

# Technique of Exploring Women's Choice in Select Novels of El Sadaawi, Ba, Alkali and Adichie

Dr Mrs Angela Ngozi Dick<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English and Literary Studies, Veritas University Abuja, Nigeria

Correspondence: Dr Mrs Angela Ngozi Dick, Department of English and Literary Studies, Veritas University Abuja, Nigeria

Received: April 27, 2018

Accepted: June 4, 2018

Online Published: September 27, 2018

doi:10.5430/elr.v7n3p42

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v7n3p42>

## Abstract

Women writers in Africa have enjoyed wider audience especially in higher institutions where the curriculum includes African Women Writers, Gender Studies and other related courses. African women writers may focus on a variety of subject matters but what is common to their literary art is that they concentrate on the experience of women. This article focuses on how the authors use their literary art to portray women's experiences in their social milieu. Nawal El Sadaawi, Mariama Ba, Zaynab Alkali and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are women writers from Africa. The first three women are older and from Moslem background. Adichie is younger and from a Christian background. The choice made of the novels of these women is due to the recurrent problem of being a woman everywhere. In contemporary times women are still treated differently just because they are women. However, it has been observed that there is nothing intrinsic in women that depict them as the bad or inferior species of human beings. This article focuses on the commonality of style used by the select African novelists in couching the predicament of women in the African society. The novels chosen in this research are El Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *God Dies by the Nile*; Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*; Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* and Adichie's *Americanah*.

**Keywords:** technique, women's experiences, choice, select

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 What Is Technique?

Technique or style is how a writer uses words to develop and tell the story in a literary work. Roberts and Jacob (1989) describe technique as "the way, in which writers assemble words to tell the story, develop the argument, dramatize the play or compose the poem" (p.262). According to them, technique is "highly individualistic. It is a matter of the way in which specific authors put words together under specific conditions in specific works (p.262)." Technique as defined here is the literary tool at the writer's disposal with or without embellishment. "The techniques employed by the women novelists in their select novels to explore the themes of choice include metaphor, journey motif, dream, irony, repetition, death, local language, poems, songs, letters and sequencing" (Dick 2009; 249). Here the author will also touch on aspects of those style used in an earlier work.

### 1.2 The Foot as Metaphor

The human foot propels the body to walk, move from one place to the other, stand, sit, run, sprawl or recline. The swiftness of one's foot or otherwise tends to be in harmony with one's state of mind. In Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, the foot is portrayed as metaphor for freedom. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Sadaawi uses the foot not only as metaphor for freedom but as metaphor for woman's voice and triumph. Opara (1996) points out that the free movement of the foot is an indication of woman's freedom from patriarchal "fetters" ("The Foot as Metaphor..." p.161). When Firdaus earns her first personal money following her escape from Sharifa's apprenticeship, she walks with quick, energetic steps (*Woman at Point Zero*, p.65); she walks the streets with her head held high and her eyes looking straight ahead (p.68). At such times the author makes the pleasurable emotions of Firdaus blend with the brightness and glow of elemental phenomena like the sun. On the contrary, in *God Dies by the Nile*, the foot shows lack of freedom and poverty. Zakeya of *God Dies by the Nile* "walks on two legs with a powerful steady stride" to the farm(p.1), at times with a "swinging movement starting from the hips and thighs" to show tiredness (p.2) but in *The Stillborn*, Li swings her hips to show she is in love (p.55). It is in *Woman at Point Zero* that Zakeya's shadow takes on

the physical body of Firdaus seen in action and speech as against the “silent”, “squatting” Zakeya of *God Dies by the Nile*.

In Ba’s *Scarlet Song* “walking” is used to portray and also emphasize the poverty of Ousmane’s family. Before his social ascendancy, Ousmane had decided never to travel by bus “to save on fares, an important item in his family” (p.4). In *So Long a Letter*, “walking” is used to portray leisure and self-fulfilment especially when Ramatoulaye and Aissatou take “time off “to the beach after the daily “tensions of life” (p.22). However, in *Americanah* Adichie creates elitist characters who drive cars, travel by aeroplane, or hire taxi. Consequently the reader does not feel their anguish or joy while they walk on the street (pp.1-9). Nevertheless, loss of job gave accent to an ungraceful use of the foot in Ifemelu’s home. First her father “ sat mute on the sofa... bent over loose sheets of paper at the dining table” (*Americanah*, pp.47-48) , casting the posture of a broken man who has lost twelve years of dedicated labour for failing to call his female boss “Mummy” (p.46). Secondly, Ifemelu’s mother changes from Catholic church to Revival Saints, a Pentecostal brand that preaches asceticism. To avoid distracting her new prayer life: “ Everybody tiptoed around her mother who had become a stranger, thin, knuckly and severe” (p.42). This episode in *Americanah* portrays the foot negatively as a carrier of shortage and insufficiency.

### 1.3 Journey Motif

A motif is a dominant or recurring idea or element in art that may be symbolically significant when interrogated. Journey motif means travelling from one place to the other using any means of transportation in plot development. Alkali uses journey motif in *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*. In *The Stillborn*, Awa, Li and Faku travel to the city to attend primary school (pp.1-3). After the antagonism of the women at the well, Li enrolls at the Advanced Teacher Training College and graduates (p.85). In *The Virtuous Woman*, the journey of the three girls from their village, Zuma, to her Majesty’s College in Kudu, is a journey that enables them to denounce puddah, acquire education and deconstruct the Moslem precept that parents should choose their children’s spouses (pp.2 & 21). To Okereke (1997), journey motif is a “feminist pilgrimage” that empowers woman to conquer subjugation (“The Foot as Trope, p.272”). Although Uko (2006), refers to journey motif as “peregrination”, in her critic of Alkali’s short story entitled “The Cobwebs”, like journey motif, “aims at achieving something, causing a development or making important discoveries” (“Self-fulfilment through Peregrination” p.259). Uko adds that Alkali’s *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* do not seem to have peregrination “as dominantly and fundamentally” as in “The Cobwebs” (p.259).

In Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, journey motif serves a positive outcome by giving accent to self-education in the women. For example, the movement of Aissatou from Senegal to France and later to the United States of America in *So Long a Letter* is a rebellion against polygyny. Consequently, it rehabilitates Aissatou academically and economically (p.32). On the contrary, journey motif serves a negative outcome in Ba’s *Scarlet Song*. The actions that lead to the death of Mireille’s son, and her repatriation are anchored on the journey she undertakes to establish the presence of Ouleymatou, her Senegalese co-wife. Consequently, her action accentuates the destruction of the marriage she worked so hard to contract. Journey motive brings out feminist militarism in El Sadaawi’s *God Dies by the Nile* and *Woman at Point Zero*. In *God Dies by the Nile*, the pilgrimage to Cairo undertaken by Zeinab and Zakeya creates awareness in both of them. Thereafter, Zeinab stops going to the Mayor’s house while Zakeya realizes that the Mayor is the source of the tragedy in her family. Consequently, Zakeya murders the Mayor in front of his own house (*God Dies by the Nile*, pp.81-93). This type of courage is not found in Zakeya at any other stage in the plot development. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus escapes from her marital home into the street of Cairo where she secures a job in a company, conquers the fear of men and chooses to be a prostitute instead of a wife (p.45). In El Sadaawi’s novels, journey motif re-defines woman to re-construct her personality and self esteem, creating awareness in her, equipping her for greater achievements, and helping her make ennobling choices so that she can shuttle between the domestic hearth and the public space.

Journey motif in *Americanah* is used to portray restlessness among the migrant characters. For example, the novel opens with Ifemelu, the protagonist waiting for a train at Princeton to go to Mariama African Hair Braiding at Trenton (pp.1-18). At Mariama’s salon, Ifemelu describes the type of hair style she intends to make to symbolize the end of her stay in the United States of America and her resolve to redefine her life with a job and life together with Obinze in Lagos, Nigeria. The recurrent theme of better life abroad that induced journey motif in Adichie’s *Americanah* is expressed here: “They would not understand why people like [Obinze], who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere, eternally convinced that real life happened in that somewhere else were now resolved to do dangerous things . . . (p.276).” Generally, journey motif in *Americanah* corrupted the immigrant characters who impersonated to get jobs and residency documents.

## 2. Dream

Dream consists in “an alteration in consciousness in which remembered images and fantasies are temporarily confused with external reality” (Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard 1994 p. 171). Freud’s theory associates dreams with understandable and interpretive “mental products” which relate to the “dreamer’s anxieties, conflicts and daily preoccupations” (Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard, 1994 pp.173-174). On the other, Forster points out that authors use dream for the purpose of not presenting “a character’s life as a whole, but that part of it he lives while awake” (p.62). Dream is employed by El Sadaawi and Alkali but Ba and Adichie did not. Ba and Adichie crafted ostensibly elitist and wealthy characters whose activities elicited near perfection rather than search for empowerment.

One could argue that dream is a psychological journey motif. The street is usually the site for Firdaus’s dreams in *Woman at Point Zero* during which colour imageries and the feel of water blend with the setting of the bank of the River Nile. In this dream state, success and self-fulfilment are achieved, thus bringing out the theme of woman’s quest for freedom. For example, when Firdaus meets Sharifa by the Nile bank, the verdure of the scenery imparts refreshing relaxation unto Firdaus’s psyche: “...like the feel of water in the sea, a sea in which I was sleeping and dreaming, in which I was sinking without getting wet, gradually dropping without getting drowned” (p.52). The use of the progressive tense here makes the search for self-expansion urgent. The use of simile to compare dream and sea equally emphasizes the helplessness of Firdaus. A dream is an individual experience. The sea encapsulates all the vicissitudes of one’s own personal experiences in which only an omniscient, supernatural being could rescue the individual. In dream, Firdaus’s psyche assumes her own voice which the narrator hears distinctly. Firdaus’s voice is seen as accomplishing more than her body. Although the actual character expressed in *Woman at Point Zero* is the body of Firdaus, her voice takes on the function of a transcendental character, so that at the end of the novel, Firdaus’s physical body suffers death and tragedy, while her voice continues to ring in the ears of the omniscient narrator. Her voice, thus, transcends her physical body, so that the generation of women after her would continue with conviction, the fight for freedom.

The portrayal of dream continues in the epilogue in *The Stillborn* which presents a dream in which the speech and Li’s activities portray a home luxuriating in peace and harmony. In that dream, Li has become a great grandmother whose great granddaughter addresses in an endearing term “Get up, co-mate” (p.104). It is this peace that comes alive when Li takes Shuwa to the city to reunite with her father after ten years. The dream in this epilogue also shows that freedom engenders peace. Alkali also uses dream in “The Cobweb” to show that choice is like a journey undertaken only by the “strong breed” (p.44). In her reflections on Amadi’s *The Great Ponds*, Umoren (2002), notes that dreams are “channels of warning and spell ill or good omen” for the characters (*Portrait of Womanhood*, p.51), but in these novels dreams portray desire as in Nana in *The Virtuous Woman*, Li in *The Stillborn*, and self-fulfilment as in Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. Ultimately, dream is as didactic and developing as a physical journey.

Dream in Alkali’s novels could be contrasted with dream in El Sadaawi’s novel entitled *Two Women in One*. In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah Shaheen, the major female character is frustrated by the hypocrisy of other males and females in her immediate family and the society. She complains that: “Everything about them became confused. Mannerisms, gestures and meanings were alike to the point of suffocation” (p.14). Personally, she is not able to differentiate her dream state from her conscious state, but she resorts to touching her body to make sure it is her own body and not another person’s. At eighteen she begins to theorize that reality or life as people live it in the society is dream. According to her, what constitutes actual reality or what is concrete becomes that which she draws on a “white sheet of paper with a pen point” about herself, her mother and her father (p.25). On that white sheet of paper she “[conceals] her real self in the folds of the hidden sheet of paper (p.26) ... she defined things as she really saw them” (p.27), echoing Julia Kristeva’s statement that Literature is both the space for the sublime and abject (cla.purdur.edu. p.9).

## 3. Irony and Scatology

Irony is a contrast between what is expected and what actually exists while scatology in literature deals with the treatment of obscenities while. In El Sadaawi’s *God Dies by the Nile*, irony is created by situating Zakeya’s wooden door house directly opposite the Mayor’s iron, gate house. This makes Zakeya, who toils from dawn to dusk, squat in front of her house to watch the Mayor who walks with a “slow step, his dark cloak falling to the ground” (p.8). The Mayor walks, followed behind by his retinue of men who serve his political ambitions (p.8) while Zakeya walks to the farm with a “gaunt and bloodless” faced buffalo behind her (p.1). This irony shows that Zakeya is not invested with power and she lacks freedom. On the other hand, the Mayor is invested with power to dominate his subjects. In El Sadaawi’s *Woman at Point*, it is ironical when Firdaus’s father promises to give her money if the buffalo is sold before it dies. Thereafter, Firdaus’s father is seen praying to and exhorting God to delay the death of the buffalo, but the buffalo dies before anything is done (p.64). This prayer is to stop Firdaus from earning any money and to keep her in

perpetual want. The consequence is that woman is not free to earn any money as long as the buffalo is alive. The death of the buffalo is significant because thereafter Firdaus's father dies, she travels to Cairo, and the other events that lead to her freedom are unfolded.

There are several ironical incidents in Alkali's novels. In *The Stillborn*, Li's naivety at the beginning of the novel makes her believe that social acclaim resides in being noticed at the village arena when she practises the dance steps. But Awa stops Li from dancing that night at the cultural dance while they await the arrival of Habu (p.16). Later in the novel, when Li despairs of waiting for Habu, she begins to date Alhaji Bature. Li's physical confrontation with the women at the well leads to the composition of a malicious song with her name at the village arena. This song prods Li to run back to the city where she enrolls at an Advanced Teachers' College and graduates. The village arena provides an opportunity for Li to meet and choose a spouse and also acts as a catalyst of self-redefinition (pp.83-85). In *The Virtuous Woman*, Hajjo's admission into the secondary school connotes success to her while it connotes separation from her grandmother who considers her an illegitimate child (p.7)

In Ba's *So Long a Letter*, there is irony when Ramatoulaye smiles and thanks her brothers-in-law who bring the message of another marriage contracted by her husband: "Smile, take the matter lightly, just as they announced it. Thank them for the humane way in which they have accomplished their mission. Send thanks to Modou, 'a good father and a good husband', 'a husband becomes a friend' " (p.38). In *Scarlet Song*, the episode on the sponging habit of Auntie Kine on Yaye Khady (p.13) is re-echoed in Yaye Khady's excessive but ostentatious financial demands on Mireille. Yaye Khady insists that Mireille should cook at least five chickens in one pot of soup for her father-in-law (p.97).

Irony is evoked in the names of some major female characters in both *God Dies by the Nile* and *Woman at Point Zero*. Zakeya means "pure". In *God Dies by the Nile*, Zakeya is desecrated by the Mayor's sexual and physical oppression of the women and men of her household which culminates in the corporal annihilation of every member of that family. Fatheya means "beginning" but Fatheya and her adopted new born baby are murdered thus, terminating a new life that is just beginning in that boy-child. Firdaus realized as Firdaws or Firdoos in other Arabic renderings means "highest garden in paradise" ("Feminine Arabic Names" p. 4). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is not accorded any theological or social honour rather she is rejected despite the culture, and wealth she acquires later.

El Sadaawi uses scatology in contrasting the wooden gate and the iron gate. While the wooden gate belongs to Zakeya, the iron gate is used scatologically to capture the series of obscene sexual thoughts and practices which the Mayor of Kafr El Teen uses to oppress Zakeya and her family. Scatology as used by El Sadaawi brings out the extreme authoritarianism of the government and the religious leaders, which is ironically matched with the radicalism and militarism of the victimised, peasant, female character. It also brings out Zakeya as being powerful enough to kill her male oppressor. Adichie's use of scatology elevates the characters to complement the age of technology in which they operate. They characters are adolescents when the story begins, they explore their sexuality as Obinze and Ifemelu do contrary to Igbo culture of sexuality. This relationship trails them to adulthood, culminating in the break-up of Obinze and Kosi's marriage. Scatology is found in Ba to show the uncaring attitudes and dirty habits of in-laws who spit under the carpets in Ramatoulaye's lounge. Adichie's uses scatology to accentuate the predicament of immigrants and racism when Ifemelu scouts for domestic work. The toilet in groaning old man's contains streaks of dry urine and strong stench of urine (p.130).

#### 4. Repetition

The repetition of the word "truth", in the closing pages of *Woman at Point Zero* lends it a moral voice which tends to judge the sexes. Truth becomes deified, acquiring the power of life and death so that Firdaus is morally justified to propose a society without men which is in opposition to Alkali and Ba's African feminism, accommodationism and womanism. The deification of truth is the premise for the radicalism of Sadaawi's feminism in which god (man) dies by the Nile and in a woman's room. In Adichie, the word hair is repeated and used to identify a character's race. (Dick 2018, " Identity and Hair Narrative in Adichie's *Americanah* ").

#### DEATH

Forster (1980) points out that death "ends a book neatly" and that when a character dies, "the author understands him" (p.61). Death is used by the authors as a contextual symbol to represent woman's autonomy. Death could be understood here as both the corporeal loss and corporeal absence of man which creates space for woman's freedom and self-definition. In fact, death constitutes the finality of woman's repudiation of cultural barriers. Alkali uses death to repudiate polygny and patriachal male inheritance. In Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*, Musa Dogo's first son and the male twins born by his second wife die in quick succession so that the two daughters he repudiated in his youth could

succeed him at old age and in his death. In *The Stillborn*, the death of Li's father and the exile of Sule afford her greater freedom to operate as the "man" of the house (pp.81-83). Ba uses death to show disgust for child marriage, wife abandonment or repudiation. In Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the death of Ramatoulaye's husband shows that woman's chosen husband is not repudiated even in death and sustains Ba's belief in love and choice (pp.2-3).

In Ba's *So Long a Letter*, death has a cathartic effect on Ramatoulaye. Death gives her the voice with which she gives utterance to her pain. It is a channel for her to release strong feelings about her abandonment and society's oppression of women. At the end Ramatoulaye finds it easier to continue with life as a widow and mother of many teenagers. In *Scarlet Song*, the death of Mireille's son exposes the bitterness of a betrayed wife (pp.164).

In El Sadaawi's novels, the women kill the men who oppress them bringing out feminist militarism. Adchie's use of death brings into prominence the military influence in Nigerian politics while making a dependent woman plan for an independent financial life. Violence and oppression are so much imbued in African marriage pattern that the death of a husband brings relief to the woman. For example, in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili's mother kills Papa by slowly poisoning his tea after Papa had beaten out her celebrated pregnancy (p.281).

### 5. Synaesthesia

Synaesthesia is the description of one kind of sensation in terms of another elicits meaning beyond itself. Female writers "have given women mouth, not just by creating words, worlds and people, but also by challenging male writers to gender dialogue with its disquieting, subversive dialogic tensions" ("Okereke 1998, African Gender Myths of Vocality" p. 139). The first person narrative point of view used by Ba in *So Long a Letter* brings out the humanity of womanhood as Ramatoulaye relishes in Doua Dieng's second declaration of love. Ramatoulaye uses synaesthesia to express how it feels to be loved: "...those *well-worn* words... Their *sweetness*, of which I had been deprived for years intoxicated me: *I feel no shame in admitting it to you*" (p.65, emphasis mine).

This statement could address Ogun-dipe-Leslie's dissatisfaction with Ba's ascetic treatment of romantic love in her novels. Here Ramatoulaye observes Grice's maxim of quantity by giving the required amount of information in conversational implicature (Leech and Short, 1981, 295). This leads the reader to have a mental picture of the magnitude of Ramatoulaye's emotional and romantic loss during her abandonment and widowhood. About the use of implicatures in Nwapa's novels, Ogu states: "[Nwapa] uses implicatures to admit the reader into meaning creation that goes on in the novels and also as tools to quarry the resources of language" (p.73).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, synaesthesia was inverted because of cultural influence. The first person narration does not invest Firdaus with the power of speech to tell Fatheya about her relationship with Ibrahim because of cultural operations and inadequate academic empowerment: "I tried to tell her what had happened, but I had forgotten exactly what it was, or as if nothing had happened at all" (p.80). While one could salute the romantic courage of Mireille to admit to her father the degree of her love for Ousmane, one should not ignore the cultural antecedents influencing her action. However, Firdaus is invested with vocality when she denounces men and kills the pimp towards the end of *Woman at Point Zero*.

### 6. Local Colour

Language in Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* is replete with mother-tongue intrusions to show the people's identity and cultural practices. About the use of language in Alkali's novels, Okereke (2003) adds that language is used for "local colour, cultural validity and rootedness of the conscious woman...to depict the rustic consciousness of the unschooled folk of Zuma" ("Rupture in Ideological and Narrative Continuity" p.245). For example, in *The Stillborn*, Awa refers to Li as "daughter-of-my-mother" (p.90- 91) and informs Li that Habu's family commiserated with them at the death of their father with two live chickens. In *The Virtuous Woman*, Laila expresses disappointment with Major Lawal in these words "God of my ancestors" (p.88) which depict the belief of the community in their traditional religion. In the words of Eko (2006), the effect such words create is "one of greater intimacy, warmth and down-to-earthiness, simply being oneself" (p.50). In *Scarlet Song*, hot *kinkelibe* served as breakfast, foregrounds Yaye Khady's control of Ousmane through his stomach (p.3) which heightens his wife's lack of freedom. When Ousmane falls ill, Yaye Khady insists on his eating "ox-foot soup with a dish of fofou" for quicker recuperation as against apple, yoghurt and beefsteak prepared by Mireille (p.94). Although Chinweizu's theory (1990) of the potency of a mother over her son could appear probable here by the argument of gastronomic tastes (food and stomach), a woman or man cannot but eat the food prepared by her or his mother (p.19).

Both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* contain local words explained in the glossary proving that the fight for woman's freedom is not localised; it is rather universal. The proverb used by Ousmane's father at the police station means that one should not follow the crowd always and it is also a caution to men who abandon their wives and children:

“when one abandons one’s own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble” (p.168). Irony is portrayed in Mireille’s use of this proverb: “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” (p.90). True, Mireille loses her verdure when Ousmane marries Ouleymatou. Consequently, her blue eyes become scarlet.

In Adichie’s *Americanah*, the swapping of Igbo proverbs between Ifemelu and Obinze, the use of Igbo names overlap with metaphor of the hair to bring out self-confidence. The hair narrative began on the street in the United States of America but ends in Ifemelu’s flat in Lagos, Nigeria with the prospect of Ifemelu and Obinze living out their romance in marriage, thus resolving the conflict of immigration. The major characters from Nigeria bear native names for example Ifemelu, Obinze, Ranyinudo and Kamarachizuoroanyi to depict origin and rootedness in Nigeria.

Sequencing in *Americanah* is presentational and the story began *in medias res* (in the middle) with the narrator presenting first (the hair) what will be the hallmark of the narrative. In *Americanah*, the hair narrative is told back and forth, through series of flash back. The reader works hard to make the plot linear through a rigorous process of “suturing” to make the story complete (Okereke 1996, “ Woman’s Quest for Autonomy, p. 98”). The story has multiple narrating voices especially Ifemelu, Obinze, Ranyinudo, and Aunt Uju , to harmonize with the numerous settings like the United States of America, Nigeria and the United Kingdom, thus, portraying the author’s concern for globalization. The blog links people across geography making the novel global and contemporary. The author’s language use is flawless and greatly resonate honest details that recall realism. (Dick, 2018; 7). The following description recalls the coarse physiology of Aunt Uju’s man friend.

The General had yellowish eyes, which suggested to Ifemelu a malnourished child. His solid, thickset body spoke of fights that he had started and won, and the buck-teeth that gaped through his lips made him seem vaguely dangerous. Ifemelu was surprised at the gleeful coarseness of him (*Americanah*, p.79).

## 7. Songs and Poems

The use of poems and songs by El Sadaawi and Alkali these not only portray the oral nature of African society but also artistically invest the feminist woman with voice and power. Chukwuma (2002) points out that oral literature “exists alongside written literature sometimes fusing into written literature” (*Igbo Oral Literature*, p.19). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus takes a walk at night after Ibrahim jilts her to reflect on the contradictions in wifehood. She celebrates her independent life with this song: “I hope for nothing...I am free” (p.87). In *The Stillborn*, poetry is used to show the extent of social injustice meted to a childless woman. Manu’s bride is ridiculed by children and the villagers at the cultural arena. As she packs to go she renders her plight in poetry:

My blood is hot, but my flesh is famished I fear I will burn to ashes. The rains have come, the field is prepared, but my field remains untilled. Do not ask me to stay. Who can stand the sneaking whispers of the wicked woman? Who can avoid the mocking looks of the age group? Who would rebuke the innocent children when they call me barren? (*The Stillborn*, p. 54).

In Ba’s *Scarlet Song*, song is used to show that the attainment of woman’s independence rests on re-orienting the conservative woman. During her daily chores Ouleymatou enshrines her conservatism in this song: “*Fi Mireille doufi nan égneh*. Here Mireille will drink no sauce” (p.158).

In *God Dies by the Nile*, there is an outstanding use of alliteration in the songs which hightens El Sadaawi’s intemperate radicalism at the end of her novels. It gives the final message of a mutilated and subjugated “womanity” and womanhood:

Their voices joined in a high-pitched wail, as long as the length of their lives, reaching back to those moments in time when they had *been born*, and *beaten* and *burnt* under the soles of their feet, and in the walls of the stomach, since the *bitterness* flowed with their *bile*, (p.76, emphasis mine).

Social injustice in this passage is marked by poverty, malnutrition and preventable infant mortality. The theme of social injustice in Egypt is expanded in the writings of Naguib Mahfouz especially in the *Whisper of Madness* in which the madman “takes revenge on the rich by stealing a chicken from them and giving it to the poor” (Qtd. in Attiya, 1996, p.11).

## 8. Chapter Split as Woman’s Style

Without risking ambiguity this researcher finds merit in El Sadaawi chapter split as a stylistic device to accentuate woman’s voicelessness. For example, all the three chapters begin with three ruled blank lines and an unruled blank space spanning two and a half pages, at the end of which the story begins. The space and blank lines show that a woman has to work hard to be able to speak and achieve freedom of choice.

In a discourse about style, Humm (1986) writes about a “woman’s style” as the “use of imagery and vocabulary around themes which create a different literary iconography from that of male writers” (*Feminist Criticism*, p.76). In a more recent study, Cameron refers to woman’s style as “verbal hygiene” which is a term for a “diverse set of normative meta-linguistic practices based on a conviction that some ways of using language are functionally, aesthetically or morally preferable to others” (36).

The story of *Scarlet Song* begins in the street when Ousmane is seen walking to school, and ends in the street where an ambulance is seen carrying Ousmane to hospital. The street is the symbol of search for woman’s freedom which Ousmane and his mother stubbornly refused to find. The repetition of the term “street” (seven times) in chapter one is a sequel to conflict, movement and restlessness in the novel. The police station on the street depicts that woman’s search for freedom is a legal one, contestable in the law courts. Nonetheless, Oko views the street “as a human challenge to realize goals as a transcendent self” (89). She adds that the street affords Ousamane the opportunity to evaluate his life and achieve self-fulfilment (89).

Women’s experience in El Sadaawi’s novels typify Kolawole’s contention that “from the zero point of woman’s dilemma [El Sadaawi], creates rebellious heroines violating social conventions and refusing to be tools in the hands of men.” (177).

### 9. Sequencing

Sequencing in *Americanah* is presentational and *in medias res*. The story begins in the middle with the narrator presenting first (the hair) what will be the hallmark of the narrative. In *Americanah*, the hair narrative is told back and forth, through series of flash back. The reader works hard to make the plot linear through a rigorous process of “suturing” to make the story complete (Okereke, “Woman’s Quest for Autonomy, 98”). The story has multiple narrating voices especially Ifemelu, Obinze, Ranyinudo, and Aunt Uju, to harmonize with the numerous settings like the United States of America, Nigeria and The United Kingdom, thus, portraying the author’s concern for globalization. The blog links people across geography making the novel global and contemporary. The author’s language use is flawless and greatly resonate honest details that recall realism. The following description recalls the coarse physiology of Aunt Uju’s man friend.

The General had yellowish eyes, which suggested to Ifemelu a malnourished child. His solid, thickset body spoke of fights that he had started and won, and the buck-teeth that gaped through his lips made him seem vaguely dangerous. Ifemelu was surprised at the gleeful coarseness of him (*Americanah*, 79).

Jealousy by unacknowledged mistresses, contentions among women, meetings of the been-to’s indict pettiness as lived in the human community (pp.397- 450). The plot is woven with fine threads of descriptive competence and honesty as depicted in love-making episodes between Obinze and Ifemelu.

Woman’s rebelliousness is achieved in the plot of the novels through the actions of the rebelling characters and through the authors’ use of sequencing. Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and El Sadaawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* begin *in finis res*, from the deaths of the characters. Death signals closure and finality but the dead is artistically resurrected in order to start the story. Through structural flashbacks, Ba and El Sadaawi infuse life into the corpses of Modou Fall and Firdaus respectively to hear patriarchal impositions from a woman’s perspective. In the words of Okereke (1991), Ramatoulaye “resuscitates” Modou to tell “the bitterness, the trauma in her soul inflicted by Modou’s betrayal of her love, respect and trust” (“The Independent Woman”, p.58).

The silencing of Firdaus’s voice by capital punishment is artistically defeated by El Sadaawi’s structural use of flashbacks. In the preface of the novel, El Sadaawi confirms the death of Firdaus through the second narrator: “This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of her life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their rights to live, to love and to real freedom” (p.iv). This statement is confessional and therefore emphatic. It also makes the novel a real life story.

The preface in *Woman at Point Zero* aids the reader to discover the sequencing in that novel. Sequencing is the order in which events are presented in the plot of a novel Leech and Short, (1981; pp.176-177). *Woman at Point Zero* has a chronological sequence. The series of flashbacks integrate the story into a whole so that the reader perceives Firdaus’s lack of choice as a child in the home, on the farm, in the school, as a teenager in marriage, as an adult eating at a restaurant on the street of Cairo, as a factory worker in the office, and as an independent woman living in a rented apartment opposite a street in Cairo. *God Dies by the Nile* also has chronological sequencing. The same type of sequencing is found in Alkali’s novels. The omissions of the birth narratives of Li in *The Stillborn* and Nana in *The Virtuous Woman* at the beginning of these novels are artistically filled in by Awa and the omniscient narrator

respectively to give life and identity to these protagonists. These omissions are “sutured into completeness through flashback” to bring out the chronological sequencing of the novels (Okereke, “Woman’s Quest for Autonomy”, p. 98). The characters’ journey to school, their return from school, their experiences at the stream, the woods, the cultural dance, and their doubts about life in marriage create tension but also sustain the reader’s interest.

Sequencing in Ba’s *So Long a Letter* is psychological. The letter form of the novel makes the plot reside in Ramatoulaye’s “subjective consciousness” (Okereke, “The Independent Woman”, p.155). The reader’s psyche is affected at the beginning of the novel when Ramatoulaye nervously hails down a taxi to see Modou’s corpse and during the obsequies. On the other hand, sequencing in Ba’s *Scarlet Song* is presentational. In presentational sequencing, information is presented to the reader in an appropriate order based on what the author considers appropriate Leech & Short (1981, p.177). Ousmane’s poverty is presented first as he walks on the street to school in *Scarlet Song* to develop the theme of hypocrisy. It also shows how dishonest his intention of marrying Mireille is. It also evokes the reader’s pity for Mireille. The use he makes of Mireille’s wealth and the tyranny of Yaye Khady bring out the disturbing dramatic irony as Mireille severs relationship with her natal, aristocratic family. Ousmane’s acquisition of wealth makes him degenerate from a charming boy-friend to a grossly, ruthless husband whose callousness towards the end of the novel is taken for granted.

## 10. Conclusion

The authors’ use of style brings out woman’s lack of choice. In El Sadaawi’s novels, woman’s strategies for survival in the face of subjugation are militant. The longing for freedom beats profoundly in every heart. The styles of Alkali also provide possible propositions of empowering the society so that woman’s freedom and choice would not only be achieved but also sustained. African feminist theory engages style by using language, characters, plot structure, narrative point of view etc., to subvert the patriarchal definition of woman. For example, the feminist woman’s process of transformation in Emecheta’s *Double Yoke* (1984) begins when author Emecheta invests Nko with the power of speech in a dialogue with Ete Kamba about the myth of male unlimited, sexual exploit, virgin bride and female prostitution, to the dismay of the male chauvinist, Ete Kamba (pp.62-64). The use of metaphors creates a new woman out of a prescribed, conforming woman. As it were, the style of the authors reflects the cultural realities of the settings and is in agreement with what Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1993) expresses as: a “product of a delicate network of influences operating in time, and it must be analyzed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page, a form that itself is subject to a network of influences and conventions, including the operations of the market place” (Qtd. in Eagleton 1986 ,p.12).

All the authors recognize the liberating effect of education on the woman’s personality, but education does not seem to affect the man’s personality or his definition of womanhood. However, there are exceptions in the attitudes of Sule and Bello in Alkali’s *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* respectively; Ibrahima in Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Ali and Guillaume in Ba’s *Scarlet Song*. Ironically the male characters in Ba’s *Scarlet Song* did not prosecute Mireille like they did for Zakeya and Firdaus in El Sadaaw’s novels for diplomatic reasons thus, allowing the influence of education to bear on them. Adichie’s characters are already empowered and are already walking side by side with modern technology by blogging but the search for a better life outside their native countries situate them in conditions that make them compromise honesty.

The cumulative experiences of the female characters in all the novels show that relational values like marital intimacy, total commitment of the self in marriage, specific personality needs of the couple, cannot be achieved without mutual love and trust. Adichie’s elitist characters are confronted with challenges of identity, race, immigration and respectable jobs stretching out before them outside their countries but they face great disappointment.

## References

- Adichie, C.N. (2013). *Americanah*. Lagos: Kachifo.
- Alkali, Z. (1984). *The stillborn*. London: Longman.
- . (1986). *The virtuous woman*. Ibadan: Longman.
- . (2005). *The Descendants*. Zaria: Tamaza.
- Atkinson, R, Atkinson ,C & Ernest R. H. (1994). *Introduction to psychology*. 8<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Ba, M. *So long a letter*. (1981). Ibadan: Newhorn.
- . *Scarlet song*. (1986). London: Longman.
- Chinweizu. (1990). *Anatomy of female power: A masculinist dissection of matriarchy*. Lagos: Pero.



- Chukwuma, H. (2002). *Igbo oral literature: Theory and tradition*. Port Harcourt: Pearl.
- Dick, A. N. (2000). "Female individuality and marriage in the works of Zaynab Alkali: *The stillborn and the virtuous woman*". Ph.D Diss. U of Port Harcourt.
- . . . . (2018) "Identity and hair narrative in Adichie's *Americanah*". *Journal of English and Literature*. Canada: Techmind Research. 9.3. pp.3-4
- El Sadaawi, N. (1973). *God dies by the Nile*. London: Zed.
- Eko, E. (2006). "Nigerian Literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Voices, New Challenges". *Current in African Literature and the English Language*. iv pp.43-54.
- Kristeva, J. *The powers of horror*. Cla.purdure.edu.
- Leech, G and Michael H. S. (1981). *Style in fiction*. London: Longman.
- Kolawole, M. E. M. (1999). *Womanism and african consciousness*. Trenton: Africa World.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (1987). "The female writer and her commitment". *Women in african literature today*. 15. Ed. Eldred Jones. London: James Currey, pp.5-13.
- Okereke G. E. (1997). "The journey as trope for female growth in Zaynab Alkali's *The virtuous woman*". *Currents in African literature and the English language*. 1.1. pp.91-102.
- . (1996). "Woman's quest for autonomy in Zaynab Alkali's *The stillborn*". *Ufahamu*. XXIV.II & III. pp 97-120.
- . (1998). "African Gender Myths of Vocality and Gender Dialogue in African Literature". Ed. Mary E. *Gender Perspective and Development in Africa*. Modupe Kolawole. Lagos: Arrabon. pp.133-157
- Oko, E. (1997). "Eros, psyche and society: Narrative Continuity in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*". *Currents in African literature and the English language*. 1.1 pp.80-90.
- Opara, C. (1990). "The Foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's novels". *Literature and black aesthetics*. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu. Ibadan: Heinemann, pp. 158-166.
- Roberts, E. V. & Jacobs, H.E. (1989). *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Uko, I. I. (2006). "Female prostitution as metaphor for survival in Cyprian Ekwensi's *jagua nana* and *Nawal El Sadaawi's woman at point zero*". *Currents in African literature and the English language*. iv. Pp.142-155.