

## Addressing the Evils of Sexism: The Example of Alkali in the Virtuous Woman (2006)

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### Abstract

The primitive idea, culturally construed that male sex is superior to female sex has conveniently penetrated itself to the modern Africa particularly Nigeria: a country in the western part of the continent. The effects of sexism are felt in almost every sphere of life. This is heavily pronounced in the area of education most especially in the colonial era and to a reasonable extent in the post-colonial period. This has made the women fold to suffer a conspicuous set almost in most every human endeavour. Men are heard everywhere. The need for women to realise their potentials so that they can be more useful to themselves and contribute meaningfully to their community led to series of educative campaign against sexism: a major fall out of patriarchy. Literary artists are very significant in this regard, the example of Alkali in the *Virtuous Woman*. The paper examines such effort as revealed in the novel particularly that, such awareness and education given are yielding results. In recent time, evidences abound which, prove that both men and women have the natural ability to do well in education if given the opportunity. The fact that some Nigerians in real life, in spite of the enlightenments and the development so far still behave like Dogo in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* makes sexism remains a challenge which, should be overcome.

### INTRODUCTION

Roles for a very long time are assigned in most African communities on the basis of sex. The emphasis on the male sex (sexism) provides greater opportunities for men. Over the years, positions of authority have been the reserves of the men. For this singular reason, women have been pushed to the background except for the awareness in the recent time. The various attempts to ensure a change of attitude to the female sex in a country like Nigeria and in most African countries have yielded little results. The recognition given to women is not yet up to expectation compared to the situations in most European countries. The various discussions on gender imbalance, women subjugation, discrimination against the female sex and the likes have not changed totally the concept of sexism particularly in Nigeria.

Sexism still remains a challenge in West African because women are not yet given the opportunity to fully realise their potentials and contribute their quota to the growth and development of their society as made available to men. This disparity is felt in almost every sphere of life, education inclusive. The Longman Dictionary of contemporary English (1995) defines sexism as "the belief that women are weaker, less intelligent and less important than men". This age long belief affects assignment of roles, wealth distribution, employment opportunities, education of children and admissions into both schools and also courses of study. It equally affects other social political and economic privileges.

It is important to state clearly at this juncture that every human being grows up to meet him or herself as either a male or a female. Sex is biological. One is either of the two without any personal effort. The ideas of male chauvinism and male hegemony have eaten so deep to the extent that many women still find it very difficult to assert themselves even when the opportunity avails.

This paper is an attempt to further join others to point out some evils of sexism with a focus in education as expressed by Alkali in *The Virtuous Woman*. This is very necessary, particularly when considering the potentials of the African woman as evident in history and oral literature. The significance of women in the pre-colonial Africa has gradually been eroded because of Western ideas. Education plays a significant role in bringing back this relevance as presented in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*.

### Literary Artists as Educators

One of the major roles of Literature is to educate. Literary artists on most occasions write to create awareness on certain pressing issues in their immediate environment. Their works are published as either novels plays or poetry. The numerous publications of these kinds have helped a lot to educate their audience on which ideas to moderate, retain or discard. For example, the most effective and efficient campaign on women issues and the inherent fall outs have been in writing. The various 'ism' coined to end women marginalisation in male dominated societies are very prominent in literary discussions such included: feminism (European), womanism motherism and stiwanism. The opinion that women are not under "any bondage" in some cultures particularly

African led to “Acholomi’s Womanism, Ogun-dipe – Leslie’s STIWANISM” (Afolayan, 2012). The attempts are to ensure moderate and balanced concepts to solve women problems in patriarchal societies. So, they talk of co-operation between the two sexes and not liberation for women as obtained in European feminism.

Popular African writers particularly females have used their works to educate prominently in this dimension. Such include: Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Zaynab Alkali (the focus in this paper), Aduke Adebayo, ifu Achufusi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Yetunde Olukemi Akorede and Mary E.M. Kolawole. There are male writers such as Femi Osofisan, and Chinua Achebe in his later works. Education as a process involves importing desirable knowledge. Two classes of people are involved: The teacher and the students. This could be formal or informal. In the case of literature, the writer is the teacher while the audience serves as the students. As educators literary artists use their works to enlighten and educate. They are in the process, initiate desirable knowledge and create awareness on what they feel are right based on cultural beliefs, social aspirations and new developments in their various societies.

In a descriptive sense “teaching is importing knowledge” (Oloruntegbe, 1993). For him, “education, like other human organisations introduces changes as new ideas and information about man and his environment emerge”. The job of an educator is clearly spelt out in this opinion. A literary artist as an educator through his or her work(s) convinces their audience (mostly people in their immediate environment) of changes, new ideas and information so that old and primitive ones could be replaced with new and better concepts. In the process the orientation of many people changes and better society is attained.

### **Emphasis on certificate and the consequential effects on Nigeria Women**

Certificate from ages has remained the major prerequisite for good jobs and attractive income not only in West Africa but also across the globe. Moreover, the emphasis on certificate in Nigeria is unique. In addition to securing a job, promotions on the job rest mainly on the kinds of certificate presented at the entry stage and/or the one(s) acquired on the job. For workers in Nigeria particularly those in the public services, to get to the apex of their careers, University certificates are inevitable.

In the recent time, the advice in every is ‘go and develop’ yourself. Employers are always preaching “look for additional certificate”. It is as if the paper (certificate) is going to do the work. Little or no credence is given to hard work, commitment to duties and productivity. Consequently, every Nigerian is interested in going to school if only to get the certificate: an evidence of training and not the ability to do the work. Women in such environment find it difficult to compete favourably well with men in the labour market. This is a result of the traditional belief that given education to a female child is a waste. In patriarchal societies, Nigeria inclusive, women are seen to be weak, less intelligent and could not handle much demanding mission or assignment in addition to their cultural roles as mothers and wife. The modern religions (Christianity and Islam) give credence to this.

The woman has experienced a setback for a very long time in every sphere of life, education inclusive. The traditional African man from inception saw no reason why a female child should be sent to school. For a reasonable number of years in the past, only boys go to school, girls remain at home helping their mothers in domestic activities and petty trading. The disparity in male and female education explains the observation of Afolayan (2012) that “The Nigerian literary scene has long been dominated by men from Chinua Achebe... to the writers...tagged second generation writers like Femi Osofisan...however broken by Flora Nwapa in 1970 with her *Efuru*”.

The early deprivation of Nigerian female children from education, even though the situation has changed considerably in the post colonial period, is still felt particularly when considering the number of men in significant positions such as: Vice Chancellor, Provost, Rector, Directors, Director General, Permanent Secretary, Registrar, Bursar, Chief Justice, Bank Manager, Chief Medical Director, Dean of Schools and faculties. The numbers of women in such positions of authority are very insignificant compared to those of men. The reason among other things reside in two factors: certificate and the societal value placed on the male sex above the female sex (sexism).

It is becoming glaringly and almost impossible for this gap to get closed. As many girls go to school nowadays to get certificate because of the change in attitude to their sex in this direction, boys have not stop going to school. They are both there. Men and women go to school alike in recent time. This is made possible because of the public awareness and campaign; particularly the education and enlightenment afforded through literary works. To really close the gap and to ensure equal treatment, more intensive education on the challenge (sexism) and how to overcome it should be given. This is very necessary. In spite of the improvements recorded so far, certain courses in higher institutions are still seen as feminine while some are seen as masculine. As a result, more girls are found in departments such as: Home-Economics, Music and liberal arts. For example most Nigeria professional caterers are women. Majority of the nurses are equally women. This is because the two professions toe the cultural roles assigned to women as mothers and keepers of home. Notable lawyers, popular medical specialists and distinguished engineers are mostly men. This explains,

the importance and the relevance of the present study.

**Disparity in male and female education: The evil of sexism pointed out in *The Virtuous Woman*.**

Alkali is one of the notable African female writers who write to re-define women in patriarchal societies: where women live a stereotyped life. As an ‘educator’, Alkali identifies with the observation of Akorede (2005) that women are opened to all forms of violence in the family, outside the home, from the state and national laws. So, she writes to educate her audience (mainly Nigerians) to have a change of attitude towards the female child and women generally.

*The Virtuous Woman* is a novel written primarily to create the awareness on certain fall outs (evils) of sexism in male dominated societies. The focus is on the bitter experience of a woman who gives birth mainly to female children and the disparity in the treatments given to the female children and the only male child particularly, in the area of education. The latter is the concern in this paper. The author presents Dogo to create an impression about people like him in the outside world who are still living in the past.

The attitude of Dogo in the novel shows hostility that the female sex (girl or woman) experiences in societies that regard the male sex more than the female sex (sexism). In the past, education has not necessarily been a priority for the girl child because of cultural beliefs...” (Otutu, 2015). Dogo in *The Virtuous Woman* (this will herewith be referred to as TVW) says,

*What is the use of sending a female child to school?  
If she turns out well, the man she marries get the  
benefit of her education. If she get spoilt in school, I  
get the blame. It’s my name that gets dragged into  
the mud. It’s my house that becomes her refuge.  
Whichever way you look at it, the father of a female  
child is the looser. Let the girls stay at home and help  
their mother; when it is time for them to marry, let  
them marry (TVW, 47).*

Every attempt for Falta to convince Musa Dogo to have a change of mind proves abortive. Falta will advise “the world is changing fast. Send at least some of the girls to school, if not all”. The response of Dogo to this in anger is

*what for? If I had sons now, my name  
would be carried from generation to  
generation, my wealth would multiply  
tenfold but not so with daughters. They  
are consumers and they let other people  
consume your wealth. While your  
name dies out, the daughters continue  
the life line of another man in another  
family (TVW, 47).*

This obviously reveals the thinking and attitudes of the likes of Dogo who because of poverty or past impression about the female sex see nothing good in sending a girl to school. In the case of Dogo, it is not a question of poverty.

If the opinion of Ocho (2005) about education as the process through which individuals are made functional members of society is worthwhile, as a challenge people are left with the question: How do women function properly as members of their society in case the opinion of Dogo in TVW holds in every home. The character of Dogo is consciously created by Alkali in the novel in order to clearly show to her readers that many people out there are still not favourably disposed to female education in Nigeria. It then implies that sexism as found in the habit of Dogo is still a challenge that should be resolved in earnest in West Africa. An objective analysis of the character of Dogo reveals that he is behaving out of sheer ignorance. The kind of Dogo needs to be informed. The exact thing the author is out to do in the novel. The obtuse part of Dogo’s life is further revealed when he sends the only son of the family (a polygamous one) to the “city to study” while he takes another wife when his wife gives birth to the sixth daughter. He makes life difficult for both the mother and also the daughters. Only the son (the first child) receives his attention. Other children (females) and their mother are left unattended to. The wife faces a lot of maltreatments.

At the beginning of the novel, Alkali calls the attention of her readers to the dispositions of two men: Boni and a man. The novel opens with an excitement in a village in the Northern part of Nigeria. This is as a result of two girls who were offered admissions into “her majesty’s College in Kudu”. This is considered a brilliant achievement in the village. The headmaster of the primary schools that produced the two girls is particularly happy. The happiest man is Boni: the father of the two girls. While Boni “boasted loudly” in front of his house to show his pride in the performance of her daughters, a man stands near-by look “uninterestedly” (TVW,

3). His silence is considered to be a “rude” one. His “reluctant rejoinder” as described in the novel is to discourage Boni. The man is still a relic of traditional belief about women. His actions represent that of a man who as a result of sexism sees the money spent on the education of a female child as a waste.

Alkali as an educator, through her novel places Boni and the man side-by-side for her readers to admire one and condemn the other. Boni “nodding his head vigorously” declares “my daughters and granddaughter are wonderful children” (TVW, 3). Alkali wants all men in the real life to emulate Boni. She uses Hajjo, Laila and Nana to impress on her readers that determination and brilliance are needed to cope with education. Sex is highly irrelevant and should therefore not be a factor to send children to school.

Sexism is consciously attached in the novel. Alkali clearly advocates for a conducive atmosphere for every normal human being to fully realise his or her potentials irrespective of their sexes. Adama and Talatu through personal efforts and help of their mother (who turns a farmer) manage to train as teachers in the “Teachers’ Training College” even though their father has the resources. The only son considered to be a ‘Child’ by their father (sexism) refuses to take care of Dogo on his return from “the white man’s country (TVW, 49). He disagrees with his father on the maltreatment given to his mother. This is a conscious creation of the author. The reason is for the readers to condemn totally, the actions and attitudes of Dogo.

Things turn against Dogo later in the novel. The money is no longer available. The two girls on the long run become the succour of the home. They become “the pillars in Dogo’s household” (TVW, 51). The burden of the family rest on their shoulders, Alkali through this provides a realistic basis for argument in support of female education. The usefulness of the education of these girls (later women) goes beyond their husbands’ house.

Alkali in *The Virtuous Woman* reveals very clearly that the question of sex should not arise when it comes to who and who goes to school. The awareness in the novel is that a trial, will determine who finally produces the desired result and becomes the most beneficial. She unequivocally nullifies the disparity between male and female education that has not been totally eradicated in male dominated societies. For Alkali many Africans particularly Nigerians are still having their minds darkened in this regard, such minds need to be illuminated. The exact thing she does in *The Virtuous Woman*.

## Conclusion

It is obvious in the modern time that sexism is evil. The evils are revealed through public campaigns and more effectively in literature. Both men and women need certificate as prerequisite to access certain job opportunities in a country like Nigeria and to get to the apex of their chosen careers. It could no longer be disproved that society cannot attain meaningful growth and development if male education is considered more important than female education. A society where this persist remains uncivilised and under-develop until a reasonable change of attitude is recorded in every man, sector, institution and organisation.

When the challenge is totally overcome, equally opportunity will be opened to both men and women to contribute their quota to their families in particular and society in general. This is in addition to their usefulness to themselves. The popular opinion that men alone cannot do ‘it’ is further driven home in *The Virtuous Woman*. The impression is that sexism with regard to education should be rejected in its totality because sex has nothing to do with brilliant performance in educational activities. Moreover, there are living evidences in the public domain that females (girls or women) who have the opportunity to go to school perform brilliantly well like their male counterparts both in schools and on jobs secured after the training.

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