Prismatic Horizons
Journal of Social Science and Humanities
www.phjssh.lexarcheus.com
Vol.-03, Issue-04 (Oct-Dec, 2025)



Self-Discovery and Female Identity in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19071418

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received	12 Oct, 2025
Revised	22 Nov, 2025
Accepted	25 Dec, 2025
Available Online	30 Dec, 2025

ARTICLE ID
PHJSSH0304003

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Identity, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Education, Polygamy, Solidarity, Autonomy

ABSTRACT

The Stillborn by Zaynab Alkali presents a powerful exploration of the struggles faced by women within a patriarchal Nigerian society. The novel traces the experiences of Li, Awa and Faku as they attempt to negotiate restrictive cultural norms, marital oppression and economic dependence. Through the journey of its central protagonist, Li, Alkali portrays a process of self-discovery in which education, resilience and female solidarity become crucial tools of empowerment. The narrative exposes the emotional and social consequences of patriarchal institutions such as polygamy while also emphasising the importance of education and economic independence in transforming women's lives. By foregrounding issues of female identity, autonomy and empowerment, the novel reflects the broader concerns of African feminist discourse. *The Stillborn* illustrates how women can reclaim their agency and reconstruct their identities despite the constraints imposed by patriarchal traditions.

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Prismatic Horizons: Journal of Social Science and Humanities
ISSN: 2583-9284
Vol. 03, No. 04, Oct-Dec, 2025
www.phjssh.lexarcheus.com

INTRODUCTION

Zaynab Alkali is one of the leading writers from Islamic Nigerian society who has effectively broken the "silence" on the plight of women in it. Alkali, Hauwa Ali and other emerging northern Nigerian women writers who have been marginalised or secluded from the mainstream literary tradition and have been relegated a backseat in the contemporary literature of Hausaland have been trying to find their voices amidst the 'official silence' and express themselves through their creative writing. Alkali's first novel, *The Stillborn*, won the Association of Nigerian Authors' award for prose fiction in 1985 and has also been translated into several languages. She has widely explored the manner in which women are overburdened by discriminatory social, economic and religious structures and has suggested possible remedies to these constraints. In her texts:

> "…the burden of African womanhood comes from within and without, for women have internalized a socially constructed sense of self that causes them to accept, consciously or unconsciously the role of second fiddle (Mojola, 1997:127).

Zaynab Alkali states that a change of attitude in society is most indispensable to liberate women from patriarchy. Issues of female education, empowerment, female bonding and virtue occupy Alkali in her narrative. "In *The Virtuous Woman* and *The Stillborn* Alkali's pre-occupation is with the plight of young girls in a society where their only viable option for a long term emotional survival is to strive and achieve a meaningful education" (Kassam, 1997:119). *The Stillborn* encapsulates the shattered hopes of three adolescent girls who surmount the impossible and eventually seek a meaningful survival for themselves. Li, the main character, her sister Awa, and her friend Faku restructure their lives which have been fractured by patriarchal oppression.

Li represents "the latest generation of Africans eager for a measure of social freedom" (Bamikunle, 1986:12). She is not against tradition, but rebels against the restrictive and strict behaviour of her father, Baba, whose uncompromising Christian principles create tension between him and his children. Li sees him as a "dark shadow" which seeks to blot out her freedom by confining her to the house. Ironically, she gets along better with her aged grandfather, Kaka, who represents a dying tradition while Li represents modernity; she often wishes he were her father and wonders how such a "warm hearted man could have a heartless son like Baba".

The various conflicts in Nigerian society are portrayed through the life of Li and her family and the intergenerational conflict between Li and Baba is highlighted. "By condensing different cultural tensions into one family… She (Alkali) emphasizes the religious and cultural dilemmas facing multiethnic communities alongside challenges to established familial structures" (Kassam, 1997:119). The plot is an episodic narration of the interwoven stories of Li, her sister Awa and her childhood friend, Faku. The focus of the novel is Li's life story which unites the complex threads of societal relationships together.

The novel can be interpreted at two levels, firstly, it is the story of a nameless Nigerian village and the scores of nameless women like Li's mother, who suffer because they live in marginalised existence in a male dominated culture. Secondly, it is a female bildungsroman of a strong and assertive woman who overcomes the drawbacks of being a woman because of the education she has received and is determined to alter attitudes in her village. The title is very

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appropriate for the word "Stillborn" symbolises the aborted dreams of Li, Awa and Faku, and how young girls are not given the freedom to lead self-fulfilling lives.

This paper examines *The Stillborn* as a narrative of female self-discovery that foregrounds the struggle for identity within a patriarchal social order. It argues that through the experiences of Li, Awa and Faku, Zaynab Alkali highlights the importance of education, economic independence and female solidarity as essential means through which women can challenge oppressive structures and redefine their social roles.

This symbolic dimension of the title also reinforces the central concern of the novel with the thwarted aspirations of women within patriarchal societies. The metaphor of the "stillborn" extends beyond individual experiences and reflects the broader social reality in which women's dreams are frequently curtailed by rigid cultural expectations. Alkali therefore situates the personal struggles of her female characters within a larger critique of gender inequality, highlighting the urgent need for education, economic empowerment and social transformation in order to enable women to realise their full potential.

At the very outset of the novel we meet a restless Li who feels sick at the thought of returning to her prison like home for her annual holidays. The heat, dust and the recklessly driven lorry symbolise the rebellious streak in Li. Her legs feel numb as if someone is sitting on them but she manages to ward it off, "Thank God… at least my legs are free" (Alkali, 1984:5). The statement is very symbolic in conveying Li's quest for a life of her choice. She feels trapped and helpless but even in a fatigued state like hers, she does not lose hope. Her "free legs" reflect her gaiety at whatever little freedom she manages. She is addressed as "a monster", "a superbeing", "a river goddess" in the novel highlighting her reckless and spirited nature. She refuses to live like the 'caged bird' of Victorian fiction and is ready to fight sexual politics at all levels.

This rebellious impulse in Li's character can also be understood within the framework of the female bildungsroman, a narrative form that traces the psychological and moral growth of a female protagonist as she negotiates restrictive social structures. Li's desire for movement and freedom symbolically challenges patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices. The metaphor of "free legs" therefore becomes significant because it represents not only physical mobility but also intellectual and emotional independence. Through Li's defiance of paternal authority, Alkali presents the emergence of a new generation of African women who are willing to question inherited cultural norms and redefine their identities within a changing social environment.

Li is the original rebel, she defies her father to sneak out of the house to attend village dances and to meet her boy friend, Habu Adams in the woods. To realize her dream of the greater freedom of the city where she can find a job and be financially independent, she marries Habu Adams, who betrays her love and marries a city wife. After being abandoned by her husband for four years in the village, Li follows him to the city where she "found an unsmiling welcome awaiting her" (Alkali, 1984:69). She is mentally and physically abused by Habu, "He does not want me here… He treats me as he would treat a dog, with disgust…. What happiness will a child bring that was conceived in drunkenness and silence" (Alkali, 71-72)?

Her sister Awa is more conformist, who inspite of being maltreated by the headmaster eventually marries him replacing the tyranny of her father with that of her husband. Awa is a conventional thinker just like her mother who lives a subservient and non-existent life in her

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home playing her role in the shadows. The suppression of women like Li's mother is an outcome of their lack of economic power and partly because they still believe in silence as a golden rule. For Awa too, man is the substance while woman is his shadow. She bears a child every other year, her husband turns alcoholic, all the same, she is obstinate that, "a marriage with a child in it has to remain intact" (Alkali, 1984:86).

Running parallel to Li's rebellion is the story of her childhood friend, Faku who sees marriage as an escape from the horrendous life that she has led in the village. But she undergoes a psychic humiliation at the obnoxious affairs of her husband, Garba who further tortures her along with his first wife because she has only one child. "No Sule, if anyone of us did not mean to drift, it was Faku. She knew, where she was going but Garba could not understand. He failed to fill that vacuum" (Alkali, 1984:100). Unlike some city women who get into prostitution for commercial reasons, Faku engages in the trade to ease her tormented life. Alkali stresses that women like Faku are not intrinsically bad but victims of their vicious societies. She condemns a social order which prompts young women like Li and Faku to escape from oppressive environments by contracting hopeless and hasty marriages.

Both Li and Faku suffer because of the marital infidelity of their husbands who are insensitive to their feelings as reflected in the statement of Garba who said it is fashionable for city men to have more than one wife, "In the city, you do not have to live together in the same house. I have a friend who keeps four women in four different areas of the city. None of them know the other exists and they all slave for him" (Alkali, 1984:45). Alkali overtly denounces polygyny as it discourages true love in marriage, undermines the happiness of women and seeks to treat them like commodities. The situation of Li and Faku assumes a tragic dimension when they learn about their co-wives. Faku's "gaunt looks" and a "thin haggard face" is descriptive of the impact of polygynous life on African women.

Polygamy is the epitome of female denigration, exploitation and domination in West Africa. If 'home' represents the place where one is most at peace and at ease, the polygamous home is not home but hell for the co-wives and their children as tensions reign supreme, fuelled by envy, distrust, intrigues and all sorts of destructive passions (Mojola, 1997:28-29).

According to Kassam, "female subservience is not biologically produced but culturally imposed". Religious beliefs along with cultural practices often play their part in subjugating women. Even before the advent of Islam, polygamy had existed for centuries in Africa. Li's grand father, an animist marries four women. It is such religious practices and superstitions that also oppress women as they accept their denigration without questions. Polygyny signifies that their life is like that of a bird which is not allowed the freedom to fly and explore the skies.

Alkali's critique of polygyny therefore extends beyond the personal suffering of individual characters and exposes the structural inequalities embedded within patriarchal institutions. By portraying the emotional anguish and psychological insecurity experienced by women in polygynous marriages, the novel reveals how such arrangements often transform relationships into arenas of competition and resentment. Women are denied individuality and reduced to their reproductive and domestic roles, while their emotional needs remain unacknowledged. In this sense, Alkali's narrative challenges the romanticized perception of traditional marital systems and instead foregrounds the lived realities of women who must struggle for dignity and recognition within these social structures.

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Zaynab Alkali has given a psychological representation that a woman is culturally indoctrinated to her subordinate status from childhood and to survive, she needs a crutch in the form of a father, husband or son. Hereto, she demonstrates that women must refuse to be used as chattels. Li and Faku eventually realize this and take their destiny into their own hands by demanding a change in status quo.

Married at fifteen, abandoned by her husband and saddled with the responsibility of bringing up her daughter alone, Li gears up for a lonely future as she realizes that a woman who "spends the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master's plate" is doomed to suffer (Alkali, 1984:85). Mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and resilient but they rarely indulge in extravagant displays of maternal affection. Li does not have the time to molly-coddle her little daughter, she leaves her in the care of her mother and sister so she can study for a degree which will enable her to earn a better and decent livelihood for her daughter and herself and also make her self-reliant, giving her self-confidence and self-fulfilment.

Presenting the issues of female education, empowerment and virtue through the stories of Li and Faku, Alkali offers her heroine as a role-model worth emulation by young readers. Both Li and Faku transcend their situations by acquiring a meaningful education. At twenty-nine, Li successfully completes her Advanced Teacher's Certificate and returns to the village as an educated responsible individual, builds a large four bedroom house in her father's compound and is accepted as the head of the family when everyone in the village comes to condole with her on the death of her grandfather. Faku too revives her life after summoning up the courage to leave her husband, she acquires the necessary training to become social welfare worker, and finds fulfilment.

The relationship between Li and Faku and also Li, Awa and their mother illustrates how female bonding enables African women to create and articulate an Afrocentric feminine space. As mothers, sisters and friends, women affirm one another's humanity, specialness and the right to exist. "When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world" (Collins, 1991:97). Female solidarity and strong women's friendships arise from the practices of Hausa life and Alkali makes her strongest feminist statement through the affirmation of female education and the economic empowerment it provides, as necessary tools for social change and modernization.

The Stillborn at this level is essentially a novel of growth. The immature girls who sneaked out to meet their boy friends at night, have at the end of the novel matured into strong and resilient women, "Li had matured and in the process of maturing had become a person with a finer soul" (Alkali, 1984:94). Inspite of her self-assurance, Li is assailed by a sense of emptiness at times, "It wasn't just emptiness of bereavement but an emptiness that went beyond that. For ten years she had struggled towards certain goals. Now, having accomplished these goals she wished there was something else to struggle for" (Alkali, 102).

Alkali has made frequent use of dream imagery to delineate the growth in Li's stature. Her dream of going to the city, which was not realized when she married Habu is fulfilled when she returns to the city for professional training. At the end of the novel, Li has a dream where she advises her great grand daughter that even if some dreams are stillborn she should continue to dream and realise her aspirations, "…it is also important to remember that like babies dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn" (104). Li is discomforted at the thought of having conceived her daughter, Shuwa in a drunken

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intimacy with Habu. It is her dream that Shuwa would not be a 'stillborn' like Awa. Alkali stresses that a marriage of mutual love and respect gives birth to a healthy child, not a 'stillborn'.

African feminism seeks to create a harmonious society based on mutual respect and love between the sexes. Li leaves her husband because he cannot respect and love her. But Habu repents for his infidelity and begs for Li's forgiveness. Li is astonished that Li should even think of going back to a crippled husband and act as his crutch, "What then, you want to walk behind and arrest his fall? I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk" (Alkali, 104).

Alkali asserts that men and women are complementary. As husband and wife, they should think and act jointly and share their responsibilities without involving third parties. "A man must discard his pervasive habit of seeing a woman as a means of satisfying his excessive sexual propensity or a necessary complement to his social and economic functions" (Mojola, 1997:134). Hereto, the novel has a universal theme which is simply that life often does not turn out the way we want and in the end it is how we face it that counts.

In this context, Alkali's vision aligns closely with the principles of African feminism, which emphasizes negotiation, balance and mutual respect between the sexes rather than direct antagonism. African feminist thought often seeks to transform social relationships without dismantling the cultural frameworks within which communities exist. Alkali therefore portrays empowerment not as a rejection of men but as a reconfiguration of gender relations based on equality, dignity and shared responsibility. Li's personal journey from rebellion to self-realisation illustrates this perspective, suggesting that true liberation emerges when women acquire education, economic independence and the confidence to assert their identities within both the private and public spheres.

Like Jane Eyre accepts Rochester with the classic remark, "Reader, I married him" it is in this spirit of equality and understanding between man and woman that Li is willing to revive her marriage.

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