

## **The Dilemma of the Post-modern Woman: Asserting the Female Voice in Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs and Other Stories***

Muhammad Mahmud, PhD  
Department of General Studies Education,  
College of Education Minna, Niger State.

**E-mail:** mtmahmud07@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of the postmodern Woman in Alkali's *Cobwebs and Other Stories*. It argues that the postmodern condition and its tendency to question traditional, social and religious structures opens up a space within the patriarchal system for women to assert their identity especially in their search for meaning and happiness. Using Lyotard's argument of "incredulity towards metanarratives" as analytical lens, this paper examines how the female characters respond to the postmodern condition. The paper finds that the main characters in the selected short stories are confronted with the dilemma of choosing between fulfilling their personal dreams and motherhood or the cultural and religious expectations of traditional society. It concludes that the postmodern condition empowers the female characters in the selected short stories with the capacity to interrogate beliefs and cultural systems that trample on their right to happiness and freedom. Thus the need to assert the female voice has become a recurring theme in postmodern fiction.

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the representation of the postmodern condition in Alkali's *Cobwebs and Other Stories*. It focuses on the possibilities that postmodern flexibility advocate and how they defy the dogma of traditions. It specifically examines selected stories in the collection and their representations of the dilemma of the postmodern woman. The stories are thus examined against the backdrop of the generality of postmodern condition. To actualize this, the stories are examined via the lens of Postmodernism as "incredulity towards meta narrative" which is rooted in the argument of Lyotard. Based on this idea, we can argue that what postmodern approaches have in common is the critique of the core values and belief system that have underpinned modernist approaches – such as rationalism objectivity, and the idea of scientific as social progress (Olsson, 2008:655). These, however, are the basis for the incredulity and rejection of the traditional. Thus, words such as discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, etc. are often associated with Postmodernism (Hutcheon, 1988:3). As a technique of reading and interpretation, therefore, this tent allows for the study of the struggles of the post-modern woman in challenging the dogmas of tradition and religion as portrayed in the selected short stories.

### **Negotiating the Traditional and Postmodern in "Cobwebs"**

The story illustrates the crisis that often characterizes every attempt to imbibe or situate the postmodern culture within a traditional system. This crisis is expressed in the dichotomy between Mama's new world view and that of her people in Beta. The

story captures the crisis that confronts Mama's attempt to negotiate the traditional system and cultural expectation of her community after developing a world view that clearly questions the cultural demand of her community. All through the narrative, we see the juxtaposition of a mind shaped by the postmodern condition and those that wallowed in the supremacy of culture; the idea that, for a woman, the demand of culture must never be violated especially for individual gain or personal freedom. According to Ampah (2009:85) the condition of urban life affects individuality because they create a distinct urban personality which is anomic, materialistic, self-sufficient, impersonal, hurried, superficial, manipulative, and inclined toward insecurity and personal disorganization. The effects of this "urban personality" is essentially what informs the postmodern condition. The story therefore reveals the dilemma that characterise an exposure to urban and rural life. The character of Mama symbolizes the postmodern in the story. She develops a postmodern sense of reality upon exposure to university education in Azir and begins to question the demands of culture and religion. Her perspective or perception about life and how much of a say she has in it and in the decisions that affect her, begin to assume a radical stance when placed against the backdrop of the Beta way of doing things. The plot of the story explores the different levels of reactions that Mama is confronted with as she returns to Kufan and Beta respectively.

As is often the case, an acculturation of the postmodern condition and reality automatically comes with a tendency to question views and behaviours that traditional life celebrate. A major contention in the story is the dichotomy between the flexibility and freedom that the postmodern world allows and the restriction and boundaries created by traditional and rural life. The character of Mama is symbolic of the attitude of the postmodern thinking when placed against the traditional values that assumes a transcendental status in a communal setting. What proceeds from the juxtaposition is a total rejection of these values by Mama when she became exposed to a more flexible reality; a reality that doesn't discriminate against the female gender. In the traditional wisdom, "a good wife and mother should be content with making a career out of her marriage (p.20). Clearly, Mama's decision to abandon her children in the care of another in order to pursue education violates such cultural expectation because "the idea of university education for a woman, especially a mother of two was received in Beta with mixed feelings. Hildi, Mama's business aunt from Lari became a voice that broke the limitation placed on education for Beta women. She encouraged Aliyu to give his consent but his agreement was with the exception of her studying a profession that is "too masculine" like law and medicine. It was victory for the whole of Beta because Mama was not the only one who was not comfortable with the cultural position that discriminates against women. The narrator recounts that:

There were some others in Beta who wanted to send their daughters to a university, but were waiting for someone to set the precedent. Whatever the feelings were, there was excitement at the new turn of events (p.20)

The postmodern reality has created an environment that question certain cultural practices or social constructs. Mama's father was quite uneasy but was a proud man and felt torn between the villager's excitement and the elder's wisdom. The story unveils the traditionalist expectation for women in Beta which clearly is patriarchal in nature. Mama's life began on a note of such cultural dogma; from birth, her destiny was already decided by the community. In her world, personal dreams don't matter for a woman, what matters is living up to the collective expectation of the community. In contrast to her educated and rebellious views, the likes of her mother, Amsa; her stepmother and Ladi her cousin have built their reality around the cultural expectation and suppression of the female gender. Thus, even though Adamu, Ladi's husband abuses her all the time, she still tries hard to be a good wife (p.54). Ladi is described as a pleasant, easy-going, uncomplicated woman, dutiful, sincere and took whatever it was that was given to her in good faith. For her a man marrying a second wife is not backward thinking but forward thinking because the idea of marrying a new wife is actually marrying a replacement (p.54). Ladi's perception of the place and duty of a woman is restricted to the values of the Beta people, thus she accepts her fate even when Adamu threatens to kick her out. She believes it is not in a woman's place to reject a man, their ancestors do not permit such except of course if the man is unable or unproductive (p.56). This is why Ladi criticizes Mama's actions as unacceptable, to her Mama has been bewitched in the city and needed help desperately. This traditional world view places both ladies on different sides of life. As the narrator observes;

There seem to be no point in prolonging the argument. They may have come from the same generation, the same culture, but different worlds. Her cousin, for instance would never understand that the issue in question was hardly that of "getting involved with a stranger" as she puts it...the issue was that of acquiring a different world view. She now had a different set of values which did not fit into the values of her own people. Now she believed in living by one's own standards. Knowing one's nature and where one was going. What one wanted in life and being in full control of one's destiny (p. 57).

In view of the experiences of both ladies it is clear that they are both victims of an oppressive system. The difference however, is that Ladi merely stops at lamenting over the values and its implication for her. Mama on the other hand, by virtue of her exposure to the postmodern world-view challenges these values. These same crises are largely what distinguishes the modernist from the postmodernist. Mama's exposure to university education exposed her to a more universal platform that preaches against oppression especially on gender grounds and champions the gospel of freedom and the right to a voice and choice. Mama's attempt to challenge these traditional values is only the first phase of her acceptance of the postmodern culture, the second will be her appreciation and celebration of the contradictions between the values of her people and the postmodern reality. In some ways however, Ladi saw the rejection of Adamu and her decision to acquire a skill as some sort of victory as much as Mama perceived that her rejection of Aliyu and the entire value of her people will bring her freedom. For

Mama, however, her reluctance is born out of the uncertainty that comes with postmodern culture. An example of such uncertainty is the story of Mallum, a thirty-year-old business man who married a forty-year-old graduate teacher he met within three months; only for them to separate during their honeymoon. The story largely appreciates the cultural dynamism that the postmodern society creates. This is achieved through a juxtaposition of the conflicting realities of the age. In view of such juxtapositional representation of views the perception of Adamu and Aliyu on female education differ. Adamu wanted educated women while Aliyu condemned educated women as rebellious and bad wives and bad mothers who abandon their husbands and children (P.54).

Mama's exposure to the reality of the city life and the freedom it preaches largely creates an internal crisis that fragmentarily erupts all through the story. She soon had more questions than answers. It is the search for answers that led her to Baba Modu despite the fact that she and Sophia always refer to diviners as "illiterate psychologists" who are only good enough for local minds (p.25) but they were wrong, she realised this when she encountered a number of city people at Baba Modu's place who were no doubt educated (P.25). These points to the fact that the postmodern culture is more "question-generating" than "answer giving" in other words it creates more problems than it offers solutions. Humanity has always been characterised by the search for answers. Mama's sojourn through university education still left her clueless as to what choices to make, thus, she opted for spiritual guidance. Her visit to Baba Modu also known as Modu Fezzan raised suspicions about his authenticity. Such suspicion about the authenticity of religious or spiritual figures is yet another postmodern reality captured in the story. The tendency of spiritual leaders referred to as men of God to dabble into witchcraft than prayers just to take willingly from gullible sufferers giving them nothing but vain promises in return. Mama's visit yielded little or no satisfaction, as she couldn't understand how three pieces of black amulets would solve her problem or ward off the nightmare that had become of her life. However, the new realization for her was that "a man of God was still an ordinary man with no answers" (p.28). This realization is the reality that has dampened the spiritual reverence in the postmodern space.

The Cobweb is aesthetically fashioned with elements of postmodern representations, this is besides its stylistic conformity with elements of the short story tradition. The story therefore expresses the intersection between the short story form and the postmodern tradition. It captures slices of postmodern realities through a fragmentary representation of the contradictions and dynamism that characterise the postmodern reality. The narrative technique objectively assigns the narrative voice to a third person narrator who randomly uncovers the events. The plot of the story is also largely characterised by a juxtaposition of views or ideas in a manner that allows for both a lamentation and an appreciation of the postmodern reality. By and large the characterization is a random display of individual representation of ideas, philosophies and world views that pervade the postmodern space, thus, even though it expresses the

Northern Nigerian setting, it still captures not just themes of postmodern significance but also themes of universal relevance.

The title "The Cobweb" largely embodies the irony of rural and urban movement. The rural space is largely considered the ancestral root of those in the city, thus, as Pa Joe observes; "Some of the sons, when they make it in the city, come back home to their birth place and with a remarkable zeal erect mansions for the cobweb to live in" (pp. 33-34). Cobweb in this sense, metaphorically connotes the rural setting which is deserted by the abled-young men who go in search of a better life in the cities. The rural setting becomes a cobweb due to lack of development and progress. This is why Mama finds going back to Beta had become a recurrent nightmare (p. 27). The village, just like a cobweb, traps behind the old, the very young and the disabled who cannot leave home (p.33). There is also the tendency of the rural area to trap its inhabitants in the past or within the boundaries of their collective world view. This is why the likes of Hildi and subsequently Mama who escaped the cobweb of such communal thinking no longer feel comfortable fitting into the entrapping realities of the Beta life. Upon Mama's return to Beta the narrator remarks thus, "past or present, her life was still stacked in a mesh of cobwebs" (p. 36). This is because while Mama in principle rejected the Beta world view, in practice or practical term she still remained sceptical of what choice to make. Mama's cobweb is a bigger trap because unlike those trapped within the boundaries of rural life, Mama is trapped between two worlds; a postmodern crisis that holds true particularly for those in the third world countries where certain traditional values still holds sway. Besides, there is also the moral crisis of being married to Aliyu and pregnant for Imam.

### **Polygamy and the Female Voice in "Saltless Ash"**

The story "Saltless Ash" highlights the crisis of Polygamy particularly in relation to the dominance that patriarchal culture assigns to a man as the sole decision maker of the family. Against this backdrop, the story repudiates this dogma through the characters of Amsa and Yabutu who through different in terms of character and are ages apart, unite to establish their voice in their home against the spontaneous attempt by Hassan their husband to marry a third wife. This attempt is a bold rejection of an essence that is not only traditional but also religious. The story unfolds in a society that is already engulfed in the crisis and dilemma of religious and cultural evolution (p. 83). The Turabe clan was once a conservative and alien clan that was strict in their adherence to Islamic religious doctrine. However, the power of the clan was soon undermined in time by petty rivalries and disloyalties. This background laid a precedence for the tendency for change and the psychological influence that shaped the consciousness and world view of Amsa and Yabutu.

Amsa for example was well-informed about her heritage from a young age. She knew her place and was quite ready to shoulder her responsibility despite the disappointing turn in her marital dream. There is a distinction between Amsa at fourteen and Amsa at thirty the norm for the former is to accept her fate without questions because she lives in a system where men have an exclusive privilege of knowing what is right. Besides, a child that disobeys her father is cursed (p. 84). At thirty however, Amsa had given birth

to eight children and had her foot squarely placed on her husband's neck (p. 84). This Amsa is a more sophisticated woman who is quick, calculating, alert and cunning. At this stage she could now wriggle her way off tight situations through what the narrator refers to as "matrimonial diplomacy" (p. 84). Her manipulative skills is compared to that of an old politician. In contrast, Yabutu who is twenty years older is more aggressive; she literarily fights out issues and is too blunt to discuss things (p.86). This contrast represents the old versus the new; the use of might versus the use of diplomacy. However, victory over a male dominated regime was achieved through a combination of the both. It is against this backdrop that the story projects the postmodern reality of women emancipation. The blatant rejection of norms and dogma that infringe upon the right of women.

Yabutu and Amsa largely express certain attributes of the postmodern woman and her approach to life. We are told that Yabutu had kicked aside conventions in order to acquire economic independence (p. 84). Economic independence as it were is a most sought after "virtue" of the postmodern woman especially within the context of the evolving mantra of social justice or equality for all. The reaction of Yabutu and Amsa to Hassan's attempt to marry a third wife largely negates the traditional and Islamic religious rights of a man that practices polygamy. By their actions, they question this right when they asserted their voice and rejected their husband's proposal to bring in a third wife. This display of strength corresponds with the postmodern clamour for social justice for women or more particularly, the numerous strands of feminist agitations that advocate the empowerment of women with a sense of equal participation in the marital enterprise. Yabutu and Amsa display this right when they kicked against their husband's attempt to marry a third wife on two different occasion. The victory in this regard signifies victory not just for them but also the possibility of victory for all women who are willing to fight for their right.

The bane of their contention lies largely on the need to assert the voice of reason over folly. According to them, their husband has lost his head, "his brain has turned into ashes" (p. 85), thus, they resolve to set things right. Amsa against the tide of criticism that greeted their action, explains that:

...she feared no third wife. She was simply fighting for justice. How fair was it for their thoughtless old husband to take up a new wife at a time when there was hardly enough food in the house to go round (p. 92).

This defence implies their rejection was not born out of the cheap sentiment or fear of been displaced by a third wife but the need to secure the economic wellbeing of the family. Notwithstanding, these reasons as far as the people of Betadam were concerned held no weight when placed on the scale of religion and tradition. The place of a woman was to "please a man" (p. 83). Ironically, not even the women in Betadam supported their actions in fact, they accused both women of dominating the old man or emasculating him and practicing witchcraft (p. 92). This irony stands as the biggest obstacle against women emancipation in contemporary times. The unity of purpose expressed by Yabutu and Amsa is not often the realty among women.

Beyond the rejection however, the action of Yabutu and Amsa are yet a representation of the growing reaction of modern women to polygamy. Yabutu's activist approach and Amsa's diplomacy are common ways in which modern women in polygamous families are beginning to react to the extent to which their families can be extended especially if the man in question lacks the means to afford a larger family. On the other hand, Hassan's diplomacy in getting a third wife failed as equally as his second forceful attempt, even though he reserves the right to marry a third wife without seeking the consent or approval of his wives, in "Saltless Ash" however, we see a display of the right of women to question this right. Amsa at fourteen when she was married off to Hassan had no sense of such right because her world view was defined by the fact that men always knew what is right and that disobeying them attracts the consequence of a curse but after thirty years of marriage and eight children she realised otherwise and learnt to exercise her right through diplomacy.

In view of the events in the story, the title "Saltless Ash" is largely suggestive of a loss of value of essence. The old man Hassan who is the antagonist is described as old, insensitive and lacking in foresight. This becomes the basis upon which he is emasculated by his wives. The idea is to question the ability of Hassan and by implication men to see beyond the "pleasure essence" of a woman. Amsa, describes Hassan as a "Saltless Ash" because he is inconsiderate of the implication of his action to the family's wellbeing (p. 92). Yabutu also describes him as a seventy-year-old man who needs to be hospitalised because he thinks he is twenty (P. 85). These views suggest that Hassan is not fit to take decision because he fails to see beyond the pleasure of marrying a third wife on his family and not the financial implication. This becomes the ground for the emasculation of his character and the empowerment of both women to decide the fate of the family.

### **Early Marriage and Girl Child Education in "The Vagabond"**

"The Vagabond" explores the consequence of early marriage and advocates girl child education. The story also illustrates the consequence of negligence in parental responsibilities within the context of postmodern reality. The vagabond in the story refers to Aunt Hildi's children who were given to drugs and stealing due to the negligence of their parents in offering them a good life and protecting them from the harsh realities of life. She gave out her daughter who is just fourteen in early marriage to her business sponsor. The union clearly was to close a business deal. Hildi was established in business but her daughter Bibi suffers health complications during pregnancy and delivery, thus exposing her to both bodily and psychological frustration. Her happy childhood was cut short by the irresponsibility of her parents and the failure of society to protect her from such irresponsible action. Baki on the other hand is given to drugs and stealing on account of same negligence. The description of the house and the number of children in it is apparently not a place that is fit for proper child upbringing. Pana upon arrival on the city was distressed about how the children are left on their own to scavenge through their neighbour's rubbish bin (p. 97). Their health was also in question because they looked malnourished with protruding stomachs and

thin limbs (p. 97). These descriptions illustrates the extent of negligence and hardship that the children were exposed to. It also portrays the harsh reality of poverty in modern times. The lack of jobs and inability of some parents to be disciplined to live within their means. Over population has become a main challenge in the postmodern world and families such as that of Aunt Hildi are responsible for the explosion in population and also the breeding of vagabonds and miscreants within the society that constitute a nuisance. This is the reality of most third world countries.

There is also the display of the tendency of deception in the story. There is often in contemporary reality a distinction between perception and reality. Modern life comes with certain social and economic expectations, Aunt Hildi tries to create an impression in Old Beta that she is living a luxurious and flamboyant life in the city. She puts on her best whenever she pays a visit to Old Beta. Pana was however disappointed and ashamed at Aunt Hildi's actual life and standard of living. Even more shocking for Pana is the irony of Aunt Hildi's support and role in ensuring that her father sends her to school, while her own daughter is given out in early marriage at the age of fourteen. This double-faced life is a modern reality that is born out of the pressure of meeting up with certain expected standard. The effect of this is a life of deception and pretence just to earn recognition and respect. The climax of Aunt Hildi's negligence eventually translates to a privilege of education for Pana.

Consequently, *The Cobwebs and Other Stories* juxtaposes modern perspectives and traditional ideas about the place of the woman by creating characters that represent each of these perspectives. According Joseph (2005:178) Alkali offers a remarkable perspective in understanding the complexities of the role and position of the woman in an Islamic society. However, she has built characters that negotiate and rise above the cultural and religious demands of the Northern Nigerian society. According to Alkali (2009:46) Literature when it is read generally raises the consciousness of people to themselves and to their environment. For example, the portrayal of the likes of Mamma, Maaya, Umma, Amsa, Yabutu and Panna will raise the consciousness of the oppressed to the reality of their oppression as imbued within these characters are experiences that portray the reality of most women within the postmodern world. They are presented in contrast to those that accept their fate or role as prescribed by culture.

The general approach to the pattern of characterisation adopted in the collection emasculates the male character figures in most of the stories. This in itself constitute some form of questioning of the prevalent practice of male character domination within the representation of reality in Northern Nigerian Fiction and by implication Nigerian fiction. In other words, beyond the questioning of patriarchal dominance, the representation of characters in the collection also question the "protagonization" of male characters and trivialization of the female presence in fiction. Alkali's pattern of characterization "protagonizes" female characters while emasculating male characters. There is no doubt that there is an overwhelming presence of themes that express feminist agitations in the collection, notwithstanding, the collection is also imbued with postmodern aesthetic elements that opens up the representation and interpretation of



these issues beyond the boundaries of feminist discourse. This is made possible by the deconstructive tendencies in postmodern thinking. Thus, ideologies, philosophies and beliefs seem to be examined through the binarism that often gives room for contrast in postmodern criticism. In the collection therefore ideas are juxtaposed, given prominence and also questioned. This dichotomy illustrates the complexity of the postmodern reality. Consequently, there is a deliberate attempt to be suggestive rather than assertive. This is why the characters explored in the stories and the ideas they project are met with resistance either internally or externally. This pattern of representation depicts the postmodern condition; an endless search for meaning and answers in a world of uncertainties and scepticism. In the “The Cobwebs” Mama’s search for direction appeals to both the logic of reasoning and divine guidance. Thus, she questions her reasoning as much as she questioned the Sage; Modu Fezzan’s admonition. The same attitude is expressed by Maaya, in “The House of Dust”, who questions and celebrates the wisdom in her commitment to family. The case is no different in “Vagabond” where Aunt Hildi pushes for Panna’s education but gives out her daughter in early marriage. These contrasting representation of ideas and actions illustrate the uncertainty and scepticism of the postmodern reality.

The stories in *The Cobwebs and Other Stories* are therefore an expression of postmodern aesthetics and condition on one hand and the modern short story form on the other. The aesthetic and thematic content of the stories are an expression of the intersection between the Modern short story form and the aesthetics of Postmodernist reality. Thus, besides belonging to the corpus of Northern Nigerian Literature, the collection fairly fulfils the aesthetics quality of the short story form and the representation of the postmodern condition.

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