Cohesive Devices in Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*

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Abstract

Many scholars have criticized the language of Alkali's literary texts as simple and straight forward. But the question is what makes the language to be so? It is partly because of certain cohesive devices. In Discourse Analysis, there are various segments that are brought together to make a text unified and whole. These devices are encapsulated in literary texts particularly Alkali's The Descendants being analysed. When a text is properly held together as a unit, it is said to be cohesive. 'Cohesion' therefore, is one of the devices used by authors to hold a text together. It is therefore our intention in this presentation to study the cohesive devices that have made Alkali's texts to be widely acclaimed as cohesive using her latest novel, ***The Descendants*** *as a case study.*

Introduction

Fundamentally, linguistics is a field concerned with the nature of language and communication. It is apparent that people have been fascinated with language and communication for thousands of years, yet in many ways we are only beginning to understand the complex nature of this aspect of human life. Part of what Zaynab Alkali did was to communicate some salient messages using four of her novels that she has written namely: *The Stillborn* (1984), *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997) and *The Descendants* (2005). The central message in Alkali's fiction is the exploration of the female characters. She strongly believes that the female child should not be dependent on marriage as an answer to all her needs. The self-fulfillment of the female protagonist as achieved in her texts are by virtue of hard work as each character in all her works has to surmount traditional and cultural inhibition that attempt to relegate the female child to the status of perpetual dependence. The assertion above is justified in her texts and exemplified by these characters: Li in *The Stillborn*, Nana in *The*

Virtuous Woman, Mama in *Cobwebs and other stories* and Seytu in *The Descendants.* The achievements that are attained by these characters came through because of attitudinal developments and change of focus by each protagonist.

As a result of the above evaluation, Alkali has a major preoccupation in all her texts. Our intention therefore is to explore the cohesive devices that she has used that make her work so easily understood by readers by analyzing one of her latest novels; *The Descendants.*

Synopsis of *The Descendants*

The Descendants, published in 2005 is Zaynab Alkali's most recent and ambitious work. Her multiple narrative techniques which revolve round four main characters: Magira Milli, Aji Ramta, Prof. Zaki and Seytu; is complex and the character jostle for prominence. Even though the novel derives its title from the descendants of Magira Milli, who Aji refers to as the 'royal one', Aji Ramta is the centripetal force of the colony, while Prof Zaki's exemplary dedication to his calling and the welfare of the people in whose midst he is working is proofread by Alkali for commendation. However, it is actually Seytu's tale that Alkali narrates in *The Descendants.* In Seytu, Alkali tries to explore many issues that confront a woman in the society, especially from her own immediate society; Northern Nigeria. Some of the issues are the emancipating role of education, equity for the girl-child, independence and free choice for the woman, and the place of marriage in the life of a woman. Some of these themes she had earlier probed in her other previous novels such as using Li in *The Stillborn,* using Nana *in The Virtuous Woman* and Mama *in The Cobwebs.*

In this particular text under study, the characterization of Seytu further reiterates most of the values that Akali had partially explored in her earlier works. The major pre-occupation of Alkali in *The Descendants* is that of the woman acquiring a different world-view which education with its liberalizing influence can give someone especially the women folk so that they can be free from inhibitive cultural and social issues. To justify this position that education is the key that opens all doors to the girl child, in the text, Alkali asserts:

> *Magira Milli may be yesterday's woman, but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society. Ramta was not too far away from the major cities. She was a good listener who constantly tuned into her small transistor radio. She was also a watcher of events. She knew education is the master key to*

opportunities for a better life. Education opens doors and gives an individual options in life. She may have missed those options, but she wanted those options for her grandchildren, for she no longer had children, except Aji...
She realized belatedly that her late husband, the great Lawani Duna and herself, had made a mistake. The paramount chief of Ramta had believed more in royalty than education. He had not allowed his sons to go to school and so, they had not ventured out of their father's domain one by one, they had perished in that land of ignorance and superstitions, a land of poverty and disease. Only Aji who had traveled out to Borno to pursue an education, had escaped. She was ready to make amends by seeing that her grandchildren did not walk the same path of their fathers. They, unlike her sons, would have options and only education can offer them these options. That was why Magira Milli had seen to it that everybody went to school, including Seytu (13-15).

Education therefore, with its ability to awaking the consciousness and a change of people's perception, becomes a tool that Alkali explores to the fullest in determining the extent to which the woman can go in her assertiveness in a society that had hitherto literally caged her. This is the conscious move towards the redefinition of womanhood that Alkali started consistently in *The Stillborn.* When Li succeeded in life after making it without the help of her man; Habu Adams. She goes back to him even when there was no reason for her return. But her decision justifies the marriage institution because according to her, "every woman needs a man". Li's action therefore makes it obvious that for Alkali, as well as many emancipated African women, the quest for self-fulfilment and self-realization is not an advocacy for "a world without men", but a world in which equity is assured for each individual, male or female. However, critics have looked at Li's last and final step to go back to her husband as a disservice to 'sisterhood' and this singular action of hers has been criticized as one of Alkali's flaws. This same theme is enhanced and developed in *The Cobwebs* but from a more radical perspective. Alkali in *The Cobwebs* makes Mama, the heroine, to abandon literally her husband Aliyu, and her twin children and becomes pregnant for her campus consort; Imam.

In *The Descendants,* there is an extension of this same theme as Seytu, the protagonist, revolts against her second husband, Yerima Gamma and walks out of her matrimonial home. She later marries Col. Hassan without any indication that she has divorced Yeriman Gamma or that he

divorced her. The study: Cohesive Devices in *The Descendants* by Alkali is therefore an attempt to bring to limelight those elements/features that make the text to be unified and simple for the readership to understand the messages, she is trying to pass across.

What is Cohesion?

According to Chalker and Weiner (1994:68), cohesion has to do with grammatical or lexical relationships that bind different parts of a text together. Similarly, Osisanwo (2003:31) defines cohesion as the linguistic means by which a text functions as a single unit. The implication of these two definitions is that everything that makes a text to be whole or single unit is a cohesive device. When we therefore talk about cohesion in texts, we are talking about how actual texts like the one under study; *The Descendants* by Alkali is held together lexically and grammatically. There are certain linguistic devices used in relating segments and bits of a text to one another. These linguistic devices are called cohesive devices. In the study of languages, there are so many of such devices but our interest is in the English language. We shall therefore be looking at cohesive devices that are predominant in *The Descendants*.

Halliday and Hassan (1976), outline taxonomy of types of cohesive relationship which can be formally established within a text. It is these outlines that we shall use to analyze *The Descendants*.

Cohesive Devices

From the two definitions of cohesion earlier given by Chalker and Weiner (1994), and Osisanwo (2003), two words/terms are glaring. The two words are: *grammatical* and *lexical* relations. Our primary interest therefore is to look at the lexical devices in *The Descendants* and we shall begin with what this term means.

Theoretical Framework/Analysis

Lexical Device

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of the text under study is that of lexical device as one aspect of cohesive device. The question is what is Lexical Device? This involves making use of the characteristics and features of words as well as the group relationships among them. It is important to stress here that there are two main types of Lexical Device. They are: *Reiteration* and *collocation*. The diagram below summarizes what we are trying to do in *The Descendants*.

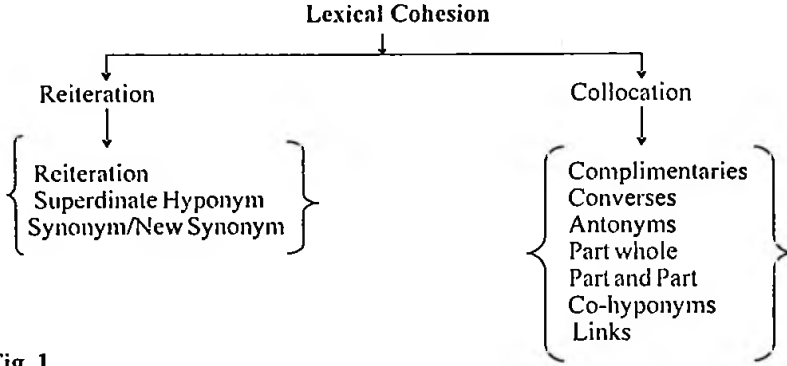


Fig. 1

A. **Reiteration**

This is the first class of lexical cohesion that we are looking at in *The Descendants*. It is one fundamental feature that leads to the formal cohesiveness and patterning of texts. It means saying or doing something several times. As a lexical device, it manifests in the following three ways: *Repetition, superordinate/hyponymy* and *synonymy.*

Repetition: This is a situation where words are repeated so many times and it is a prominent device in the novel. In *The Descendants*, the following words *Four years, Yesterday, Doctor, Hospital, Grandchildren, Butcher, Child, Get-together, together, tonight* are repeated so many times in the text. We shall just exemplify with some due to time and space.

One evening, just before the group converged in the courtyard for the usual story telling and gossip session, there was an unusual argument between Aji Ramta and his Mother, Magira Milli that made the word butcher to be repeated so many times.

What worried the old woman ran deeper than just her granddaughter getting married to a butcher whom she disliked (12). *She sighed heavily*, a *butcher* (13).

The above scene gives us the picture of the kind of hatred that Magira Milli has for the *butcher*. The word *'butcher'* again came to limelight in the text when Peni had put to bed and was no longer breast feeding her baby.

> *She began to look radiant, she was no longer the gawky looking girl but a full rounded matured woman with wide hips. The butcher suddenly became amorous* (31).

> *When Magira Milli was praying for the entire household mentioning their names, one after the other, when she*

mentioned Peni; the daughter of Abdullahi, she said: Deliver her from the dirty paws of the butcher (73).

On one of the days when Seytu was discomforted about the presence of her cousin sister and her kids in her house, she has this to say/think about Peni's children:

> *The butcher's boys kept on sneaking into the kiosks, from wherever they were living, to collect money from the smaller boys. ...The bucher's sons, all grown up now were bad news* (158).

In one of Peni's painful memories, she has this to say against her uncle:

> *...Aji Ramta, she was encouraged to marry that lousy village butcher. Peni refused deliberately to acknowledge the role Magira Milli had played in interrupting her union with the butcher, and the fact that she herself, had opted out for the marriage* (159).

The repetition of the word 'butcher' has made us to know who the butcher is, what he does and how others assess him in the text and perhaps in the society.

'*Operation*' is another word that is repeated so many times in the text as shown below:

> *...in twenty-four hours, she was to undergo her second operation, and she was feeling extremely nervous.* (40)

> *Seytu was determined more than ever, to have a successful operation for a reason which had been a secret pleasure for her. (40). Now, the operation had to succeed for her and Hassan. It would be the third operation to repair her damaged vaginal walls. ...with what she knew and felt in her heart, the most important issue in her life right now was a successful operation and a wholesome recovery.* (42)

> *Seytu sat sullenly by Milli's side. Her operation had been postponed again by a few months; due to some urgent cases.* (57)

The word '*operation*' was also mentioned when Magira Milli was praying for each and everyone in the family and when it got to Seytu's, she said:

...Seytu, the daughter of Ilia, her affiliation pulls at my heart strings. Grant her successful operation and cure her. (73)

Also towards the middle of the novel, the word '*operation*' is used by Professor Alman Zaki. In Professor Zaki's words:

The second operation was a wise decision (107).

He just hoped that the colonel will survive this last *'operation'*

. ... one is on a life support, and the other would soon be on the theatre table for another operation. (109)

Synonymy: This is another way that lexical device manifests in the novel to achieve cohesion. It has to do with getting words that have the same meanings or words/expressions that are almost the same in meaning as exemplified below:

Aji Ramta's household, however, never a quiet one, was a rowdy centre of activities (15).

From the above, if a household is not a quiet one it was a rowdy one. The expression "never a quiet one" therefore is synonymous with "rowdy centre".

Having failed to stop the marriage, she was intent to break it up (26).

From above, the words, 'stop' as used in the context is synonymous to 'break'.

Isa: *Where is my Cap?*
Meramu: *In the hut*
Isa: *Bring it here.*

The word 'cap', a noun from above is synonymous with 'it' a pronoun. Other examples in the text are:

Aji went to the ward to see Usman. The man lay immobile and fixed his eyes on the ceiling. (69).

He enthrusts his wife, Mero and the unborn child to me (75).

She needed friendliness in her home, pleasant atmosphere,

not this acidic eroding atmosphere (154).

She had looked beautiful and elegant in the hall (143).

Super-ordinate/Hyponymy

This is the third way that **reiteration** helps us to achieve lexical cohesion in the novel. Super-ordinate has to do with words used as umbrella terms under which some others exist. Walker and Weiner (1994: 385) define the term as words that operate at some other level than another which is subordinate to it. Thus *animal* for example is super-ordinate to a *tiger* and *Kangaroo* and the word *furniture* is super-ordinate to *chairs*. In the text being analyzed, situations of super-ordinate/hyponymy did not really appear. However, here is one example:

She had lost sons, in the past... including a grandson. (10)

From above, we have tried to justify the presence of *reiteration* as a lexical device for achieving cohesion in the novel being analyzed, we shall now try to justify the presence of types collocation.

B. Collocation

This is the second class of lexical cohesion. Collocation has to do with some words moving very closely together in discourse where the mention of one brings to mind the other one or members of their group. For example, in a gathering, when someone says "ladies and...," the word *'gentlemen'* is often used to complete the phrase to have "ladies and gentlemen". This is so because the two words collocate. There are seven collocational types in discourse, as seen in figure I that we had shown. We shall therefore analyze few examples of these collocational types from the passages in the novel.

What we see in the presentation above is like a marked or rigid division in classifying lexical cohesion. According to Halliday (1970: 88), the truth is that, there are many instances of cohesive and lexical forms, which lie on the border line between two types and could be interpreted as one or the other.

The implication of the above expression is that we may have overlaps where one expression may be an antonym and the same expression may be a converse etc. We shall now use the above frame to bring out the different collocational types, beginning with:

Complimentaries: From the word 'complimentaries', it means words that complement each other or one another. A few examples from the novel are:

Malam Isa and Meramu were still glued together (7).
One by one, they emerged from their huts (8).
She would creep quietly to where Mairiga Milli sat (9).
One by one, they had perished in that land of ignorance and superstitions, a land of poverty and disease (14).
Hauwa stood up abruptly (16).
Their wagging tongues would have nothing to gossip about this time. (48)
As big as you are, you still lie on your grandmother's lap. (63)
One studied engineering while the other architecture. (135)

Converses: According to Cruse (2004:167), converses are also often considered to be a sub-type of directional opposite. They are sometimes paradoxically considered to be a type of synonym. These are words that are like opposites of each other. In the novel under study, there are so many converses that Alkali has used. We shall therefore consider a few examples:
Aji was teaching older people how to read and write (15).
She backed out of the door and dashed behind her mother/s hut (21).
They lived weak and died weak. (24)
The two exchanged greetings coldly and politely. (152)
She knew for sure that some of the older boys were drinking and gambling heavily. (158)

Antonyms: According to Ukwuegbu et al (2002:122), antonyms are words that are or nearly opposites in meaning. There are a few examples in the novel under study.

... Her voice rose and fell (10).
... She could not tell light from darkness (19).
Adam's face fell. He shared every victory and every failure with his master who actually was like a father to him (109).
She wondered if someone had unwittingly stepped on the tubs of the "small but mighty" (116).

Part/Whole: These are words where there is a part and a whole of an item used in the same sentence. An example will suffice here.

- *The herbalist and his team took care of all the patients.* (57)

Part/Part: These are words that have different parts to a particular item or situation. We have scanty examples of this collocational type in the text. The few seen are:

Even though he was tall, he was also potty and shambled as he walked (12).

Still his mother was not satisfied and always brought him down in the hearing of his wife and all the children around him. Sometimes too, in the hearing of the houseguests who respected him so much (24).

Co-Hyponyms: The word 'hyponym,' according to Cruse (2004: 148), is one of the most important structuring relations in the vocabulary of a language. The example of this type of relation is *apple* and *fruit, car* and *vehicle, slap* and *hit*. We therefore, say that *apple* is an hyponym of *fruit*. But the word we are describing is *co-hyponyms*. Co-hyponym therefore means hyponyms that are in company. The text under review has many examples of co-hyponyms.

Moreover, Magira disliked loud, boisterous men with a passion (12).
For days, she was plagued with all manner of illnesses, vomiting, rashes, and severe diarrhoea being the commonest (19).

He sat on his reclining chair and yawned and groaned and stretched. (49)

May our enemies stumble, fall, and break their necks before they carry out their evil plans (74).

A hardworking, quick witted, resourceful, and astute business man (116).

She had tastefully furnished her bedroom, her private parlour, and her children's two bedrooms for when they visited (152).

Conclusion

What we have tried to show in this paper are the cohesive devices which we consider have made Alkali's novels simple and straight forward for her reader. From the diction, we have looked at various examples that have bearing with reiterational types and collocational types. The examples that we used have shown that the way sentences and expressions are structured in a text contribute a great deal to our understanding of the meaning of a fictional prose. We must however quickly mention here that

the examples chosen to illustrate each facet of our discourse are in no way exhaustive. They are even sometimes limited and somehow arbitrary. Yet, we believe that the areas that we have touched or brought out as examples have tried to bring out the cohesiveness in Alkali's *The Descendants*.

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