

Many Faces of Rebellion: Women's Struggles Against Patriarchy in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the representation of women's resistance to patriarchal subjugation in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, situating the analysis within the analytical framework of African feminist theory. This study interrogates the lived experiences of multiple female characters, exploring how they confront, negotiate, or conform to sociocultural expectations surrounding marriage, education, motherhood and autonomy. While some characters embrace traditional roles, others engage in subtle or overt acts of defiance that challenge deeply entrenched gender norms. The research underscores the complex and varied expressions of female agency, highlighting that rebellion in the novel is not monolithic but multifaceted, from assertion to outright rejection of prescribed roles. Drawing on the principles of African feminism, which foreground context-specific understandings of gender and cultural identity, the study demonstrates how *The Stillborn* engages with broader discourses on female empowerment and resistance in postcolonial African societies. Ultimately, the paper argues that Zaynab Alkali's novel functions as both a critique of patriarchal structures and a literary space that reimagines the possibilities of womanhood within a restrictive cultural milieu. This paper employs the content analysis approach to qualitative research.

Keywords: Subjugation, Female, Agency, Rebellion, Resistance.

Introduction

The condition of women in many African societies continues to generate critical discourse, particularly in literary studies that examine how cultural, religious, and patriarchal structures shape female identity and agency. Literature, especially that written by African women writers, has become a powerful platform through which gendered experiences are articulated, challenged, and reimagined. Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* stands as a seminal literary text in this regard, offering a nuanced portrayal of African women grappling with the tensions between tradition and self-realisation. The novel not only reflects the socio-cultural realities that constrain women but also foregrounds

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their varied and complex responses to these limitations.

Zaynab Alkali constructs a narrative in which women are simultaneously actors in and subjects of the patriarchal system that delineates their social roles. The principal characters Li, Faku and other generational figures navigate a deeply entrenched cultural framework where a woman's significance is largely defined by her marital status, reproductive potential and conformity to customary expectations. These pressures are not exclusively external but are often reinforced by familial and societal institutions, including material and elder female figures who have internalised patriarchal ideologies. Nevertheless, the novel demonstrates forms of resistance-both visible and subtle-through which women exercise autonomy and reshape their sense of self. These acts of resistance range from Li's prioritisation of education over marriage, to Faku's ultimate disillusionment with household life, to the subtle emotional rebellions of older women whose narratives remain at the margins.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the lens of African Feminist Thought to explore how *The Stillborn* interrogates the gendered power dynamics that shape women's lives. Unlike Western feminist frameworks that may prioritise individualism and confrontational resistance, African feminism acknowledges the communal, cultural and historical contexts within which African women operate (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 12, Obioma Nnaemeka 2004: 376). It emphasises that women's agency may manifest not only in rebellion but also in negotiation, endurance and alternative expressions of empowerment. Through African Feminist Thought, this paper analyses how Zaynab Alkali's characters respond to societal pressures and how their choices reflect broader questions of gender, autonomy and transformation in postcolonial African contexts.

While existing scholarship has largely concentrated on the protagonist's pursuit of education and independence, this study widens the critical framework by investigating the experiences of multiple women within the novel. It asserts that *The Stillborn* does not offer a single story of female defiance, but instead presents a diverse array of responses to subjugation, shaped by generational context, personal aspirations, and cultural expectations. In this way, the novel functions as a space of both resistance and postcolonial, unveiling the structures of patriarchal domination while envisioning routes towards women's emancipation.

Review of Related Literature

The literary importance of African women's writing lies in its capacity to interrogate enduring patriarchal institutions and render visible the experiences of women across cultural landscapes. In *The Stillborn*, Zaynab Alkali emerges as a notable voice in African literature, depicting how her female characters confront, negotiate and endure subjugation-both overtly and subtly. Scholar Maina Ouarodima (2018: 178) underscores the novel's depiction of male authority:

Men are presented as the first in everything, even when they are not, and the best also when they are not. They are the king, and they are the head.

This framing highlights the dominant role patriarchal ideology plays-even in decisions that should, by logic, recognise female competence-setting a compelling backdrop

for understanding why the women in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* must resist in varying ways.

In reappraising Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Ismail Bola Garba (2006:6) notes that Zaynab Alkali herself being labelled a feminist, "Akali fiercely resists being labelled a feminist, seeing it as simply deceptive, while revealing herself as merely a writer who just happens to write about women". This nuanced position suggests the author's intention lies beyond polemics of feminist doctrinal allegiance, offering a layered, narrative-driven exploration of womanhood rather than ideological manifestos.

Central to this study, Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004: 357 – 385) concept of nego-feminism foregrounds negotiation and cultural specificity. She defines it as:

The feminism of negotiation 'no ego' feminism Negotiation has the double meaning of 'give and take/exchange' and 'cope with successfully/go around'. African feminism... knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal land mines.

This articulation grounds the idea that the female characters in *The Stillborn* may engage patriarchy through subtle choices, emotional withdrawal or strategic compliance-forms of agency that may not appear confrontational but are equally powerful.

The broader currents of African-centred feminist theories also provide context. Nah Dove (1998:535) describes Africana Womanism as rooted in cultural heritage and communal balance:

It foregrounds the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct and create a cultural integrity that espouses reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice.

Although feminist readings of *The Stillborn* have emphasised Li's resistance as a symbol of empowerment, this literature review contends that a fuller understanding must include the varied expressions of female agency across generational and relational spectrums. Incorporating theoretical frameworks such as nego-feminism, Africana Womanism and Feminism helps illuminate how these women resist, endure, comply or transform, revealing a textured, culturally embedded continuum of rebellion and survival.

Reclaiming Voice and Agency: A Feminist Reading of Women's Resistance in *The Stillborn*

Through *The Stillborn*, Zaynab Alkali redefines female empowerment by illustrating how her protagonists navigate and undermine patriarchal expectations through lived experiences rather than vocal resistance. Itang Egbung (2011:8) points out, "she creates female characters who subvert the patriarchal expectations women taking over the responsibilities of the men". Li's rebellion unfolds not through dramatic gestures but through simple, decisive acts: returning to school and advocating for mutual respect in marriage. She declares:

It is time to learn to walk again... just hand him the crutches and side by side we learn to walk (105).

Rather than depicting rebellion as a violent disruption, this metaphor of partnership redefines it as a respectful reshaping of traditional gender dynamics-an understated but potent act of defiance. Silence in Zaynab Alkali's narrative emerges not as passive conformity but as a culturally conditioned strategy of resistance. Her portrayal of Grandma-a commanding and morally ambiguous woman who manipulates her granddaughter yet

remains admired for her physical charm complicates simplistic readings of female behaviour.

Zaynab Alkali's depiction of Grandma as both alluring and ethnically complex reveals her resistance to categorising female characters as purely idealised or entirely victimised. According to Emmanuel Lanior (2014: 11), the decision to feature Grandma, "if the key preoccupation were to propagate feminist propaganda such as character would not have merited a place in the novel". Through Grandma's powerful yet imperfect persona, Zaynab Alkali affirms her commitment to crafting female characters with depth-eschewing both glorification and victimisation in favour of realism.

The tenets of womanism-prioritising interconnectedness and cultural continuity-hold significance in this discussion. Ibrahim Sanusi Chinade (2019: 8) underscores that Zaynab Alkali's female characters, "dream of self-fulfilment and emancipation Woven around marriage" and shared responsibilities, rather than disengagement from their cultural foundations. This womanist lens conceptualises survival as the delicate balance of tradition, kinship and self-definition. Rather than framing rebellion as a severance from cultural bonds, Zaynab Alkali positions resilience as growing out of these ties, suggesting that survival depends on continuity rather than disruption:

After a few weeks at home, Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound suffocating. She felt trapped and unhappy. Already, she missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, free and gay. At home, the little ones were too young to understand the restrictions, and the older ones too dull to react. They all seemed to accept the situation as natural except, of course, Sule, her senior brother, who suffered the silence with her. Restless and dissatisfied at home, the two get the worst treatment. Li and Sule minded the rules they considered stupid and unnecessarily rigid. They abhorred the "don'ts", that heavily outnumbered the 'do's'.

'It is worse than a prison,' Li complained one day as she sat with her brothers and sisters in the cooking hut (3).

Zaynab Alkali's portrayal of resistance favours nuanced, routine expressions of agency-such as continuing education, asserting emotional sovereignty and reconfronting marital expectations dramatic rebellion. Critical perspectives diverge: Itang Egbung regards this as deliberate gender role reversal, yet Emmanuel Amase Lanior suggests avoiding a narrow feminist categorisation, highlighting Zaynab Alkali's broader societal insights.

Within *The Stillborn*, silence emerges as a tactical, protective response rather than blind obedience. The inclusion of morally intricate figures such as Grandma dominant and ethically conflicted-exemplifies Zaynab Alkali's refusal to generalise the female condition. Emmanuel Amase Lanior argues that such characters problematize simplistic feminist categorisations:

Whenever she passed by men, they would shake their heads and say: "What man in his senses would leave a woman like this behind?" If he isn't capable, there are capable men around. Look at Alhaji Bature, son of the soil, rich and prosperous and ready to marry her, yet she will have nothing to do with him. Truly, our ancestors were right when they said, "where there is hope, there is no load, and where there is a load, there is no rope" (57).

Li continued to wait patiently despite the many tricks employed by Alhaji and the others. But with each passing day, her hopes waned, and her hard protective shell began to crack a little at a time. She wished she could confide in someone close to her, but there was no such person. Faku had long gone to the city and was reported to have given birth to a male child. Awa too was not left behind. Two years ago, she had

twin sons, Hassan and Husaini, and was now expecting another baby (57).

Grounded in African womanism, the experience of survival in *The Stillborn* is realised through resilient cohesion involving marriage, community and cultural identity, rather than disengagement: Ibrahim Sanusi Chinade interprets Zaynab Alkali's characters within this conceptual angle, stressing unity over estrangement.

The core objective of this research is to uncover how the women in *The Stillborn* navigate, resist or are subdued by the male-dominated systems embedded in their society—whether through schooling, marital relationships, individual choices, quests for independence or inner emotional battles. Li, the central character, embodies intellectual defiance by prioritising education over matrimony. Faku, her close companion, initially embraces conventional roles through early marriage, symbolising traditional compliance, yet later grapples with its consequences. Li's mother and grandmother reflect generational pressures and the deep-rooted internalisation of patriarchal norms. Other women in the village, often silenced or marginalised, represent the shared experience of female subordination and systemic oppression.

The Stillborn interrogates oversimplified oppositions between cultural heritage and progressive change as well as between obedience and resistance:

“Let me be a heathen,” Li said more seriously. ‘I’d be much happier. At least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been to’ (3).

‘Well, big sister, ’ Li inclined her head to one side. ‘I had no reason to cry. Why should I? Just to keep a tradition?’ (6).

‘Well, they should have known better than to bridle me. I was born with my stubbornness’ (7).

Viewing Li solely as a figure of feminist emancipation overlooks the complexities of her experience. Her journey is fraught with contradictions; education does not grant her full autonomy, revealing how empowerment remains an emotionally turbulent and ambivalent process.

Li's grandmother exemplifies the internalisation of patriarchal values; she is depicted as an authoritative matriarch who exerts control within the household, occasionally even over male family members:

Grandma was Baba's stepmother, his own mother having died when he was only six years old. Shrewd and dominating, she had driven three other wives from the household and had ruled father and son with an iron hand. It was rumoured that she had been divorced three times by kaka, but each time had refused to leave. She had remained immovable in the family, and every mishap was blamed on her presence (8).

Grandma's complex presence suggests that women may sometimes enforce patriarchal values as mechanisms of survival or internalised cultural power, not simply as victims but as enforcers within the gendered hierarchy.

It is important to emphasise redirecting critical attention from solely focusing on Li's personal journey to encompassing the collective resonance of women's experiences. The narrative gains greater depth when it includes Faku's emotional disillusionment, the grandmother's coerced resilience and the daily perseverance of village women. This expanded perspective aligns with African feminist theory's focus on communal negotiation and the plurality of female realities.

Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* portrays the oppressive, degrading and dehumanising conditions experienced by female characters within traditional village society. This is conveyed through stark and evocative language such as "trapped", "suffocating" and "unhappy" which underscore the constrained and restricted existence of women. In contrast, male characters are depicted as enjoying unbounded freedom-freedom that reinforces their societally constructed masculine roles, often associated with courage, assertiveness and defiance. Consequently, Mama's role in *The Stillborn* as a housewife burdened with domestic and familial duties imparts to the young girls a clear understanding of the socially constructed expectations imposed on women within both the household and the broader community. Her life is marked by subjugation and conformity-conditions that feminist thought challenges fundamentally and rejects. In contrast, Baba, embodying the traditional patriarchal role of the male head of the family, is portrayed as being obsessively preoccupied with discipline and control:

..... she had shouted at Li for some undisclosed crime. Li did not understand their mother at all. She knew things were far from right between her parents and that their mother was very unhappy. Whatever faults the children committed, especially Li and Sule, Baba would punish them and afterwards lash out at their mother with words. Only the other day, he had said to her, 'A heathen woman can only have heathen children. Why I married you is what I can never understand. There were many believing women in my village, but I had to end up marrying from a heathen village. And even after having civilised you, you still behave like heathens. Of course, the lion cub takes after its mother. They always quarrelled at night behind closed doors, but nothing escaped inquisitive Li, especially when the child in question always faced Mama's angry scowl the next morning. (13).

Zaynab Alkali's focus in *The Stillborn* extends beyond the advocacy for female emancipation to explore the broader human condition within a society in the midst of profound transformation. Her depiction of human struggles is inherently and understandably feminist, and her social vision is largely shaped by the predominantly feminist lens through which the fictional world of *The Stillborn* is constructed:

Li sat still in an armchair and crossed her elegant legs. At thirty-three, she looked years younger than her age. The trim waistline and the unlined complexion were signs of careful cultivation, which belied years of fierce emotional struggle and hard work. At last, she had accomplished her ambitions. She was a successful teacher and the owner of a huge modern and enviable building Li ought to have felt fulfilled, but instead she felt empty. It wasn't just the emptiness of bereavement, but an emptiness that went beyond that. For ten years, she had struggled towards certain goals. Now, having accomplished these goals, she wished there was something else to struggle for. For that was the only way life could be meaningful (101 – 102).

Concluding Reflections

This study has explored the multifaceted nature of women's resistance in a patriarchal society in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. Through the lived experiences of Li, Faku, Nana Ali and other female characters, the author presents a detailed portrayal of rebellion-not merely as overt defiance but as a spectrum of choices, sacrifices and quiet acts of endurance. These women navigate the structural limitations imposed by tradition, religion and socio-economic expectations, crafting pathways that redefine what it means to survive and assert self-determination within a deeply patriarchal world.

This research has shown that rebellion in *The Stillborn* is not monolithic; rather, it manifests in varied and sometimes contradictory forms. For Li, rebellion lies in the pursuit of education and economic independence, even when it means confronting societal censure and personal loss. Faku, on the other hand, challenges gender roles by refusing to be confined by her marital status, asserting her autonomy in more direct but socially disruptive ways. Nana Ai's struggle reveals the emotional and psychological toll of resisting systemic oppression, highlighting the internal dimensions of rebellion that are often overlooked.

Zaynab Alkali does not offer idealised portrayals of her female characters; instead, she presents them with all their vulnerabilities, contradictions and moral complexities. This realistic portrayal underscores a critical message: that women's rebellion against patriarchy is often fraught with setbacks, compromises and pain. Yet, within this struggle lies the seed of transformation-not only for the individual women but for the larger societal structures they inhabit.

By examining these different trajectories, this paper affirms that rebellion, in the context of *The Stillborn*, is both personal and political. It is shaped by individual autonomy but also constrained by cultural, historical and economic realities. What Zaynab Alkali ultimately offers is a vision of resistance that is dynamic and evolving-where even in apparent defeat, there is dignity, resilience and the possibility of change.

Thus, *The Stillborn* stands as a significant feminist literary text within African literature, revealing the complex, often silent battles women fight in their quest for self-definition and liberation. Zaynab Alkali's narrative invites readers and scholars alike to consider the many faces of rebellion not just as acts of resistance, but as essential expressions of identity, hope and survival in the face of enduring patriarchal dominance.

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