

## **Aborted Dreams of the Northern Women: A Case study of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Degradation of the Eastern Women: An Example of Buchi Emecheta's *The Second Class Citizen***

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### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with gender inequality in *The Stillborn* which entails textual analysis. It highlights the recognition of women and the forms of discrimination, oppression and acts of injustice meted out to women in the Northern part of Nigeria. The beauty of literature is used to imagine the world in which we live and to represent the image of woman correctly. The novel is of inner development about women who manage to assert themselves despite the oppressive structures of Islamic society in Northern Nigeria, brought recognition to the writer far beyond the borders of her region. This paper also embraces the basic patterns of this society which can be changed only by very small steps at a time, even within the Islamic establishment. The main motor in this process is education for women and girls. This paper also deals with *The Second Class Citizen* as a mirror of Nigerian women recognition. The main characters in this novel show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way by which to define feminism and womanhood.

**KeyWords:** gender inequality, discrimination, oppression, injustice, feminism and womanhood

## **Introduction**

In the Northern part of Nigeria, we find the Hausa people. The Hausa people are one of the three biggest ethnic groups in Nigeria, and they exert one of the strongest political and economic influences and as almost seventy percent of all Hausas are Muslims. Islam is the strongest influence in their social cultural organization. They adhere strictly to Koranic injunctions, especially those items referring to women. Among these conjunctions are veiled heads and restricted conversations with male non-kin in public.

In Hausa society, a prevalent practice is early or teenage marriages. Most often, a female child is betrothed at birth to a man that is old enough to be her father. As soon as she reaches puberty or adolescence, she is given out in marriage to the man. These women are too young for pregnancies and most often cannot give birth naturally. A lot of them suffer life long diseases as a result of this, yet the practice has not been stopped because it is part of their tradition.

These young women are forced into marriages without love against their wishes. They do not have a say in their lives, but to marry whomever their parents have chosen for them. Most often, the Hausa girls have dreams and potentials but they lost their dreams before they realize it. This is due to the fact that, their society does not encourage them. They learn early in life that they are inferior to their male folks. Therefore, they allow society to decide and live their lives for them.

In the Eastern part of Nigeria, we find the Ibo people. They occupy seven states out of the thirty-six states in Nigeria. They are the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria and they are predominantly Christians. This is because when the first missionaries arrived Nigeria they settled in Ibo land. Most of them practice Christianity. Their life style is closely related to the teachings of the bible. One of such teachings is that, wives should be submissive to their husbands.

In Eastern Nigeria, the female child was not respected. She is regarded as a property and treated less importantly than the male child. The Ibo society treats the female child as a property, and the bride price is normally very high till date. Most often, an Ibo man uses his daughter's bride price to enrich himself or to add to his riches. They use to marry out their daughters as if they were selling them out. This why a lot of Ibo men do not get married early, if they want to marry from their place. They have to spend their time to acquire enough wealth so that they can afford to pay the bride price of an Ibo girl.

In a typical Ibo society, the female child was regarded as insignificant, and this was made known to her right from childhood. She grows up, constantly knowing that she does not have equal right with her male siblings. She was not exposed to the same educational opportunity with her male counterparts. She is taught early in life to accept the kitchen as her place.

The author of *The Second Class Citizen*, Buchi Emecheta, tells us about women's place in the Ibo society in her book. Buchi is from the Eastern part of Nigeria, she was born in 1944 near Lagos in Nigeria. At a young age, she was orphaned and spent her early childhood years being educated at a missionary school. In 1960 at the age of sixteen, she was married to Sylvester Onwordi, a student to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven. After their marriage, they both moved to London. Over the course of her six years marriage, Buchi gave birth to five children. *The Second Class Citizen* is her second novel. In this novel, she tells about gender discrimination, which is often found in the culture of her people. Through Buchi's eyes, we follow the life of a young and clever girl, Ada who is the main character in the novel. She started her life and the struggle she undergoes because she did not want to subject herself to the culture of her people, also, the initiative and determination to get what she wants against all odds is revealed.

### **Aborted Dream in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn***

Zaynab Alkali, one of the first women novelists to emerge from Northern Nigeria. In her first novel, *The Stillborn*, she reflects her belief that it is essential that women throughout Nigeria even Africa be allowed and encouraged to fulfil their potential, if they are to make an effective contribution to the growth of our nation. In Zaynab's novel, the character Li, is an example of a young maiden growing up in a Northern rural society, she has a dream to escape from the village to a life of luxury in the city. Li is unhappy and uncomfortable with life in the village. The life which her elder sister and so many other young girls have grown to accept. She shows her resentment in the (p. 3), words to her elder sister Awa.

Awa and other young girls who have not had the opportunity to school outside the local community have accepted the life as proper. Li on the other hand, has been exposed to life outside her village because she has lived a gay and free life in the primary boarding school. So when she came home for holiday, she complained that life in her father's compound is worse than prison.

In Hausa society, the family regards the male child more important than the female child. Zaynab illustrates this in her novel, *The Stillborn*, when Li went out to a dance at night and broke the fence. When her father discovered, he was furious and wanted to beat whoever was responsible for the breakage. After much interrogation, before Li could own up, Sule her elder brother covered for her. He told his father that he was responsible. His father did not beat him, not just because of his age but what he stood for; 'a male child'.

The Hausa girls live a life that is devoid of meaning and happiness. They just live without adding values to their lives, as a result of the way their society and upbringing regards them. The Hausa girls without husband have no social status, besides that they will face mockery and be ridiculed by their neighbours. Life for them has meaning only when they attach themselves to men. Even when they have dreams, they do not work towards realizing their dreams, but wait for a man to help them. Whereby the man does not come, they wait and hope forever. Therefore, they have no identity of their own.

In Zaynab's novel, *The Stillborn*, we see this happening in the life of Li and her best friend, Faku. Faku was very happy to tell Li that a man from the city is interested in her. Despite her love for the city, she knows that she can never get there except a man marries her and takes her there. Besides, only in that way will her parents allow her to leave the village. So for as long as she wants to live in the city, she has to marry Garba even if she knows that she does not love him. Besides, the Hausa or Northern maidens are not brought up to see love as relevant to marriage. Rather, they get married so that people do not ridicule them and their families. We noticed this in Faku's words during the discussion of polygamy between Awa, Garba and Habu (p. 16). We also noticed that Garba was older than Faku; he is in his 30s while she is only a teenager. This is a normal situation in the Northern society.

We also noticed that Li started dreaming of the shape her life will take only after she met Habu Adams. She began to imagine herself living in a city, becoming a successful Grade 1 teacher and Habu a famous medical doctor. She imagines herself living in a big European house with so much luxury and having housemaids to attend to her. Soon, we realize the difficulties she faces and her inability to bring this dream to realization, simply because she is dependent on Habu to make this dream real. Shortly after they met, Habu paid her bride price and left her in the village. He asked her to wait for him until he sent for her (p, 57). It was after she received his letter that she realized that, he deceived her into believing that he is a medical doctor. Nevertheless, she waited for him; she waited for weeks, weeks turned into months and months into years. At first, she got the sympathy of the villagers but as the years passed, they began to ridicule her, for waiting for a man who had lost interest in her.

The stupidity of these Hausa women is so overwhelming, that they allow their lives' happiness and dream to be determined by the man they decide to marry. Awa, Li's elder sister, we were told was often sullen and unfriendly shortly after her marriage, her husband changed into a drunk and she is unhappy but society expects her to remain with him.

On the other hand, Li aborts that dream of living in a European house, married to Habu, a medical doctor while she is a Grade 1 teacher. All she does now is hoping that her man will come and take her to the city; because she is beautiful, different suitors continue to ask for her hand in marriage. Yet, she is determined to wait for her lover, some other time; she wished she could escape from the pressures of home and mockery of the villagers as well as the constant advances of other men. Before she finally heard from him, it was after four years.

In Zaynab Alkali's novel, we realize how miserable life can become for a Hausa spinster. We noticed how unhappy Li was for those four years. After the four years, the message was that, she should prepare within one week to go to the city with Habu's younger brother to meet her husband. For the next few days before the journey, she was very excited. Her excitement is short-lived when she met her husband in the city. He gave her a very cold welcome and did not sleep in the house that evening. Soon she realized that she is married to a total stranger, once again she is unhappy, and she starts to cry (p. 70). Once again, her dream changes, the life of luxury and happiness in the city is not what she found when she finally gets there.

Zaynab Alkali's novel, *The Stillborn* described how these young women are faced with shattered dreams everyday of their lives. They get married and soon after, live very unhappy in their husbands' houses. Their husbands on the other hand have no consideration for their feelings. She tells us how Faku, Li's best friend found herself as Garba's second wife. Garba had deceived her into believing that he was never married. Whereas he had been married for close to twenty years with nine children. Shortly after she left for the city, she finds herself in the village attending her father's burial. Before leaving for the village, she quarrelled with Habu, and she determined not to return to him until he apologises to her. She now has a daughter Shuwa, and she is determined to make decisions for her life.

Li has learnt a lesson this time, not to allow any man toss her around or determine her life for her. Despite pressures from her mother and sister to return to her husband, she refused. Rather, she has decided to empower herself, and to take responsibilities for her life and action. She is ready to read for her Advanced Teacher's Certificate. Her intention is to become the most educated woman in the village and miles around.

Li is strong-willed and is determined to bring this dream to realization; she was able to realize it, unlike the other girls who allow life to determine their dreams. In the end, they never realized their childhood dreams. We noticed this in the conversation between Awa and Li (p. 93). In the end, Li got her degree and when she decides to go back to her husband, it was out of sympathy for his plight. She goes to him, a different person, and an empowered and educated woman. This time around, he will have no option but to respect and adore her.

### **Degradation of the Eastern Women in the novel**

The Ibo culture was well-known for its gender discrimination, this we can notice in Buchi's novel *The Second Class Citizen*. Buchi tells us about the character Ada whose birth was not recorded because she was a girl (p. 7). This is to show how serious the discrimination is. This serious gender issue can also be noticed in the treatment of the girl as a child, when they had to send her to school. Although they knew the importance of sending their children to school yet, they would not want to send the female child to school. This can be noticed in (p. 9). Despite the Ibo people were aware of the importance of educating their children, yet

they did not think it was wise to allow their daughters the same opportunity as their sons. Ada's parents sent her younger brother, Boy to school and wanted her to stay at home. Ada, being a determined child went to school on her own, although she knew that she would be punished when she came back. Her parents later enrolled her in a public school.

Another practice that was common with the Ibo people is treatment of a woman as if she were a property. When a man died, his brother inherits his wife along with the property. Buchi illustrates this in her novel, *The Second Class Citizen*. We were told that when her father died, her mother was inherited by her father's brother. Ada was advised to get married to an older rich man in her early teens. They wanted her to get married to a man that will pay an expensive bride price to her family.

Ada refused; she did not want to get married to a man that was old enough to be her father. She struggled on her own to write her Secondary School Common Entrance Examination. And as luck would have it, she won scholarship to study. She later got married to Francis, although, they were both under aged. After her marriage, she got a well paying job but her dream was to go to England with her husband. She was loved by her in-laws because she provided for them financially and she was fertile. Emecheta points out that sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way to define feminism and womanhood in the Ibo society which was proved through this in (p. 28).

We also learn that in Ibo society when making decision, the women were not involved, even when the decisions were about them. This also is revealed in the novel, when Ada told Francis of her dream; that they should go to London. Francis and his parents discussed it without asking her consent. They decided that Francis should leave while she remains and continue to work to support the family. After Francis left for England, Ada moves to join him. On getting there, she realized that Francis never loved her but had married her in order to enrich himself. He told her that he married her because she could work harder than most girls of her age. She was also disappointed at the way Francis treats her, he beats her and treats her unkindly. He was also going out with other women. Francis on the other hand, does not work but lives on her money, under the pretence that he was sitting for an examination that will make him a lawyer. He sat for the examination five times and never made it and he blamed her for his failures. Instead of spending his time studying, he spent it watching television in their neighbour's house and chasing young women.

Ada got a job in the British library, her money was used to pay the rent, the bills and to feed and clothe the family. Yet, Francis never appreciated her or praised her; instead he beats her up and demands sex from her whenever he pleases. As far as he was concerned, marriage was sex and lots of it. She could not refuse him even when she would have loved to. This was due to her cultural background and upbringing; she was brought up to be subject to her husband. The character, Ada had lost her esteem as a woman right from the childhood. Therefore, she accepts life as a second class citizen and accepts her role as defined for her by her husband. He was always commanding and controlling her. She always tried to please him thinking her achievements could save her marriage.

She sacrifices her life in order to please him, even when she was ill or in pains, she tries to cover it up and go to work. She believed it was her duty to work while her husband was supposed to have an easy life. For example, when she was having labour pains and she knew she was expecting her baby to arrive anytime within that period, she went out to work. She came back home only when the pain became so severe, yet she was scared of her husband disbelieving her. This can be noticed in (p. 105). This shows to what extent she feared her husband.

In the novel, *The Second Class Citizen*, Buchi illustrates how much more the male child is valued than the female child in an Ibo society. When Ada's son Victor was ill and she

had to take him to the hospital, she was so panic stricken. When the nurse noticed and asked if Victor was her only child, her reply was in (p. 68).

The character Ada has been an obedient and loyal wife and she paid the price by giving birth every year or every other year. This disrupted her from furthering her studies, which was why she came to London in the first place. Her husband was only interested in getting her pregnant without considering her feelings or her welfare. In order to pursue her dream, she thought it was wise for her to use birth control but she was scared of discussing it with Francis. When he finally discovered, he accused her of equipping herself so that she could sleep around, he also beat her for it.

He was an incompetent husband who left his responsibilities to his wife. Ada, who is a very intelligent woman, wrote her first novel, *The Bride Price* while she was nursing her fourth baby. When she showed it to her colleagues, they encouraged her to publish it. When she showed her husband, he discouraged her. His words can be seen in (p. 184). Emecheta illustrates in her novels how the woman is always blamed and expected to apologise in Ibo society. This can be noticed when Ada realised she was pregnant with her fourth child; she sat at a park crying. When an Ibo man saw her crying, he encouraged her to go home and beg her husband in (p. 170).

Francis treated her very unkindly; he often accuses her unjustly and beats her up mercilessly. She always thought he would change but he never did. He wanted to kill her dream of ever becoming a writer that he burnt her first story *The Bride Price*. Living with Francis was purgatorial and unbearable. She finally found the courage to leave him. She took her four children along while Francis swore never to come looking for her. Francis came looking for her after one month, he continued threatening her and beating her, he even carried knife with him. He forced himself into her room just to fight her (p. 194). He replied that his father always knocked his mother until he was old enough to fight him.

Her neighbour called the police and Francis was sued to court. In court, he denied ever beating her, claiming all the bruises and cuts were as a result of falls. He also denied ever getting married to her and also denied the children. Ada was unable to produce the marriage certificate and birth certificates of her children because Francis had burnt them. Ada finally realised that she could be free from slavery of being tied to Francis. She promised never to let her children down. She was going to struggle to bring them up on her own. She comes out triumphant in the end because of her willpower.

## **Conclusion**

Women should teach their men to treat them with respect even before they get married. They should respect their feelings and emotions and not treat them as objects for satisfying their selfish desires and producing children. Women on their own should love themselves and treat themselves with love and teach the men to do likewise. This paper emphasises the way Emecheta's fiction seek to account for the situation of African women in traditional Ibo land. She points out that it is unfair to relegate the female child for they are not included when making decisions, even when the decision is about her. This paper also stresses the vehement animosity at the gender discrimination that is often found in the culture of her people. It is realized that, the female child should be educated so that she can be empowered. Also, women can live effective and fulfilling lives when they are empowered especially in African setting in order to be recognized. Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* also elaborate the inner development about women who manage to assert themselves despite the oppressive structures of Islamic society in Northern Nigeria, brought recognition to the writer far beyond the borders of her region.

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