory.

As a symbol of tradition and its inflexibilities in *The Stillborn*, Baba's progressive fragility and deteriorating health symbolize the loss of the potent grip of restrictive traditional norms on Li, the conscious woman. Unlike Baba, Kaka, the symbol of progress and modernity despite his age, is bubbling with health and vitality. He sagaciously advises Baba that "children shouldn't be caged... for if the cage got broken by accident or design, they would find the world too big to live in."²⁰ It is symbolic that unlike Baba, who dies when Li is still suffering in the bondage of patriarchal marriage, Kaka lives long enough to witness her liberation and benefit from the achievement of the assertive woman's ambitions.

Awa, in her conformity to tradition, acts like a foil, the voice of restraint to Li's rebellious, assertive excesses. Her fear expressed in her cautioning of Li contrasts sharply with Li's bubbling exuberance and carefreeness as they prepare for the dance:

'I will come with you, but we won't stay long and you must behave yourself. Someone close to father might see us. You know very well what he thinks of cultural

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

dances.' Li gave her a pleased wink.²¹

The dances performed "under the watchful eyes of the full moon,"²² become the context within which Li flaunts constituted parental authority that symbolizes patriarchal impositions on woman, and asserts her individuality in spite of the fear-ridden Awa. Significantly, she also meets Habu during one of these nocturnal dances-- love germinates and flourishes in the romantic atmosphere of moonlight dances, but can hardly withstand the harsh realities of daylight, as Li discovers in the near future.

Li's ability to break the rules and attend the cultural dance where she meets Habu marks her achievement of self-assertion at the domestic level. She has symbolically emerged from the cocoon of her claustrophobic home, and like a butterfly, is ready to spread her wings and fly into autonomy. After this initial success, it is easy for Li to assert herself in other ways through revolt, especially in her choice of husband. With her meeting Habu and deciding to marry him against Baba's patriarchal ethics, Li the new woman, has succeeded in scaling the first hurdle in her path to autonomy. As Alkali symbolically asserts: "[t]hat day was to mark an important turning point in Li's life."²³ But this is just the beginning of the journey for woman.

The second stage of Li's quest for independence is defined within the context of marriage. At the beginning of this stage, Li, like Mireille in Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song*, luxuriates in romance with her newfound love, Habu Adams. His obvious poverty, like Ousmane's poverty in Bâ's novel, is a non-issue, as woman is in love, the realm in which negative reality does not exist. It is significant that while Awa who is not emotionally committed is negatively impressed by Habu's material poverty, signified in his undersized old shorts and his battered canvas shoes, Li sees beyond these to his good looks and positive qualities, as love at this stage of woman's naivety, is *blind* and she has *fallen* in love. Li, like Mireille, is a victim of "eros," which Gregory

²¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²² Ibid., p. 48.

²³ Ibid., p. 56.

Nazieanen defines as "the hot and unendurable desire,"²⁴ and whose qualities of entrapment John Macquarrie describes as "a passion, an ecstasy, a madness."²⁵ We are made to understand that Habu is as handsome as Li is beautiful, as Li, in her excitement, tells her friend, Faku, that Habu is handsome "like a god." This is usually woman's rating of her man in the excitement of romance, but when he actually starts behaving like a god in marriage, she becomes alienated by the enigma and unapproachability of the "god."

Significantly, this second stage of Li's rite of passage sets her horizon, her quest for autonomy, beyond the village to the city where Li will live with Habu after their marriage. The city becomes the symbol of her liberation from the chores of home and from the restrictive village life:

[s]he was dreaming of a paradise called the 'city.' A place where she would have an easy life, free from slimy calabashes and evil-smelling goats. She looked down at her coarse hands and feet. One of these days she would be a different woman, with painted nails and silky shining hair.²⁶

Li romanticizes the city, and in her naivety, is ignorant of its dark side as the destroyer of dreams. Garba's account of the city, with its loose life, loose morals and vices, foreshadows Habu's life there and Li's later experiences. With its "availability of free women, easy money and idle living,"²⁷ it is a place of degeneration for the unwary. Woman must, of necessity, however, build on illusions that must be shattered before she can qualify to achieve redemption and autonomy.

Li builds her dreams of a fulfilled life around Habu:

[s]he was going to be a successful Grade 1 teacher and

²⁴ Gregory Nazieanen, Quoted in *New Testament World*, William Barclay (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1964), p. 17.

²⁵ John Macquarrie, *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1967), p. 198.

²⁶ *The Stillborn*, p. 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Habu a famous doctor, like the whitemen in the village mission hospital. The image of a big European house full of houseboys and maids rose before her.²⁸

But she soon learns that dreams, like bubbles, evanesce when they are anchored on another, rather than on one's inner resources. Li's later bitterness and disillusionment are heightened by the euphoria she now draws from her dreams:

[e]ver since the chance meeting with Habu in the dancing arena, Li had lived in a dream world. She swung her hips as she walked, her feet barely touching the ground. Her face had that peculiar glow that is derived only from an inner happiness.²⁹

Like Li, Awa and Faku have also built their future on dreams around men.

But when Alkali makes another leap in time and focuses on the heroine four years later as a young woman of nineteen experiencing frustration in her unconsummated marriage, the dreams of the three women lie about their feet in shards as Li goes down memory lane through her reminiscences. Alkali fills in the events of the past four years through flashback which she aptly and unobtrusively introduces with the words: "[a]s her fingers worked, her mind went back over the last four years when her life and her hopes had been different from what they were now."³⁰ Alkali's positioning of this flashback at the height of Li's frustration and bitterness against Habu for abandoning her in the village makes her situation and male treachery more poignant, as it contrasts sharply with the romantic euphoria of her courtship with Habu which forms the content of the flashback.

This flashback on the promises the men made to each of the women is dramatized as Li relives and savours the euphoria of that magic moment that has evanesced forever. This gives the incident an

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

immediacy that heightens the pain she feels in her rejection and in the "death" of all their dreams. Alkali concludes the flashback by reintegrating it into the flow of the narration in a very unobtrusive manner with these words:

Li shook her head at the memory of the night. 'The gods never missed a word, we said that day. We made our plans-- they took over.' Now, four years later, here she was, still in the village, still waiting for Habu³¹

The gods and fate join hands with patriarchal man to deal woman a blow as she waits in vain for her man. Thus, rather than the fulfillment of their dreams, each of the women confronts the harsh reality of subsumption in marriage. Li soon discovers, as woman is wont to do, that the romance of courtship dies at the aisle, or in the traditional context, at the threshold of the marriage rites. Each of the women is shown to fight out her own survival within this antagonistic marital context, for as Helen Chukwuma rightly observes: "the true test for woman continues to be the marriage institution. In this closed-in arena every married woman is to fight out her survival as an individual."³²

Li is abandoned in the village for four years by Habu who is now a salesman in the city instead of a doctor. In her frustration, Li cries out to Kaka: "I am his [Habu's] responsibility now."³³ Despite her yearning for independence, Li still wants to pursue a male-defined destiny. In fact she sees man (Habu) as her only hope of escape. As the realization of abandonment dawns on her, however, the romantic blinkers fall from her eyes, and couching her declining love in the image of a flame that has burnt itself out, she angrily muses "[y]es, he had fanned the flame of her love, but she was determined to quench its embers."³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³² Helen Chukwuma, "Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta," *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*, H. Otokunefor and O. Nwodo, eds., (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1989), p. 5.

³³ *The Stillborn*, p. 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

As a result of this abandonment, Habu has exposed Li to the opprobrium of ridicule by the villagers. She would not hear of cheapening herself in male eyes by returning to Habu on her own, as her traditional sister, Awa, would have her do. Her grandfather's advice that Li continue to wait for Habu is the conservative voice of tradition cautioning woman against violating the status quo so as to retain her moral credibility and high commercial value in male eyes, thus advocating woman's imprisonment by a tradition that refuses to recognize her humanity. But Li has transcended the stage of the *Efuru*, the *Idus* and *Nnu Egos*,³⁵ whose suppression of their feminist consciousness, only to atrophy in the conformity of tradition represents the tragedy of their lives.

Li questions a tradition that demands that she wait indefinitely for a faithless husband:

[w]as she to spend the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master's plate? Who says a husband makes for a guardian or a father? Certainly not the Hausas, who would say, 'A woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan.'³⁶

Society itself recognizes the truth of the female predicament in this Hausa proverb which tells the truth about woman's marital situation, not only in the Islamic culture, but also in other African cultures. Li's questioning marks a turning point in her life and saves her from the annihilative end that befalls Mireille in Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song*, who decided to wait for man.

Habu redeems the situation by sending for Li who now lives with him as his wife in the city. Marriage seems to transform man from a lover to a monster, from one who cares about his woman's feelings to a misogynist. Li mourns the "death" of the carefree romantic lover she had known in the village. She discovers that Habu's metamorphosis is completely in consonance with the destructive influence of the city with

³⁵ See Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* and *Idu* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* respectively.

³⁶ *The Stillborn*, p. 85.

its bright lights, voyeuristic women and inexhaustible stock of alcohol, and "Li knew she had lost her man to the city... The man lying on the other side of the room was a well-dressed stranger who did not talk to a village woman."³⁷ The distance between them transcends the physical to the emotional and psychological, thereby laying the foundation for the disintegration of their marriage. Rather than confide in Li concerning his escapades, Habu freezes her out of his heartland, so that there can be no joy and harmony in such a marriage built on mutual distrust and hatred.

In her desperation, Li adopts the traditional woman's method for salvaging her marriage. She consults a native medicine man who impoverishes her but fails to redeem her marriage. Li's landlady is her confidante and mentor in this regard. Alkali, like other African women writers, portrays female friendship as a therapeutic and necessary alliance in sisterhood towards her achievement of autonomy. Woman "in tradition," as exemplified by Hajiya, who like Rama in Miriama Bâ's *So Long A Letter*, is an accommodationist, sees patience with man as a virtue that will eventually yield fruits. But the conscious woman, Li, like Aissatou, in Mariama Bâ's *So Long A Letter*, sees this as feeding from the crumbs that fall from man's emotional table. Hajiya's marital destiny, like Faku's and Mireille's, is an analogue of woman's fate in the traditional polygamous context which Li, the assertive woman, rejects. Significantly, this traumatic stage of marital warfare has yielded fruit-- a pregnancy for Li.

Li's return home at the death of her father serves as a stock-taking trip that is needed to give the conscious woman the required impetus to assess the extent of her success in her quest. It is one that will reawaken the now suppressed assertiveness of the conscious woman and set her on the path of revolt and progress in her quest.

During this trip the picture that her friend, Faku and her sister, Awa, present, reveals to Li that as a result of unsavory encounters with man in patriarchal marriage, woman has lost the vivacity and romantic robustness of her girlhood. Faku has metamorphosed from a lively, ambitious village girl into a "gaunt-looking woman" with a "thin

³⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

haggard face," a woman "famished in body and no doubt famished in soul,"³⁸ living under the painful tutelage of a vagrant husband and a domineering senior wife. Her emotional aridity and barrenness symbolized in the brown, unyielding soil after only one son, her sparsely furnished "tiny" room, and Faku's pretended satisfaction, signify that woman's adventure in a polygamous marriage has not only impoverished her physically, emotionally and materially, but it has also robbed her of psychic health by stripping her of the dreams of youth. Like J.P. Clark in *Song of a Goat*, Alkali aptly couches woman's infertility in the image of an arid, barren land.

Awa's dreams of becoming a school mistress fizzle out in her frequent maternities and her relentless struggles to provide for the children. In the true image of the traditional woman, she has, like her mother, borne many children and Li aptly and metaphorically couches her fecundity in the flora of the rural setting: "[y]ou have the womb of the pumpkin."³⁹

Through the failed dreams of the three females whose lives preoccupy Alkali in *The Stillborn*, she symbolically makes the point that woman can never achieve self-realization through a male-defined destiny, that security for woman in marriage is an illusion as Germaine Greer posits,⁴⁰ and that, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "marriage kills love,"⁴¹ and "annihilates woman."⁴²

Next we meet Li as a young woman of twenty-nine. Ten years of marriage have shattered her dreams and illusions of a fulfilled male-defined destiny. Again, there is a major leap in time as Alkali's camera moves from the pregnant Li's trip from the city back to the village at her father's death to the new woman now in an Advanced Teachers' College visiting home in response to her sister's urgent letter of invitation. Once again, Alkali uses flashback to "suture"⁴³ her exploration together by showing Li suffering a second and more humiliating abandonment and single parenthood that jolt her out of her

³⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁰ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971), p. 320.

⁴¹ de Beauvoir, op. cit., 219.

⁴² Ibid., p. 496.

⁴³ Finney, op cit., p. 131.

apathy and dependence on Habu for love, happiness and fulfillment. Characteristically, Alkali introduces this flashback unobtrusively:

Li was now home to 'see for herself.' She could not forget the last time she had been at home and the reasons for her flight from the village. Li cringed with shame at the memory.⁴⁴

At this point, Alkali presents Li's memory of the collective female revolt against Li by her rivals in the village. The opprobrium of this revolt of women whose husbands' eyes are now turned towards the abandoned Li, heightens her bitterness. But it also reveals to Li the depth of moral turpitude into which she has fallen, especially as their insults are couched in leases of reification and moral depravity, such as: "Unsaddled horse," "The vulture that isn't anybody's chicken!" and "Rich man's play thing."⁴⁵

Alkali effectively dramatizes this corporate revolt against Li, conferring on it an immediacy that "implicates" the reader into Li's experiences. This revolt also depicts the spirit of oneness and solidarity with which village women often confront a common enemy with assured success. It is at this point that Li deflects her destiny from man's control and starts controlling her life herself. Thus, women, through mutual antagonism, become instrumental in the assertive woman's change of destiny. Stung to anger by the humiliation of rejection that she has suffered individually and collectively with her family, Li decides to take complete control of her destiny. This flashback comes to an end unnoticed and is smoothly integrated into the thread of the narrative with the words:

[s]he had then vowed to go back into the world and make an independent life for herself. Dusting her class seven certificate, she had fled from the village, leaving her daughter behind. Now five years later, she was ready

⁴⁴ *The Stillborn*, p. 83.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

for her Advanced Teacher's Certificate.⁴⁶

This revolt that propels Li forward in her quest marks the end of the second stage of her rite of passage into autonomy.

Another important flashback occurs when Li undertakes to open up to her sister, Awa, on her experiences in the city and the very changed Habu. Occuring close to the events explored earlier, this flashback fills in the gap and answers questions that have arisen in the reader's mind concerning the mystery behind Habu's complete metamorphosis from a caring lover to a misogynistic husband.⁴⁷ Apart from the effective structural integration of these flashbacks that unravel woman's subsumption in marriage and her revolt, their positioning is so strategic as to satisfy the suspense created previously by the mystery gaps in the fabric of the narration, and each serves to propel woman forward in her journey towards independence. The complicated nature of the plot in this second stage, occasioned by the flashbacks and shifts in time is symbolic of the painful and tortuous route the assertive woman has had to traverse in working out her traumas on the journey towards autonomy in a male world of treachery.

Alkali's language in this stage also reflects woman's inner torture at male treachery. The short structures in the following example have a staccato rhythm that expresses the shock of the narrator (Li) about the horrid experience in this scene concerning the other woman in Habu's life, who has ruined him and their marriage:

[s]he had to commit abortion or suicide. There was no other choice. Habu found a herbalist. A large sum of money was paid. Money borrowed from the unsuspecting landlady. Three days later, the same landlady was hurried into Habu's room. A woman was unconscious in a pool of blood. From there, there was no hiding anything. The hospital. Her uncle. An operation. She lost both the baby and the baby bag.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-93.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

The final stage of the assertive woman's growth begins with her determination to strike out on her own and direct the course of her destiny. This is symbolized by her physical departure from the village. Chioma Opara has established the foot as a synecdochic symbol of woman's quest for autonomy in Alkali's novels.⁴⁹ Li travels often and this movement symbolizes woman's success in casting off the fetters of confinement in tradition. Despite her incipient feminist consciousness in the village, Li's revolt takes on a radical dimension only after she has travelled to the city. Her travelling out of the village in quest of education, and (symbolically) autonomy in the city, is the redemptive move that changes her destiny and equips her for autonomy.

Thus, contravening the Muslim ethic of female inertia, Li flees the village with definite, challenging goals in mind-- these will convert her from a dependent, self-pitying wife to an achieving individual on whom depends the comfort and progress of the entire family. Finally this is in place, for as Helen Chukwuma states: "[b]ut an aggrieved female need shed no tears but must work out a strategy for survival and recognition."⁵⁰ Li, the now independent woman, resolves:

... to go back to the world and make an independent life for herself She intended to be the most educated woman in the village for miles around. Only then would she assume the role of the 'man of the house' in her father's compound.⁵¹

Li's action here is legitimate and in consonance with Germaine Greer's survival strategy for the married woman who strives for independence and self-realization, in that, "[e]ssentially she must recapture her own will and her own goals, and the energy to use them, and in order to effect this some quite 'unreasonable' suggestions, or demands may be

⁴⁹ Chioma Opara, "The Foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novels," *Literature and Black Aesthetics*, E.N. Emenyonu, ed., (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1990), pp.158-166.

⁵⁰ Chukwuma, *op cit.*, p. 5.

⁵¹ *The Stillborn*, p. 85.

necessary."⁵²

Li's refusal to return to Habu on her own and her determination to be self-reliant constitute her feminist consciousness, and are a repudiation of the myth of female dependency on man for direction and survival. She strikes out on her own to acquire formal Western education and economic independence. Li is, here, a true feminist for as Filomina Steady rightly observes, "true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant."⁵³ Alkali, in this move by Li, agrees with fellow female African writers, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Mariama Bâ, that education with its liberalizing influence and its concomitant economic independence, is of necessity a weapon of liberation for woman from patriarchal subjugation, especially in marriage.

Li's dreams of independence are realized when after her studies, she builds a "large four-bedroomed house," and Awa rightly refers to her as "the man of the house now."⁵⁴ Li has acquired that phallic symbol of power, a house, and has proven that woman can be relied upon where the men have failed.

The men in Li's family have failed and their failure challenges the latent feminist toughness in the heroine. They are described as being "lame;" lameness becomes a signal term describing man's inadequacies, especially in marriage. As Awa writes to Li symbolically, "there is not a single man around."⁵⁵ Biologically, there are men, but in terms of responsibilities there are none: Habu Adams has been swallowed up by the city and has degenerated into a "no good;" Sule is now a cursed exile; Baba is dead and his compound is in ruins; Kaka is too old to be of much use; Dan Fiam, Awa's husband, has degenerated into a village drunk. Having shown how the men have failed in a thoroughly patriarchal culture that invests man with responsibility and rates him above woman, Alkali now paves the way for the independent woman (Li) to assume a masculine role in which she performs creditably. By this deflationary technique that Alkali exploits in her portrayal of the

⁵² Greer, *op cit.*, p. 323.

⁵³ Filomina Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge: Schneckman Publishing Company Inc, 1981), p. 35.

⁵⁴ *The Stillborn*, p. 101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 82.

men in *The Stillborn*, Alkali has humanized the penis and taken the "steel" out of it, and made it flesh again as called for by Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*.⁵⁶

Li has traversed a torturous and tortuous feminist route to self-realization through education, economic and emotional independence that restore to her a healthy psyche. Li has achieved self-assertion and independence and is the truly feminist figure in *The Stillborn*. Her feminism is further buttressed by her continued rejection of the now dissipated, "lame" Habu whose amorous escapades have brought him to a ruinous end. Elaine Showalter posits the *raison d'être* for the "maiming motif" in female fiction. Thus:

[m]en, these [female-authored] novels are saying, must learn how it feels to be helpless and to be forced unwillingly into dependency. Only then can they understand that women need love but hate to be weak. If he is to be redeemed and to rediscover his humanity, the 'woman's man' must find out how it feels to be a woman.⁵⁷

Alkali shows Li as being equipped to live a successful and independent life, but does not stop here for that would fall nihilistically short of the goals of an African feminism that does not condemn marriage, but seeks to reassess and revitalize it for the good of both man and woman and of the society in general. It is this consideration that marks the last stage of the independent woman's growth--reconciliation.

By a narrative twist, Alkali shows Li, the now autonomous woman, opting to return to her feckless husband, Habu Adams, who having been chastised into accepting his weaknesses despite his masculinity; having been symbolically castrated like Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, is qualified to start afresh in an equal relationship where husband and wife will walk side by side and prop

⁵⁶ Greer, *op cit.*, p. 318.

⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.152.

each other up through the storms of life.

Alkali's conciliation of Li and her husband has been regarded as "throwing sand into the feminist 'garr'"⁵⁸ and as "a dramatically ironic reversal of events"⁵⁹ which is "self-negating,"⁶⁰ but it is a writer's strategy of a restorative vision for her society. For as Du Plessis states, "one of the moments of ideological negotiation in any work occurs in the choice of a resolution."⁶¹ Having made her point of complete rejection of the traditional Muslim ethic of man as master of woman in marriage through the exploits of the independent woman (Li), Alkali proceeds to redeem the marriage institution for the health of society. This confirms Alkali's stance which some critics describe as womanism. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's definition of womanism sums up Alkali's stance and the independent woman's image in *The Stillborn*:

[womanism is] a black outgrowth from feminism. Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand.⁶²

Both woman (Li) and man (Habu) emerge from their traumas more mature and better-equipped to relate more meaningfully in marriage. That Habu's torturous route to growth and maturity has yielded positive fruits despite his physical, emotional and psychic

⁵⁸ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Women and Nigerian Literature," in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*, Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., (Guardian Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1988), 1:63.

⁵⁹ Omolala Ladele, "The Novels of Zaynab Alkali: Another View," *The Guardian*, 29 August 1987, p. 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Rachel Blau Du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3. Quoted in Susan Z. Andrade, "Rewriting History, Motherhood and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's Literary Tradition," *Research in African Literatures-- Special Issue: Critical Theory and African Literature*, 21 no. 1 (Spring 1990): 104.

⁶² Ogunyemi, *op cit.*, p. 65

traumas, is seen in the reversal of roles. While Li begged and waited for him at the early stage of their relationship, he is the one begging now and waiting for her return. This makes Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's comment on Western women writers relevant to their African counterparts: "[w]omen writers' most common move in the nineteenth century, and sometimes in the twentieth, was to invert the model of male dominance by placing the man in the victim's position and objectifying him."⁶³ Li has succeeded in asserting herself by proving her worth to the world, but suppresses the pride that goes with autonomy and success, and decides to give marriage with Habu a second chance. Both man and woman have passed through "fire" and have emerged tougher and more refined to withstand the storms ahead.

It is significant that the dream that changes Li's decision about giving Habu a second chance is centred around their child, Shuwa, whose sex (female) is a feminist reversal of patriarchal values. Before the dream, Li, the now independent woman, had, like her literary sisters-- Debbie in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, and Aissatou in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, come to the conclusion that marriage and autonomy for women are mutually exclusive. But in the dream that represents Alkali's greatest leap in time, Li traverses fifty years into the future (this is only plausible within the dream world whose margins of reality transcend the boundaries of consciousness) and confronts her present decision never to return to Habu with regret. This regret is communicated through her great-granddaughter, whose youth and marriage remind Li of her own thwarted dreams of a romantic fulfilled life. In the dream, she is an old woman who is alone because Habu is dead. Her regret derives from her loneliness which is, of necessity, the price the radical feminist has to pay for her male-antagonistic self-assertion.

Li rightly comes to the conclusion that life is empty if it is not shared with the object of one's love. Similar to Elechi Amadi, she realizes that "men and women need each other emotionally, and...for survival."⁶⁴ When Li awakens and finds that it is only a dream, she

⁶³ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, "Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic," *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 126.

⁶⁴ Elechi Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1982), p. 71.

comprehends that she still has the opportunity to redirect her life towards marital fulfillment with the now chastised Habu who she still loves. It dawns on Li that her destiny is still inextricably linked with Habu through their ten year-old daughter, Shuwa. And so in a sudden decision that surprises her sister Awa, and angers some feminist readers and feminist critics, Li decides to go back to Habu. It is significant that Li's decision to return to Habu is conceived of in maternal emotional terms expressing the hope of a relationship, or a baby, that will live and grow rather than that which is doomed to stillbirth like her previous experience:

[s]he knew that the bond that had tied her to the father of her child was not ruptured. And inspite of everything, in the soft cradle of her heart, there was another baby forming. This time Li was determined the baby would not be stillborn.⁶⁵

It is also significant that the independent woman (Li) is "determined" to make her marriage succeed rather than watch it drift towards disintegration. The inertia that had marked woman's helplessness in her early, naive relationship with man, has now given way to woman's feminist determination to direct the course of her marital destiny, showing that she is prepared to fight any obstacle in the path of the success of her marital life, no matter in what form it comes. It is also significant that at her return, Li would neither "hold the crutches and lead the way" nor "walk behind and arrest his [Habu's] fall," but "hand him the crutches and side-by-side we will learn to walk."⁶⁶ This apt image of a couple on a journey through life as mutual equals symbolizes the autonomous woman's position not in front, not behind but *beside* her man in marriage.

Thus Li's return to Habu is the return of not the "angel," or the "devil," but of the assertive woman of the house to a human husband rather than to a "god." This is the import of Li's statement to Awa, "[w]e are all lame ... But this is no time to crawl. It is time to learn to

⁶⁵ *The Stillborn*, pp. 104-105.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

walk again."⁶⁷ Neither man nor woman is perfect, but they can both rise above their imperfections and mutually grow to realize their potentials together.

Through Alkali's portrayal of Li in *The Stillborn*, it is clear that the independent woman, in the context of this paper is an African feminist (or womanist) whose feminism is neither anti-male, nor inherently combative. Her feminism only adopts a combative posture when man objectifies and victimizes her by betraying her loyalty and love. Even when this happens, however, calm returns after the raging of the storm and life has to continue meaningfully. Alkali's portrayal of the assertive woman's quest for autonomy in *The Stillborn* has been influenced by her views on the African woman in search of self. As she states, "we need each other, men, women, and children."⁶⁸ It is this desired unity of man, woman and child in filial bond despite man's brutalization and alienation of woman in the past, that has formed the cornerstone of Alkali's charting of the conscious woman's rites of passage from the immanence of patriarchal definition to the transcendence of autonomy and self-definition in *The Stillborn*.

Although Alkali adopts the omniscient narrative viewpoint in charting woman's path to independence in the novel, she explores events through Li's consciousness. By adopting the conscious woman's perspective and implicating the female reader, she has no choice but to empathize with Li as Li lives out her destiny.

The novel covers a long time span (20 years) within which Alkali works out the independent woman's destiny; her growth from a village girl luxuriating in her love for her man to a knowledgeable city woman, now educated in both books and in the way of the world. The disappearance of the village and its unique nostalgic life-style corresponds to the disquieting changes in woman's life. It is significant that Alkali shows Li meticulously noting the landscape and the natural state of the village at the beginning of the novel, and towards the end she shows Li, now a transformed woman, again noting the remarkable transformation of the village into a town. This has not only destroyed the traditional rhythms of life in the village, but it has also alienated the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Alkali, "Keynote Address," op cit., p. 10.

villagers from the communal warmth that defined their lives:

at dawn, there was no sound of the cockcrow. Early in the morning, no one came to wake you up with the latest gossip. Everybody kept himself to himself. Li grieved inwardly. Awa was right after all, when she had said, 'We needn't go to the city, the city will come to us.'⁶⁹

But whereas changes in the village are destructive of positive values, changes in the autonomous woman are destructive of self-negating values.

Alkali's use of traditional rhetoric in expressing the traditional Hausa milieu adds local color and confers authenticity to Alkali's fictional world. Expressions such as: "daughter-of-my-mother," "son-of-the-chief," "mother-of-the-house," and "by the gods of my ancestors," root the experience explored in *The Stillborn* in the folk tradition of the Hausa. This is both "in-character" and aesthetically appealing. That Li, the independent woman, uses these expressions even in the city shows how well-rooted she is in the tradition of her people. This also shows that autonomy need not fragment, alienate or eradicate the independent woman from her traditional roots. What Li rejects are the retrogressive aspects of her people's ethos not the entire traditional world. Her regret at the destruction of the natural village setting by modern structures and values buttresses this point.

The remarkable aspect of Alkali's creative impulse is that it transcends the lament of woman in the immanence of tradition preoccupying other Nigerian female novelists at the nascent stage of their creative careers. Alkali depicts woman not only grappling with these limitations and eventually rising above them to achieve self-realization, but also making herself relevant to this tradition in nurturing and enriching dimensions. Herein lies Alkali's feminist stance-- that woman must, like Li, map out survival strategies and succeed despite the crippling and stunting circumstances that define her existence in a patriarchal culture.

⁶⁹ *The Stillborn*, p. 94.