

**RE-DEFINING THE IMAGE OF NIGERIAN WOMAN: A CASE
STUDY OF ZAINAB ALKALI'S THE DESCENDANTS**

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**BEING A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES AND
LINGUISTICS, FACULTY OF ARTS AND ISLAMIC STUDY,
USMANU DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY, SOKOTO, IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT FOR THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A HONS) DEGREE IN
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

OCTOBER, 2015

CERTIFICATION

This research work has been dully supervised and approved as having met the requirement for the award of a Bachelor of Arts (B.A) in the Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

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DEDICATION

This research work is dedicated to my loving Father Alhaji Bello Muhammad Sabo Giyade and my beloved mother Hajiya Fatima (Talatu) Bello Sule. May Almighty Allah bless them abundantly, Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give all praise to Almighty God, the creator of the Universe, for giving me the great opportunity, knowledge, strength and of course courage to undertake this project.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my Supervisor Dr. Aminu Mode, whose help, suggestions and guidance contributed immensely towards the success of this research work.

My Honour and gratitude goes to my parents who contributed in sending me to school, financial and moral support given to me towards the completion of the program, no words to thank you but just to say I love you.

My sincere thanks and appreciation goes to my lovely husband Alhaji Mukhtar Muhammad who also tried his very best in making this research work successfully, you are one's more and u pray to Almighty Allah to continue to bless our union.

My sincere thanks goes to my precious and loving daughter Fatima (Nawal) and also my brothers Alhaji Nazeef, Alhaji Suleiman, Baffa, Nsudais, Ja'afaar, Ibrahim, Umar (Abba) and lovely sisters, Rafiatu, Fatima (Ummi), Hannatu (Walida), Zainab, Husna, Aisha, Aunty Fatima, Aunty Indo and the rest whose names are not mentioned I did not forget to thank you all.

I owe a big regards to my Aunt (Aunty Farida), My sons, Ibrahim Abdulwahid, Nuhu Abdulmalik (Fa'ik), by best friends Aisha Usman Lamido, Aisha Aliyu Kiryo, Nafisa Abubakar, Fatima Lawal Maccido, Habiba Lawal, Salma Muhammad, Helen Kagah, my honourable class rep Francis Miracle and all my course mattes.

I also thank Hajiya Hannaty (lovely grandmother), mama Innayo, Mama Bebi, Aunty Jummai, Aunty Lami and my uncle Sagir for their contributions, suggestions, advices and help throughout my study.

Finally, my gratitude goes to my supervisor once again, for his contributions, may Almighty God reward him abundantly (Amin).

Finally, to the typist Miss Microbiology (MISS MCB) for a Job well done. I say thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
Certification	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of contents	v
Abstract	viii
CHAPTER ONE	
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Statement of Problem	2
1.2 Background of the Study	3
1.3 Significance of Study	11
1.4 Scope of the Study	12
1.5 Methodology	12

1.6 Brief biography of Zaynab Alkali 13

1.7 Plot summary of The Descendants 14

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction 17

2.1 Discourse on Womanhood 17

2.2 Traditional Image of the Nigerian woman 24

2.3 Critical Works on The Descendants 30

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 The re-defined image of the Nigerian woman 43

3.2 Re-defining the image of Nigerian women in Zaynab Alkali's_ The Descendants. 47

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Summary of findings 53

4.1 Conclusion 58

4.2 Work cited 61

ABSTRACT

In 1835, Auguste Comte, in his treatise on The Positive Philosophy, stated that “the essence of God’s wisdom in creating Eve (woman) was not to undermine Adam (man) but to establish a balancing force between the creator and the created. It is, therefore, a truism that a woman is, by the very fact of her creation, a partner of man. It is unfortunate that the men folk have seen it fit to relegate women to an ignominious position. However, in an effort to redeem the situation, women have awakened themselves to the self-realization that they can, in the essence of their being rise up to any occasion just as their male counterparts can. Thus women in Nigeria have risen up to the protection of their rights and the advancement of their desires. Today, women in Nigeria are engaged in all endeavours of life; there are women in the academics, women in the professions and women in artisanship. Women in Nigeria, just like women in other parts of the world are re-defining their functions and, by extension, re-moulding their status. In these modern days, there are women presidents, prime minister, engineers, pilots etc. indeed, the Nigerian women have made significant advances in redefining their image.

1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Womanhood (femininity) is not just an expression but a reality; a woman is created by Almighty Allah just as a man is; she is subject to the commands of Allah and his Prophets in the same ways as a man is. Almighty Allah declared to Adam that:

“O Adam, dwell, you and your (wife) in paradise
and eat there from ... (Surah 2 al Baqarah).”

It means, therefore, that women have originally been made as (mates) for men as opposed to slaves or chattels. A woman is a help mate to the man for her position is not that of an underling in the family but a participating member upon whose shoulder rests equal responsibilities as the man bears.

In years gone by, some ancient civilizations used to be of the misconceptions that women were vessels to be used and dumped at will; that a woman's place was defined solely by her ability to keep the house, bear children and bend to her husband.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There is no gain saying the fact that women have been degraded to the position of inferior creatures to men. A woman's voice is not given as much consideration as it should be; the personality of a woman is almost always taken for granted. In most situations, a woman is evaluated by her child-bearing status and/or her skills; she is not considered by being worthy of being assigned any communal or national responsibilities.

However, secularization trend and psychic mobility have promoted women (and even men) to redefine their image. Women have begun to adopt the attitudes that are changing their roles in their homes and the larger society. Communication technology has made it possible for women to imagine, see, hear or read about the activities of women in other nations. This has made women in Nigeria to sit up and re-awaken their sense of self-worth.

Women in Nigeria have come to the realization that they are no longer subservient to the men folk; they are now aware that, as creations of Almighty Allah, they also hold a pride of place as an integrate part of society.

In a general sense, women in Nigeria are now redefining their image in such a positive way that the men folk are taking notice.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A woman is unfortunately defined in context rather than in natural personality; a woman, unlike her male counterparts, is not assigned her inalienable right as a natural person when she is being spoken about. It is common to hear men (and even some women) speak about women as an “item” rather than a personality. This is done in the grave misconception that a woman has no individual right to occupy a meaningful place in society.

In the traditional African society and even in some western countries of the world, a woman is seen to be a chattel and a housekeeper rather than an equal. In fact, women used to be seen as properties and indeed, in some communities, women could (and still can) be inherited just like other pieces of furniture and other belongings; it is known that in some communities sons used to inherit their late fathers' youngest wives while brothers could inherit their late brothers' wives (Kisseica, 1981)

Even up to these modern times when sophisticated modes of civilization causing waves of significant and laudable changes in society, some African men are still of the mistaken belief that a woman is theirs to use in whatever manner and to dump when their usefulness has exhausted.

The most disturbing issue in this matter of the obscurity of the image of women ideas the fact that the women themselves used to subscribe to the misconception that Almighty Allah created women not as helpmates to men but as the property of men. In the years gone by men could just go out and 'acquire' women when they felt like it and such women would passively succumb to the acquisition.

Often, in many communities in Nigeria double standards are set at the expense of women. There are certain beliefs and practices held by communities which the men folk can breach but a woman dares not even think of it. In such communities, a woman is severely punished if she dares to greet a man on the street even if he is her relation; childlessness in marriage is considered to be the sole curse of the wife who may be called as a witch, or any such worse name; the man is completely absolved of

any blame when his wife fails to bear a child even though the man may be at fault.

There were certain jobs and tasks which were seen to be as the exclusive prerogative of the men folk; in as important a social endeavor as education, the female gender has been marginalised so much so that today the ratio of men to women in the field of education is as colossal as 10:3 – you would find then (10) educated men before you would find three (3) educated women.

In many ethnic groups in Nigeria, a woman is worth only what her husband and his family ascribes to her. Among the Kofyar people in Plateau state, a woman is supposed to be responsible for the whole household – she feeds, clothes and provides for the children. The only responsibility of the husband is to provide accommodation and children for the woman (Simmonds 1992)

It is an unimpeachable truth that until recently; a woman was derived any chance that would be her own woman-she was prohibited from asserting her right in any manner whatsoever; it was a taboo for a

woman to express an opinion in the presence of men folk because she was thought to be without the faculty of reason. Indeed, the woman was perceived to be lacking in such hereditary factors like intelligence, physique and temperament which interact with social and cultural environment to produce a unique pattern of characteristic thoughts, feelings and actions that combine to constitute a distinct, individual personality (Kisserca, 1981)

Womanhood is symbolic of tenderness, love, kindness and compassion but, unfortunately, the men folk used to perceive these glorious qualities as weakness. The greater love that a woman showed to her fellow human beings, the weaker she is seen to be; the more compassionate that a woman bestowed on humanity, the more foolish she was thought to be. Thus, in spite of shared socio-cultural values, beliefs and practices with men, the woman used to be taken as only a shadow of the men folk (Simmonds 1992)

The culture and traditions of some ethnic communities in Northern Nigeria have stringent restrictions where the women folk is concerned. In

some communities, women are completely without individual identity. The woman is not allowed to inherit any item of her dead husband's, she cannot go out to seek employment but has to rely on and manage whatever is given out to her by her husband and master (Tahzib, 1983)

Generally, family life and organization used to revolve almost entirely around the man; even though the woman as wife bears the children and keep the home, she was of no significance; she could not think for herself nor for her children but if anything went wrong with the children or in the home the woman would be at the receiving end of the rebuke, admonishment and even the physical remonstrance over the situation. As a matter of fact the status of women in Nigeria used to be an ignoble and harrowing one which gave rise to an image of them that was so indistinct as to be obscure.

However, fortunately for nations all over the world, this ignoble and unredeeming image of women is now changing for the better. The men folk and their female counterpart have now awakened to the harsh reality that a woman is not a shadow but a real substance of bones, flesh

and blood who possesses a brain of the same size and function as the man; that a woman is also a glorified creation of Almighty God and so she deserves to enjoy all the rights and privileges which a man does. It has now come to the realization of the whole world that a woman is equally capable of attaining feats which were in there to felt to be the exclusive ability of men. Indeed, men have now come to accept the truth that if they are to achieve desired success in their endeavors, they have to carry their female partners along. The fact is that the image of women in the world in general and Nigeria in particular is now being re-defined.

The acquisition of modern education by and employment of women in the formal sector have necessitated radical changes in the functions which women now play in their homes as well as in the larger society. There is now a vast difference between the image of the Nigerian woman 25 years ago and the image of the Nigerian woman in the 1990s and the new generation.

Today, the Nigerian woman is not the sit-right house-keeper and bearer of children; she is no longer the dependant who subsists on the

meager offerings of her husband and master. The Nigerian woman is no longer the passive sufferer of insults and violence; she is now an inheritor rather than the inherited. The Nigerian woman has of recent redeemed her image; she has now begun to occupy her pride of place in society and gladly enough, the men folk has taken notice and accepted what is the women's inalienable right.

By the very fact of the acquisition of western education by and formal employment of women, the economic state of the home has changed so much better that now families can now afford to eat and live more comfortably than it was before. Some misconceptions which used to be held by the larger society are now becoming extinct. The desire for a brood of children who used to be managed by the woman is no longer in fashion; since women also go out to work, fathers have found that they can no longer afford to have children with no one to look after them.

Modern trends which have been created by advances in science and technology have evolved what can best be described as a female headed households. A working mother now gets more recognition from

her husband and children because more often than not she pays of contributes a significant amount of house-keeping money and the children's school fees;. Thus the working mother is now more visible and by implication more acknowledged than the husband (Tahzib, 1993)

The Nigerian woman of these days is economically viable thus being accepted in businesses, trades and other economic endeavors and this makes her socially recognized. Women were also contracted in marriage only for the two purposes of house-keeping and childbirth; it is now no longer so.

Women such as Indira Ghandi, Margaret Thatcher, Benazir Bhutto and many others have played their roles in re-defining the image of women in the male dominated world by politics. In Nigeria we have such political giants as Ngozi Okonjo – Iweala, Zainab Maina, Diezani Allison Madueke in politics; Zaynab Alkali, Grace Alele-Williams, Esther Kwanashie in the academia; Ceceilia Ibru, Hauwa Ismail, Bolalade Adesokan in commerce and industry. There are so many thousands of

women out there in Nigeria who are gallantly taking on the task of re-defining the image of women in Nigeria.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The basic purpose of any and every research project is to identify a prevailing societal problem and to make efforts at finding solutions to the identified problem. Therefore, every research project which is titled “Re-defining the Image of Women in Nigeria” is significant to the extent that it would.

- i. Examine the situation(s) which have caused women to try to re-define their image.
- ii. Identify the means by which women (and other stakeholders) have been exploring in an effort to re-define their image.
- iii. Identify the impact (positive or negative) which the redefinition of the image of women has had or would have on the women themselves and on the large Nigerian nations.

These three factors constitute the relevance of this study that would ultimately culminate into its significance. Despite these three (3) objectives however, the study may highlight other factors that may emerge as the examination of the situation progresses.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Being an educational research, the scope of this study is confined to the project topic which is 'Re-defining the Image of Women in Nigeria'. The study does not seek to delve into the general activities of women neither is it a documentary of feminine rights activism. It has the sole aim of studying how the image of women in Nigeria has been or is being redefined.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted through the collection of data and documents from different sources which include text books, internet works, projects related to the topic and some conference papers.

1.6 BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZAYNAB ALKALI

Born in the Tura-Wazila com of Bomb State in Nigeria, Zaynab Alkali is one of the first female novelists to write in English Language from Northern Nigeria. She was the principal of Girls High School and has had a long university career teaching English and African literature. She graduated from Bayero University, Kano with a BA in 1973. She is currently engaged in research at Bayero University.

Zaynab Alkali's first novel is *The Stillborn* was published by Longman in its drumbeat series in 1983. It won many accolades like the Association of Nigerian Author prize for prose fiction in 1985. The novel is set in Nigeria and explores the challenges facing Li, a young balance her family life and her own need for economic and emotional independence (Childhood in African Literature – A Review –Eldred D.Jones Google Books)

Zaynab Alkali also published three stories in German, one of which, *Saltless Ash* been published in Heinemann Book of African women writers her third collection of short stories *The Cobwebs* and

other stories is about the maturing of Nigerian women and touches on the problem of child-brides and the negative consequences of unemployment and child abuse. She is also the author of the descendants, the virtuous woman, and initiators.

1.7 PLOT SUMMARY OF The Descendants

The descendants is a novel which tells the story of a woman called Magira Milli. Magira Milli is an old woman who is a wife, a mother and a grandmother. She is a woman who has shown love to her husband, her husband's family and ultimately to her children. Magira Milli's love of her family manifested in her prayers to God to spare her remaining son Aji. She begs God to let Aji survive so that his offspring would continue the lineage of their ancestor, Lawani Ramta. Her prayers to God is prompted by the ignoble occasions of Azreel (the angel of death) who has cruelly snatched away her son's Abdulai, Made, Umar and Ilia, however her most unfortunate situation comes when Azreel snatches away her precious grandson Shuaibu.

In chapter one, it is seen that Aji, the only surviving son of Lawani Ramta and Magira Milli is a humane person who has the interests of his community at heart. Magira Milli is set against the values of individuals that go against the general values of humanity. This is the reason why she goes against the marriage of Peni to the community butcher. Magira Milla is an old woman who in spite of being without western education has insight enough to know that humanity is not served by selfish interests but by understanding the wills of individuals (p.23)

Zainab Alkali has, by virtue of her understanding of the ways of human beings dissected the means by which women who are adjudged to be the weaker gender of humanity, strive to assert their rights. Magira Milli's dissention with her only surviving son, Aji is a clear indication that women have minds of their own, that women tend to bring themselves with the natural and religious injunction of self will.

Aji, the son of Magira Malli has tried to assert his role as the champion of the house but ultimately, he has to accept the firm resolves of his mother. But to his mothers influence, members of the Ramta are

able to succeed in their chosen educational and other endeavours of life. Hawwa Lawani certain instance who used to suffer certain instances of degradation is able to read and rise up to the prominence the state minister of justice.

The novel is a story on love, dissent compromise and success, it is a story of a community that relies on the vicious of an old woman to make it thrive. Magira Milli despite her misfortunes at the hands of Azreel, the angel of death, has through her faith in God been able to preserve the lineage of her family. She is an epic example of women who do not aspire to greater heights for themselves but that their descendants may flourish in every way that is possible.

Indeed, Zaynab Alkali has written a story that is woven around a woman. Who by all standards should be dubbed as the matriarch of not only her family but of the entire community. Magira Milli is certainly a woman whose attitude and characteristics are worthy of emulation not only by women but also by men who desire success in their temporal world and the eternity.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, references have been made to and quotations taken from contemporary works of other authors which are of the same thematic disposition as this research project. The chapter is on discourse on womanhood; a treatise on the feminine gender as an intrinsic population of Almighty Allah's glorious creation. The second section of this chapter discusses Nigerian women in the traditional role and image, which society assigned to them. The third part of this chapter is given to critical analysis Zaynab Alhali's novel, The Descendants, which is the main source of data for this research project.

2.1 DISCOURSE ON WOMANHOOD

Every society of the world is populated by people who are differentiated by their natural endowment which in this case is the gender disposition which makes a person either a man or a woman. This

gender difference has been a source of discussion, debate, confrontation, agreement and disagreements. Men have over the years, wittingly are unwillingly, made womanhood to be a contentious issue; this is so much so that even women themselves have tended lose sight of their identity collectively and individually.

Women have been referred to as the weaker sex who need to be protected by the men folk whose machismo disposition make them suppose they are stronger than women. However, it is now a point of fact that women are now coming into their own and are able to compete favourably with the men folk.

Womanhood is no longer seen to be a disadvantage. This is because women have proved to men that they are creatures of wit and intelligence; women have successfully ventured into fields of endeavour which have hither to been considered to be the exclusive preserver of men. Women have made their marks in such fields as engineering, avionics, teaching, medicine, literature and even the armed forces.

It is true that there are certain societies in which women are considered to be domestic chattels (Kisseka, 2001) but it is also true that even in such settings, women are respected as the pivot which the household spins. (Nething, 1996).

In these modern times women have access to opportunities that enable them to prove their worth. This is largely due to the emerging secularization trend in societies of the world particularly the so-called third world countries. According to Kisseka, M.N (1985) Secularization trend is:

“The evaluation of people and events on the basis of their utility rather than blind insistence on what is traditional or natural”

Kisseka goes further to explain that now there is lack of emphasis on ascribed status such as age, gender or any other criterion of birth, as legitimate bases for participation in public activities of education, employment or occupancy of position of power and responsibility.

It is in the light of the above factor that the United Nations set 8th march of every year as women's day; it is also in the spirit of secularization trend that the Beijing conference of 1995 and other subsequent conferences have discussed at length the empowerment of women.

At the North West zonal MDGs conference of 18th August, 2014 titled "Achieving greatness (Goal 3-women Empowerment) through synergy and convergence" various resource persons who presented papers were explicit on the need for the men folk to see themselves as partners to men rather than chattels.

Women deserve to be treated equally as their men folk. In a household where the couple is childless, the wife often, receives the brunt of the criticism; she is seen to be a witch, sorceress or any such unpleasant being. In her book, Behind The Clouds, Ifeoma Okoye enunciates the unfortunate position of a wife in a childless marriage even when the husband is to blame. When Dozie and Ije Apia fail to produce a child, Dozie's mother places the blame squarely on Ije in these words.

“I wonder who had talked you into taking a new wife at last. Maybe you’d realized you’d been waiting in vain, or maybe her medicine has lost its potency” (page 93)

Such are the biting remarks which Dozie’s mother throw at Ije at every given opportunity because Ije has failed to produce a child.

Even in school settings which are meant to be enlightened, women are discriminated against and bullied for the slightest infraction. This is shown in A.H Mohammed’s novel, Last Days At Forcados High School, when Efua cover wrote in her dairy that she loves Miss Novi. The whoel school is quick to reach the conclusion that Efua and Novi are lesbians and the male student begin to ridicule Efua. Efua’s predicament is summed up by Joke who reveals to Efua that:

“When I got to school this morning, the boys from arts class were laughing and making rude jokes... they said you wrote that you were lovers” (p 63)

Such is the kind of misconceptions that even educated students have about situations which involve women.

Traditionally, particularly in the Nigerian setting, women are not free to engage in certain activities however innocent such activities maybe. The woman is compelled to conform to certain principles, beliefs and practices which are considered to be taboo (Mairo, M 2005).

There is no gainsaying the fact that womanhood connotes aesthetics, kindness, tenderness and maternity; these qualities are what women deserve to be loved and cherished – to be cared for. Womanhood, in all ramifications, is an embodiment of virtue and loyalty. A woman is to all practical purposes, averse to disreputable conduct in any form; she is created in the role of an angelic being and by her very disposition is, shy but not timid; gentle but not weak.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that men have chosen, by their very conceited conduct to cast women in the light of weakness, unreliable and impractical. It is egoistic for men to believe that the only good things that women are good at are house-keeping and childbirth (Soyinka, 1979)

It is the conceit of men that give womanhood bad name; men do all sorts of things that tend to dehumanize women and then they are

assigned to derogatory positions in society (Oyofemisi and Tamimowo, 2008)

It is also due to the arrogant attitude of men that women engage in robbery etc (Mu'azu, 2009). The reasons why young girls and women engage in prostitution are many and varied, ranging from economic factors, early exposure to the phenomenon and faulty socialization (Haruna, 1993).

From a demographic angle, it is pertinent to point out that many prostitutes are products of forced and early marriages, while others are divorces from early marriages,, while others are divorces from childless marriages while yet others engage in it as a viable albeit, a degrading means of self-employment for survival (Soyinka, 1979)

Literary writers (authors and scholars) in Nigeria have used their write-ups to advance social, political and economic factors which force women into disreputable positions. In his novel The Concubine, Elechi Amadi tells the story of Beatrice, a village beauty who is betrothed to a water spirit who is so jealous that any man who takes her to bed would

surely die or suffer some serious ailment. This situation casts Beatrice as an untouchable.

Indeed, womanhood is a virtue; the woman is an epitome of all that is good and reliable. It does not matter in what image the men folk cast the women folk, the fact remains that womanhood is a source pride and happiness to every and all societies; there can be no society that can ever thrive without the women folk; indeed, there can be no society without women. It is, therefore, incumbent on all manner of people to wake up to the clarion call for women emancipation and empowerment (Patience 2014, Maina, 2014).

2.2 TRADITIONAL IMAGE OF NIGERIAN WOMAN

The traditional Nigerian woman is she who recognizes herself as her husband's property; a property who has been bought and paid for by her man. The woman in the Nigerian traditional setting is meek, physically weak but emotionally strong; she dares not look her husband in the eye while she speaks with him. Indeed, the traditional image of the Nigerian woman is that of one who may be seen but should not be heard.

Chinua Achebe, in his novel Things Fall Apart, elaborates this when Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna to his house and hands him over to his first wife and when she tries to clarify some issues, Okonkwo shouted at her thus:

“Do as you are told woman; when
have you become a member of the
Ndichie!

The traditional image of the Nigerian woman is that of passive submissiveness; she is told without attempting to voice an opinion; she is chattel who is owned by the husband to use in any manner that he deems fit.

In The Descendants, Zaynab Alkali illustrates the passive submissiveness of women when Aji Ramta gave out his niece in a forced and ignominious marriage to Madu Chimba; Madu Chimba beats up his wife, Peni at the slightest provocation and when she goes back to her uncle's wife he tells her to go back and bear the beatings as other women do. Peni has no choice but to go back to hateful husband who has the staunch support of her uncle.

This unfortunate situation is also manifested in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. Beatrice, Eugene's wife and mother of Kambili and Jaja is a soft-spoken man who has been reared in the traditional Igbo setting in which a wife is totally subservient to her husband. Eugene uses this as an excuse to beat his wife and humiliate her in the very presence of their children without uttering a word of protest (pages 101-110).

The traditional image of the Nigerian woman is belittled even among the elitist sect of the Nigerian men. In his novel, Sacred Apples, Abubakar Gimba gives instances of this when Midoka attacks Zahrah in the office and she is forced to fight back but Noussah threw the blame on Zahrah accusing her of attacking Midona when she is only a woman. Zahrah staunchly defends herself on the ground that she is being victimized only because she is a woman while the real culprit, Midoka is a man (pages 94-99).

In peace time and in times of war, women mostly suffer more than they deserve to; women suffer the indices of war because they bear the

brunt of the defeat suffered by their men. A clear example of this is manifested in Femi Osofisan's play Women of Owu, when Maiye, the leader of the military alliance who laid siege to and conquered Owu Kingdom, the men were exterminated but the women of Owu were shared among warlords of the conquerors who carted them away into slavery as unwilling spouses.

Festus Iyaji, in his novel Heroes expresses the view that women in Nigeria are traditionally seen as the 'underdogs' whose voices should not be heard; this is manifested in the following conversation over a disagreeable situation.

Osime: "The woman is not free to express her dissatisfaction"

2nd woman: "But the man is free to do so"

Osime: "But that does not mean that the woman is not dissatisfied" (page 138).

In the realm of formal western education, the traditional Nigerian woman is not even considered. Most Nigerian families did not give the first thought to girl-child education except it be religious education particularly in Northern Nigeria. In The Descendants, Aji Ramta, who is a man comes into confrontation against his biological mother over the issue of the education of his female family members. Aji Ramta strongly opposes the female members of his family to attend school for western education while his illiterate mother, Magira Milli is in full support of their been sent to school for western education. Like most men in Northern Nigeria, Ramta believes that there is no sensible basis for women to be provided with western education since they would end up in their husband's kitchens anyway.

Education is a veritable tool for socio-economic and political advancement of any society. However, for the fact that girl-child education is a contentions issue among family members and the larger community, it is a glaring fact that the traditional Nigerian woman's economic and political status are tenuos and at beset tentative.

The female gender has been so discriminated against that the ratio of economically advantaged women to that of men is negligible. Even in government circle, the woman are mostly inferior to men (there are few instances where women are in top positions in civil service and organized private sector)

In Sacred Apple Zahrah is despised by Midoka simply because she has been placed in a position to which he is a subordinate; it does not matter to Midona that Zahrah has studied and worked hard enough to deserve her position. To Midoka Zahrah is just a woman and so she should be inferior to him.

So also in Zaynab Alkali's The Descendants when Seytu reported for duty on her first day of work at state specialist hospital Garpella, she was received rudely by the receptionist and with misgivings by the chief medical director, Aiman Zaki –all because she is a woman. No one expects a female doctor to rate up to the task.

In daily everyday real life, women are discriminated against just because of their gender; this is the reason for which the United Nations

has recommended that women should be given 35% of public offices in the political dispensations of nations.

2.3 CRITICAL WORKS ON The Descendants

Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants* is a novel that in literary terms, is referred to as a saga; it is a saga because it tells the story of a family's fortunes and misfortunes from one generation to two other generations. The story begins at the time of the family patriarch, Lawani Ramta and the matriarch, Magira Milli to the time of their children, Aji Ramta and his late brothers to the time of Aji's own children and grandchildren.

Being a saga, there is hardly one central hero or a particularly notorious villain; rather the story is a sequential account of a family who seeks to maintain its roots and possibly make the humble beginnings better and more prosperous. Even though there are non-blood family members among the consanguine ones, still the household is closeknit one in which everyone has a sense of belonging.

The initial place setting of the story is Ramta but with the death of the patriarch, Lawani Ramta, the surviving son, Aji Ramta moves to Makulpo where he builds a large compound that accommodates not only his bloodline family but also neighbours who would find a place to live in while they are patients of Makulpo Memorial Hospital.

The story is, indeed, episodic, as it involves a lot of episodes concerning the many characters in it. Every member of Aji Ramta's household has an episode and event in his life which serve to mould his or her character in the story.

Although there is no central hero in The Descendants, the story, abinitio, revolve around two staunch members of the family – Magira Milli and her son, Aji Ramta who between them dictate the direction and pace of the story. Magira Milli is the matriarch of the Ramta family and she takes her position and responsibilities with the utmost seriousness and dedication. She is an old woman who does not tolerate unfairness, laziness or deprivation if she can help it; she does discriminate against any member of the family household. In fact, it is Magiri Milli who first

muted the idea of sending the girls of the household to school even against the better judgement of her son, Aji. Members of the community loves Magira Milli because she cares for everyone and is quick to point out faults where they exist. Indeed, the matriarch of the Ramta family is also a fixture of devotion to the Ramta and Makulpo communities.

Aji Ramta is a man who believes that the tradition of the community should be closely observed and adhered to; that values, beliefs and practices of the community should be upheld as sacred. It is in the light of this that Aji Ramta is strongly against the girls in his household being provided with Western education.

Indeed, Aji Ramta is a staunch proponent of early marriage for girls. This attitude Aji Ramta's is clearly manifested in the issue of his niece, Peni's marriage to the village butcher, Madu Chamba. True to his character, Aji Ramta refuses to be swayed in the decision to give out his niece, Peni, in marriage to the ugly and brutal butcher. Magira Milli tries to dissuade him thus.

Magira Milli: Aji, my son, did you know that Madu Chamba's first wife is securely locked up in an asylum?

Aji Ramta (in surprise): "My mother, the royal one, what has this got to do with anything? What is the connection? I can't see any" (page 112).

Aji Ramta is almost fanatical in one advocacy for early marriage for girls and the lack of provision for their education. Zaynab Alkali captures the essence of Aji's fanatical belief on girl-marriage on page 21 when Peni ran away from her matrimonial home after a severe beating by the husband and her uncle aji addressed her thus:

"A little beating from you husband and you run back home like a spoilt child. If your mother had run away each time your father had beaten her would you have been born? What are you doing to me? What have I ever done in this village that you seek to spoil my good name? all I have wanted for you children is to see that you are settled. That way I would have completed my obligations and gone on with my life"

This lengthy speech sums Aji Ramta's attitude to his family and to the community: he is culturally dogmatic and practices religious bigotry.

The Descendants is a novel that captures the true nature of its characters by assigning to them their individual identities; each character is described in his own individual rights but in his or her own personal interaction with other members of the household and the community. On page 13 Zaynab alkali sums up the nature of the matriarch Magira Milli in these words:

“Magira Milli may be a yesterday's woman but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in societies”

The author aptly describes a woman who, although was born some eighty years before the story unfolds, still keeps abreast of events and even advises her own children and grand children who are born on the present generation and so should know better than the ancient one. For instance, Magira Milli, although an illiterate herself, knows the value of education; she knows that education “opens doors and gives an individual options in life”. This progressive attitude of Magira Milli is in

direct contrast with that of her son Aji Ramta who, being about 30 years younger than his mother should know better but unfortunately does not appreciate the value of education.

It has already been stated that the story in The Descendants is full of episodes consisting of various events that are caused by the multitude of characters on the story. However, the story is also sequential in that each episode is influenced by one that has already happened or would happen. Zaynab Alkali is able to weave the story together so that no event or character stands in isolation. Even the house guests who are not related by blood, members of Aji Ramba's household are given pride of place in it so that they feel a bond with the family.

The house guests in Aji Ramta's household have come there primarily to receive treatments at the nearby Makulpo Memorial Hospital. Anytime any of them lapses in health everyone feels despair and sadness. A case in point is the problem of Usman (page 33); another case is that of Hussaina who suffers some mental disorder and when one night she was heard screaming due to an attack and so she had to be

tied her bed post. This incidence makes everyone in the household to be sad (p.34)

Indeed, The Descendants is a story within a story; every story begets another story and so it goes on and on. Despite the large number of characters which Zaynab alkali has created in the story, she is able to relate them together so that no one feels neglected.

Every story told has, apart from the geographical or place setting(s), a time setting that is the time when the events in the story take place. As for The Descendants, there is no specific time setting. However, it is safe to assume that the events in the story began to unfold in the early 1900s to 1960s or 1970s. This can be deduced from the age of Magira Milli who dies at the age of 91. The fact that Aji Ramta is able to install electricity in his house means that the story has moved to the 1930s or 1940s; also the fact that Aji has bought a pick-up truck is another indication of modernity. The physical state of Garpella specialist Hospital gives us an indication of modern time setting and so also is the fact that Seytu and Helwya ride in jeeps to Makulpo.

Apart from the place and time setting there is also the atmosphere of the story which describes the mood of the characters. The general atmosphere in The Descendants is that of depression but often interspersed with lighter moods of cheerfulness and even outright happiness. At the beginning of the story Magira Milli is presented in prayerful supplication to Almighty Allah; her supplications are both pleadings to Allah and lamentations to him. Magira Milli pleads with Allah to protect her family and to make her only surviving son, Aji Ramta to be strong in health and prosperous in materialism; she begs Allah to grant peaceful repose to the souls of her late sons: Abdulai, Ilia, Umar and Madu. Magira Milli goes on to plead that Allah should destroy her enemies. It can be seen, therefore, that Magira Milli's prayer is basically one of lamentation.

As the story in The Descendant unfolds tension begins to take hold. It is evident in Magira Milli's reminiscences on page 13 when she thinks back that she had to flee with Aji to Makulpo eleven years before so as to:

“Fled from the land of her ancestors to escape from recurrent terror and haunting nightmares”

This is a vivid recollection of the frightening and unhappy times which Magira Milli suffered in Ramta; the deaths of her sons and the continuous agitations in the house hold.

Aji Ramta’s household itself is shrouded in despair, hope, sadness, grief and tension. Most of the inhabitants of the household are hospital patients. This creates the mood of despair in inhabitants of the household which, willy-nilly, turns into grief as one or another of the ill ones passes on to the great beyond.

Indeed, the frequent disagreements that ensue between Magira Milli and her only surviving son, Aji Ramta are usually causes of tension among the members of the household. However, it is the gruesome tales that are told in the household that causes the gloomy atmosphere in. for instance on page 61 the grievous discourse between Meramu and Magira Milli is worrisome indeed especially when Meramu declared that:

“But Kaka, death by lightening, insanity and a sudden disappearance all in the same family, one after the other are strange happenings”

They are, indeed, strange happenings which are capable of creating horrible feelings and emotions in minds of people.

However, grief and despair are not the only moods that engulf the characters in The Descendants. There are also moments of happiness even though they may be few and far between. These moments of happiness basically constitutes the periods when babies are born to couples within the household. At such moments the household goes agog with happiness and merriment.

The language of The Descendants is prosaic – there is no flowery use of language as in poetry. The author uses straight forward everyday words to create conversations among the characters and to express the thoughts and emotions that are in the minds of the characters. Zaynab alkali leaves the readers in no doubt as to the message that she wants them to imbibe.

The narrative technique adopted by the author of The Descendants is the mixed method narrative technique. This technique is adopted by modern authors in their books at suitable points to suit a desired purpose.

The narration of the story itself is done in the Eye-of-God (Omniscient) technique. In this technique, it is difficult to identify the actual person who is telling the story because he/she is neither a character in the story nor the author of the novel. Zaynab Alkali has adopted the Eye-of-God method so that she may be able to delve into the hidden depths of the characters to gain access to the private thoughts, feelings and emotions which otherwise, no one can glean; the author, through this method is able to be into two different places at the same time so as to present to the readers vivid pictures of events at different places. By adopting the Eye-of-God or Omniscient method, the author of The Descendants also employs. The use of the stream-of-consciousness method. By using this method, the author is able to present to readers the manner in which one item of thought in the mind of a character cause him/her to think of other related items in a chain of

reminiscences. For instance from the 21st to the 25th paragraphs of chapter one, the thought of her grand daughter getting married to Madu chimba makes Magira Milli to think back on the reason for her escape from Ramta to Makulpo; this also makes her think of the consequences of her late husband's refusal to send their sons to school and how four of them had died in Ramta amidst illiteracy, ignorance and poverty (pages 13-15)

The stream-of-consciousness is also manifested in Seytu while she is a medical doctor working at the Garpelli specialist Hospital. Prof. Zaki asked Seytu about the lack of vaccines in Ramta and this triggers of a chain of thought about the time when she was six years old and was afflicted with measles and she thought she was going to die.

In addition to the two methods already mentioned, there is also the use of the flashback method. In deed, in almost all the chapters of the novel, there is the use of the flashback when the author (through the Omniscient narrator) go back in time to recall particular events that are related to the ones that are happening at the present or are about to

happen. The flashback method is closely related to the stream-of-consciousness method.

Generally The Descendants is a novel that is written in true prosaic style. This means that it has observed all the rules and stipulations that make a good novel. The plot of the story builds up gradually around two popular and stalwart characters Magira Milli and Aji but does not marginalize the other characters. The settings, in terms of place (geographical), time and atmosphere are well defined mostly through the discourse and actions of the characters. The narrative technique adopted by the author serves to present vivid pictures of the attitude, challenges and expectations of the characters. By and large, The Descendants is a novel that tells its own story most comprehensively.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 THE RE-DEFINED IMAGE OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

Indeed, the image of the Nigerian women has been uttered in a liberating way; in a way that grants women to engage in healthy competition with the men folk. Today the Nigerian woman is not as easily intimidated as she was in the past.

The re-defined image of the Nigerian woman is mostly attributed to the advent of information and communication technology (ICT) into the Nigerian society. However, before the full-fledged incursion of ICT into Nigeria, there had been a clarion call for girl-child education since education is seen as the first irrepressible and irrevocable step towards self-realization and self-reliance through the development of an individual's potentialities (Rufai, 2013).

When a percentage of Nigerian girls were given opportunities to attend school to as far as tertiary institutions, their image became re-defined even as they grew into womanhood. The acquisition of modern

education by and employment of women in the formal sector have instilled self-confidence in them and have also necessitated general respect for the folk by the hitherto cynical men folk. (Uche 2014)

Today, the woman is not just an ‘instrument for child-bearing or a tool for house-keeping. The acquisition of education by and employment of women have caused radical changes in the mode of family life and organization. Now, the emphasis is no longer on women remaining at home to care for the children; husbands now allow for the fact that wives are also partners who go out to work and earn money which she contributes to the up-keep of the house (Maina, 2014)

In a similar situation, the re-defined image of the Nigerian woman is attributed to the acquisition of the trend of mobility by Nigeria. Mobility (upward or downward movement of people in a system of social stratification) involves the ability of a society to create structural opportunities for education and employment for all people regardless of gender, economic or social status, religion or political affiliations. (UNDP, 2014)

Owing to psychic mobility, successive Nigerian governments have accepted the need to implement policies that would create enabling environment for the liberation and empowerment of women. It is in the light of this that the present administration of President Goodluck Jonathan has granted 35% of public offices to women; more women are also contesting public offices in the national and state assemblies, governorship races, board leadership and ministerial appointments (NBS, 2010)

However, it is not only in politics that the image of the Nigerian women has been re-defined. Even at the domestic home front women have more freedom. Modern education by and employment of women have resulted in the birth of a few number of children that can be managed adequately by the mother who can now afford to buy all the necessary items which babies need for healthy growth and intellectual development.

Indeed, the image of the Nigerian woman has been red-defined positively. However, there are still some negative features that are

associated with this image re-definition some aspects of the re-definition of the image of Nigerian women has caused an adverse shortening of the period of breast-feeding of babies. This is not good for the physical growth and intellectual growth of the baby because the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended that all infants should be breast feed with their mother's milk for a period of less than six months (WHO 2014).

In the same vein there is rising concern about the neglect of children and the home by career women or those in any manner of employment. Women in regularly employment work many hours of the day which leaves them with very little time to attend to their children and other domestic duties. Rather such women employ the services of nannies or deposit the children at day-care centres. This is a sure way of alienating children from their mothers (UNFPA, 2014)

Generally, however, the positive aspects which have already been highlighted above can be summed up as making women free of male domination and other primitive practices; giving women the opportunity

to contribute positively to decision making at the national and domestic levels; providing women with the means of contributing to raising the standard of living of the family. There are other demographic syndromes such as delayed marriages as against early marriages and their attendant VVF; smaller and more manageable families which transform into better health and more material comfort for the family particularly the children. Re-defined image of the Nigerian woman has also resulted into reduction of child and maternal mortalities and morbidities (diseases)

3.2 RE-DEFINING THE IMAGE OF NIGERIAN WOMEN IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S THE DESCENDANTS

Technically speaking, The Descendants is a feminist novel. This is because the novel tells the stories of a number of women whose earlier lives had been dominated by men. However, at a point in their lives, these women encouraged by the indomitable matriarch of the Ramta community, Magira Milli, began to be aware of how wretched their life is. The women come to the realization that if they are to make something

good of their life, they have to heed to the advice of Magira Milli and shed the shackle of male domination.

Magira is an old woman who, due to her old age is sometimes referred to as the ancient one. Having lost her husband is forced by circumstances to take on the burden of caring for her children and grandchildren.

After the loss of her husband, the great Lawani Duma, leader of Ramta community, Magira Milli begin to lose her four sons to death in quick succession. Abdullai, Umar, Ilia and Madu follow one another in death and so Magira Milli is forced to flee Makulpo with her only surviving son, Aji, so that he may escape death at the hand of Azreel, the angel of death.

At Makulpo, Magira Milli does all that is in her power to settle down and begin a new life. Her son, Aji Ramta, builds a big house and assumes the control of the family. This brews confrontations between mother and son; Aji Ramtas decisions concerning the female members of the family are sometimes out of context and Magira Milli confronts him

at every turn. When Aji decides to give out his nieces in early marriage, Magira Milli opposes him and advises him to first of all send the children to school so that they may have some measure of independence and self-reliance.

Magira Milli, even though she is an illiterate recognizes the value of education; she herself understands that education opens doors and gives and individual options in life (page 13) she who has never been in the four walls of a classroom, comes to identify the benefits of education by the listening to her radio at regular basis. Thus the radio her re-defined the image of the old and illiterate Magira Milli into a wise woman of the world who becomes a formidable advocate for the provision of educational opportunities for girls.

At first Aji Ramta refuses to give in to Magira Milli's demands for girl-education and he sends them to early and ignoble marriages. However, as their individual marriages fail, the girls come back in the ghosts of their former selves. First, Peni is given out in marriage to Madu Chimba who beats her regularly. Peni grows tired of her marriage and

abandons her husband. Although she fails to go to school. Like Seytu and Hawwa do, she defies her husband and her uncle to become independent and raises her children by herself.

Seytu does not really believe that one day her dream of being a doctor would materialize. After she had been plagued with measles at the age of six years and having watched another small boy almost die of illness she promised herself if given the opportunity she would become a medical doctor. And so it is that Seytu, a child of a girl who grew up in the backwaters of Makulpo finds herself as medical doctor. Seytu who was forced to marry and bear a child at an early age when she could not voice her rights and assert her opinion now finds herself alone to lead her life the way she likes. She has gone through a mis-marriage with the arrogant Yerima but upon realizing the futility of the union she makes her decision and breaks away vowing never to marry again.

Indeed, Seytu's image re-definition is a very positive one which describes that of many Nigerian women. She is a woman who, from childhood has been denied any manner of freedom in her uncle's house

where the only source of comfort and courage was her grandmother Magira Milli; at that time she was not given the chance to attend school but was forced into an early marriage. However, by sheer determination and courage, she takes her life into her hands and goes through all the processes of acquiring education and eventually emerges as not only a medical doctor but ultimately as the chief medical director of a sophisticated medical hospital, the Government Specialist Hospital Garpella.

Another case of redefinition of the Nigerian woman in The Descendants is that of Hawwa, the daughter of Seytu as a child was timid and like in all manner of children desperately seeks the attention of the elders. Not much is known of Hawwa's child but suffice it to say that she is one of the extended family of Magira Milli for she is the daughter of Seytu who is the daughter of Ilia, Aji Ramta's deceased younger brother.

Just like her mother, Seytu, Hawwa needs the encouragement of her great-grandmother Magira Milli and upon attaining the desired age she is sponsored by her mother to seek education. Despite all odds,

Hawwa goes through the processes involving in acquiring western education.

By dint of perseverance and hard work Hawwa comes out of the education process as a lawyer and is eventually appointed to the post of minister of state for justice.

Indeed, the women in The Descendants have come a long way from the backwoods Makulpo to change their life and their images as rural passive women into educated, independent and self-reliant women, thanks to the tireless efforts of Magira Milli, the matriarch of the Ramta community.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 SUMMARY

It has been an age-old tradition that men are superior to women in every aspect of life-intellectually, physically, emotionally and even spiritually. This tradition belief may be right or more supposition, no one can say certain. However, the mere fact that a woman was created from the rib of man makes the belief to have divine roots.

It is the right of this that right from pre-historic times, women have been subjected in all spheres of human endeavor as men have arrogated themselves the right to rule over women. However, therefore, are made subservient to men which means that women are pliable to the whims and caprices of men. It has become the belief of men, willy-nilly, that women are created for the sole pleasures of the men folk. This belief has robbed women of their individual identity; women are seen only is the way that men cast them.

Traditionally, men have cast women in the role of domestic beings; a woman's only attribute is procreation and housekeeping. Men 'acquire' women only because they need some ways to satisfy their physical pleasure, have children who would perpetuate their names and someone to cook their meals and generally make their homes comfortably to live in.

In some communities, women cannot inherit the properties of their deceased husbands. Infact, in such communities women are inherited as a son inherits his late father's youngest wife while a brother inherits his deceased brother's wife. It is unfortunate that women themselves by their timid and passive nature, tend to reinforce the myth of male superiority and dominance over them. Indeed the lots of women in the society have been very gloomy.

Thanks to modern civilization however that this ignoble trend is now being reversed. Women have now woken up to the realization that were created not as men's chattel but rather as men's partners; the feminine

gender is now conscious of its existence as Allah's creation to be men's alter ego but not part of their creation comforts.

At the turn of the 20th century, there grew the consciousness among women and even some men that women should be recognized as women as human beings who possess the same quality as men folk do so their rights should be accorded to them even if not as equals of men but as human beings. This awakening of the female consciousness gave birth to some movements as feminism, womanism, motherism and others which all seek to liberate women from the yoke of men domination.

In the early days of feminist movements, this arose in America and Europe, all that the women wanted were to be recognized in their own rights as human and to be treated accordingly. However, with growing awareness, proponents of feminine belief began to agitate for the same rights and opportunities as men: equality.

Women literary writers like Virginia Woolfe (USA) and Simone De Beauvoir (France) used their novels as vehicles for conveying the desires of women. At the tail end of the 20th century, other parts began to follow

the in the direction of the feminist movers in America and Europe. The African continent particularly; Nigeria was not left behind.

Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali and other female writers use their books to join in the clamor for the emancipation of women; some men joined in this effort. Thus, it is observed, the situation has changed for the better as the role of women all over the world has become redefined.

Today, women are no longer passive members of the society; they have risen above the image of docility and meekness in which they are hitherto known. It is true that for all practical purposes, the woman is still a house wife who bears children, cook and keep the house but it is equally true that the house wife also contributes financially to the family up keep; indeed, in some homes, the woman is the sole or major bread winner.

In these times, men do not look at women with disdain for women are now engaged in endeavors which were hitherto considered to be the sole prerogative of men. Today there are women engineers, women medical

doctors, women professors, women journalists, women authors, women pilots, women police, women soldiers, women politicians, senators, women governors, representatives; name any human endeavor and you will find women there.

Women have led some of the great countries of the world like India, Britain, Brazil, Pakistan, Germany (presently). In Nigeria there has been Sarah Jibril who was in the race for the country's presidency. Yes, women have come a long way in redefining their role. Women have forced men by sheer perseverance and success, to sit up and accord their proper place in the society.

Women are now being evaluated on the basis of their usefulness to the society rather than on their domestic dispositions. In the present times, there is lack of emphasis on ascribed status such as age, gender or any criterion of birth as legitimate bases for participation in public activities such as education, employment or occupancy of position of power and responsibility.

It may not be said that women are now have full equal opportunities as men because religion and culture have placed certain restrictions on the roles which women can play; nut it certainly be said that the role of women in Nigeria has been very well redefined. In urban areas, women have regained their voices through education and they are now recognized within their rights as capable human beings.

4.1 CONCLUSION

The situation which this research project has investigated is how the image and role of Nigerian women are being redefined; how the women are shedding the image of docility and meekness which traditions (and religion) have thrust upon them.

In the course of the research, the data collected and analyzed brought home some universal truth. One of these is that the Nigerian women had over the years been suppressed, marginalized, sanctioned and relegated into an ignoble situation in the society; that the Nigerian women had land still may be suffering, suffered many forms of degradation and deprivation at the hands of the men folk.

Another conclusion reached is that the Nigerian women particularly the educated ones are now consciously aware of the predicament which male chauvinism has thrown them into; women have now realized that if they do not stand up and fight for their rights, no one would fight for them and they would perpetually be under the men dominance.

The awareness of their misbe gotten situation in the society has caused the women to sit up and call attention to them; women have made great strides in the campaign for equality with men. Women have formed many feminist and joined non-feminist movements that would aid them in their call for equal rights and opportunities as the men have.

One further conclusion reached by this study is that women are succeeding in gaining some measures of freedom to engage in certain fields of human endeavor which were hitherto forbidden to them. Even in northern Nigeria where women have negligible access to western education, they still persevere to better their lot in spite of all odds stacked against them. It have been found that women engage in politics and even hold political offices in the executive arm of government, the

legislature; in the academic field there are women professors and senior lecturers; there are women medical doctors and consultants; there are women in engineering, architecture and survey which used to be considered as sole prerogatives of men.

Generally, women are rising to meet the challenges of life; they have thus far shed the traditional image of being docile, meek, weak, timid and shy. Women are now proving to men that it is not physical strength that matters but that stern resolves can achieve significant results.

The good thing is that men have sat up and taken notice; even in northern Nigeria where women are denied education and employment, the situation is fast changing for the better. Yes! The image and role of women in Nigeria have been redefined.

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