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## Reconstruction of Women Identity and Vision of National Development in Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** African female writers across the generations are interested in the reconstruction of the battered images of women associated with African male writers as well as creating a new road map through which women could contribute meaningfully to the development of their societies. This paper focuses on the reconstruction of women identity in connection with their roles in national development using Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants* as a text of reference. The study examined various brands of feminism in African literary scholarships such as Womanism, Black Feminism, Africana Feminism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Nego-feminism, Snail-sense feminism and Femalism. Thus, the paper resolved and embraced Womanism as its theoretical framework because of its relevance to the present study. The study delves into character development in the text and the deployment of appropriate techniques by the author towards the actualisation of her thematic thrusts. It is discovered that African literary scholars have contributed a lot to the growing gender discourse as revealed in their theorisation. The study also discovered that education and economic empowerment play predominant roles in re-defining and reconstructing the new images of women. It helps to erode the previous stereotypes and patriarchal dominance, which have hitherto hampered women's contributions to national development. The paper concludes that functional education and economic independence, on the parts of women, are the prerequisites for the promotion of an egalitarian society and national development.

**KEYWORDS:** Zaynab Alkali, women identity, national development, womanism, patriarchal dominance

### Introduction

Zaynab Alkali was born in Tura-Wazila, Borno State, Nigeria in 1950. She is a renowned novelist in Nigeria and one of the leading female novelists from Northern Nigeria. She bagged a BA degree from Bayero Uni-

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versity, Kano in 1973 and obtained a MA in African Literature in English in 1979. She had worked at the University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Bayero University, Kano and Nasarawa State University, Keffi. Her works always focus on the predicaments confronting women at the developmental stage of their lives. She employs her art to agitate for the education of a girl-child. Some of her publications include *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, *Cobwebs and Other Stories* and *The Descendants*. She won the Association of Nigerian Authors award in 1985 with her 1984 publication *The Stillborn*.

Most of the previous African works written by men focused more on male characters while women are mentioned at the periphery. Sometimes, women are wrongly represented in male authors' works as depicted in the works of writers such as Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* and Camara Laye in *The African Child*, Amos Tutuola in *The Palmwine Drinkard* and Ferdinand Mbia *The Old Man and the Medal*. In all the texts listed above, male characters occupy the centre while women are assigned supportive and inconsequential roles by the male authors. The presence of female writers in African literary production has played a major role in the reconstruction of the images of women in response to the previous works of male authors mentioned above. The story of the female writers now focuses more on the peculiar challenges confronting women in African societies. Therefore, this paper focuses on the female theorisation in African literary study with a view to examining how the female writers project the female characters in literary productions as an instrument of positive change in their society with a focus on Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants* as a text of reference.

To achieve this, the paper will take a look at the contributions of African female writers in redefining the authentic image of women in African societies. Efforts will also be made to look into the various theorisation on gender discourse in order to ascertain and acknowledge the noble contribution of women to scholarship in general and the narration of women story in particular.

References will also be made to Zaynab Alkali's previous works to link her previous works to its present ones. Zaynab Alkali is an advocate of the education of a girl-girl, and her strong belief is that education is capable of obliterating the gulf and social chasm between men and women. It also serves as a tool for economic empowerment and social engineering.

## Reconstruction of women identity in African literary scholarship

Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju (2013, p. 6) in their joint paper entitled, "Models in the construction of female identity in Nigeria Postcolonial Literature," argued that the construction of African women in the colonialists and Senghorian works as "naked" and "mothering" view women from sex perspective and subject them to the whim of the supreme male. They forge ahead to argue that "...the body image and social classification of the African female in both the colonial narratives and the African narratives of the Senghorian and negritude tradition entailed the sole identification of *women* with essentially biological, or sex-related roles." (Oloruntoba-Oju and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013, p. 6) Such classification according to Omotayo and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju on sex engenders the inferiorisation of women and privileges men over women.

It is against this backdrop that older and contemporary female writers strive to reconstruct such images of women constructed based on sex. Mary Ebum Modupe Kolawole (2004, p. 141) wrote, "The older generation of women writers of the continent now present women not only as symbols of social change: their heroines are more radicals". This trend, which started around the 1980s, had gathered momentum in the 1990s and taken centre stage in contemporary women writings. Mariama Ba's characters in *So Long a Letter* negotiate a new identity for themselves in a strictly patriarchal Islamic society. The two leading female characters in the epistolary novella, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, are caught in-between the triangle of traditional African culture, the Islamic religious tradition and modernity. The novelist, therefore, projects how the female characters negotiate themselves despite the cultural and religious encumbrances confronting them. The two central female characters are presented as the new face of African women who are agents of social change in their society. Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*, another literary text from Senegal, West Africa, parades more radical female characters. For instance, in *The Beggars' Strike*, Sagar Diouf, the secretary of Keba Dabo, challenges her boss over the issue of beggars roaming on the streets of Dakar. Sine, the new wife of Moure Ndiaye, is also a liberated radical feminist who wears trousers and smokes cigarettes to the annoyance of her husband. Another attractive female character in the text is Salla Niang who marries Narou, a weakling. Salla Niang, the de facto leaders of the beggars at the Slum Re-

sentment Area, defies Mour Ndiaye's instruction that the beggars should return to the street. This singular act of confrontation later leads to Mour Ndiaye's downfall, a patriarchal figure in the novella. Tambudzai (Tambu) is another enviable female character in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition*. The novel depicts the constraints of women in post-independence Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe (South Africa). The novel also depicts how Tambu overcomes her challenges associated with patriarchy in her society. Other writers such as Amma Darko in *Housemaids* and *Faceless* parade women who are determined to succeed in men dominated world. The reconstruction of the female figures in the texts has helped to redeem the battered image of women in our society as well as serving as the impetus for women collaboration in moving the society forward. The female characters of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are also admirable; Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Ifemelu in *Americanah* are exemplary women. The character development is the author's vision for the new identity of women.

In Zaynab Alkali's previous novels, *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, the novelist presents female characters who acquire western education and contribute meaningfully to the development of their families and their societies. Li, in *The Stillborn* and Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* are two of such enviable characters and the representations of the new identities of African women projected as the harbinger of positive change in the two texts by the author.

Alkali remains at the forefront of female education, empowerment, and national development. She always agitates for the collaborative efforts between men and women, with the consciousness of the society she is coming from, i.e., a patriarchal Islamic society, to move the society forward. The northern part of Nigeria, over the decades, has been regarded as an educationally disadvantaged region and women education is minimal if compared with what is obtainable in the southern part of the country. It is against the above backgrounds that this paper seeks to examine the reconstruction of women's identity in *The Descendants* with a view to discussing how it has helped the author add her voice towards the development of her society.

## Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the womanist literary theory approach in the analysis of Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*. Womanism is a home-grown brand

of feminism that pays particular attention to the roles of women in African society. The theory seeks a collaboration between men and women in the development of the society. To start with, feminism as a literary theory is always associated with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The basic preoccupation of the feminists is to challenge patriarchy, women subjugation and oppression. Womanism as a literary theory was originally carved out to cater for the peculiarities of black women in the West. Womanism is a brand of a non-radical feminist ideology, which seeks a mutual collaboration between men and women towards the development of the society. Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, coined the term "womanism" as a counter-discourse to the mainstream Eurocentric feminism. Alice Walker used the term in his work entitled, *In Search of Our Mothers*. According to Alice Walker, the term "womanism" was derived from the adjective "womanish." She argued further that a womanist is, "A woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture...and women's strength... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female. Not a separatist... Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." (Walker, 2003, p. xi). Womanism transcends the concerns of the second wave's feminists who were predominantly concerned with the issues of "gender-based oppression and violence." (Davidson & Davidson, 2010, p. 241).

Maria D. Davidson and Scott Davidson in their paper entitled "Perspectives on Womanism, Black Feminism, and Africana Womanism" submitted that scholars and writers like Anna Julia Cooper, Jessie Redman Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Morrison are always regarded as womanists and their works are regarded as womanist literature (Davidson & Davidson, 2010, p. 239). Womanism from its inception is an all-inclusive theory that seeks collaboration among women of all categories including men. The involvement of men in its theorisation is a noble and novel departure from the mainstream white feminism. In the opinion of Alice Walker, white feminism exclusively focused on gender oppression without consideration for oppression of women based on their race or colour, which the womanists try to rectify. (Davidson & Davidson, 2010, p. 242). The opinion of Alice Walker and other advocates of Womanism like Bell Hooks in her work entitled *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* is that the white feminism has failed to address the peculiar concerns of the black people. The concern being referred to here is the issue of colour discrimination.

Other category of gender discourse scholars are the Black Feminists. One of such scholars is Monica A. Coleman who in one of her essays entitled, "Must I be a Womanist?" claimed that, "... I've also been shaped by black feminists, and I believe that I'm a part of a generation of women who have grown up (intellectually) during a time that takes womanism as a given. I'm not sure I'm a womanist." (Coleman, 2006, p. 85–86) Womanism is a theory that takes care of all categories of women. However, Coleman argues that womanism has failed to address the issue of Homophobia, (Coleman, 2006, p. 88). However, the words "Womanism" and "Black Feminism" are used interchangeably as noted by Patricia Hill Collins, "...Many African women see little difference between the two [i.e., Black Feminism and Womanism] since both support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination." (Collins, 2001, p. 10). Davidson and Davidson, in their parts, believe that "Womanism" is an "internal Discourse" that addresses the black women alone while "Black Feminism" seeks a collaboration or synergy between the blacks and whites' women (Davidson & Davidson, 2010, p. 245–246). The concern of Walker "...is thus rooted in the unique, embodied, irreducible experiences of Black women and their relationship to Black culture" (Davidson & Davidson, 2010, p. 246). The strongest tie that binds Womanism and African Womanism together is Black Women. The two theories are agitating for the rights of black women. It is observed that Womanism speaks from the agency of individuality, i.e., individual woman, while Africana Womanism speaks through the agency of family and community. In the words of Hudson-Weems, the proponent of Africana Womanism, she argued that the concerns of Africana Womanism are to speak to "...uphold the Africanist womanist agenda and priorities within Africans historical and cultural contexts. Such contexts are reflected in our ongoing struggle for the human rights of our entire family—men, women, and children" (Hudson-Weems, 2004, p. 8). Africana Womanism preaches women tie with their family and community. Africana womanism places emphasis on the significance of community over the interest of an individual woman.

In Nigeria, West Africa, Mary Kolawole in her ground-breaking seminal entitled *Womanism and African Consciousness* further espoused what womanism entails from an African perspective. It is therefore, crucial to acknowledge her huge contributions to the promotion of the Womanist theory in Africa. The womanist theory is highly supported by other renowned scholars such as: Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi among others. In a paper entitled "Re-Conceptu-

alising African Gender Theory: Feminism, Womanism and Arere Metaphor,” Mary Kolawole argued that cultures play significant roles in the construction of gender and sex. Kolawole further asserts that,

There has been a consensus that culture has to be taken into account in development issues and that a close affinity exists between gender and culture. One area of culture mediation on gender is the traditional belief in the muting of women’s voices in many African societies which is justified by proverbs and traditional ideologies that shape the mind –set of men and women. It is considered culturally incorrect for women to be a focal participant in social structures. Such ideologies and beliefs call for decoding of culture to unpack gender myths and philosophies that keep women in liminal places as well as recording of new ideologies (Kolawole, 2004, p. 255).

Furthermore, Irene D’Almeida identified “culture of silence” as a debacle to women empowerment especially the francophone African women. Mary Kolawole frowns at the poor representation of women in the struggles against colonialism especially as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Kolawole affirms that,

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe... institutionalizes male heroism and women’s marginalisation but this is a contradiction of history. Igbo women mobilized themselves in the early part of the twentieth century to fight against colonial rule, oppressions and taxation that affected women and men (Kolawole, 2004, p. 257).

In her introduction to her text entitled *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, Oyeronke Oyewumi attempts to clarify the difference between, feminism and feminist, Oyeronke posits that,

The term feminism usually refers to a historically recent European and American social movements founded to struggle for female equality. Feminism by this designation has become a global political project. But the adjective feminist has a broader reach in that it needs not be confined by history; infact it describes a range of behaviour indicating female agency and self-determination (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 1).

Oyewumi added that gender roles in Africa are fluid and social categories are not necessarily based on gender. She cited the example of a female husband among Igbos. (2) In the opinion of Oyewumi, western feminism

is “entangled with the history and practice of European and North American imperialism and the worldwide European colonialism of Africa, Asia, and the Americans” (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 3). Oyewumi advocates for “Sisterhood” which according to her proclaims, “...the equality and homogenization of position of women worldwide” (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 3) Oyeronke Oyewumi claims that the term “Sisterhood” connotes solidarity among women. (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 7) She further submits that:

Sisterly relations emerged out of the family heritage as the only viable model: the mother-daughter relationship was hierarchical, but sisters were equal. Sisterhood, which developed to signal the gender exclusivity necessary for white women to escape male control, also symbolised common victimhood and shared oppression, which made for equal relations and solidarity. Here in lies the historical and cultural roots of sisterhood (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 8).

Oyeronke further asserts that most of the African brands of feminism are tied to kinship because of Africans’ emphasis on family ties (Oyewumi, 2004, p. 10). This opinion is in tandem with that of Africana Womanism, which has already been discussed.

The need to domesticate the feminist literary theory in relation to the African realities has necessitated the formations of various alter-Native feminist theories such as “Womanism”. The theory was first coined by Alice Walker and supported by Okonjo Ogunyemi and Mary Kolawole. Apart from Womanism, other scholars have formulated their versions of home-grown theories, which practice aligns with the postulations of the Womanist theory. Some of these theories include Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s “STIWANISM.” Stiwanism is an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. It is a theory that seeks cooperation between men and women in the development of society. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie advocated for women self-expression, and she theorizes STIWANISM as a brand of feminism based on social transformation. Ogundipe-Leslie further stated that,

I have since advocated the word “Stiwanism” instead of feminism to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensure whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa. The word feminism in Africa.... The word feminism itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word is very nature hegemonic.... “Stiwa” is my acronyms for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 229).



Obioma Nnaemeka advocated for “Nego-feminism” which calls for negotiation between men and women for the goals of an egalitarian society to be achieved. Nnaemeka’s Nego-feminism is hinged on “...the principle of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance.” (Nnaemeka, 2003, p. 369). Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo advocates for Snail-Sense Feminism. Adimora-Ezeigbo is of the opinion that women need to adopt the techniques of snails in negotiating difficult terrains without being injured. She also encourages women to adopt snail’s withdrawal tactics to avoid danger. She further submits that the snail-sense is “... what women do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchy culture” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012, p. 27). Chioma Opara brands her feminist theory “Femalism” which places emphasis on the concept of “Africaness.” As a contradiction from Walker’s Womanism. Femalism, therefore, is more concerned with the peculiar challenges of African women. Catherine Acholonu propounded “Motherism” which emphasises the roles of rural women in the struggle for the emancipation of women.

Some of the major thematic foci of the womanist literary critics are, motherhood as the pride of womanhood, support for the marriage institution, opposition to the discrimination against women, seeking mutual respect and collaboration between men and women, identify the need for women’s education as an instrument of liberation and national development, etc. It is against the backdrop of the above that this paper shall examine the reconstruction of women’s identity in Zaynab Alkali’s *The Descendants* using womanism as a theoretical framework.

### **Synopsis of Zaynab Alkali’s *The Descendants***

*The Descendants* (2005) begins with a supplication by Magira Milli, the matriarch of the Ramta’s family. In her prayer, Magira Milli seeks for the success of the Ramta’s family, her surviving child, Aji, her grandchildren: Abbas, Seytu, and Peni; her great grandchildren, Hawwa and others. The Ramta’s family led by Magira Milli has migrated to Makulpo, from a village called Ramta, in Borno, North-East, Nigeria followed the death of Magira Milli’s husband, Lawani. She also prays for Duna and her male children: Abdullahi, Madu, Umar, Ilia and her grandson Shaibu who have all been taken away by “Azreel the Angel of death” (Alkali, 2005, p. 18).

At Makulpo, Magira Milli occupies the position of the head of the family. She ensures that all the members of her household have access to west-

ern education and guides them to be successful. Seytu, the daughter of Ilia, is trained to become a paediatrician. Abbas, the son of Abdullahi, attends a university at Gamma and becomes a highly successful engineer. Hassan, the son of Sulayman, becomes a colonel in the army while Hawwa, the daughter of Seytu, becomes the Minister of State for Justice in the country.

Magira Milli, assisted by Aji Ramta, her son, builds the Ramta's Holdings. She deals in vegetables, grains and later mechanised farming (Alkali, 2005, p. 153). Meanwhile, the good relationship between Dr. Seytu and Prof. Aiman Zaki, the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of Garpella Specialist Hospital, pays off when the Professor donates a modern Community Health Centre to the Ramta community. All the successful members of the Lawani Duna's family and their friends contribute generously to the establishment of the hospital. The entourage of the Hon. Minister of State for Justice, Justice Hawwa Lawani later besieged Makulpo on a condolence visit and celebration of the life of the departed Magira Milli who died at the age of ninety-two.

### **The Reconstruction of Women's Identity in Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants***

The emerging African women writers have committed so much efforts to the reconstruction of the images of women as a prerequisite to meaningful contributions of women towards the development of their various societies. In reaction to the previous images of women in male-dominated works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), where women are silenced or treated as goddesses; the new emerging womanist writers create female characters that have voices of their own. The new created female characters are also different from the previous female characters found in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* in the sense that they are highly educated, modern, and cosmopolitan.

In addition, many literary artists have conceived the notion of national development in relation to the roles of women in achieving it using different paradigms. Zaynab Alkali, through her artistry, reminds us of the needs to reconstruct the image of women in our society in a view to repositioning them better in modern society so that they can contribute meaningfully to national development. She projects her viewpoints by parading highly enviable female characters in her texts which serve as the standard-bearers

and exemplary characters worthy of emulation by other women. They are also portrayed as agents of positive change in their society.

In *The Descendants*, the writer creates Magira Milli as an enigma and a family head. Her character dwarfs the male characters in the text. She is focused and visionary. She envisioned that if she continued to stay in Ramta, it could spell doom for her and her family. As a result, she migrates to Makulpo to start a new life. The narrator captures her vision and mission of migration thus:

By fleeing with Aji to Makulpo, she had uprooted the grand children from their ancestral home with the hope of giving them a fresh start. The least she could do for them was encourage them to go to school. That way, later in life, they could make the choice on their own, either to remain where they were, or to reconnect to their homeland, Ramta (Alkali, 2005, p. 18).

This migration of Magira Milli and her surviving family members is highly connotative and symbolic. It represents a migration from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to enlightenment and from the periphery to the centre. At another level of interpretation, it suggests that there is an urgent need for women to embrace the opportunities provided by modernity. Women need to brace themselves up and accept the needed changes that will make them take their rightful positions in society. This is the author's vision of an ideal woman who is prompt to take a life-saving decision towards the growth of her family and, by extension, society. Magira Milli is the most dignified and the most conspicuous character in the text. Her commanding and indomitable powers resonate across the family's generations: "Magira Milli had, for ages, commanded everyone in the house. She was the field Marshall, so what was new?" (Alkali, 2005, p. 152). As earlier mentioned, African female writers, though they claim that they differ from western feminists who are radicals, they always create strong and enviable female characters with overpowering powers. Examples of such characters abound in African literature, Efuru in *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Salla Niang in *The Beggars' Strike*, Olanna in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chira in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*, among others. In *The Descendants*, Magira Milli is presented as an embodiment of womanhood, resilience, and vision.

Magira Milli is pivotal and instrumental to the establishment and the sustenance of the Ramta's Holdings. She encourages her children to ac-

quire western education and abhor indolence and early marriages. She scorns infidelity and condemns immorality. She goes against all forms of traditional beliefs that hinder development. She is the epitome of vision, power, and authority. In fact, she is an institution in her own right. According to the writer: "Over the years, Magira Milli had become an institution like an ancient monument. She had become part and parcel of the Makulpo landscape." (Alkali, 2005, p. 258) Most African fictions portray social realities. Zaynab Alkali speaks through the character of Magira Milli to condemn the inadequacies of her society. She particularly advocates for the importance of female education as well as economic empowerments. Alkali has identified these two factors as the bane of women underdevelopment in Northern Nigeria. If women are educated and financially independent, it will put them in an advantageous position to be relevant and meaningfully contribute to their societies' social-economic and political development.

The text also parades other amiable female characters such as Seytu, the daughter of Ilia and granddaughter of Magira Milli. Seytu is the key factor that necessitated the relocation of Lawani Duna's family from Ramta to Makulpo when she was struck by measles in her early life. As a young child of thirteen, Seytu was violated by a man called Lawani Dam. Their unholy relationship begot, Hawwa with a serious damage to her body system. Despite the abuse, Seytu strives to become an accomplished medical doctor. Even in her workplace, she is highly revered and respected; men sometimes beg her favour. Her vision is presented thus: "Seytu wanted to make an impact in her society, wanted badly to be a role model for a younger generation and was prepared to do anything to achieve such a life." (Alkali, 2005, p. 59) At this point, Zaynab Alkali is speaking for the oppressed women or those that are socially stigmatised. Social stigmatisation is a major factor that prevents many women from achieving their life goals. At another level of analysis, it could be stated that, the character of Seytu serves as an encouragement to women that there is no limit to what they can achieve in life with focus, vision and resilience. The past life story of a woman, no matter how dark, should not be allowed to constitute an encumbrance to the attainment of their life targeted goals.

This vision of becoming an accomplished woman motivates Seytu at home and her work to be hardworking and focused. She must prove herself through perseverance before Prof. Aiman Zaki, the Chief Medical Director of Garpela Specialist Hospital, could accept her as a member of his staff. This is highly significant in the sense that it encourages women to be

meticulous and up to the task in whatever capacity, they found themselves. Again, it is an admonishment to all aspiring women that, the African society is male and any woman that intends to succeed must be ready to prove herself. In compensation for Seytu dedication to work, Prof. Aiman constructs a community health centre, in Ramta, her place of birth. The writer sums up the characters of Seytu, her travails and success stories thus:

Here in Ramta, she stood for something more important than just the daughter of Ramta, and a successor to the great medical chief. She was a model for young and aspiring men and women, a symbol of growth and progressive womanhood. She had left Ramta a young disabled girl with little hope, and had come back a conqueror (Alkali, 2005, p. 267).

Seytu, therefore, represents the author's vision of a modern woman. The inequality and disparity between men and women will vanish when women begin to acquire the necessary education and empowered economically.

Another female character in the text is Doctor Glo Medina Kayes, a renowned obstetrician gynaecologist (p. 143). She is the daughter of Prof. Kayes, a Professor of Economics. Her endearing and well-bred characters make her a good match to Engineer Abbas, Seytu's cousin. Also, Hawwa Lawani, the daughter of Seytu, is trained and tutored under the enigma Magira Milli. She grows up and becomes a lawyer, a judge and a junior minister in the Federal Ministry of Justice. The characters mentioned here are all well brought up and highly educated. Therefore, with proper education and a good upbringing, a woman could attain the same feat with men as found in the female characters enlisted in *The Descendants*.

In summary, *The Descendants* is a celebration of enviable and highly successful women. Such women are, independent minded, courageous, vibrant, focused, highly educated, enterprising, and successful. It is through their character development that the writer foregrounds her central thematic thrusts i.e., the issue of women participation in community and national development. The ideas that are espoused in this text are interwoven; to contribute meaningfully to the community and national development, one must be endowed and self-sustained. To be self-sustained; one needs to be well educated. To have access to quality education, the parents, such as the great Magira Milli, must have a clear vision and plan for the good of their children and those coming after them. In fact, we must plan for the tomorrow of our "descendants".

## Education as a Veritable Tool for Women's Liberation and National Development

One of the major contributions of Alkali to the development of Nigerian Literature is her agitation for women empowerment as a prerequisite for their contributions to national development. She recognises education as an instrument of liberation for women. She also seeks a mutual understanding and collaboration between men and women in moving society forward. Hence, for both men and women to contribute to the community and national development, they must be well educated. This same theme is prevalent in *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*. *The Descendants* is a story about an extraordinary woman who builds a strong and powerful dynasty through her vision, supplication, and passion for the acquisition of knowledge and western education. It is widely believed that education serves as an antidote to the suppression and marginalisation of women. Oriaku affirmed that: "...Education affords the woman who has acquired it a good professional position; it is the sledgehammer with which the shackles of patriarchy are broken. With her education, she can create for herself the paradise the patriarchy had denied her" (Oriaku, 2012, p. 142).

In *The Descendants* the success of the female characters begins with a vision of a woman the matriarch, Magira Milli who prayed for the success of her family.

'O God, once more Milli is before you calling you to look down and have mercy on her children, her children's children and their children.

'Lord, I come without a gift, except a long record of requests over a number of years. You took my sons away – Ramta boys are all gone, except for Aji, but as you know, from a child, a dynasty is built. I want Ramta dynasty here in Makulpo, descendants of Lawani Ramta [...].

Seytu, the daughter of Ilia, her affliction pulls at my heartstrings. Grant her a successful operation and cure her. Let her read and become educated. I want her to compete with the doctors in Makulpo Hospital, protect Hawwa, her little girl [...].

Let each and every one of my descendants acquire education and become great [...]. Let my descendants triumph over their enemies [...].  
(Alkali, 2005, p. IX-X).

The above supplications by Magira Milli suggest that the matriarch is convinced that for her descendants to be successful they need to be properly educated. Again, Magira Milli wants her daughter to be cured of her ailment so that she can “compete” with those doctors she comes across at Makulpo hospital. The word “compete” is significant here because it speaks directly to the struggle for equality, which is a hallmark of feminists. It also foreshadows what will happen in the later parts of the text. In the earlier part of the text, Aji Ramta assumes the position of a local teacher saddled with the responsibilities of teaching others how to read and write. His effort is encouraging and motivational. It affords the members of his household, who are less privileged, has access to western education; his efforts produce the like of Colonel Hassan.

Still on the question of the significance of education and the need to have a vision geared towards achieving one’s mission, Magira Milli, though an illiterate, is better-informed and prioritised education. She mandates her children to acquire western education. The writer reveals her viewpoints thus:

Magira Milli might be a yesterday’s woman but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society [...]. She was a good listener who constantly turned in to her small transistor radio. She was also a watcher of events. She knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. Education opens doors and gives an individual options (sic) in life (Alkali, 2005, p. 18).

Magira Milli pursues the above goal to a logical conclusion. She rebukes Peni, her granddaughter for chosen to get married at an early age to the village butcher. She knows, right from the outset, that for Lawani Duna’s children to become pillars in Makulpo, they need to acquire western education. The matriarch surveys her surroundings inundated with sick people seeking medical attention from the Makulpo’s hospital and concludes that it is only through education that people can be better informed on how to live a healthy life and be successful. The above excerpt also indicates that access to information by women is significant for them to live a meaningful life and impacts positively on their society.

It is obvious that Magira Milli’s prayers are eventually answered. Her children are properly positioned and successful because of their education. Seytu becomes a paediatrician and later the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of Garpella Specialist Hospital. Through connection and exposure, she can

attract philanthropists who build a Community Health Centre in Ramta. The same gesture also brings electricity generating sets and public toilets to the village of Ramta. The health centre serves as evidence of a carefully planned community development and modernisation. The construction of the Community Health Centre and the Public toilets in Ramta is a symbolic representation of women's contribution to the growth of their community. It is also evidence that women with proper education, vision, exposure, and determination can also achieve what a man can achieve.

After roaming the world, the descendants of Lawani Duna and Magira Milli are able to bring civilisation to their natal home, Ramta's community. This is the power of education. It liberates those who have it and puts them in good positions to contribute to the development of their society.

The writer suggests that all those who embrace western education in the text become successful. Engineer Abbas "established a prosperous Ramta Construction Company in Garpella" (Alkali, 2005, p. 153). Hawa Lawani becomes the Minister of State in the Ministry of Justice. Seytu, also becomes a successful medical doctor.

However, the author, through foil characterisation, warns us that illiteracy breeds ignorance, poverty, regret and failure. Through the point of view of Hawwa, Seytu's daughter, the writer says:

[...] Hawwa unable to sleep, thought about the glum-faced suffering Mero, compared to her mother, Seytu, the good-looking vivacious woman with an appealing condition. She also compared Seytu with her sour-tempered, thin-lipped aunt, Peni (Alkali, 2005, p. 82).

Mero is the child-bride and wife of Usman and Peni is Seytu's cousin who chooses marriage over the acquisition of western education against the wishes of Magira Milli, her grandmother. Having failed in her marital life, Peni lives with Seytu, her successful cousin. Her latter life is characterised by regret and frustration. The writer, through the stream of consciousness technique, states that:

[...] Peni lapsed into painful memories. She considered herself unlucky one who never got an education. She blamed this on her father's early death. Her uncle Aji, she thought unkindly, concerned himself only with acquiring money and building his business empire. He had encouraged Abbas, the male and Seytu Ilia's daughter but for her, she was encouraged to marry that lousy village butcher (Alkali, 2005, p. 193).



If Peni had gotten western education, her life would have been different. Education could have made a huge difference in her life. Those who have access to education in the family: Seytu, Abbas and Hawwa, are all successful. They are not only successful but they make meaningful contributions to the development of the Ramta community. The descendants of Magira Milli bring her vision to fruition through their new statuses made possible by education. Zaynab Alkali's position on her society makes her a major voice speaking for the reconstruction of women's identity and the rebuilding of the society through women's emancipation, functional education and economic empowerment.

## Conclusion

Alkali's novels always emphasise the needs to empower women through the acquisition of western education. She believes in the marriage system and the development of society through a functional family system as the smallest unit of a nation. She holds the belief that education will make women make the right decision about their marital life. Our individual family is bestriding with infirmities, which, of course, need to be extirpated if our vision of a new nation is to be realised from the existing diseased and collapsed society. To achieve this feat, women must be properly educated. Both men and women must work together to move society forward. The age-long system of denigrating women needs to be condemned. The collaborative efforts between Magira Milli and her son, Aji Ramta brings about the success of the Ramta's family business outfit. The collaboration between Seytu and Glo Medina brings about solutions to their marital problems. Prof. Aiman Zaki can achieve his age-long project of giving back to the society through the construction of the community health centre in Ramta in conjunction with Seytu. All these are achieved because the people involved have flair and access to western education with clear vision and dedication. The acquisition of education, therefore, puts them in a good position to develop their society. In summary, Zaynab Alkali's female characters in *The Descendants* are highly enviable and sophisticated women who deploy their knowledge acquired through western education to contribute to the development of their natal home and humanity in general. The acquisition of education by the female characters in the text and their collaborative efforts with men towards the development of their society make the text a quintessential Womanist novel.

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