

## Love and Social Trend in Two Female African Novels

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### Abstract

*Love in both traditional and modern African societies is seen as a peculiar act conditioned by the society. This inner-feeling which is supposed to be a self-devotion towards a partner becomes the concern of a community in the African context. Among the Igbo- living in the southern part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria- for example, Life is dictated and oriented by a set of traditional principles; and each member of the community is responsible in preserving and promoting these social values. It is the same with the Hausa people living in the Northern part of Nigeria and depicted in Alkali's work; they have also their own ways. All individuals including dead, ancestors, spirits, gods and slaves directly or indirectly interfere to regulate these principles. Each person shall act in accordance with his customs and beliefs and everybody must fight to achieve some kind of social unity. This paper titled "Love and Social Trend in Two Female African Novels", will be an assessment of two well-known Nigerian female novelists' works: Zaynab Alkali and Flora Nwapa. A socio-comparative approach will be used while developing the topic.*

**Key Words:** love, marriage, children and collective tendency.

L'amour dans les deux sociétés africaines traditionnelle et moderne, est vu comme un acte particulier, conditionné par la société. Ce sentiment intérieur qui est supposé être un attachement personnelle envers un partenaire, devient l'affaire de la communauté dans le contexte africain. Parmi les Igbo vivant dans la partie septentrionale de la République Fédérale du Nigéria par exemple, la vie est dédiée et orientée par une série de principes traditionnels ; et chaque membre de la communauté est responsable en tant que garant et promoteur de ces valeurs sociales. C'est la même chose avec les peuples Hausa vivant dans la partie nord du Nigéria tels que décrits dans le roman de Zaynab Alkali ; ils ont aussi leur propre culture. Tous les individus, les morts y compris, les ancêtres, les esprits, les Dieux et les esclaves, directement ou indirectement, interviennent afin de réguler ces principes. Chaque personne doit agir en conformité avec ses coutumes et ses croyances et chacun doit lutter pour atteindre une sorte d'unité sociale.

Cet écrit titré « L'amour et la tendance social dans deux romans africains écrits par des femmes » sera une évaluation des travaux de deux (2) bien connues écrivaines africaines nigérianes, Zaynab Alkali et Flora Nwapa. Une approche socio-comparative sera utilisée pour développer le sujet.

**Mots clé:** amour, mariage, enfants et tendance collective.

### Introduction

Worldwide, women- mothers of humanity- are marginalized and put aside in their own issue- love affair. For this reason, female writers, through their works of arts, stand firmly to fight for their rights.

In this paper, women struggle for the betterment of their life conditions will be discussed. The work of two well-known Nigerian female novelists, Zaynab Alkali and Flora Nwapa will be the framework of this dissertation. Like other female novelists, they have their reasons of motivation in venturing into creative writing. They have both given themselves the role to speak on behalf of African women in general and Nigerian women in particular.

### Marriage in Hausa Communities versus Li's marriage

According to Ibrahim Madauci (1968) marriage is recognized as legal if only the following conditions are fulfilled:

“... the payment of the dowry, the consent of the two parties (the bride and the groom)... there must be witnesses to the marriage. Like in other parts of Africa, in Hausa society marriage involves parents and relatives; and the two young people about to marry do not decide anything on their own. A young man, who loves a girl, will talk to her; if he is too shy his or her friend talks on his behalf. If the girl's answer is positive, the boy and his friends will make a first contact visit to her by bringing some presents. Then the boy's father accompanied by friends and relatives will make the introductory visit by giving presents; later on the father will organize another formal visit where he will again bring presents. The acceptance of the several presents by the- in- laws to be indicates that the girl's parents accept the boy. The period of

courtship can be a month or even a year. Then the betrothal takes place after paying the dowry. A month or two later, the marriage will be celebrated”.

If we look at all these steps and principles of the Hausa marriage, one can conclude that in opposition to traditional ways, Zaynab Alkali's heroine, Li, has violated these principles of courtship and engagement. According to Madauci's marriage description, it is the young man who should talk first to the young girl; if not, he can ask either his or her friend to do it on his behalf; but Li has acted differently- she is the one who has approached Habu Adam as mentioned in these lines: “when Li and her sister Awa met Habu at the dance, she was the first to talk to Habu in these words: ‘you are a stranger here’.”(*The Stillborn*, 16) “That day her sister even jabbed her knowing that she was behaving against their tradition”; and as mentioned on page 18, “she was playing to the tune of a traditional courtship. A woman is not supposed to show interest in a man on their first meeting”. Moreover, it is the young man who should visit the girl at her house. Here, Li has done worse by escaping “through the hole she made on the fence at night to join Habu without the knowledge of her parents” (*The Stillborn*, 18).

In the Hausa culture it is hardly accepted that a young man and woman meet each other on the street. But one day, on his way to visit a sick friend, Kaka has passed by the dancing arena when he has seen his two granddaughters talking with a tall, young man; Kaka could not stay indifferent to that; he has said: “Men are utterly shameless and callous these days ... He speaks to a woman even before he has met her parents ... This is what they call modern living”. (26)

Here Kaka's implication is that boys and girls meet each other in public place without the knowledge of their parents; it is new and against the tradition. According to the tradition the man should go through the girl's parents first before any meeting with her. At this point we are assisting powerlessly to the progressive devaluation of traditional ways. And we will see it through Efuru's marriage which differs from the common Igbo marriage.

### **Marriage in the Igbo Community versus Efuru's Marriage**

According to Uchendu, “four stages are to be followed: Asking the consent of the girl; working through a middleman; testing the bride's character; and finally paying the bride wealth”.(*Efuru*: 21) Asking the girl's consent depends on the circumstance. In most arranged marriages, the two people about to marry are so young and have no choice. The middleman and other relatives exert their pressure. And investigations are done by both families. After satisfactory inquiries the courtship begins; it involves both family members and presents are exchanged. The courtship ends with the payment of the dowry. The testing character is the introduction of the girl to her family- in- law. And she is observed to by the adults of the extended family, for her physical beauty, as well as her behavior; her ability in household chores is tested. Once the dowry is paid the betrothal takes place and the two youngsters are husband and wife. Of course, inquiry is worthy doing because all parents want their in-laws to be from good and moral families; and by doing inquiry they are sure not to introduce undesired qualities in their own families. That is why it is said in French: “tel père, tel fils” or “telle mère, telle fille”[Like father like son or like mother like daughter].

According to Igbo traditions, Efuru has violated the principles and steps of marriage: First, she runs away with Adizua after only a fortnight courtship. Second, she does not give time to her parents to do inquiries. And third, the dowry is not paid by her husband. Efuru's act is against the Igbo community's rules. A dowry is mandatory; and any girl who dares to follow a man who has not paid the dowry before the celebration of the marriage, brings shame on her family. Efuru's father has noted it in these words: “It is a shame our enemy will glory in this”. (21)

Efuru's father is very angry because of the shame caused by his daughter in the community. And even Adizua's family feels embarrassed because their son has done something against the customs; when his uncle has heard that he has not pay the dowry to Efuru's father, he has warned Adizua that “he must do something about our custom” (21). This marriage without dowry is condemned by the community members who are so attached to their tradition and customs. Efuru's act becomes a subject of gossip in the entire community. Some people have even qualified it as an insult to her father. The following market women's conversation is edifying: “... if it were his youth, his daughter would not have dared insult him in this way” (16).

The above statement shows that the Igbo people are attached to their traditions. But, Efuru has felt that she should make up to her father who implies her respect; she has engaged in trade with her husband and when they have got money she was eager to go to her father as she has said to Adizua: “... We shall look for another thing to do, but we have to go to my father now that we have money” (20). Adizua's people go to visit Efuru's father in order to pay the

dowry; the dowry is paid, the custom is at last fulfilled; Efuru's father is finally relieved of his burden and becomes quite happy.

Considering these two marriage descriptions of Ibrahim Maduci and Udenchu, we come to the conclusion that both Li and Efuru have violated the principles of traditional marriage courtship. However, none of them has anything against the tradition; but, there is something hidden behind their acts. We learn from Maduci that child marriage and forced marriage also exist in Hausa land though they tend to disappear nowadays. We also learn from Uchendu that in Igbo society, "it is the love growing out of the family created by the marriage that is emphasized" (*Uchendu*, 52). This means that in Igbo society, love does not come before the marriage but after it.

Li and Efuru have violated the principles of marriage courtship in order to make their choice on their own. They do not want to find themselves in the hands of men against their will like Mama Dinar in *The Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997) and Agnes in *The Women are different* (1986). In *The Cobweb and Other Stories*, the heroine, Mama Dinar is given in marriage to the rich Aliyu against her will- a man she does not love. It is the same thing in Nwapa's *The Women Are Different* where Agnes is married to a man of her father's age.

Alkali and Nwapa are challenging these practices in *The Stillborn* and *Efuru* by opposing tradition and modernism in terms of marriage and childbearing. In both Igbo and Hausa societies, the main purpose of marriage is having children. Marriage and having children are connected; and the two concepts are vital in Hausa and Igbo communities. That is why Alkali and Nwapa choose to discuss them. Hence, the discussion about marriage will lead us to childbearing. We will analyze the impact of childlessness as well as the advantages of having children in *The Stillborn* and *Efuru* respectively.

### Importance of Children in Li's Life

If for Igbo people the purpose of marriage is to beget children, the Hausa people also care about having children. Chimaraoke O. Izugbara and Alex Ezeh reported from some women in Islamic Northern Nigeria, that:

"...They deliberately give birth too many children in order to inhibit men's tendency to divorce or to engage in plural marriage... And it was concluded that the husbands' behaviors and attitudes constitute an important contributing factors to the high fertility in Northern Nigeria".

(<http://onlineLibrary.wiley.com>)

This means that the Hausa men do not react only to the women's bareness but also their having few children. So, if a woman fails to bear as many children as her husband desires, he may either divorce her or take a second wife. The example of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* is edifying. The marital life was not easy for Faku who had only one child while her co-wife has nine children as mention in the following lines: "...Nine children between them; she is the mother of the house and the master of the house" (79).

Here Faku is implicated because she has many children to control in the house. Even the example of the landlady is illustrative when she has reported to Li how she has suffered in her marital life because of her bareness: "I experienced a raw agony ... I was pushed to the background because I had no child" (72).

If a fruitless marriage is meant to collapse, the fruitful broken marriage mostly will revive one day. Li and Efuru's cases are edifying. Efuru has left both of her husband's easily and for good because as Ajanupu told her "since she has no child, there is no reason for her to stay; she has no right to stay in the house, and so, only having a child could save her marriage."(72-73).

On the other hand, Li who left her husband after having suffered like Efuru, joined him back after ten years, not only because she loves him and wants to help him, but also there is something linking them together, making them hardly separable from one another; this thing is their daughter. As written in the novel, "Li knew that the bond that had tied her to the father of her child was not ruptured". (104-105). That is why she decides to go to the city to join Habu as stated in the following lines: I am going back to the city [ ] I am taking Shuwa (her daughter) with me" (105).

This conversation tells us the great role a child can play in maintaining a marriage everlasting. If Efuru has no reason to stay, the fact that Li's daughter is a teenager now, who perpetually claims for her father, is a good reason for Li to

go back to him; saying that she does not want to destroy her daughter's life: "How can I forget the father of my child, big sister? You yourself said just now that to break up home is like breaking a child". (88)

To conclude this sub-chapter, it can be said from Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, we have understood that in both Hausa and Igbo communities like in African society in general, children rank first in marriage; they are the purpose of marriage and they also solidify it. We have seen how the childless woman suffers without enjoying her womanhood life and how a fruitless marriage hardly survives. If children are essential in parents' life, if they provide them great happiness, having children means having great duty and responsibility that parents should not fail to fulfill- education and/or upbringing. That is why this discussion of childbearing will conduct us to the child upbringing.

### **Child Upbringing in *The Stillborn* and *Efuru***

Children are of great value among the Hausa and the Igbo communities; however, parents are mainly responsible of what their offspring will become in life. According to Bishop Alexander "all aspects of a man's life-his character, sense of responsibility, good and bad habits, ability to cope with difficulties, and his piety- are shaped primarily during his childhood." (<http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/>). If all these aspects are shaped in the childhood this implies that it is up to the parents to shape them. In traditional Africa in general as in Hausa and Igbo societies in particular children are wanted to grow and behave; therefore, they need good care and good upbringing. Progeny upbringing is a pleasant and difficult duty; the challenging aspect of youngsters upbringing is that parents are seen through their kids as mentioned by Omirima in *Efuru*: "if a child does not take after his father, he will take after his mother and children easily copy bad things".(89)

So, parents are like a model for their children as stipulated by the French saying *tel père tel fils ou telle mère telle fille* – like father like son or like mother like daughter. Accordingly, parents should show their children good examples; they are their kids' first teachers. In short, parents and community members must give a good start to children for a better education, behavior and wisdom. My concern here is to analyze how child upbringing have been tackled in both Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* as a reflect of childbearing in Hausa and Igbo communities.

Concerning the Igbo people they are very serious with the children's education. As we learn from Uchendu, the Igbo parent initiate the child to all the activities they undertake. adolescents are trained in farming, trading, mat making, as well as household chores like fetching firewood, carrying water, cooking (for young girls). They also have right to activities like wrestling.

In their very young age both boys and girls are close to their mother than the father. They receive their first trainings from the mother. When the boys start to grow up, they get close to their father in order to acquire male initiation and training. But concerning the girls, their initiation/education will always remain the mother's affair. This is confirmed by *Efuru*'s father when she entered the house late at night: "If her mother were alive she would have known how to handle her" (2). This implies that the mother is more experienced in dealing with girl's education and it is more her duty than the father's. The parents are more concerned with the child's upbringing; but this does not exclude that, relatives, neighbors and other community members are involved.

In Igbo culture children education is everybody's concern; any member of the community can take care of any child. Children belong to the whole tribe or clan. They are not only their parents'. Flora Nwapa has giving a vivid example in her novel through the characters of Ogea and Ogonim. One day *Efuru* sent Ogea (her maid) and her daughter Ogonim to Ajanupu's house to stay there while she is in the market; then Ajanupu asked Ogea to do some works for her and she was following Ogea's every single act and corrected her as described here: "The mortar is not properly washed... Bend down and sweep like a woman... Put your legs together and sit like a woman... You eat your fish last". (*Efuru*, 50).

Though Ogea is not Ajanupu's own daughter, she has given herself the duty to train her, to teach her good manners since in Igbo culture child's education is everybody's occupation. And if a girl does not know how to do properly the household tasks, her mother is the one to hold responsible. On the other hand, if a child is well brought up the mother will bear the good name. That is why in *Efuru*, Ajanupu is charging *Efuru* in these words: "You are spoiling Ogea... If you don't bring up her well, nobody will marry her... You are too blamed". (51)

The above examples indicate that traditionally among the Igbo, Parents worry a lot about their children upbringing. That is the case with the Hausa people whose main preoccupation is to have well educated children, as stipulated by a Hausa saying, cited by Affoha and Sadiku (1996): “Kaki danka, duniya ta so shi. Kaso danka, duniya ta ki shi”.[meaning, if you dislike your child, the world will love him. And if you love your child the world will dislike him].

This implies that the disciplined child will be the well-behaved and useful community member appreciated by everybody. In contrast, the undisciplined boy will misbehave and consequently, he may be unappreciated by people. From Affoha and Sadiku’s words, child upbringing in the Hausa traditional society is the responsibility of parents and the extended family members. In the Hausa traditional community, besides discipline and love children received, they are also initiated to societal values and survival skills through parental education. These children are well prepared for their future life because they have received knowledge and wisdom about social responsibilities; and they are also well oriented for different jobs. Children are especially thought their parents’ activities and other self-entertainment tricks.

Since Hausa people are mostly Muslim, their children education includes also the learning of Islamic practices. Girls’ training is usually done by the mother who teaches them the household chores. Moreover, she prepares them to be future brides, wives and mothers. So, both boys and girls are trained to different jobs as depicted in *The Stillborn* through the character of Li’s mother who shares works among her children as follow: “Awa, go and fetch some water; Li, wash the dishes; Sani, take the sheep and goats to the hills to feed; Becke and Hirwa sweep the compound”. (15) Here we see that both boys and girls are given different tasks to do, we also understood that laziness which is not part of African culture is not allowed in this Hausa family, each child has to work.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we realize through these two novels that in both Hausa and Igbo communities, women’s role and responsibility are greater than that of men. This matter of fact can be explained by our African cultural principles in which children are closer to the mother than the father. If women have to bear the greatest part of children’s upbringing, this is not a reason for men to avoid their part of responsibility. Unfortunately, none of the heroines’ husbands in *The Stillborn* and *Efuru* can be expected to play the parental duty. They vanish, leaving the children on their mothers’ shoulder.

The two Nigerian female writers have revealed the richness of the Hausa and Igbo culture to which they are deeply attached. Moreover womanhood is viewed by the two writers the same way in their two books. The main difference between *The Stillborn* and *Efuru* resides in their setting. The geographical areas are not the same. *The Stillborn* is set in Northern Nigerian among the Muslims Hausa people, whereas *Efuru* is set in Southern Nigerian among the Christians Igbo community. Traditions and religious beliefs vary from one area to another and so are women’s occupations.

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