THE SEMIOTICS OF FRONT COVER DESIGNS IN LITERARY TEXTS: A STUDY OF ZAYNAB ALKALI'S TEXTS

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of semiotics according to Halliday and Hassan (1985: 3) derives initially from the concept of the signs and the modern words that back the term are semianon, semainomenon, which means signifier, signified, used in ancient Greek linguistics by the stoic philosophers. The stoics were the first to evolve a theory of the sign in the 3rd – 2nd century B.C. and the conception they had of the linguistic sign was already well advanced along the lines in which it was developed two thousand years later in the word of Ferdinand de Saussure.

Semiotics can therefore be defined as the general study of signs. As the study of signs, it is sometimes restricted to non-linguistic communication including possibly body language and the kinds of visual sign and symbol that 'translate' into words. For example, traffic signs and signals, company logos and such old established signs as a barber's pole or a billboard indicating a hospital, school etc. In other words, the primary function of signs is communication (verbally or non-verbally). Communication, as it is often defined, is a process of passing information (message) from one person (communication) to the other (receiver), if it does this in a cultural milieu. The means of communication, whether oral, written from one culture context to the other. There is one limitation that has usually been apparent in the history of this conception of the sign, which makes it to be seen as an isolate, as

a thing in itself before it comes to be related to other signs. This is also seen in the work of Saussure, despite his strong conception of language as a set of relationships, this rather atomistic conception of the linguistic sign is still there. That was why Halliday and Hassan (1985: 3) modified the above definition of semiotics by saying that it is the study of sign systems, that is, the study of meanings in its most general sense, instead of considering it as a study of signs.

From the background above, linguistics then is a kind of meaning other than through language because there are many modes of meaning which are outside the realm of language. This will include both art forms such as painting, sculpture, music, the dance, front and back cover designs of literary texts and other modes of cultural behaviour that are not classified under the heading of forms of art, such as: modes of exchange, modes of dress, structures of the family and so forth. These are all bearers of meaning in the culture.

Our intention in this paper, therefore, is to show the inter connectivity between complexly interwoven areas of study; semiotics and semantics using the front cover designs of Zaynab Alkali's first novel. *The stillborn*, and her latest and most recent book *The Descendants*.

Text 1: The Stillborn
Author: Zaynab Alkali
Genre: Prose

Sign or symbol used in the front cover: A photograph of a young girl.

Signifiers: What is contained in the illustration. A young girl with a wrapper tied round her waist. She is wearing on her head a scarf;

she is sitting down on a local mat, bending her head in a thinking mood with unpeeled groundnuts spread before her on a mat.

The Signified: Makes reference to what the sign and signifiers mean. It deals with semantics, what the symbols mean.

or through any other symbolic system has to be culturally contextualised. In other words, it is culture bound, hence the differences between one mode of communication ANALYSIS
The story told by the author at the back cover page says that The Stillborn confronts the problems facing a young girl in rural Nigeria who is torn between village life and the lure of the city. Through a woman's eyes, we follow one girl's passage to womanhood and struggle for independence.

A critical look at the front cover will make us see the agony of a young girl; Li, who is lonely and who is in a deep thought about herself and what the future holds for her especially as it pertains her marriage. Her posture is therefore that of thought due to the confusion she is in because she has been abandoned in the village for four years by her husband, Habu. This situation of abandonment as we shall come to discover later in the text did not prepare her for the emotional abandonment that is to follow her in the city. She, (Li) acknowledges that:

> She had lost her man to the city this man wasn't the man she used to roll this with on the sand in front of her father's compound. The man lying on the other side of the room was a well dressed stranger who did not talk to a village woman (P.70).

The same picture and posture is captured in the text thus:

> Four years later, Li, a young woman of nineteen, sat still on a mat, her legs

> crossed in a meditative position, resting her chin on her palm of her right hand, she sat like that for a long time. Finally, she shook her head sadly. Drawing a calabash of groundnuts in front of her, she started shelling them... (56).

The picture therefore tells us of a girl of nineteen who uses her posture and meditative mood to think and reflect; and from her thinking and reflection, we are able to see some of the things that happens in the text through the technique of flashbacks. "As her finger worked, her mind went back over the last four years when her life and hopes had been different from what they are now", (P.56).

It is from this posture of Li that we are able to know more about Baba, Kaka, Sule and Alhaji Bature. We are also able to know more details about the other female characters that Alkali uses to send across her message in *The Stillborn*. The female characters are Awa, Faku and Li herself. We are able to see from this picture and posture how Faku had caught the city fever. She announces Garba's intention to marry her and settles in the city. According to her, Garba is tired of the village and yearns to go back to civilisation. It is this posture and photograph that helps us know Awa's position and dream about life as she says:

> Yes, daughter of my – mother, we need not to go the city. The city will come to us. The government will soon take over all schools and hospitals. That means rapid development... (P.56).

This picture and posture of Li also helps us to know that for the first time, Li also voices her views carefully while others listen with rapt attention. She (Li) also saw the picture of herself in the city with her husband as she spoke:

> The qualified doctor, the Grade I teacher, the big European house, full of servants, the smooth body, the long silky hair, there was no end to the luxuries the city could offer. The future was in their hands... (57).

It is from this picture and posture that we see Li's sober reflections when she voices out what has happened to her. How her dreams has been affected. Shortly after her bride price has been paid by Habu's family members soon after the dance that brings them together, Habu has told her that he has to get a job first in the city and having found the job, he has written to say "as a salesman, I am always travelling. You will be alone in the city, so wait at home until I send for you (P.57)". Two years after Habu had gone and he has not come to take her to the city, fresh suitors begin to come to her. Principal among them is the famous Alhaji Bature who represents the class of men that the author is writing against.

The picture and posture of Li as we see in the front cover page helps us know the type of sympathy that Li draws for herself because as she passes the men, they would shake their heads and say "what man in his senses will leave a woman like this behind? If he isn't capable, there are capable men around (P.57).

Alkali also uses this posture and picture to reel out to us the wickedness, selfishness and the male ego in men; one of her major pre-occupation in this text is feminism. Li herself describes Alhaji Bature thus:

> He was a greedy, selfish man who spread his wealth to get what he wanted even at the cost of other people's happiness. He was a cunning, dirty man who showed no

> interest in a woman until another man did... (P.64).

With all that has happened to her, it is four years now and the picture and pensive mood we see Li in makes her to take the bull by the horn because after waiting for her man who refuses to come for her, the aftermath of this mood is that Li is launched shortly after this into a new stage of her life i.e. going to the city to meet her man: Habu Adams.

We are also able to see from this picture the estranged relationship between Li and her father even while on his sick bed. Alkali tells us:

> The few times she had been there, Baba had simply stared at her. At first, she couldn't read the meaning of his looks, but gradually, she realised that he would rather not have her around. It was then that Awa was sent for (P.58).

The father on his sick bed had not forgotten how delinquent Li has been that he prefers the presence of Awa around him than Li. That was why they had to send for Awa to come and take care of him.

This same posture of Li also makes us know more details about Sule. We are able to see the supposed promiscuity and what happens to him thereafter. It is this posture that makes us know that Sule was disowned by his father when he is accused of sleeping with a girl that brings about the birth of an unplanned child named Bala. Even though Sule has denied knowing anything about it, this did not prevent Baba from placing a curse on him and disowning him. It is from this posture of Li that we know how

Sule leaves the village and 'enters the world'. We are also able to see how Kaka, the grandfather feels about the whole episode concerning Sule and his reaction against Baba's (Sule's father's) harsh position as he says "cursed be me, he wailed that I should live to see the day a man child is disowned for proving his manhood, (59).

Through this same picture and posture of Li, we are able to know the villagers and others' gossip about other peoples businesses and affairs. This is exemplified thus:

> Whose daughter is that? A man from the other side of the river had asked, "Ah that, she's Baba Garu's daughter still at home? The man asked again yes four years, waiting for her husband... (P.60).

It is this thinking stage that we see of Li in the front cover that marks the end of one stage of her life in preparation for the next phase of her life. Because not long after this posture of Li, three months one week later, she finally goes to the city to meet her husband; Habu Adams in the company of Umoru; Habu's younger brother who took her to the city.

Text 2: The Descendants
Author: Zaynab Alkali
Genre: Prose

Signs or symbols in the front cover:

1) A photograph of an elderly woman
2) A photograph of a young woman
3) Photographs of tharched roofed houses and zinc houses.

Signifiers: (What is contained in the illustration).

1) The first photograph of front which is that of the elderly woman signifies the grandmother. She is by name Magira Milli. She covers herself with a veil;

2) The second photograph, which is behind that of the grandmother is that of a young woman by name Seytu, who wears a laboratory coat with a stethoscope hanging on her shoulders. This signifiers that she is a medical Doctor.

3) The buildings; two types: 1. Thatched roofed houses signify traditional buildings; 2. Zinc roofed houses signify modern buildings.

The Signified: Makes reference to what the signs and signifiers mean. That deals with semantics, otherwise known as meaning. It is therefore our intention to use the signs and signifiers to analyse and derive some meanings from the text.

ANALYSIS:

1) Magira Milli – As a woman in control:

The first picture in front of the cover page is that of Magira Milli. She is the centripetal force of the 'colony'. She is again, the matriarch's of the Ramta family. From the way she positions herself in the picture at the front cover page, she is at the fore-front of the affairs of things in her family. In other words, she is in control of things in the family. She justifies this through many of her actions that are mentioned: first, when Peni, Aji's niece, was to be removed from school and given as a wife to the village chief butcher, and lord of the Abattoir, she is not happy; she is totally outraged. She argues with her son (Aji) mover of the plight of the young woman, insisting that Peni should not be removed from school; she should wait for a better offer or better still to continue with her education. She tells Aji to make sure that Peni does not

develop interest in the meat man, Madu Chimba, because according to her, 'he is no man' (P. 11). The picture represents so many things about her as shown below.

As a Matriarch

To Magira Milli and from her status and position as the matriarch of her family, it would have looked better and more tolerable if the man Peni is to marry were to be young and aspiring like the head teacher, T. K. or the young Doctor at MMH. Who often hangs out with T K if any of her child often gets married to Madu Chimba it would remind her of too much of the past; too much of Ramatu; and the life of poverty and ignorance, which they has lived in for far long and she never wishes that she or any of her son or grandson should go back to. She therefore hates with every passion the idea of Peni getting married to a butcher. She says it, she shows it, she acts it and she voices it for every body to know that she never supports peni's wedding plans to marry a butcher.

As a woman with responsibilities

From the way she positions herself in the picture, she is presented as a woman weighed down by an enormous responsibility. Her reading, in Makulpo, on the other side of the river, was not an accident. A few years ago (eleven years to be specific) she has fled from the land of her ancestors in Ramta with Aji, thereby uprooting her grandchildren from their ancestral home with the hope of giving them a fresh start. Alkali makes us know her own mind when she says that "the least she could do for them (her grandchildren) was to encourage them to go to school, (13)". That way later in life, they could make the choice on their own, either to remain where they are, or to reconnect to their home land, Ramta, but according to her, she has to do it and because Alkali believes that education is the key that opens all doors to the girl child, she says this of Magira Milli:

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> Magira Milli may be a yesterday's woman, but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society... she knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. Education open doors and gives an individual options in life... she may have missed those options, but she wanted those options for her grand children, for she no longer had children, except Aji..... and only education can offer them these options. That was why Magira Milli had seen to it that everybody went to school, including Seytu, (P.13 – 15).

As a pace-setter

The picture Magira Milli that we see in the frontispiece gives us the impression of a woman who sets the pace. To justify this assertion, when Peni runs home as a result of her being beaten by her husband, and Aji scolds her for coming home, when he says:

> A little beaten from your husband and you ran back home like a spoilt child. If your mother had run away each time your father had beaten her, would you have been born? Answer me that one? What are you doing to me? What have I ever done to this village that you seek to spoil my good name? tell me, why you can't remain quite in your husband's house like other married women? (P.21).

It is while Aji Ramta is ranting against Peni's action that Magira Milli has to call him to order as she says:

> Leave her alone, Aji, leave the poor child alone. If you are blind, are you also deaf? The pagan brute is even worse than I thought. He mistakes the child for one of his beasts. He is no good. I warned you before that that man was no good. Does a man walk eyes open straight into lion's den? Had I not seen it from the beginning that my grandchild is going to meet a fate worse than that of that good woman the butcher had sent scurrying into an asylum? And now to cover your shame, brought about by you and your wife's greed, you ask that child to take a little beaten for your sakes, (P.22 – 23).

As a God fearing/Prayerful woman

The picture at the frontispiece also shows Magira Milli as a God fearing and prayerful woman. She does this by kneeling on a prayer mat, her hands raised to heaven, and supplicates rather desperately, calling her children and names them one after the other to The Almighty one asking him to do some specific things for each and every one of them. The sample of her prayer is below:

> On God, Milli before you calling you to look down and have mercy on her, her children, her children's children and their children... make Aji strong and prosperous may Aji's offspring populate Makulpo and from the Ramta dynasty. May my descendents be conquerors and inheritors. Peni, daughter of Abdullah, help her lord. We both know that she married wrongly. Deliver her from dirty paws of the butcher.

> Aji shakes his head; give her a husband like the head teacher... (P.72 – 74).

As a Dreamer

The picture of MAgira Milli standing in front of Seytu in the front cover page gives us a posture of a woman who dreams and who is prepared to make her dreams come alive, particularly, when it has to do with the lady that is standing at her back in the frontispiece; Seytu. Having prayed that God should grant Seytu a successful surgical operation and cure her, and her desire that she wanted Seytu to compete with the doctors in Makulpo hospital, she was willing to "help God" actualise this dream by forcing Seytu to be focused, realising as stated earlier that it is only education that could give Seytu options in life. We are not therefore surprised when at last, Seytu becomes one of the highly reputable medical doctors, and Hawwa becomes "Justice Hawwa Lawani".

2) Settu Umma

The second picture in the front cover page is that of a lady dressed in a laboratory coat with a stethoscope hanging upon her neck. She is from the picture, a medical doctor of paediatrics. Her name is Seytu. She is one of the principal characters in the text. Through her, Alkali is able to make us know her radical shift from the old liberal feminist theory to the radical feminist theory.

Alkali has used Li in *The Stillborn* to forcefully propagate her liberal feminist idea. She has also used Nan Ai in *The Virtuos Woman* and now Seytu in *The Descendant*. In all these instances, education is and has been a very strong tool in empowering the women. The norms of the Nigerian societies portrayed in Alkali's texts are clearly male oriented. The same norms have dictated that it is useless and unheard of to educate girls because as soon

as they are married, they cease to belong to their families. Nana Ai, for example, comes from a social milieu where a man believes that:

> There is no use sending a female child to school, if she turns out well, the man she marries get the benefit of her education. If she gets spoilt in the school, I get the blame. It's my name that gets dragged into the mud. It's my house that becomes her refuse. Which ever way you look at it, the father of a female child is the loser. Let the girls stay at home and help their mother, when it is time for them to marry, let them marry, (P.47).

The same negative conception of womanhood and the education of the girl child runs through Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuos Woman, Cobwebs and other stories* and her most recent work *The Descendant*. In *The Descendant*, the author treats, in detail, the unjust, discriminatory and wicked practices levied against women in their search for better learning opportunities. Alkali's major message in these collections is that, lack of a higher degree has reduced the African woman's chances of occupying higher positions in the society than the man. Alkali seems to be crying out that a woman needs to acquire a higher status in life through her education.

Seytu as an Over-comer/an Achiever

The picture of Seytu that we see in the front cover gives us an idea of an over-comer and an achiever despite all the obstacles before her, particularly because of her marriage, she becomes what Ojinmah and Egya (2005: 148) call the new voice for a redefinition of Alkali's version of feminism.

Looking at the picture of Seytu that is in the front cover once again makes us to look at her past, before she becomes a medical doctor that we see in the front cover page. She had been a victim of early marriage. She marries at thirteen; she is hurt and abandoned by an old man at fifteen because the man finds out that her virginal walls had been damaged while giving birth to his child. She endures the shame of the affliction and with the support and encouragement of her grandmother, Magira Milli, whose picture is in front of Seytu's. she begins to attend school with children. At the school certificate level, she comes out with seven credits and three distinctions. She later went to the medical school and came out with a second class upper division. She had also won the award for the best student in paediatrics.

All these feats by Seytu are answers to the matriarch, Magira Milli's prayer, that she wants seytu to "compete with the doctors in Makulpo hospital, (P.73)".

Seytu as an independent/Liberated Lady

The photograph of Seytu that we see in the front cover page is that of a woman who is engrossed in her career that she does not care about marriage. She would only wish to marry on her own terms. Alkali was able to make her reactive radicalism an shift inherent in seytu's action pf walking out of her second married with Yeriman Gwamma without a proper divorce and entering and formalising another marriage with a military officer, Colonel Hassan. Seytu's action, therefore, is a clear indication that the new woman in Alkali's fiction is prepared if possible to disregard both marriage and traditional institutions that have been the stumbling blocks to their self-identity and accomplishments.

Seytu as a Model

The picture of seytu that is in the front cover page is the type that presents Seytu as a model. In the text, it said that:

She was a model for young and aspiring men and women, a symbol of growth and progressive womanhood. She has left Ramta, a young disabled girl, with little hope, and has come back a conquer, (222). She can sit among the very important personalities due to her social status. Her daughter becomes a Minister: Hon. Justice Hawwa Lawani at 38 years old, in President Jojo's cabinet, she also became the Chief Medical Director (CMD) in Aiman Zaki State University, Garpella.

The pictures we see in front of the cover pages are therefore suggestive of the kinds of things we see in the text. The pictures therefore have meanings that should be decoded.

Seytu: A Woman Conscious of her beauty

The picture of Seytu in the front cover page also depicts or shows a woman who is conscious of her beauty. This is exemplified in the following excerpt:

> Seuty, the daughter of Ilia, emerged from Dala's hut, carrying a hot dish of food for the men. The optimistic young woman was elegant and smooth of complexion. She was blessed with a charming personality and magnetic charisma. She swung her hips and thrust her head backwards as she walked, conscious of her beauty. She was greatly humorous and laughed easily, revealing a set of white sparkling teeth with a slight gap in the middle, (P.8).

3) The House

The third picture we see in the front cover page are the houses. There are two types of houses shown in the cover page. The first

s the traditional roof thatched houses which symbolise traditional ifestyle. The second is the modern buildings which symbolise vesternisation. There is, therefore, the movement from the raditional to western cultures in the text. This is, still, symbolised n the character of seytu backed up by Magira Milli. The picture of he houses therefore show or symbolise one of the major hematic pre-occupations of Alkali in her texts. For example, in *The Stillborn*, we see the movement by Li to the city for education nd in *The Descendants* this same theme is re-echoed through he character of seytu as she moves to attain higher heights.

CONCLUSION

he age we are now is the edge where people are in a hurry to et things done. Most times, we have discovered that our steners, watchers, admirers, audiences do not usually have nough patience to wait for us to explain all that we have to say. eople usually look for short cuts or the fastest ways of getting to heir destinations or getting things done. This is fast becoming of ur tradition and culture. We observe that there are different vays of communication. It could be through verbal and non-erbal codes. The exercise conducted in this article, looking at the emiotics of front cover designs in literary texts have shown that he pictures we see in front of literary texts are signifiers that hould help us to understand the signified. The pictures we see in ront of the cover pages are; therefore, suggestive of the kinds of hings we see in the text. The pictures; therefore, have meanings nat should be decoded. If this does not happen, then something s wrong. As communicators, the symbols that we put at the front f our texts should be such that will communicate our major hemes. This is what Zaynab Alkali has done in the texts used for nalysis.

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