

THE JOURNEY AS TROPE FOR FEMALE GROWTH IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S *THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN*

Grace Eche Okereke

Zaynab Alkali has published two novels - *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*. Both novels reconstruct female experience in the journey to consciousness in sexist society. Alkali's is a welcome new voice in African creative writing and her relevance cannot be over-emphasised, for she is a lone female voice from Northern Nigerian that has undertaken to expose the reality of woman's life in a male-dominated culture. Through her novels, Alkali has led the Northern Nigerian woman out of her silence by giving her a voice to speak out in protest against male hegemony and domination, to tell the world of her troubles, of society's insensitivity to woman's predicaments and her individual struggles for survival, self-definition and self-realization in patriarchal culture.

Although she is operating from a christian background, Alkali's literary vocality in a predominantly Muslim society that views writing as "a male privilege and the incarnation of power" (Sabbah 6), is in itself a daring departure from the Muslim ethic of female silence and inertia, and is an act of feminist protest which has earned her some vitriolic criticism (Alkali, "Keynote Address"3). This paper examines Alkali's exploitation of the journey as a trope for female growth in *The Virtuous Woman*.

Mobility is fundamental in the construction of consciousness. Alkali in her novels - *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* - inscribes mobility (physical and psychological) as the starting point of female consciousness in Muslim culture that imposes immobility on the female. Chioma Opara (158-66) and Theresa Njoku (177-78) have variously examined the salutary effects of movement on Alkali's women, especially in their search for identity.

The female hero in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* is Nana Ai. Alkali exploits the framework of the journey to plot woman's quest for the ideal of autonomy. It is a physical and psychological journey that explores the female predicament in the process of growing up.

The journey unfolds itself in three major phases and an unexplored fourth phase. Each phase equips Nana Ai with a new experience and pushes her a step up the ladder of social, emotional and psychological expansion and growth. The vehicle in which Nana (woman) undertakes each phase of the journey tropologizes the speed of her growth in consciousness.

The first phase of woman's journey to maturity is undertaken on foot. The speed is slow because she is just starting her journey, and needs to define her goals and equip herself. This first phase is a journey into traditional values and female virtues in Muslim culture. Although there are positive aspects of these that are beneficial to the female, culture is largely limiting for her. Thus, this first phase of the journey is symbolically undertaken on foot, and begins from the rural environment of Nana's village, Zuma.

Alkali's evocation of the setting foreshadows the beauty and loneliness of the heroine, Nana Ai, at this starting point of her journey:

Zuma: a small, beautiful and, isolated village...Zuma popularly known as "Gidan Zuma", honey castle, lies low and snugly cushioned among her hills, like a tiny baby between her mother's breasts (Alkali, *The Virtuous Woman* 1).

Like Zuma, Nana is small, beautiful and delicate with a sense of insecurity.

Alkali proceeds to introduce the heroine into the fabric of the story. She (Nana Ai) is an orphan (deprived of filial love and security) and a cripple (with "a paralysis in the left leg, the result of polio at the age of six" (11). Thus, woman's route to consciousness is fraught with obstacles that threaten to paralyse her efforts rendering them puny and ineffective. She has to define her goals and her identity amidst the antagonisms of fate, nature and society.

Nana is, however, compensated with a caring grandfather, Bana Sani, under whose sagacious tutelage she grows up. Baba Sani becomes a surrogate father and mother to her, inculcating in Nana the moral ethics of her people, the repository of which he is. Nana is challenged in the initial stage of her journey into defining herself

94 93
in the contest of female antagonism, physically dramatized as a fight with another girl in defense of her grandfather's honour. Alkali states symbolically, "it was the first real fight of her life" (17). This fight becomes a dramatic paradigm of her struggles against the obstacles in her path to autonomy.

Having successfully scaled this initial hurdle in her path to self-definition, Nana, equipped with the moral axioms of her grandfather and her virtues, launches out to confront the society which becomes the macrocosmic context of her quest. The first phase of her quest is concluded in the village, which has also served as a preparing ground for the second phase. Her self-assertion symbolized by her victory in the fight, equips her with the needed boldness, while the moral ethics that she has imbibed equip her with the modesty of tradition, both of which qualify her to undertake her symbolic journey to the ideal. She is, therefore, doubly armed with seemingly opposing values to undertake her self-definition in the larger social context.

As this first phase of her self-definition comes to a close, Nana still feels insecure. The presence of her grandfather, as she and her friends leave the village to the highway, is reassuring, for Nana is still dependent and needs him to strengthen her. His awareness of her need of him is expressed in Alkali's statement that Baba Sani "coughed from time to time to assure them of his presence" (21). But soon Nana is left to face the world alone as her prop is removed, when her grandfather leaves them. With the return of her grandfather, the voice of morality, her pillar and strength, to the village, Nana is symbolically stripped of parental male protection and of patriarchal direction of woman.

She is of necessity left to depend on her own inner resources, for to qualify for autonomy, woman must prove her worth, as an individual by confronting the harsh outside world. Nana's lingering dependence on her grandfather (her patriarchal prop), is expressed in the fear and loneliness that envelop her at the old man's departure: "Nana watched her grandfather's retreating figure, her eyes suddenly filled with hot tears" (22).

Nana's symbolic birth from the serene womb of Zuma and of her grandfather's hut, to the harsh realities of the external world symbolized by the noisy, chaotic highway, is complete as, like a newborn baby, she cries against the fears and uncertainties of life. But unlike Zuma secure in its baby-like dependence on its mother, Nana must of necessity be weaned of her grandfather's maternal nurturance and face life. Growing up is painful; it involves an initiation baptised with blood or, as in the case of Nana, with 'hot

tears' because it is a symbolic break with childhood, and a launching out into maturity and the traumata that are its corollary.

The second phase of Nana's journey into maturity begins when her grandfather leaves her at the highway junction, which as Alkali tells us literally and symbolically "was another world" (21). It is a tupsy-turvy world whose moral degeneracy threatens to destroy woman; a world of social, moral and emotional chaos, as symbolized by the noisy make-shift motor park at the junction with its flux of activities. Alkali effectively captures this scene which contrasts sharply with the serenity of the 'honey castle' Zuma village that Nana has just left with her group:

The highway was another world. As early as five in the morning, it was buzzing with the voices of travellers, traders and street hawkers. Besides serving as a motor park, the junction had inevitably become a market, a drinking and gambling centre. The atmosphere stank of petty thieving, pickpocketing and prostitution (21).

It is a slum in the making in consonance with its moral filth, and is a microcosm of the larger corrupt and amoral society within which woman has to define herself.

Nana has to travel with two new school mates, Laila and Hajjo. Alkali's use of three female friends in undertaking the journey to self-definition, reflects the female solidarity that feminist theorists apprehend as important in the achievement of female aspirations. However, their opposing values militate against this solidarity, for as Simone de Beauvoir asserts:

Women's fellow feeling rarely rises to genuine friendship... Women feel their solidarity more spontaneously than men; but within this solidarity the transcendence of each does not go out towards the others, for they all face together towards the masculine world, whose value they wish to monopolize each for herself. Their relations are not founded on their individualities, but immediately experienced in generality; and from this arises at once an element of hostility(558).

The first obstacles Nana confronts in the larger society comes in the form of male debauchery, which constitutes a test to her traditional moral education. Woman's status as victim is communicated in Alkali's description of her as a 'prey' and, no doubt, the man is the predator represented by the Secretary, who want to give the girls a lift in return for sexual favours:

Girls care for a lift?' He asked in a casual voice that suggested he was sure of his *prey*. His voice was disturbingly thin like that of a woman and when he smiled he exposed a set of red, rugged kolanut stained teeth (Emphasis added, 23).

His lecherous confidence shows that the Secretary has long been in this amoral game of trapping unwary young girls. His red vampire-like teeth and 'tiny red eyes' are instrumental in his defloration of young girls who he seduces with a smile and a lift. The flabbiness of his features are physical manifestations of his moral and professional laxity.

The Secretary vindictively assigns the girls a sick old man, Malam Jauro, (who in his corpse-like state epitomizes the corrupt female-antagonistic society) as their guide. In addition to this, is the corrupt, uncaring system - the laxity of civil servants, the recklessness of unqualified, inexperienced drivers leading to the carnage on Nigerian roads, the venality of the law enforcement agencies that cripples justice, and the protocol of the police that rates bureaucracy over human life. These ubiquitous man-made impediments cripple woman and delay her journey of growth.

Despite these obstacles that make her progress laborious and painful, woman ultimately hopes to attain her ideal of fulfillment as she matures through experience. Experience is thus a vital weapon in woman's survival and achievement of growth. The journey becomes a journey of growth from innocence to knowledge, from naivety to experience. Nana's journey with her two mates starts off peacefully and uneventfully, but as they get closer to their destination, they are exposed to several experiences that mature them precociously from 'innocent', exuberant village girls, to girls who have savoured the vicissitudes of life. At the beginning of the novel, Hajjo and Laila are inquisitive about the look of the inside of a train showing their naivety and ignorance, but by the end of the journey that marks the end of the novel, they have been enmeshed in sexual politics, and have stared death in the face.

In Alkali's novels, dreams are landmarks in woman's journey of growth. Sometimes, they propel her forward, at other times, they cast her back into the past to draw sustenance for the present stage of her quest. Thus, there is an extensive use of dreams to interiorise

Nana's emotional conflicts, fears, desires and aspirations. This affords her a psychic reconciliation with the harsh realities of life, but can also be seen as escapist. It is significant that Alkali couches woman's illusions and dreams in flashbacks that transport her backward into the past. Her psychological flights into the past (constructed around her beauty as a bridge across her gender deficiencies), shelter her from the challenges of the present. Nana's diffidence is occasioned by her inadequacies as a female victim maimed by male values in a patriarchal world. Woman's femininity confers beauty on her but the deformity of her immanence as a male construct renders her self negating and narcissistic like Nana. She needs an external element to boost her ego and self confidence. In exploiting the dream technique, Alkali utilizes dramatic monologue and dialogue, stream of consciousness - all serving as devices for externalising Nana's psychological state.

The second phase in woman's journey to maturity is the longest in time, space and the richest in experience. It covers two days, three chapters (three to six), and the distance is between Birnin Adama and Birnin Dala. It is also the phase that is most fraught with interruptions, obstacles and dangers. Symbolically, the female (Nana, Laila and Hajjo) meets the male (Bello and Abubakar) and they journey together, stressing that the journey to consciousness is a collective male/female experience needed to help the sexes redefine gender relations in the Muslim context. Fatima Mernissi's assessment of gender relations in Muslim society articulates this need:

At stake in Muslim society is... the fate of the heterosexual unit. Men and women were and still are socialized to perceive each other as enemies... Muslim ideology, which views men and women as enemies, tries to separate the two and empowers men with institutionalized means to oppress women (Beyond the Veil xvi-xvii).

This second phase is an symbolic journey into gender politics in Muslim culture and is fraught with experiential risks from which woman cannot emerge unscathed. She thus suffers loss - emotional loss, indeed loss of innocence. The journey is undertaken in a lorry which is faster than the vehicle (foot) of the first phase.

The journey which is conducted physically and in the psyche, is an analogue of the linear plot structure. Flashbacks which are used to integrate background materials outside the narrative time and space during the journey, are done unobtrusively through dreams. The major flashback on the Musa Dogo narrative which is externally narrated and long enough to interrupt the flow of the narration, is also interrupted by the road blockage. So that the break in time sequence and in plot structure is also reflected in the physical interruption of the journey. This break affords Alkali the opportunity of exploring the travellers' character in some depth, and so is deliberate and functional. The passage of time is proportionate to Nana's experiential expansion.

Alkali shows the centrality of education in the new woman's self-definition by making it the *raison d'être* for the journey. The three girls are on their way to school; their amorous adventures are tangential to their education, to their quest for self-expansion. Men and marriage are no long the *raison d'être* for woman's destiny; they are no longer the ultimate as patriarchal tradition dictates but only an aspect of woman's total existence. When woman's destiny is anchored to man and marriage, she is often doomed to destruction, as symbolized by the heavily veiled child-bride who symbolically remains silent and inactive throughout the journey until her death in the accident. Silence and inertia are regarded as female virtues in Muslim culture (Sabbah 118), but they, like the veil, condemn woman to invisibility. It is significant that the death of the 'invisible' woman (the child-bride) does not register the pain of loss that the reader feels at the death of the vocal mother of twins. Alkali is saying that in this new order of women's liberation, such cultural anachronisms as the veil must 'die' for woman and society to be free. Thus, the accident becomes a weapon for eliminating the obstacles in woman's journey of growth- the randy phallus (symbolized in Abubakar) and the obliterating veil (symbolized in the child-bride).

Because of the relevance and expansion accruing to her from formal Western education, the questing female in Alkali's novels is not identified with the veil. She is rather identified with education that equips her with a voice to speak out in protest against her lot in sexist society and is, thus, a liberating influence. This is more so in

Muslim society where female education is an exception rather than the rule (Mohsen 50-52). Alkali uses the Musa Dogo narrative to buttress the point that education is the major hope of women to achieve in modern society. It is significant that this anecdote on the value of female education is narrated to Nana, the symbol of the new woman in *The Virtuous Woman*. Fatima Mernissi articulates the disruptive effect of female incursion into educational space thus:

The access of women as citizens to education and paid work can be regarded as one of the most fundamental upheavals experienced by our societies in the twentieth century. By laying siege to the places considered until then the private preserve of men and the privilege of maleness - the school and the work place - women opened everything up to question, in their personal life as well as their public role (*The Veil* 23-24).

By nipping Laila's relationship with Abubakar in the bud, Alkali is symbolically refusing woman easy material success vicariously through male achievements. Alkali would rather woman strives on her own to achieve her goals through self-reliance and through harnessing her intellectual resources. This is a feminist stance which Alkali mellows by defining Nana within the tradition.

The second phase of Nana's quest for identity significantly ends in loneliness and tears like the first phase. Her loneliness in the first phase was heightened by her grandfather's departure. At the end of this second phase, her loneliness is buttressed by her departure from another male (Bello) on whom she has leaned however tenuously for emotional support: "Wiping the tears with the end of he wrapper, she turned and left him standing there in the hospital corridor, like an undecided ghost" (70). Woman is still not emotionally strong and mature enough to withstand the treacheries of life, and so the journey to this needed strength anchored on self must continue. She must break with dependency and continue the rite of passage into maturity.

The last major phase of the journey is marked by the last chapter of the book which symbolically opens with the words "the train joggled peacefully southwards" (71). The word 'peacefully' is significant in that this stage displays none of the emotional storm

and psychological torment of the second phase. The emotional turmoil Nana is going to experience here is one of budding happiness in the flowering of her love for Bello. It is a 'bitter-sweet' emotion not the emotional turbulence of the violent second phase.

At the beginning of this last phase of the journey, woman (Nana) takes stock of her psychological and emotional growth: "She grieved for the loss of her innocence, yet she could not regret it, for somehow, she was beginning to grasp the true meaning of life" (73). Like a newly married woman, she has lost her 'virginity', her naivety, to the wealth of experience that has initiated her into womanhood and psychological maturity. Mallam Jauro's return to the Secretary, thereby removing the major obstacle in woman's growth and progress, marks this maturity. She is now mature enough to take care of herself and does not need a patriarchal guide. So much has happened giving the illusion of passage of time since "they left their peacefully village behind" (74), although it is only fifteen days and Nana "had learnt a lot within a short period of time" (85).

The contrived meeting between Nana and Bello in the train, though not artistically realistic, is Alkali's strategy for bringing them together again in order to develop, to some extent, her redefinition of male/female gender relationship in Muslim culture. Nana, the new woman, is allowed the freedom to forge her own emotional ties with the male (Bello). The important thing here is that a partner is not imposed on Nana as is usually the fate of girls of her age in Muslim culture. Rather, there is mutual emotional response of both parties albeit, with the sanction of tradition represented by Nana's grandfather. This is a rejection of the Muslim ethic of a father choosing a husband for a girl. The progress in woman's journey resides in her acquisition of education (consciousness) that will, it is hoped, place her *beside* man for mutual growth rather than *behind* him.

Alkali shows by Nana's experience that though woman is searching for autonomy, she still acknowledges that which is positive in tradition; it is only within this cultural rootedness that her success in finding self will be meaningful. Thus, woman's quest for growth need not be at polarities with good morals, and independence and virtue need not be mutually exclusive as critics of feminism are wont to think. Omolola Ladele questions the apparent 'ambiguity'

in Alkali's portrayal of Nana:

A pertinent question that then arises is whether traditionalism and conservatism as encapsulated in Nana are really virtuous/especially at a time when contemporary women are striving to free themselves of oppressive traditional (male-oriented) perceptions of women (13).

This refusal to launch her heroine into the arena of complete feminist revolt and self-assertion, seems to have a retrogressive effect on Alkali's vision for the new woman. This is especially so when *The Virtuous Woman* is compared with the near radical vision and heroine of *The Stillborn*. The vitriolic criticism of some anti-feminist readers of Alkali's and other African women's novels, may be responsible for the 'lukewarm' heroine, who is neither a feminist nor a traditionalist. However, by the combination of positive traditional qualities and qualities of self-definition in her heroine, Alkali is buttressing her womanist position in defining the modern Muslim woman.

Movement can be liberating for woman because it affords her social, mental, emotional and psychological expansion, but when it becomes reckless, it leads to self-destruction. And so just as Laila's reckless speed in prostituting her femininity for material gains is destructive, so too an unrestrained, amoral, radical feminism is annihilative for the African woman. Alkali contrasts Laila and Nana to make her womanist statement in woman's journey of growth. Alkali maintains that it can be a destructive or liberating journey depending on woman's choices. And so while Laila, because of her negative choices, loses the men in her life, and seems not to have gained positively from her experiences, for Nana, the journey has been educative and liberating to an extent. She has met and learnt about different personalities, and her flowering relationship with Bello is apparently a preamble to a more permanent association.

It is significant that the novel ends on a happy note for Nana as signified by her laughter, which contrasts with her fears at the end of the first and second phases of the journey. She has temporarily found peace and security, and is more confident of herself. It is also symbolic that the journey has not ended for Nana hails a taxi. The journey continues because woman's quest, especially in the Muslim context, is only just beginning; it is only just taking shape; it is not

completed.

Zaynab Alkali has successfully employed the journey as a trope for female growth in *The Virtuous Woman*. The vehicle in which Nana undertakes the journey at each stage has been shown to tropologize the speed of her growth in consciousness. The first stage of the journey is conducted on foot, the second in a lorry, the third in a train and the last in a taxi. When the speed has been recklessly fast, as in the second phase, woman's experience has been fraught with educative accidents.

Despite the short time span of the journey (two weeks) woman, in the person of Nana Ai, has attained remarkable psycho-emotional growth signified in the fact that, while she begins the journey in tears, she ends it in laughter, while she begins the journey leaning on the male (her grandfather) for support, she ends it taking control herself. She is thus transformed and is ready to undertake a new journey, to launch into a new beginning, and so *The Virtuous Woman* ends with a journey that is continuing in a new dimension. The journey has educated Nana incipiently in the gender politics that define female existence in her society. This process of education has also equipped her incipiently for self-definition within this politics, thereby setting Nana up as Alkali's model for the encouragement of adolescent girls in the Muslim Northern Nigerian context.

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