

**Empower Women Through Education and Its Relevance to
Humanities: A Womanist Reading on Zaynab Alkali's
*The Stillborn***

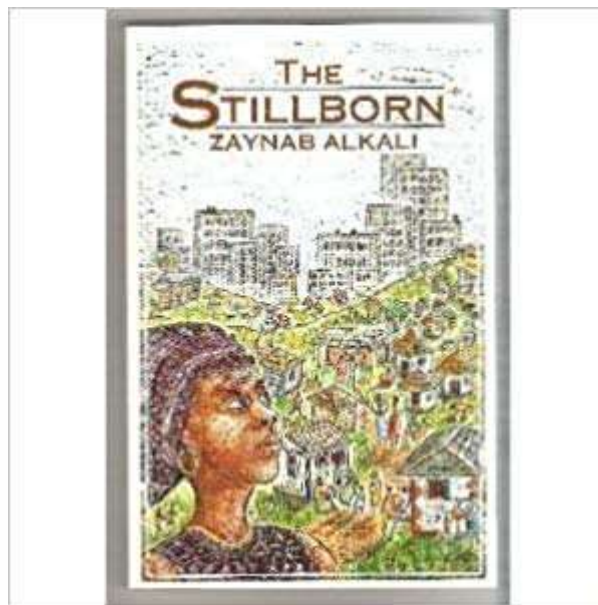
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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Stillborn-Longman-African-Classics/dp/0582026571/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=Zaynab+Alkali+The+Stillborn&qid=1568780828&s=books&sr=1-1

Introduction

Literary work is considered as source of reflection for life and humanity. Within the literary sphere comes a group of women writers that persistently exposes the injustice towards women such as discrimination, domination, subordination and oppression that denigrate women. While injustice towards women cannot be curbed just by writings that highlight these issues, but such literary works and researches are capable of bringing out the voice of women silenced by patriarchal system to global society. The Nigerian female writer, Zaynab Alkali in *The Stillborn* highlights the life of women of Hausa tribe that were in constant fear, anxiety and nervousness due to stifling local social system. Alkali presented stories of Hausa women that rarely highlighted by Nigerian male writers. The multi-faceted status of women as housewives, working professionals, semi-skilled workers and unskilled

labourers are presented in multiple perspectives by Alkali to record the diversity of women's life in Hausa tribe.

Nigeria as a nation consists of more than 250 ethnicities and languages with English language as lingua franca for all Nigerians. In Nigeria, the *Agendas of the Big Three* plays a key role in which Nigeria is broadly divided into three major ethnic groupings namely the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani people. These three ethnic groupings practise different societal system with respective culture, traditions and beliefs. Nigerian society tends to emphasise on ethnic and racial ties rather than nationalism or Africanism. Nigeria practises social, cultural and belief system that is vastly different and complex than what is and can be understood by others.

In Nigeria's social system, men are considered the head of family and symbol of absolute power, positive thinking and intelligent while women are considered weak, passive, obedient and emotional. In such relationship, women are considered inferior while men are considered superior. The image and identity of men as extraordinary and masculine has been embedded in the mind of young girls since young. Hausa Fulani are an ethnic grouping in Nigeria in which 89% of its people practises Islam. According to Coles & Mark (1991:4-6), the subordination of women to men arising from the intersection of Islamic practices and Hausa cultural values which were in place prior to colonization. Coles & Mark points out that, Hausa women are among the most strictly secluded Muslim women in Africa. Hausa women assimilate between traditional Hausa societal system and Islam in which Hausa women, regardless of before or after marriage, remain within a patriarchal system that restricts women's involvement in any activity. This reality can be further strengthened by the opinion by Coles & Mark (1991:12);

The patriarchal nature of Hausa society, the pervasive notion that Muslim Hausa women should be and are subject to control by men, and the seclusion of women have given vice to a view of Hausa women as largely powerless relative to men and entirely lacking any authority in the public realm.

Hausa girls commonly got married at the age between 10 to 12 years old. Marriage are conducted based on their families' selection and men are not allowed to get married until they are able to take care of their wives which means the men will usually get married for the first time at the age of 30s with girls (children) aged between 10-12 years old. A woman that failed to give birth to a boy and only have girls are not allowed to object or complaint if her husband brought back another wife. The societal pressure and demand towards married women are to give birth to a boy that will be the inheritor of their tribe's name and family's asset.

According to Amadiume (1987:69), when a daughter experiences physical transformation moving from childhood to adolescence, every movement of hers is observed by her mother and she is restricted from going out of the house and mingles with boys. Mothers played key role in advising and scaring girls with outlandish stories about men in order to prevent relationship between adolescent girls with men. The sight of a penis was said to be enough to make a girl pregnant (Amadiume, 1987:69). Extraordinary tales about men that has been passed down from one generation to another formed the sense of fear and amazement about men in the mind of women since young. They feel that men possess extraordinary powers and must be avoided before moving towards marriage. Such tales that has been fed to girls since young were deeply embedded in their psyche that they lack in self-esteem and always obedient to their father, brothers, husband and sons.

In terms of education, boys are fortunate to receive formal education until the family can afford spending on the boys' education. Education for girls is not given attention because girls belong to their (future) husbands' tribes. Girls are wedded when they are still children in order to help their family's critical financial condition. Occasionally, the girls' wedding payment is used to pay for the boy's education. Every girl in a family will experience discrimination in education opportunity when compared to their male siblings.

Hausa women may nullify their marriage through the system of *Khulaa* and may apply for divorce if there is domestic violence (Coles & Mark,1991:6). Rights as a wife that Hausa women can acquire are ownership of asset, Islamic education and becoming a soldier during wartimes. Women that complete their Islamic education may choose to become teacher. The involvement of women in teaching has brought drastic change to the situation and status of Hausa women. The women started to think about self-improvement and career achievement (<http://www.jamtan.com/jamtan/fulani>). The background understanding about the culture of Hausa people serves as the basis in understanding the specific culture and lifestyle of Nigerians which cannot be judged solely by views and thoughts outside the Nigerian societal context.

Hausa society is said to be tied with various elements of patriarchal system as a result of religious belief, colonialism, capitalism, political liberation and global economic integration that adversely affected women. The patriarchal marriage institution of Hausa tribe has restricted women to learn only domestic works related to their skills namely cooking, cleaning, sewing, water-carrying, firewood gathering as well as fulfilling all husband's need. The culture of Hausa tribe also allows men to practice polygamy and must marry accordance to Islamic tenet as well as not allowed to keep mistress, preference to male children and regards the wife as inferior to the husband. To achieve a respected social status, an adult woman must achieve status as a wife. Women without a husband (unmarried) and widows are hard to achieve high, respected status in a societal system based on patriarchal system.

Nigeria is the only country in the world that practices Penal Code laws that allows men to physically punish their wives without physically aiming them (Green, 1999: 107). Penal Code of Nigeria states that a husband can beat their wives by using a stick not bigger than the husband's thumb (Philomena,2008:294). Domestic violence is often rejected as a complaint by tribal chiefs or police because it is considered as family's own internal problems. Besides that, Nigerian women are often scared to make reports about domestic violence as they fear the collapse of their family structure, women are warned that if they seek litigation against their husband, their action will break up the family (Green, 1999:106). A wife might be beaten not just by their husband but also the husband's relatives as well. This shows that the social institution that was supposed to be protecting women has oppressed and persecuted women. Laws in Nigeria feature two contradictory roles, in such that the law is the saviour and protector of women and yet simultaneously a tool to oppress and compromise with Nigeria's patriarchal system that clearly dominates and persecutes women.

Theoretical Framework: Womanism

The *Womanism* theory pioneered by Alice Walker has given emphasis to status of women writers in Africa to highlight the true reality of being women in Africa. Walker has said that a new reading method has to be created to discuss the status of black women writers' literary works as western feminist readings often fail to discuss and define the work properly. The adherers of Womanism Theory wish to re-examine and highlight the identity, the spirit and instinct of black women that weren't just side-lined by literary works of white female writers but also by black male writers themselves that failed to portray the experience and history of black women.

Womanism is specially coined for women from Africa to build Africanist identity in African culture and literature in general. Within the work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker categorised her essays in three parts, namely; Oppression towards women didn't solely manifest physically and mentally but also demands women to *act like a man*. According to Walker, a person who adheres to the thoughts of Womanism is a womanist. Walker defines a Womanist to be similar as feminist but distinct due to colours of skin and ethnicity. Womanist theory is a sort of challenging to traditional articulations of feminist theory. According to Walker, issues related to women are equally important as racial and ethnicity issues. Walker said that black women are more superior to white women due to black women's tradition in valuing philosophy of life highly. The often-repeated phrase by Walker namely *womanist is to feminist as purple to Lavender* (1983: xii) is coined to create as a comparison that black women are womanist and white women are feminist. Within the thoughts of Womanism, relationships between women form a women's culture that upholds the unity and solidarity among women. Women who are womanist love all aspects that shaped them as women and appreciate the culture, emotional life and strength of women. Nonetheless, womanist women still adhere to god given nature of women. Walker glorified

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the black woman's experiences during slavery, their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood and wifehood.

Nigeria that tends to emphasise more on ethnicity diverged from Africanist concept as they emphasised more on individual ethnic identity than nationalism. Womanism is a universal theory that can be adapted by all African women and all African women are considered womanist according to Womanism theory. Alice Walker in *In Search of our Mother's Garden: A Womanist Prose* highlighted the importance of education for women in struggle against gender inequality. According to Walker, the personality and identity a black writer shines in their literary works when they expose the reality of African women that is more often than not obscured in white Caucasian writers' works as well as in black male writers' works. Walker urged the female writer to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood and wifehood. Meanwhile, Alkali as a female writer from Nigeria highlighted the life of Hausa women in their local culture, identity and uniqueness as black women, symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter, the strength of black women, the spirit of sisterhood (solidarity among women regardless of skin colour) and women's preference from the angle of a Womanist.

Pressures in daily life such as seeking employment opportunities, economical factor and status of women within organisational system/hierarchy force women to think and act like men. Their innate desire as women cannot be expressed due to social, political and economic system that are still under the authority of men. In particular, Womanism looks at the intersections between race, class, and gender. Women in many countries still has to obey the patriarchal culture that dominates them even though they have the same education and economic level as men.

The Stillborn: A Reading in Womanism

In *The Stillborn* (1984), Alkali described the dilemma of women in abiding the cultural norm of a patriarchal system and their internal conflict to free themselves for tyranny of men. The strength and courage of women are presented in this novel as an example that Zaynab Alkali is not writing as a black African writer, a Third World Country writer, a marginalized country writer and such but instead she is writing as representation of women in general. Alkali highlighted the universal idea that education will bring out awareness about identity and nature of women, an awareness needed by all women to counter the injustice inflicted on them. All aspects of women's life in patriarchal system of Hausa tribe are present in this novel such as marriage, polygamy, sexuality, and domestic violence, liberation of women, gender discrimination and importance of education for women.

Zaynab Alkali wrote about women characters in the 1980's when Nigeria underwent transition from being a British colony towards self-government and then experienced Biafra War (6 July 1967-15 January 1970). After recovering from the civil wars, the 1980s is

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considered as the age for reconstruction of Nigeria under democratic administration which also has brought economic, social and political change to Nigeria which impacted women's life. During the transition years, men's psyche is still pre-occupied with the mentality that women must remain under the influence of men and should only be allowed to give birth and take care of children. To overcome such mentality, Alkali see education as one of the way women can liberate themselves from patriarchy. In a nation facing modernisation, women will not be able to adapt to the mainstream changes without education to equip them for the future. Alkali with her sense of responsibility, seriously and boldly proclaimed the importance of education for women in almost all chapters within this novel, '... An educated woman is a great investment to her children, her husband and her parents, but most of all her country' (Alkali, 1997:20). Education is the weapon for women against being manipulated and exploited in patriarchal system.

In the practices and beliefs of Hausa tribe, they regard higher education as a hindrance for girls to find suitable candidates as husband. This is because higher education for women is considered as threat to men in order to reduce the status of women in a household (Fox, 1997:34). However, it is only through education that women are capable for liberating themselves from the practice of patriarchal system that physically and emotionally oppressed women. Education can shape women to become braver, have a source of economy, independent and freedom of speech thus women are beginning to question the injustice done by men in both household as well as societal system.

To represent the universal importance of education for women, Alkali created the character, Li, that is determined to pursue her own way of life in patriarchal system of Hausa tribe by pursuing higher education. Li as a character is progressive, independent and rejects the myth that women are inferior to man. In this novel, Alkali vividly portray that education for girls is not wasteful but instead self-defence weapon in dismantling sexist bias and rigid gender role.

Li as a character is portrayed as a matured woman as she was introduced by Alkali in the early part of the story. Even though she's only 13 years old at that point of the story, Li is already presenting herself as an inquisitive, independent, brave, assertive, determined girl and has the ambition to pursue higher education. Her education qualification has helped Li to achieve economic strength by being a teacher and begin to take on responsibility as the leader of the household "the man of the house" (Alkali, 1988:101), the role which her father and brother failed to accomplish. In the cultural practice of Hausa tribe, only men are allowed to be the leader of household. However, in the face of modernisation in Nigeria which gave higher education opportunities for women, women such as Li that are beginning to bear the responsibility as the leader of household emerge. Such change and adaptation of cultural practices is gradually being accepted among the Hausa tribe when the men failed to take on the responsibility.

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Alkali in her writing characterized women characters facing these rapid changes productively and responsibly. Alkali has introduced the character of Awa (elder sister of Li) which continued to carry out her domestic responsibility as usual after being laid off by her school but Awa's husband (Dan Fiama) failed to adapt to such changes, descended into alcoholism and let go of his responsibility to Awa. Men are portrayed as failing to face up to challenges and obstacles caused by transformation from traditional way of life to modernised Nigeria. From here we can clearly observe Alkali's authorship technique that empowers women to take on multiple tasks and juxtapose it with Fiama's position in failing to overcome his depression in losing his position as headmaster. Fiama didn't help out Awa at home and yet still insistent of being the head of household with absolute power even though he is incapable to contribute to the family.

Li, with her academic qualification rises from impoverished and oppressed life in the City to someone who is determined, optimistic and confident of self. Among the early step Li took is, to advance her education in order to liberate herself from the restrictive life shaped by tradition, culture and religion. Alkali liberates women from tyranny of men, of life being constantly under the authority of men. Alkali gave confidence and strength in Li through English-medium education. Western education provided job opportunities as well as opened Li's mind of her right being a wife and mother. When she is 29 years old, Li had just finished her study in teachers training college and became a teacher and capable of living independently. The maturity in Li's age has also been made a measurement of capability to make smart decisions by the author. The women's need for protection by father, husband and son has been dismantled by Alkali by giving confidence to women characters especially Li through education.

In *Womanism* reading, *Womanist Loves Love* in which she always receives and gives undivided love and care. *Womanist* women didn't hate men and appreciate the presence of men in her life. Alkali explores in depth and appreciates the overt and covert characteristics in women characters namely Li, Awa and Faku. The three women were introduced in the story when they are still young maidens until they grow older to become matured middle aged women. The three characters are willing to sacrifice the opportunity for higher education in exchange for family life with the men they loved. The three women were in marriage trauma when the men they loved and married to became strangers in their life. Awa, Faku and Li discovered that the men they loved and married to are two different men in one single physical body. The change of administrative structure of the government of Nigeria as well as economic pressure has affected the career and psychology of the men. Men, originally regarded as capable of providing livelihood with maturity and responsibility has become lazy, irresponsible towards the family and failed in coping with the modernisation happening at that point of time. Li witnessed herself how her husband Habu Adam, once gentlemanly and loving back in the village, has become a drunkard, ill-tempered, beating women and utterly lost in life due to pressing life in the city that is materialistic and artificial.

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A *Womanist* woman desires of *being grown up* (Walker, 1983: xi), one not just of age but also in terms of thoughts, appearance and actions. The thought of a *Womanist* woman is always matured and make decisions that will build brighter future and give self-freedom of speech. Li is ready to accept her husband again and revive her marriage. Alkali used narrative technique of dream element to bolster Li's decision. Li dreamt of meeting her grandchild when she became old and alone. Her grandchild asked about the grandfather and why Shuwa the mother lives without the father. This question from Li's "grandchild" shows that a father's love is needed to give the perfect love and care to the children. This dream has made Li think about Habu who beat and left Li when she gave birth to Shuwa. Li's decision can be seen as "anti-feminist" or contrary to western women's conception of right and freedom of living independently and liberate self from men that restrict, oppress and dominate women. The acceptance of Habu back to Li's life is neither shameful nor proves that women can't live without man but as a rational action that brings balance to women's life as mother and wife in the Hausa's society. Li's decision is a *Womanist* woman's decision hence cannot be judged from the feminist perspective.

Being a mother and a wife is an important mechanism among Hausa women. Walker in *Womanism* theory says that in traditional African way of life, a mother will regard her daughter *womanish* if she voiced out frequently, resistant and persistent in getting answers for her questions. African mothers don't like their daughter to be matured, wild and liberated from her age as they're worried that this will ruin her daughter's future family life. The character Li in *The Stillborn* always questions her mother who is deaf and often refused to discuss freely with Li. Li and her mother have never been close. Therefore, if Li has any question, she will not refer to her mother but instead seeks out the answer on her own.

After the collapse of her marriage with Habu, Li realised the hardship and sacrifice of her mother back in the village. Her mother works hard in the farm to make a living when her father became ill and after Fiana became alcoholic. The author created the character of Li's mother as someone who never expressed bitterness towards hardship but instead shows casual stoicness and never reacted with anger, hate and disappointment towards her children. It is her mother's character that helped Li to become a determined woman while encountering various challenges in the city. Li always remember every words of her mother at any point she felt disenchanted by life in the city. This is what Walker said, that she believes the words from her mother that, ... 'the father should teach the boys and the mother teach the girls the facts, as one says of life' (1983: 326).

Alkali portrayed the life of girl approaching adulthood in a phallogocentric social system of Nigeria where men dominates women as a statement of masculinity. Li as a character can be classified as a girl run counter to stereotypical depiction of Nigerian women as Li exhibited *outrageous, audacious* and *willful behavior* (Walker, 1983: xi). Alkali has given special attention to the character Li since inception of her character. Li's sibling dubbed her

“stubborn steak” for being stubborn and firm in her decisions. Even though she grew up in a familial and societal system that restricts women’s freedom of speech, Li as a character is brave to answer back her father and she never felt herself to be a girl that is obedient and fearful of her father. The restriction and control from her father spurred the rebellious character within Li. She wished to dismantle the wall built by her father and she wished to see the free, great outside world hidden behind that wall of restriction.

Baba (Li’s father) said cynically, ... ‘A heathen woman (Li’s mother) can only have heathen children...and even I have civilized you, you still behave like heathens’ (Alkali,1988:13). For Li’s father, her daughter is different than his other children as Li always voiced out, opposed and protested her father’s action in controlling the behaviour and life of his wife and children. Everything Li has done proves troublesome to her father who otherwise strictly controlled the life of their children in order to be disciplined and obedient to all of his orders. The author portrays the extraordinary bravery of Li that constantly butted head with her father even at the tender age of 15 years old. No longer as the stereotypical woman that obeys and follows the men’s bidding, Li no longer feared her father and she got married on her own choice. Even after marriage, Li is still empowered by Alkali by allowing her to live alone with the security of her education. When her marriage with Habu failed, Li transformed the failure to succeed in education.

The author also depicted a number of traditions and patriarchal system that were practiced in the village. One of them is placing women within the confines of kitchen. Alkali portrayed the mother of Li, Awa and Faku as having little power to voice out and makes decisions. In her village life that is controlled by men including her father, Li discovered that the practices of polygamy, arranged marriage and gender discrimination have negative effects towards women’s psychology. Within the same household, Li, Sule and Awa lived different lives. Sule has all the privileges and attention as a son while Awa who is a teenager were still beaten by her father just because she’s a daughter. Gender discrimination has caused Li and Awa to be confined to the home while Sule is free to go in and out of the house compound and play with his friends. Li and her father have a complex relationship as Li has always been inquisitive since birth and always acted on her own without being overshadowed and controlled by her father.

Li as a character is created differently by Alkali compared to her mother and sister, Li being visionary, matured and having clear grasp on her life. Even when her husband left her, Li continues to be independent and live a joyful life taking control of her emotion and feeling. Li as a *Womanist* exhibits *emotional flexibility* (Walker, 1983: xi). Li didn’t allow sadness and sorrow to linger in her life but instead lived happily with Shuwa and the education opportunity she received, exchanging tears with happiness.

Conclusion

The transformation that occurred in Nigeria between the years of 1967-1970 due to Civil War has led to economic transformation and emphasis on the importance of education for women. Transformation in the nation's economy and education of women has changed the opinions men have towards women. Educated women began to highlight the uniqueness and demand of black women which leads to solidarity among black women. The black feminist movement that addresses the needs of black women, men and children can strengthen the bonds with one other, deepen the sense of community and further Black Liberation. African women began to have new-found appreciation and understanding of own identity. Therefore, African women empowered themselves and felt the collective responsibility in advancing women's interests. The awareness of women's role in national development are further strengthened in the year 1995 arising from the impact of certain key effective topics about Nigerian women during the 4th World Conference of Women held in Beijing, China.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the novel *The Stillborn* has described the story of Nigerian women in transition from the world of traditions to the world of modernity. The rapid development of culture, economy, social and politics in Nigeria after attaining self-government has left various impacts to women and men. Zaynab Alkali presented the changes in women in the northern part of Nigeria experienced both externally and internally. Changes such as job opportunities, traditions, life in the city as well as introduction to new technologies have been accepted and adapted in women's daily life. Li as the protagonist symbolises enthusiasm for change in the life of Hausa women similar to Nigeria's spirit to be liberated from the history of being colonised. Changes and developments experienced by Li happened concurrently with the changes and developments in Nigeria. The various questions in Li's mind about the village, the city and the education system are among the various questions highlighted by Alkali to the rulers of Nigeria in the post-colonial era.

Li's success in achieving her dream as a teacher and her desire to return to Habu demonstrates that the life and aspiration of Nigerian women cannot be equated to the women in the West. Li's decision to return to Habu is the desiderate and belief of Hausa women in prioritising their family. The earlier refusal of Li to return to Habu is not because she hated the marriage institution but Li's passion to fulfil her dream and succeed without being reliant to Habu. Even she had succeeded and capable of living independently, Li rediscover the honour and strength of a Hausa woman is to live with family and respect the cultural and traditional conventions being passed down from generation to generation by the mothers. Education has shaped Li into a matured and serious woman but at the same time love and respect culture and tradition.

In order to pass down the traditions and culture of Hausa tribe to her child, Li has to be the perfect daughter, wife and mother. To achieve such aspiration, Li desired to live with Habu and build a generation of family that her child can be proud of. Alkali is unbiased to male characters within the novel by not depicting Habu as a villain but give a space for Habu to reconcile with Li. At the same time, Li didn't choose to continue to live alone and didn't hate Habu Adam but want to return to Habu, a womanist act in which men and women complete each other.

Not all literary works of female authors can be categorised as writings that has liberation and rights of women as central theme or featuring women character that opposed men (Coward, 1980: 63). In this novel, Li is a Hausa woman that seeks to preserve the harmony of family life. The violence and injustice Habu done to her is forgiven because she believes that human must be forgiving. According to Alkali, Li was never created to be a feminist nor as a powerful woman that seeks to right the injustice men has done to her. According to Alkali (as noted in Ismail: 2006), *Li is not a feminist, and that as far as I am concerned, I wasn't creating a feminist character.*

In general, men in Nigeria even after receiving education might still find it too difficult to accept the concept of equality between husband and wife. Nonetheless, higher education opportunities and exposures to modern life have given women the awareness to depart from the structure of patriarchal system that demands women to be mother and wife only. Education opportunities have helped women to break out from the shackles of traditions and to start thinking about the rights and liberation of women. As a result, middle class Nigerian women began to demand for right of further education in order for them to be independent and earn their own living. Women began to break away from the stifling control of the societal system that restricts their progress with education that advances their social status. Education has also opened the eyes of Nigerian women to explore their own identity and status within the family institution, religion and societal system.

Li as a character has dismantled western feminists' preconception that women oppressed and mistreated under patriarchy must live independently to prove women's strength to succeed without the support of men. In this case, Li as character must observed from the concept of Nigerian women and as a *Womanist* and *not a separatist* from Hausa culture that nurtured her. The notion of *Loves the folk* is the pride of Hausa women as well as *Loves herself* that allows them to choose what is best for them. Li's anger to Habu is only on a personal level and not towards the cultural, familial, marriage and traditional norms of Hausa society. Habu is the man she loves, and she eventually returned to Habu which is not a matter that hurts Li. Besides that, Li being 29 years old has become mature and she knows what is good or bad to her from the life experience she had. The love for Habu has made her choose to, ... *I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk* (ibid). Such decision by Li is a decision that celebrates culture and lifestyle of Hausa society that

values married life as husband and wife being a harmonious lifestyle that completes each other.

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