

Privately  
Empowered



# Privately Empowered

*Expressing Feminism in Islam  
in Northern Nigerian Fiction*



Shirin Edwin



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- D* Ali, Hauwa. *Destiny*. Enugu: Delta Fiction, 1988.
- SA* Gimba, Abubakar. *Sacred Apples*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1994. Also published in the United States as *Golden Apples*. New York: Vantage Press, 1997. Citations in *Privately Empowered* refer to the latter edition.
- TD* Alkali, Zaynab. *The Descendants*. Zaria: Tamaza, 2005.
- TS* Alkali, Zaynab. *The Stillborn*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1984.
- TVW* Alkali, Zaynab. *The Virtuous Woman*. Ikeja: Longman, 1987.



## A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

For romanization of words and phrases in Modern Standard Arabic, I have used the system outlined in the American Library Association–Library of Congress (ALA-LC). For African languages such as Hausa, Swahili, and others, I have italicized the words and parenthetically provided their meanings wherever necessary.



## Introduction



# Conjugating Feminisms

## African, Islamic as African-Islamic Discourse

Fiction is an act of willfulness, a deliberate effort to reconcile, to rearrange, to reconstitute nothing short of reality itself. Even among the most reluctant and doubtful of writers, this willingness must emerge. Being a writer means taking the leap from listening to saying, “Listen to me.”

—Jhumpa Lahiri

Islamic feminism is the unwanted child of political Islam.

—Ziba Mir-Hosseini

I focus on Arab women’s autobiographies and novels because it is there that one can most clearly see the individual creating alternative realities.

—miriam cooke

In 2001, Amina Lawal, a thirty-one-year-old Muslim peasant from Katsina State in northern Nigeria, was arrested on charges of adultery and sentenced to death-by-stoning, as laid down in the *shari‘a* or Islamic law.<sup>1</sup> She appealed the death sentence for two years before being acquitted by an Islamic appeals court in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Lawal’s case was not unique. The previous year, Safiya Husseini, another Muslim woman from Sokoto in northern Nigeria, was convicted on similar charges and condemned to death before being acquitted by an Islamic appeals court. Not unpredictably, details of these cases, especially the death sentence and the method, death-by-stoning, attracted the ire of the international community, from

international human rights groups, including women's rights organizations, to nongovernmental agencies, raining fire and brimstone on the purportedly archaic laws observed by twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states that have adopted Islamic law.<sup>3</sup> For years following these cause célèbres, European and American media scrutinized them as emblematic of the savagery sanctioned by Islam in northern Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after the international outcry over Lawal's and Hussein's cases, Islam in Nigeria found itself at the center of another storm when protests by conservative Islamic groups erupted against hosting the Miss World pageant in Abuja in 2004, believing the event would corrupt women's modesty. Famously, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka not only condemned the "Muslim fanatics" who opposed hosting the pageant on Nigerian soil as "psychopaths of faith" bringing "disrepute to the religion of Islam" by indulging in a "murderous orgy" to stop the beauty pageant, but also burnished his descriptions by calling Muslims "zealots," "religious stormtroopers," and "atavists of religion," among other invectives, who butchered innocents in the name of Islam and Muhammad.<sup>5</sup> More recently, in April 2014, Islam in Nigeria took center stage again for the infamous kidnapping of over two hundred schoolgirls from their boarding school in Chibok in northern Nigeria; they had been abducted by the terrorist outfit Boko Haram.<sup>6</sup> Attention to the abduction gained momentum with outpourings of military support and intelligence from international governments—including those of the United States and western European countries—to locate the missing boarders.

I use these three events as a window into understanding the declensions and revivals in the political and media-driven interest in Islam in Nigeria, which is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated 170 million people, and also the largest Muslim country in Africa, with Muslims making up roughly half the population. In precisely the undisguised interest in such media-worthy snippets, this book identifies a thematic pattern of the all-too-familiar stance that Islam is oppressive and violent, particularly to Muslim women.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this stance, the attention to Islam unstintingly pivots on Islamism, fetishizing its diverse forms—political Islam, Islamic activism, militant Islam, nationalist Islam, legal Islam, among others—in the attempt to proffer a solution on the putative oppression of women sanctioned by the religion. Only infrequently, however, are efforts made to peer into the private lives of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, even less so into the lives of Muslim women in West Africa who practice Islam in a myriad of secluded, private, and apolitical ways with no aspiration to participate in public venues in the form of memberships to groups or to engage in activism for legal reform or social change.

*Privately Empowered* argues that the rampant oversight of the ordinary lives of African Muslim women stems from the inordinate preoccupation with political, public, and organized approaches to the religion. African Muslim women's personal, private, and individual engagements with Islam are overlooked in Islamic feminist discourse just as Islam is ignored, when not disparaged, in African feminist discourse. To mediate the thematic and regional slippage in both African and Islamic feminist discourses vis-à-vis the African Muslim woman, I propose African-Islamic feminism: a theory, a thematic focus, and a reading practice that three Nigerian novelists who write in English—Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Abubakar Gimba—interpellate in their fiction, illustrating Muslim women's private, personal, and individual engagements with Islamic habits and rituals. In each of their novels that I examine in detail—Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, and *The Descendants*; Ali's *Destiny*; and Gimba's *Sacred Apples*—and in their depictions of African Muslim women of various ages and sections of society—teenagers, middle-aged women, grandmothers, and matriarchs; students, professionals, and housewives; and rural and urban women—Alkali, Ali, and Gimba frequently explore repertoires of spiritual practice, including *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*, collectively known as *ʿibadāt* or forms of prayer; *shahādah* or Islamic monotheism; *hijāb* or veiling; and *akhlāq* or Islamic virtue, that hold no ambition other than securing personal and private satisfaction. African-Islamic feminism in *Privately Empowered* thus escorts Islamic feminism out of the Middle East and Arab world not only *regionally*, as much of the scholarship constellates on Muslim women in that region, into sub-Saharan Africa but also out of its political and public goals *thematically* into women's personal modes of spiritual engagement with Islam. Additionally, within the well-honed rubric of African feminist politics that tends to minimize and even deprecate the impact of Islam on African Muslim women, African-Islamic feminism repatriates the African Muslim woman to African feminist discourse. Considered together, the twin aims of African-Islamic feminism tutor a broader and sharper understanding of Muslim women, in general, and of African Muslim women, in particular.

The ineluctable relevance of African-Islamic feminism as it thematizes women's private and individual engagements with Islamic spiritual habits in northern Nigerian fiction in English can furthermore be evidenced in the fact that Alkali, Ali, and Gimba avowedly write in English in a region—consisting of parts of Nigeria, Chad, Ghana, and Niger—where Hausa is spoken by no less than fifty million people. The dominant literary genre in northern Nigeria is the thriving and immensely popular

*Littattfan Soyayya* or books of love, part of the ever-growing socio-literary phenomenon of Kano market literature, sold in the markets and streets of major northern Nigerian cities such as Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, and others.<sup>8</sup> Although not of the *Soyayya* genre per se, nor in Hausa, the language of *Soyayya* fiction, Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels in English serve as windows into the Hausa society that is textualized in the more popular but rarely translated *Soyayya* fiction in Hausa. Indeed, Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels echo the dominant topoi of *Soyayya* books—interpersonal relations, romantic love, family, marriage, personal lives, Islam, and private affairs—to announce to a much wider audience of readers than those who read Hausa (written Hausa uses a roman script called *boko* or an Arabic script known as *ajami*), namely the English-speaking interlocutors in Nigeria, Africa, and beyond, that African Muslim women are not always politically or even publicly invested in Islam. As a result of this inspiration from an immensely popular genre that reaches out to no less than fifty million users of the Hausa language alone, Alkali, Ali, and Gimba amplify in English, the most widely spoken and official language of Nigeria, African-Islamic feminism as a potent literary canon.<sup>9</sup> As fiction from northern Nigeria, their novels, therefore, are not only representative but indeed constitutive of African-Islamic feminism, focusing on African Muslim women's spiritual engagement with Islam as it yields “blueprints for the future” (to borrow miriam cooke's visionary expression, albeit in an apolitical sense), while imperatively meeting the challenges of the regular inattention to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa within Islamic feminist theories and Islam's denigration within African feminist discourse.<sup>10</sup>

There is a pervasive scarcity of scholarship on Islamic feminism in Africa, as Ousseina Alidou appositely remarks:

Study after study claiming to look at the experiences of women in the Islamic world was, in fact, confined to the Arabic and Asiatic regions. There is a scarcity of scholarly studies conducted by Muslim scholars or non-Muslim scholars of the West that focus on Muslim women of the so-called “sub-Saharan” African regions.<sup>11</sup>

Roman Loimeier echoes Alidou when he limns the need for studies of Islam in Africa, given the outsized presence the religion has on the continent. He prescriptively states:

Knowledge of the existence of a multitude of traditions of Islamic learning has so far not been translated into a broader perception of African Muslim societies . . . Islam has, as of today, more than 450



million followers in Africa, constituting one of the largest agglomerations of Muslims on the planet, second perhaps only to the number of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Due to their undeniable importance in numerical strength as well as political potential, Muslim societies in Africa deserve a thorough study that does justice to the complexity of Africa's historical and societal development.<sup>12</sup>

But the purpose of *Privately Empowered* is not to simply redress this regional imbalance by adding yet another inquiry to the scant critical iterations on Islam in Africa. Undertaking studies that fill the quantitative void is not likely to tip the scales in favor of Islamic studies on Africa. Instead, I contend that scholarship on Islam and on Islamic feminism in Africa is lopsided insofar as it is conceptually moored to the evolution, articulation, and subsequent dissemination of Islamic feminist discourse itself, the bulk of which remains tenaciously contextualized in the specific histories and events of the Middle Eastern and Arab regions of the Muslim world where the Islamic feminist movement evolved in tandem with the nation-state and derived many of its aims from pronouncements on gender in an Islamic state.<sup>13</sup> In other words, in many Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in the Mediterranean Middle East, as well as in North African countries such as Egypt and Morocco, Islamic feminism evolved from organized and collective (whether or not state-sponsored) efforts to articulate women's rights and functions.<sup>14</sup> The tight embrace between Islam and the methods and aims of feminist movements has rendered the domain of women's activities irrefragably political and measurably public, indexed in rallies, demonstrations and activism, memberships to social groups, organizations, and legal reforms in virtually all spheres of life. Islamic feminism has thus grown in direct proportion to its politically, legally, and collectively activist labor. A manifest consequence of this phenomenon that I argue has assumed canonical status is the amplification of the Qur'an as a juridical reference for women's rights, overshadowing its significance as a spiritual resource. Such an approach disenfranchises the private, personal, and highly individualized dispositions of religious practice in Islam, thus further obscuring forms of Islamic feminism that do not conduce to public activity or roles.

*Privately Empowered* does not aim to discredit activist and political modes of feminist expression in Islam. With renewed critical conviction, it aims at broadening the approach to Islamic feminism so we may no longer remain circumscribed by the conceptual limits to feminism in Islam as imposed by a discourse on Muslim women that is both regionally and thematically narrow in its scope. A capacious African and Islamic

feminist discourse is particularly relevant today when we face many dangers to global and cultural tolerance, including religious extremism in the form of Islamophobia. A broader understanding of Islam and of Muslim women in particular, as I address in this book, outside the tenured rubric of feminism as connected to activism, foreign policy, politics, and publicly organized expressions of religion thus presents itself as a potential solution to the cultural impasse confronting us. My choice to examine Northern Nigerian fiction in English is therefore guided by my endeavor at broadening the scope and our understanding of feminism in Islam. By choosing a specific region to discuss African-Islamic feminism, namely Northern Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam, as Ousseina Ali-dou's and Roman Loimeier's comments above note, remains scantily studied, I aim to underscore the connections between underappreciated forms of feminist engagement and Muslims in other parts of the world. My choice of fiction in *English* from Northern Nigeria, where Hausa is also widely spoken, likewise conveys to a larger audience the underexplored aspects about Islam that influence Muslims in this predominantly Muslim region of sub-Saharan Africa. These understudied forms of feminist engagement are amply depicted in the fiction in Hausa. And finally, my choice to examine Islamic feminism in Northern Nigerian fiction in English is motivated by the operative point of the book, that in a region where twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states have adopted Islamic law or *shari'ca*, rendering the legal presence of Islam very similar to politico-legal models in Islamic nation-states as in the Middle East, the lived presence of Islam in Northern Nigeria is in fact also expressed most pervasively by women in apolitical ways in the wildly popular literary genre of *Soyayya* fiction that stubbornly privileges themes on women's personal and private lives. In these connections then between the topoi of *Soyayya* novels in Hausa, whose Islamic and feminist tenor is translated by Northern Nigerian writers into their own novels in English, nests a blueprint for greater cultural and religious understanding.

As most Arab countries (Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen) are also Islamic nation-states, the practice of converging in the religion as the foundation for laws, governance, and personal matters, where Islam is simultaneously a spiritual, legal, and political system, hearkens back to the personhood of Muhammad himself—a rare combination of statesman, spiritual leader, military commander, and adjudicator—and the plural functions of the Qur'an as a legal, spiritual, and political text. With much economy, John L. Esposito summarizes Muhammad's multifaceted role "as administrator, legislator, judge, and commander-in-chief as well as teacher, preacher, and prayer leader of the Muslim community."<sup>15</sup> In

most Islamic nation-states, then, Islamic feminism has evolved as an extension of, if not in concert with, such systems, thereby institutionalizing its agenda as a public, social, legal, and activist manifestation of women's engagement with Islam. Most notably, Ziba Mir-Hosseini articulately traces the circumstances of the birth of Islamic feminism as the "unwanted child of 'political Islam'" to a recuperation not just of the *sharī'a* or Islamic law but of practice and interpretation of the law itself, namely of *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence and *tafsir* or exegeses of Islamic texts such as the Qur'an that had become saturated with patriarchy. She unequivocally locates the core methods of Islamic feminism in a grammar of justice and activism, calling Islamic feminists "gender activists" who, horrified by the unequal and unjust laws for women, reacted to rectify the patriarchal, literalist, and restrictive interpretations of the Qur'an by Islamists that lacked spiritual or legal sanction:

I believe that Islamic feminism is, in a sense, the unwanted child of "political Islam." It was "political Islam" that actually politicized the whole issue of gender and Muslim women's rights . . . Translated into practice, law and public policy, this meant going back to pre-modern interpretations of shariah, with all their restrictive laws about and for women. These gender activists, using Islamic arguments to critique and challenge the Islamists, brought classical *fiqh* and *tafsir* texts to public scrutiny and made them a subject of public debate and discussion, articulating alternative, gender-friendly understandings, indeed visions, of Islam. That marked the broadening, in terms of class, of the fledgling Islamic feminist movement.<sup>16</sup>

Mona Siddiqui also believes that challenging Islamists by *publicly* scrutinizing Islamic legal practice can expose the gender-friendly aspects of Islamic society, writing that "one of the methods of exploring the nature of Islamic society can be pursued through the dimension of its legal literature."<sup>17</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti likewise convincingly locates the history of feminism in a symbiotic relationship between activism, social reform, and Islam in the Middle East in "anti-imperialist and nationalist struggles, a general move towards secularism, a new concern with social reform and modernity."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in a country like Iran, as Valentine Moghadem succinctly puts it, "Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice but rather a legal and political system" to frame Islamic feminism within a visibly public, political, and activist agenda.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, vast populations—in fact, sizable majorities of Muslims—also live in societies that are not Islamic nation-states. In

sub-Saharan Africa alone, eighty to ninety percent of the populations in Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, and Niger are Muslim. Interestingly, these countries are not politically organized or governed as Islamic nation-states; instead, their governments are modeled on European parliamentary systems and legacies of colonial legal structures. As Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin put it, Islam is important because it is “an area that enjoys immense academic and policy interest.”<sup>20</sup> But, as this book argues, the academic interest in Islam is directly proportionate to the policy interest in it. So, Islam is of academic interest *because* it enjoys policy value. To then study women in such societies only where politics or government and religion coalesce in public activism, legal reform, and collective labor, as in the Middle East (regions of immense policy value to the United States and Europe), glaringly omits those nations that are, like Niger, The Gambia, and Mali, predominantly Muslim but not Islamically governed, and where Muslim women may express their feminism outside the rubric of public activity or the purview of the government.

If feminism is indeed only a function of political sponsorship and activist labor, as has been discoursed by Islamic feminists like Mir-Hosseini, Moghadem, and others, this would most naturally also be the case even in Muslim-majority states in sub-Saharan Africa. However, as Leonardo Villalón observes, only Mauritania is officially an “Islamic Republic.”<sup>21</sup> Villalón ponders whether being a country populated by Muslims means that the political system should reflect Islam, and if so, how?<sup>22</sup> He singles out Nigeria’s example where Islam can play an important role even if it is not officially connected to the governance of a country, which is also the case in other Muslim-majority countries like Senegal, Mali, Guinea, or Niger. Even during the early 1970s and 1980s when the *Izala* movement, or the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, emerged as the largest reformist movement in Islam in most parts of Africa, Islam remained peripheral to national affairs and governance.<sup>23</sup>

Three key issues animating this book can be gleaned from these observations on the status of Islam in Muslim-majority states in Africa. First, Islam is politically and socially etched into the lives of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa but nevertheless falls short of impacting the political governance of even Muslim-majority countries enough to compellingly question the academic and critical climate where, unless Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is of policy interest to the United States and the West as it is in the Middle East, even its demographically overwhelming presence fails to attract academic attention.<sup>24</sup> Second, the legal and political presence of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is relegated to religious courts in matters pertaining to family and personal law, family codes, and

secularism. The legal system for a majority of issues remains modeled on European civil law (French or British). In such societies, then, where Islam is legally active only in a limited number of areas, Muslims may express their engagement with the religion in means and ends that are different from those espoused by their counterparts elsewhere and are not as strenuously voiced through lobbying, activism, and political change in the *sharī'a* as they are in Islamic nation-states, as in the Middle East. Finally, and as mentioned earlier, notwithstanding an overwhelming agglomeration of Muslims in the African continent, Islam is neglected in the vast literature and scholarship on Africa because the methods and aims of gender activism in the Middle East scarcely resonate with expressions of feminism in Islam in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>25</sup>

While they have of late become profoundly alert to the glaring absence of African Muslim women from mainstream Islamic discourse, Islamic feminists nonetheless view feminism in Africa through an analytic lens programmed to focus exclusively on Muslim women as activists or as potential beneficiaries of political and legal provisions in Islam. A signal instance is a collection of essays on Muslim women in Africa, edited by Margot Badran, titled *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*. Covering such diverse geographic regions as Morocco, northern Nigeria, Mauritania, and South Africa, the volume dwells on the political and legal ramifications of Islam in Africa. It canvasses topics ranging from women's political participation and activism, to the codification of *hudūd* laws (laws of crime and punishment) that occupied much media attention through Lawal's and Hussein's cases, to African Muslim women's organizations.<sup>26</sup> A solitary essay pertaining to the creative arts examines Somali popular songs. On the other hand, *Privately Empowered* holds the nexus between the state and Islam as responsible for this widespread neglect of Islamic feminism as a personal and private practice, not only thematically but also regionally, and intervenes to rectify it by studying African Muslim women's personal and not political engagement with Islam in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's literary textualizations of Hausa society. African-Islamic feminism parries the excessively political, public, and activist articulation of feminism in Islamic feminist theories and the deprecatory tenor of African feminist discourse vis-à-vis Islam. It retools both African and Islamic feminist discourses through a close reading of private and personal engagements with Islam in the practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits in literary fiction where women do not aspire to political, public, or collective goals of social justice, legal reform, or even memberships to women's organizations. African-Islamic feminism establishes such ends as personal happiness and satisfaction, personal

success, and personal fulfillment that leaven African and Islamic feminist discourses to seek out new approaches, topoi, and goals for feminism. In other words, African-Islamic feminism is invested in the “biliteracy” of sources, traditions, and theories in that it borrows from both African and Islamic feminist discourses and lends to both as well.

### **Biliterate Voices: African-Islamic Feminism in Fiction**

Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Abubakar Gimba conjugate African and Islamic feminisms by enfranchising personal, individual, and private modes of religious behaviors, observable in an engagement that draws from the Qur’an chiefly as a source for spiritual habits. In so doing, they compellingly reorient the field toward those repertoires of feminist expression that are not organized around activist, collective, or even public activity. Donald Wehrs calls this engagement with multiple levels of discourse, traditions, and sources of inspiration “biliteracy,” where African feminist writers recruit issues and solutions from multifarious modes of inspiration:

African novelists tend to inhabit in addition to two traditions, two modes of modernity as well, one suspicious of traditionalism, and one suspicious of modernity as embodied in the West. For African writers, bilingualism passes into “biliteracy,” being “biliterate” in the values and debates of two cultures. Such biliteracy permits these novelists to apprehend what issues irresolvable within one tradition may be approached through other traditions but it also illuminates for them what issues belong to differences between cultural traditions and what issues belong to differences between traditional and modern ways of life.<sup>27</sup>

For Alkali, Ali, and Gimba, biliteracy lies in interpellating African-Islamic feminism as a diversification of the topoi and aims of Islamic feminism. When the award-winning, yet little-known Alkali insists that she presents women from an “Islamic perspective,” African-Islamic feminism gestures to using the Qur’an as a normative source of all knowledge, more for its spiritual uses for prayer, ritual, and the fulfillment of spiritual habits than as a legal reference for women’s rights or gender equality.<sup>28</sup> Following this biliterate approach of drawing from multiple sources toward multiple aims, my analyses of their novels rest on the premise that the practice of Islam for African Muslim women may not be a conscious

effort to publicize or organize religious issues in forums or activist platforms. Through personal, private, and highly individualized engagements of Islamic practice—Islamic faith or monotheism or *shahādah*; forms of prayer *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*; Islamic behavior or *akhlāq*; and veiling or *hijāb*—Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s protagonists employ Islamic practice as a conduit for personal satisfaction or as a goal in itself. My analyses focus on the following: the most palpable ways of knowing the materiality of Islam in an African Muslim woman’s quotidian existence; the kinds of Islamic activities African Muslim women engage in besides publicly and socially rallying for change; the reasons for which women approach the Qur’an in addition to as a reference for legal justice; the ways African Muslim women engage Islamic practice to express feminism in the private, personal, and individual performance of rituals and spiritual habits; and, finally, the purpose behind performing rituals and spiritual habits. An overriding notion threads the analyses ahead: African Muslim women’s intimate, private, individual, and personal interactions in the repertoire of rituals, spiritual practices, and habits that I study in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction—Islamic prayer, faith, virtuous disposition, and veiling—most closely indicate women’s own feelings and thoughts on Islam.

Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s novels consistently keep Islam alive in their thematic depictions of spiritual practice by ordinary Nigerian Muslims. The tenor of their narration markedly reveals feminism in Islam where women’s lives unfurl in tandem with the religion in its quotidian minutiae. Their references to the Qur’an and the *ḥadīth* (reports of Muhammad’s words and deeds) and their illustrations of the observance of spiritual habits could be read as ostensibly inconsequential as they pertain to the private and personal domain of women’s lives.<sup>29</sup> However, these instances of the private, individual, and personal engagement with religion respond to key concerns in the theoretical formulations on African feminism, namely ignorance of African societies that is perpetuated by a lack of appreciation for Africa’s diversity, resulting in a misrepresentation of African cultures. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí laments that “American sociology is unaware of Africa” and that there is inadequate acknowledgment of the diversity of African social systems: “The characterization of a vast continent of diverse nations and peoples as if it were one village can be termed the ‘villagization of Africa.’”<sup>30</sup> In addition, Ifi Amadiume notes the lack of research on African societies that has led to inaccurate assumptions about the continent and about African women in particular, writing that “a great deal of what anthropologists and Western feminists were saying about African women’s lack of power was incorrect.”<sup>31</sup> Alkali, Ali, and Gimba inexorably respond to all three aforementioned concerns by



first informing readers of the ineluctable influence of Islam on Nigerian Muslims while simultaneously addressing misrepresentations of Muslim women's lives with a firsthand record of the Islamic feminist presence in sub-Saharan Africa. By focusing on Islam, their fiction also furnishes African feminist theory with precisely that specificity—the African-Islamic feminist voice—without which African feminist theory itself would be incomplete. And finally, by shifting focus from the Middle Eastern regions to Islam in northern Nigeria, their fiction prospectively announces theoretical and thematic reconfigurations for Muslim women and Islamic feminists all over the world.

Little before Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's first publications in the eighties, the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ and her compatriot Nafissatou Diallo famously wrote about African Muslim women, laying the crucial foundation for the African-Islamic feminist voice with the iconic novels *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *A Dakar Childhood* (1980), respectively, putting the socio-spiritual fabric of a predominantly Muslim West Africa front and center in African letters. Critical attention to the African-Islamic feminist voices of both Bâ's and Diallo's writings remains scarce even decades after their publication.<sup>32</sup> Both Bâ and Diallo express a private rather than a public or political engagement with Islam in their texts, focusing largely on their protagonists' private practice through prayer, ritual, and Islamic habits for personal goals and satisfaction.

Alkali, Ali, and Gimba have been writing since the early 1980s, garnering brisk accolades in Nigeria for their literary output. But none have received the recognition they deserve outside West Africa.<sup>33</sup> Better known than Gimba and Ali, Zaynab Alkali was born in Borno in Nigeria. She attended Queen Elizabeth Secondary School in Ilorin, and completed her university education at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and Bayero University in Kano. Having held various teaching positions at Ahmadu Bello University, University of Maiduguri, and Bayero University, she later worked for the National Primary Healthcare Development Agency and is currently deputy vice-chancellor at Nasarawa State University, where she also teaches African literature and creative writing. Her first novel, *The Stillborn* (1984), won the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize in 1985. She then wrote *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), followed by *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997), a collection of short stories that has also been translated into German, and more recently authored two more novels, *The Descendants* (2005) and *The Initiates* (2007).

Virtually unknown outside Nigeria, Hauwa Ali, author of the two novels *Destiny* (1988) and *Victory* (1989), was born in Gusau in Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> Winner of the Delta Prize for fiction for *Destiny*,



Ali's writing captures the simplicity of the rhythms of everyday Muslim life in northern Nigeria. She died in 1994. Likewise, little is known of Abubakar Gimba beyond Nigeria. Author of several novels—*Trail of Sacrifice* (1985), *Witnesses to Tears* (1987), *Innocent Victims* (1988), and *Sacred Apples* (1996)—and a collection of short stories, *A Toast in the Cemetery* (2002), among others, Gimba was born in Nasarawa in central Nigeria, and held degrees from Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Cincinnati. He was also a permanent member of the Ministry of Economics and Financial Planning of Nigeria. His early career in the Nigerian civil service and finance ministry served as the contexts of his novels *Trail of Sacrifice* and *Innocent Victims*. He held a variety of posts in banks in Nigeria, served on numerous boards and committees for economic planning and financial administration, and was the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors. Gimba was also awarded the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR), one of the highest Nigerian awards of merit in recognition for his service to the nation. Gimba died in 2015.<sup>35</sup>

Alkali, Ali, and Gimba stand on Bâ's and Diallo's shoulders, potently emblemizing Muslim women's priorities, failures, and successes, calmly yet relentlessly documenting the lives of Nigerian Muslim women in their fiction, and modulating a voice in an African-Islamic tenor on the important, if apolitical, issues facing Muslim women. *Privately Empowered* is the only book-length study on Alkali's, Ali's, or Gimba's work as critical interest in them remains limited to biobibliographical studies or encyclopedic entries.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, rarely have writers from northern Nigeria thematically sustained Islam and Islamic culture in their oeuvres. Even the well-known Nigerian novels on Islam, notably Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984) and, more recently, Mohammed Umar's *Amina* (2005), are but lone productions.

Interpellating African-Islamic feminism as biliteracy that mediates Islamic and African feminist theories in order to privilege personal modes of Islamic engagement is not without its share of challenges. Any attempt to discourse on African-Islamic feminism is beset by vexing debates about Islam's presence in Africa that undergird the widespread hostility toward Islam in the works of African feminists. Coalescing in the incommensurable spat over "authentic," or indigenous, versus "foreign," or external, these fundamental challenges are further discussed in chapter 1, as they were canonized by the protracted tirade between Wole Soyinka and Ali Mazrui. As I demonstrate in greater detail in the next section, an approach to the African-Islamic feminist framework must disentangle not just the persistent preoccupation with politics and Islam as found in Islamic feminist scholarship on the Middle East and Arab world, but also

the profoundly limited understanding of the place of Islam in the lives of African Muslim women. The prevalence of rhetorical and methodological strategies that scant African-Islamic feminism by de-emphasizing and even denigrating Islam in an agglomeration of millions of Muslims in Africa and drawing from an extremely parochial sample of Muslim women called to stand in for the “Muslim world”—whose feminist goals may or may not resonate with Muslim women elsewhere—is writ large in the following examples. These are two dueling challenges that *Privately Empowered* confronts head-on.

### Rhetorical and Methodological Oversights: (Middle Eastern and Arab) State over Spiritual; Africa over Islam

The privileging of Muslim women’s issues in the Middle East and Arab region is not easily discerned, as African Muslim women’s feminism continues to be read through a critical and theoretical lens that has more relevance to the Middle East and Arab world and to women’s histories and issues—political participation, legal reform, activism, and public activity—in that part of the world. I cite several prominent strategies by well-regarded theorists of Islam and gender to exhume the tenured rhetoric that abets the ellipsis of thematic constructs outside the realm of politics and the Middle East. In her useful collection of essays on gender in Islam, Amira el-Azhary Sonbol studies the variety in Muslim women’s lives in order to lament the ways in which they have been exoticized in Western literature. She pertinently evokes the “Orientalist” tendency—the persistence of ill-matched paradigms and hypotheses—in the study of Muslim women that examines and consequently misrepresents Muslim women:

Perhaps because it is still a young field, the study of women of the Islamic world can be subsumed by paradigms and hypotheses that were based more on the concrete experiences of their sisters in the West or “constructed” and “imagined” histories of women in the East or in Africa. *The deficiencies in historical research allowed for stereotypical images privileging outward manifestations like veiling to give an impression of passiveness and backwardness.* The eye beholding, concluding, and portraying impressions of women’s lives used general criteria familiar to women’s struggles in other cultures whose grids of conceptualization and cultural symbols differed from the culture being studied.<sup>37</sup> (emphasis added)

El-Azhary Sonbol most perceptively connects deficient research into Muslim women's lives with the stereotypes it has spawned. She makes several more coruscating observations about "West-centric" attitudes that model Muslim women's lives on the history of Western women with proleptically negative and dismissive perceptions to justify the need to "untangle the past."<sup>38</sup> Her well-meaning evaluation of the "Islamic world" competently touches on the need for the all-important "grids of conceptualization" in research methods for fairer contextualization.<sup>39</sup> But in the impressive range of topics covering Islam in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, with a lone essay on Algeria and about six papers on the Ottoman period in Egypt, El-Azhary Sonbol's collection of twenty-four essays misses out on the rest of Africa as part of this "Islamic world." Despite opening her effort by writing "the articles in this edited volume are concerned with sources for studying the history and life of women in the *Islamic world*," African Muslim women (barring those in Algeria and Egypt) are conspicuously absent in her work (emphasis added).<sup>40</sup> They are also absent in miriam cooke's work when she writes that "*Arab* women respond to each other, test local possibilities, plug into transcultural concerns," and that "Examining *Arab* women's rhetorical strategies has shown me how we *all* belong to multiple communities simultaneously," and of networking in Islamic feminism (emphases added).<sup>41</sup> Perhaps because, as cooke professes,

I focus on Arab women's autobiographies and novels because it is there that one can *most clearly see the individual creating alternative realities*. Alternative does not mean separate or irrelevant. These reflections on personal experience and forays into fiction may provide the blueprints for the future.<sup>42</sup> (emphasis added)

The assertion that Arab women's rhetorical strategies provide a pattern for important transnational and transcultural connections through the fiction of such writers as Nawal El-Sadaawi, Zaynab al-Ghazali, Alifa Rifaat, and Assia Djebar, among others, which can be used as "blueprints for the future," is assumptive at best. A point about North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt must be made here as they are geographically closer to the Middle Eastern region and share much in common with the histories, politics, and cultures of the Middle East. Though geographically located within the African continent, these countries are often made to stand in for Islamic communities in Africa, as is widely seen in several notable works on Islam and gender. In fact, many well-known studies on Islam and gender in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and

Algeria tend to align themselves with the historical and cultural contexts of the Middle Eastern region. Leila Ahmed's benchmark study on Islam and gender, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, which I discuss in detail in chapter 1, is perhaps one of the best known examples of this approach and tendency that contextualizes the study of Muslim women, particularly in Egypt, within the Middle Eastern and Arab world.<sup>43</sup>

Saba Mahmood's work on the activities of the mosque movement in Egypt and in the surrounding Middle Eastern region that is part of the Islamic Revival demonstrates impressive effort to rethink the political and pertinently expand the scope of Islamic feminism by validating activities centered on ethical reform rather than on state-sponsored political change (as understood by such predictable political activities as state building, electoral reforms, or juridical changes).<sup>44</sup> Mahmood convincingly argues that the activities of trained Muslim teachers, or *dāi'yāt*, engaged in disseminating Islamic knowledge in Egypt's mosques demand appreciation of Islamic feminist piety that has not been adequately explored in theories of the feminist subject:

The women's mosque movement is part of the larger Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (*al-ṣaḥwa al-Islamiyya*) that has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt, since at least the 1970s . . . [emerging] when women started to organize weekly religious lessons—first in their homes and then within mosques—to read the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and associated exegetical and edifying literature.<sup>45</sup>

In grounding the context of the piety movement in Egypt and the surrounding Middle Eastern region that she calls the "Muslim world," however, Mahmood omits similar projects of moral and ethical reform such as the *yan-taru*. Dating back to the sixteenth century in northern Nigeria, and later systematized in the nineteenth century in the Sokoto Caliphate by Usman dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u, the *yan-taru* movement formed the intellectual backbone of spiritual empowerment for Muslim women and children. Similar in purpose and scope to more contemporary piety movements in the Middle East, with even similar agents, the itinerant teachers of the *yan-taru*, known as *jajis* in Hausa, dispersed spiritual and practical knowledge through lectures and performances in the far corners of the Sokoto Caliphate to enhance Muslim women's spiritual engagement with Islam.<sup>46</sup>

More recently, and in a well-received analysis of Islam and gender in the "Muslim world," noted anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod re-engages

with some of her earlier ethnographic research on Muslim women's oral poetry in a Bedouin community in the Western Desert to write against the impulse in Western media, public attitudes, and the academy that typifies "cultures through social scientific generalizations" about the "common Western story of the hapless Muslim woman oppressed by her culture."<sup>47</sup> In her "look across the Muslim world" to show that the "winds of change" are in favor of privileging the stories of "non-elite women," Abu-Lughod's chapter dedicated to "honor crimes" around "the Muslim world" features societies in Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, and even Jordan that, ironically, as *Privately Empowered* contends, themselves enjoy "elite status" in Islamic feminist discourse.<sup>48</sup> Within this longer conversation about honor crimes in the Islamic world, Amina Lawal, who was tried and acquitted by a *shar'ia* court for adultery in northern Nigeria, is parenthetically referenced: in a note on "Shari'a law," "the most famous international case was that of Amina Lewal [*sic*] in Nigeria" in the "Muslim world."<sup>49</sup> The tendency to frame Islamic feminism in little beyond its public and activist mold is vividly envisioned in Abu-Lughod's conclusion of her complex investigation of women's rights in the Muslim world, where she applauds the emergence of a Muslim woman whose work is patently public, legal, and activist and who pursues change at such forums as the United Nations by writing articles, conducting outreach, and quoting from Islamic law:

A new type of feminist . . . She quotes fluently from the Qur'an, is familiar with Islamic law, invokes precedents from early Muslim history, writes sophisticated articles on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), arranges conferences on Google calendar, conducts online surveys, and draws from a wide range of experiences of organizing for change.<sup>50</sup>

Public visibility and activism are undoubtedly valued more than private and passive piety as Margot Badran asserts in the case of Egypt, by writing that "religiously observant women who shun the limelight and seem to ask for nothing more than pious, passive lives are also compelling acknowledgement of their membership in communities that until recently had blocked women's public presence."<sup>51</sup>

In Africa itself, a continent of no less than 450 million Muslims, African feminist discourse has not been kinder to the African Muslim woman either, for the African feminist Filomina Chioma Steady disavows the impact of Islam on African Muslim women's lives by noting that "Islam

never became entrenched as a way of life . . . In fact, the effects of colonial administration have been of greater significance on African societies . . . The impact of Islam on the majority of African women in the diaspora has been minimal.”<sup>52</sup> Most strikingly, the Ghanaian writer and feminist Ama Ata Aidoo talks of the *hijāb* and practices such as circumcision and seclusion in much the same way to discredit any serious engagement that African Muslim women may manifest vis-à-vis Islam. Aidoo mockingly writes:

Today, it is not at all easy to imagine the coastal West African woman bearing with any equanimity even the thought of the heavy black veil, the burden of the purdah, circumcision, infibulation, and so forth. But even for the West African Moslem woman, the veil is no more than a couple of meters of an often pretty gossamer fabric. This she normally and winsomely drapes over the back of her head and her shoulders. Indeed, the effect of this type of veil is to make its wearers look more attractive and decidedly unhidden. In this, West African women seemed to have more in common with Islamic women in far-away places like the Indian peninsula and the rest of Asia than with their sisters to their immediate north.<sup>53</sup>

When defending these practices—polygamy, circumcision, and child marriages in African societies—however, the African theorist, like Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, warns against ethnocentric misrepresentations and calls for placing these customs in “their cultural and social contexts that would allow Westerners to discern their meaning from the perspective of African societies.”<sup>54</sup> But for Aidoo, the practice of the same institutions among African Muslim women is a clear sign of their grinding oppression. And in the words of ‘Zulu Sofola, another African theorist, Islam engineers the “de-womanization” or degradation of the African woman and strips her “of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain.”<sup>55</sup> Sofola’s, Steady’s, and Aidoo’s astringent assessments reveal that Islam in Africa, particularly in African feminist discourse, is the “Other” culture, not sufficiently African, that sets the African Muslim woman apart from her African sisters, and her proximity to Islam is inversely proportionate to her emancipation. So the impact of Islam on African Muslim women is negligible, as Steady claims, and is oppressive, if Aidoo is to be believed. For Sofola, as is clear from her choice of words, the African Muslim woman cannot compatibly express her feminism in Islam as the religion degrades her womanhood.

The purpose of citing these rhetorical and methodological elisions is meant to reveal how enduringly the categorizations of the Middle East and the Arab world as “Muslim” and as stand-ins for “Muslim societies” the world over persist. Secondly, these strategies elide modes of Islamic feminism in West Africa, such as the *yan-taru* movement, that could be similar in scope and purpose to contemporary and more widely publicized forms in the Middle East. Furthermore, as seen in their recurrent vocabulary, these studies appear mostly concerned with the power of women’s public service, activism, or the “social life of Muslim women’s rights,” as Abu-Lughod titles one of her chapters, in such venues as the United Nations and Google and through such media as Islamic law and online surveys.<sup>56</sup> For African feminist theorists, Islam is not a welcome presence in the continent as it is regarded as synonymous with oppression and is best ignored since it has negligible impact on African Muslim women, as Steady claims. To Aidoo, the regions in Africa with fewer Muslims are also the friendliest to women’s well-being, notwithstanding the commonality of many practices such as polygamy and child marriages among African Muslim and non-Muslim societies. The presence and recurrence of these postures have acquired a level of theoretical sophistication whose exclusionary tenor forecloses the possibility of genuinely attending to an African-Islamic feminism that responds to the theoretical shortcomings in both African and Islamic feminist discourses.

Twin goals animate this study to countervail postulations that the African Muslim woman cares little for Islam or finds its presence degrading to her womanhood and theorizations of the Muslim woman who quotes fluently from the Qur’an, conducts surveys on Google, embraces rather than shuns the limelight, and engages in activism on behalf of other women. The African-Islamic feminist that *Privately Empowered* examines voluntarily and willingly seeks out Islam and the Qur’an to organize her life for personal and private ends. She uses the Qur’an but may not be able to quote fluently from it. She may not even be conversant in Islamic law, engage in *sharī’a* activism, write sophisticated articles for the United Nations, coordinate conferences on Google calendar, or conduct surveys to initiate change. Not even in a society where twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states observe Islamic law. In such societies, under the profound socio-spiritual imprint of Islam in Nigeria, embedded in the long history of the religion in the region, the African-Muslim woman expresses her feminism in sites such as Kano market literature—and the *Littattfan Soyayya* or books of love, in particular—that throw into sharp relief the import of Islam in her personal life with no allusion to its overwhelming legal, political, or economic presence. Alkali, Ali, and Gimba borrow



and translate into English the topoi of the *Littattfan Soyayya* and the culture of Hausa society—love, marriage, domestic affairs, interpersonal relations, education, and Islam. To these ends, I focus on the origins of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio; the ethnic, legal, and religious complexion of northern Nigerian society; and the influence of such popular forms of expression, particularly for Muslim women, as the *Soyayya* books, as a framework that compels attention to feminism in Islam that women voluntarily and willingly turn to and return to for personal fulfillment and spiritual satisfaction.

### Islam in Northern Nigeria

Consisting of over two hundred ethno-linguistic groups, Nigeria's population is diverse and disparate with roughly half of it being Muslim, concentrated mostly in the northern and southwestern parts of the country.<sup>57</sup> The two main ethnic groups of the Northern region are the Hausa and the Fulani. The Fulani were a nomadic herding people who lived in the region between the Senegal River and Guinea Highlands, and were gradually Islamicized over a period of several centuries as they moved around and interacted with the Hausa in the areas near northern Nigeria. Though the Hausa and Fulani groups originated in different regions of Africa, over time, and perhaps because of their common adherence to Islam and intermarriage, they became often referred to as Hausa-Fulani, one group with Islam as the chief marker of their identity. The Hausa, one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups of West Africa, make up roughly 21 percent of the Nigerian population and are concentrated in the northern part of the country and also in southeastern Niger. The Nigerian Hausa are mostly settled within the Guinea and Sahel savanna zone. African-Islamic feminist Ayesha Imam notes that the majority of the population is smallholding rural cultivators but there is an increasing penetration of capitalist activity in the agricultural production with the acquisition and control of land by large capitalist farmers. In the urban areas, Imam identifies the presence of a wage-earning proletariat, dependent on work in the manufacturing, civil service, trade, and service enterprises.<sup>58</sup>

The Hausa are predominantly Muslim; as Ousseina Alidou points out, “as much as Islam is part of Hausa religious identity, it is equally an important marker of their cultural identity.”<sup>59</sup> So pervasive is the influence of Islam that Alidou believes “even the tiny minority of the Hausa subgroups who are still animist or Christian tend to be Islamic in cultural practice and they have been assimilated to the majority Hausa



Muslim community.”<sup>60</sup> This sentiment is also reflected in Abdul Rasheed Na’Allah’s apposite remark that “it is not uncommon for people of Kano, a community of nearly 100% Muslim population, to refer to anything meant for the populace as things meant for Muslims.”<sup>61</sup> With regard to Muslim women, Novian Whitsitt insightfully observes that the reality of Hausa feminism is Islam, for most Hausa women cannot conceptualize their feminism without factoring in the significance of Islam. Their Islamic identity, argues Whitsitt, supersedes any other allegiance: “the single most important consideration in the construction of Hausa feminism is the significance of Islam, given that the religious faith colors almost every aspect of social relations.”<sup>62</sup>

Islam first made inroads into Hausaland sometime between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries when the king of Kanem is said to have converted. Strong influences from the kingdoms of Songhay and Mali in the fourteenth century, and later by the pastoralist Fulani in the fifteenth century, also led to the rapid Islamization of the northern parts of Nigeria. The first Hausa ruler to convert to Islam was Yaji of Kano in 1370. Ibrahim Yaro Yahya argues that the gradual acceptance of Islam facilitated the art of reading and writing that in turn accelerated the dissemination of the religion and its cultural achievements, spearheaded largely by the emergence of a

learned class of people known as *malamai* (scholars or teachers) who developed a unique system of learning, mainly in two phases: the first phase is the search for mastery of the Koran in *makarantun allo* (Koranic schools), and the second phase is the search for specialization in such branches of knowledge as jurisprudence, theology, syntax, logic, law prosody, and the sciences of astrology and mathematics in *makarantun ilmi* (*ilmi* schools).<sup>63</sup>

John Paden writes that the duties of a *mallam* are to “preach, teach, reform, educate, and enlighten the members of the public in all aspects of Islamic religion,” and in “a society where religion permeates all aspects of life and morals, the functioning of the mallam class becomes paramount.”<sup>64</sup>

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Islam lost ground and stagnated in West Africa as the Songhay Empire collapsed, leading to the formation of many small Islamic theocracies. Hawthorne Emery Smith points out that “many people who claimed to be Islamic were so for the social advantages only: they were really no more Islamic than their ancestors had been hundreds of years earlier.”<sup>65</sup> It was at this time that the West African *jihad* movements began to reverse the stagnation in Islam

under none other than the Fulani of Hausaland, led by Usman dan Fodio, who spurred the reformist movement to “model the Islamic community on the early Islamic Ummah which existed during the era of the first four caliphs, often called the ‘Golden Age of Islam.’”<sup>66</sup> When the British came to Nigeria, the caliphate established by dan Fodio, the Sokoto Caliphate, was “a thriving African-Islamic socio-political culture,” states Smith.<sup>67</sup> The emirate rule had become institutionalized and the system was so well entrenched in northern Nigeria that the British decided not to tamper with it, making indirect rule the only feasible strategy for colonial administration.<sup>68</sup> Toyin Falola calls the caliphate “one of Nigeria’s last great empires.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Ousmane Kane effectively describes the socio-spiritual demographics in northern Nigeria at the start of British rule by noting that the non-interference on the part of the colonial administration in Islamic zones, particularly in the Sokoto Caliphate that Lord Lugard, the Governor General of Nigeria (1914–19), had organized as the northern protectorate of Nigeria, witnessed a “spectacular growth” in Islam in the region.<sup>70</sup>

Under dan Fodio, Islam grew not only as a religious identity for the Nigerians, but also as a great unifier of economic activity, political organization, cultural stability, literacy, and trade. By all accounts, as Yahya points out, the *jihad* period is considered the most outstanding era of mass education and intellectual awakening in Hausaland, marked by “an unprecedented growth of the Ulama (scholars) and itinerant preachers.”<sup>71</sup> The ancient Muslim city of Kano, now one of the two largest cities of modern-day Nigeria, is situated in the northern part of the country. It was the most important and populous town in the Sokoto Caliphate. Although the Sokoto Caliphate lasted only until 1903, when it was defeated by the British and the French (with the portion of the region taken up by the British being called the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria), its religious and cultural legacy is still palpable, with the title of sultan being given to the spiritual leader of the region.<sup>72</sup> The present-day Sokoto state, created in 1976 and located in the northeastern corner of Nigeria on the border of Niger, is named after the Sokoto Caliphate. The capital is the town of Sokoto where dan Fodio lies buried. The Hausa and Fulani continue to be the dominant ethnic groups in the state.<sup>73</sup>

As a consequence of the adoption of the *shari‘a* by twelve states in northern Nigeria, Islam suffuses every aspect of public and private life, animating governance, economic relations, and social order, from usury-free economic transactions and activities to Islamically-influenced laws governing property, wealth, and economic relations. Politically, as well, Islam impacts the structure of governance under the *shari‘a* with the

states electing a Muslim ruler, responsible for the proper governance and administration of Islamic law. Smith identifies the reason for the thriving popularity of Islamic law, citing the need for legal stability: “The relevance for Islamic law is boosted by the growing disillusionment with the performance of the Western political models with which Nigeria has been experimenting since independence in 1960.”<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the popular push for *sharī‘a* has been justified on the basis of the majority opinion of the people who feel that the legal arrangement where a secular legal system is imposed on a people who are not secular is unfair. Aminu Maigari, chairman of the Concerned Citizens’ Committee that toured the thirty-four local government areas of the state to mobilize Muslims for the adoption of *sharī‘a* in Katsina, discloses and endorses the majority view:

Because predominantly the people of Katsina are Moslems. You cannot take the law that protects the minority and put it on the majority. In Katsina, we are up to five million people, but only about 40,000 people are non-Moslems and you bring foreign law to be imposed on them. Then you are not doing justice to the society and this is not society.<sup>75</sup>

Most recently, the Islamic Development Bank, headquartered in Saudi Arabia, invested \$470 million in the education of the *almajiris*, or pupils of the Qur’anic schools in northern Nigeria.<sup>76</sup>

As Robert Dowd notes, it is in Nigeria that Muslim women are most organizationally and politically engaged in democracy and just governance, more so than in any other sub-Saharan country.<sup>77</sup> The Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), the umbrella organization for the network of Muslim women’s associations in Nigeria, is known to empower Muslim women in Africa and in Nigeria through Islamic outreach, or *da‘wa*, with broad foci on the improvement of women’s socioeconomic status, literacy, health, education, and social service. In addition, Women Living under Muslim Law (WLUML) works to educate Muslim women in West Africa and Nigeria about their rights and encourages faithfulness to Islamic law in Muslim communities, as does the Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), which rallies against corruption to enforce responsive governance in Nigeria. In addition, groups such as BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights (founded in 1996) in Nigeria advance the rights of and rally legal support for women who live in Muslim societies through the services of lawyers and social workers.<sup>78</sup> Hussaina J. Abdullah painstakingly details the impressive work and transformatory efforts of a host of activist and nongovernmental

organizations in Nigeria, including Women in Nigeria (WIN), BAOBAB, Women's Justice Program (WJP), and the Women, Law and Development Centre (WLDC), among others.<sup>79</sup>

And yet, the overwhelming presence of Islam in urban Hausa society percolates into everyday life most prominently through two significantly apolitical phenomena: oral literary productions of which Hausa storytelling within the household is the most well-known genre, and Kano market literature, called *Littattfan Soyayya* or books of love, a genre of popular romance fiction in Hausa that dwells on such topics as love, romance, and the adventures of young lovers. The magnitude of the Hausa literary movement, as I briefly trace below its history and phenomenal success, on all levels of literary, commercial, social, and religious life, is unarguably breathtaking. My interest in this extremely successful commercial and literary movement lies, however, in its ingenious capitalization of the personal, private, and individual dimensions of the predominant topoi—the personal and private lives of Hausa women—that underwrite *Soyayya* fiction. Quite simply, it is the interest in women's personal, private, and individual interactions with Islam that redounds most significantly to the success of Hausa prose fiction.

Following a hiatus in Hausa prose writing in colonial times in the 1930s and 1940s, notes Abdalla Uba Adamu, Hausa literature, particularly the Hausa novel, received a shot in the arm that led to its revival on an unprecedented scale in urban parts of northern Nigeria, particularly in urban Kano. Adamu ascribes the unforeseen interest in indigenous literature among Hausa youth in the mid-eighties to their avid spectatorship of television melodramas (notably *Bakan Gizo* and *Farin Wata*) on romantic love, the adventurous sagas of young lovers, forced marriages, and family affairs, which catalyzed the Hausa youth to focus on romantic iconography, adventure, and the intricacies of familial and marital relationships in their creative pursuits.<sup>80</sup> One of the most tangible outcomes of this interest in televised melodramas, observes Adamu, was the formation of drama clubs, theatre societies, and neighborhood drama associations such as the Gyaranya Drama Club (GDC), among others, where writers looked to transform their written scripts or sketches into stage performances. Largely inspired by thematic motifs from Hindi cinema of the 1970s—song-and-dance routines, romantic plots, action and adventure sequences, and fantasy—against a Hausa backdrop of language and society with Hausa lyrics, dialogue, and actors, many budding dramatists churned out scripts and dramatic sketches about Hausa society, eager to see their writing on stage. Lack of capital to theatrically produce such shows and grow the dramatic wings of the Hausa literary movement,

however, led these aspiring writers to turn to publishers, where they were also met with a lukewarm response to publishing Hausa fiction, primarily due to the paucity of interest in romance as a theme and in the Hausa language. The authors finally sought to privatize publishing through printing presses started by well-established local businessmen who were keen to reap profits from the potential market among newly literate Hausa youth but also promote indigenous literature. It was becoming clearer, as Adamu points out, that it was easier to write a novel about Hausa society than to mount a drama or stage a play on it.

Abetted by cheap production costs, easy availability of computer printing technology, and the ability to market through small shops and stalls first in the streets of Kano and then in other towns (hence the eponymous epithet “Kano market literature”), a novel could sell between ten to twenty thousand copies in a matter of weeks and up to one hundred thousand copies in a few years.<sup>81</sup> *Soyayya* fiction was also the lucky beneficiary, notes Yusuf M. Adamu, of a symbiotic boost in popularity from radio programs (*Shafa Labari Shuni*, in particular) on Radio Kaduna Nigeria and Radio Kano that aired readings of manuscripts and published novels to advertise writers coinciding with the establishment of specialist literary magazines, such as *Wakiliya* and *Marubuciya*, devoted to news, reviews, and reports on *Soyayya* novels.<sup>82</sup> Consequent to its unprecedented popularity, the Hausa literary movement transitioned into a much larger and equally market-driven business of home videos, films, and video production on *Soyayya* topoi. The pervasive impact of the Hausa literary movement even resulted in the formal bifurcation of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Kano into two branches—one for writers in Hausa and the other for writers in English—thereby becoming the only ANA branch to support writers in a language other than English. Abdalla Uba Adamu writes: “Kano ANA is the only branch in Nigeria to cater to two language formats. Perhaps this has been because Kano, and Hausa writers generally, have produced the largest amount of prose fiction of any group in the country.”<sup>83</sup> And building on this momentum, explains Abdalla Uba Adamu, ANA Kano has also entered into dialogue with Hausa writers in *ajami* (the Arabized script of the Hausa language) who write Islamic literature, pamphlets, and prose on prayer and other aspects of Islamic life.

Most strikingly, this revolution in book production and consumption, its record-breaking sales, and its ecstatic reception by Hausa youth spurred young women to become literate in the roman script of Hausa (the *boko* script) to be able to read this fiction, and to eventually take up writing their own novels. Both Yusuf M. Adamu and Abdalla Uba Adamu

credit the government-sponsored Universal Primary Education scheme of 1976 that increased literacy among the Hausa youth that accompanied the success of the Hausa literary movement, and in turn pushed more youth, especially women, to become literate. By 2002, the most popular authors of *Soyayya* fiction, specifies Yusuf M. Adamu, were women, and the biggest audience for these novels remains women. Some of the most successful Muslim Hausa women writers—Balaraba Ramat Yakubu (author of *Budurwar Zuciya*, 1985, whose title is translated as *The Tender Heart*) Maigari Ahmed Bichi (author of *Kishiya ko Suruka*, 2005, whose title translates as *Rival or Mother-in-Law?*)—are notable alumni of the adult literacy program run by the Kano State Agency for mass education.

Both the unmatched success of *Soyayya* fiction and its impact on women's literacy and even literary careers, I contend, are embedded in the preeminence of the types of topoi of *Soyayya* novels. In other words, the Hausa literary movement was able to take the socio-literary landscape in Northern Nigeria by storm by precisely capitalizing on the personal, private, and individual ways in which the youth, especially women, could deal with the most crucial problems in their lives—education, marriage, and self-improvement. Abdalla Uba Adamu and Yusuf M. Adamu concur that in contrast to Hausa novelists of the early decades of the twentieth century, among the new wave of Hausa writers, particularly during the revival of the Hausa literary movement in the mid-eighties, there was a marked shift from writing about Marxism, social problems such as drug abuse, unemployment, and poverty to addressing the “emotional” concerns of the Hausa youth. To this end, and heavily influenced by Hollywood and Hindi (Bollywood) cinemas, *Soyayya* authors increasingly endorsed themes on romance, parental authority, marriage, and urban youth and their problems to the extent that they have been criticized for their insistent preference for “light” themes in their novels. At literary conferences, they have been urged to incorporate “more important problems such as corruption, nepotism, hunger, and poverty,” and consequent to such criticism, have even been labelled as “inferior.” Yusuf M. Adamu, himself an established writer and the author of two *Soyayya* novels, *Idan So Cuta Ne* (1989) and *Ummul-Khairi* (1995), responds to such critiques by clarifying that these novels most faithfully portray the “emergent social change” in Hausa society, indexed in the swelling desire among Hausa youth for education, self-expression, independence from parental fiat in marital decisions, and an overall spirit of freedom and adventure in a conservative authority-driven society.<sup>84</sup> *Soyayya* authors, therefore, feel that such themes most directly and effectively mirror issues facing Hausa youth.

Furthermore, as Abdalla Uba Adamu cogently argues, it is precisely the preoccupation with the personal, private, and individual nature of such themes that also led to the establishment of the Hausa feminist movement as *Soyayya* authors Talatu Wada Ahmed, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, and others have persistently thematized Islamic feminism in their novels through topics pertaining to Muslim women's education, marriage, and interpersonal relations. In their romantic bestsellers, such as Talatu Wada Ahmed's *Rabin Raina* series of three novels (title roughly translated as *My Soulmate*), the protagonists are all pious and educated Muslim women, "religious, obedient, respectful, and cheerfully carry[ing] out their household chores," as Abdalla Uba Adamu intimates, eager to continue their education or to choose their own spouses by Islamically negotiating with the influences of their personal and private domain, namely their parents, fiancés, or husbands.<sup>85</sup> In Talatu Ahmed's *Rabin Raina II*, for instance, Abdalla Uba Adamu helpfully explains that the protagonist is a Muslim school dropout who is assisted by none other than her Muslim fiancé to complete her education and successfully procure employment. To assist her in her endeavors, her fiancé even tutored her at home. The core focus of these topoi is not only that throughout these novels, considered as vanguards of Hausa feminism, the heroines are Islamically observant, respectful, and dutiful women who craft their desires for self-improvement within the familial fold, but that the private, personal, and individual domain of their problems is chosen precisely to convey issues most relevant to Hausa women. Although Abdalla Uba Adamu's figures show that of the five hundred-odd Hausa novels published between 1997 and 1999 only about 35% of the books strictly thematized love or *Soyayya* themes, the rest focused on equally personal themes such as family, polygamy, interpersonal relationships (disagreements, quarrels), obedience to parents, patience, perseverance, and marriage. As Adamu suggestively states, "the determination of the central theme is purely personal."<sup>86</sup> That is, a writer may ostensibly emphasize a *Soyayya* topic but also include another theme, such as a moral one to warn the public about monetary greed or deception, to highlight the primacy of his or her sense of judgement about what is most reflective of Hausa society when selecting the dominant topos of the novel.

The biggest criticism of the levity of *Soyayya* themes, then, in fact counterintuitively underscores their relevance to Hausa society, for the authors persist in centralizing the personal and private domain of women's lives, namely their *personal* choice in choosing a spouse and in pursuing self-improvement, in their novels. Ultimately, the Hausa literary movement is not so much market-driven, as gauged from its commercial feasibility,



as it is audience-driven, judging from the readers' abiding preference for certain kinds of topics. Briefly, the audience and its preference for some themes more than others underwrite the market. If the Hausa literary movement's most successful and popular proponents and its largest audience, namely women, insist on writing and reading on topics they believe are most relevant to Muslim women, the movement then not only reflects the literary and commercial value of the personal and private domain but also emphasizes the under-studied fact that the personal and private empoweringly serve as the motor for an entire socio-literary apparatus.

On the same issue of the currency of themes about Hausa women, Novian Whitsitt identifies that *Soyayya* writers portray "the reality of Hausa youth confronting dramatic social change."<sup>87</sup> Specifically, for *Privately Empowered*, the issues that are taken to be socially and realistically relevant are in fact drawn from the personal and private realm of Hausa women's lives. Whitsitt reports these writers asserting that their novels serve as "vehicles for the social concerns for the writers"; as such, it is possible to state that precisely the private, personal, and individual dimensions of the lives of the Hausa gather relevance on the social scale as hundreds of writers thematize the issues most pertinent to Hausa culture.<sup>88</sup> A popular blog on the themes of *Soyayya* books reiterates this by stating that Kano market literature is widely influential

not simply because the books are about love, but because they tackle issues that speak to the reality of Hausa youth and in particular Hausa women of today. *Littattafan soyayya* may deal with the difficulties that lovers face, from nosy family members or parents who oppose the relationship, but they also often offer advice on maintaining healthy marital relations and deal with more complex and difficult issues such as polygamy, forced marriages, purdah, the importance of educating female children and the issue of HIV/AIDS and its spread in the region. These are all topics that are relevant to contemporary society in Northern Nigeria, and in this sense *littattafan soyayya* can be seen as not only representing society but also offering critique and advice.<sup>89</sup>

It merits noting that these issues—love affairs, marriage, personal lives, interpersonal relations, polygamy, female education, and seclusion—fall within the purview of Islamic law and assume an eminently political and public texture when voiced in conventional methods of political activism, organizations, or support groups. Whereas when channeled through the *Littattafan Soyayya*, as hundreds of Hausa women take up writing on



the same themes to educate, advise, and entertain about the personal and private facets of Hausa life, they consequently foreground the quotidian aspects of Muslim women's lives with no expressly political or public ambition other than to chronicle a way of life profoundly marked by Islam.

In the nature of the *Soyayya* themes and the aims of *Soyayya* writers in the heart of Islamic states, despite being in English, Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, and *The Descendants*; Ali's *Destiny*; and Gimba's *Sacred Apples* are tendered in the spirit of Islam's presence in women's personal and private lives. As I discuss more fully in chapter 5, Ali's *Destiny* is perhaps closest in style, presentation, and length to the *Soyayya* novel. *Destiny* could very well be one of those rare *Soyayya* novels in English and, therefore, not considered by critics as serious literary work. Not coincidentally, the "native idiom" of Alkali's novels, as she calls it, refers less to the language of communication per se than to the texture of the issues she discusses in them. Stating that her work possesses the orality of Hausa culture and *literary traditions*, Alkali transcribes into English what is said by her characters speaking another language, thus presenting as the "native idiom" issues that most scrupulously illustrate the cultural landscape of northern Nigeria:

I find writing in English agonizing, to say the least, especially when it comes to dialogue. My characters in "real life" do not speak in English and in the act of translation, the native idiom is completely lost, as are the meanings of certain expressions. Naturally, I would feel more comfortable writing in my own language, but the audience, as you know, would be limited.<sup>90</sup>

And Gimba's reasons for using English as the medium of his prose are the facility of its use among his readership:

My choice of writing in the English language and not in any of Nigeria's many languages was conscious and deliberate. As the official language of instruction in our education system . . . I feel that there is a definite readership in the English medium . . . I prefer English in view of the fact that the issues I address and the readership I have in mind may be more at home in English than any other language.<sup>91</sup>

The "native idiom" is that of the issues of an Islamic context, namely the Islamic context of the Hausa—women's personal, private, and individualized engagement with Islam beyond the political dimensions of their activities—that powerfully emerges in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's work

in a language that has a relatively diffuse readership but in genres and themes most reflective of Hausa society. Activating biliteracy, or multiple sources of inspiration and traditions, *Privately Empowered* studies northern Nigerian fiction in English, in Hausa society, deriving information from *Soyayya* books, outside the popular regional locations of the Middle East and Arab world and outside political and public topoi for social reform. Indeed, it reconciles the African Muslim woman's feminism with African feminist politics to emphatically front the futurity of African and Islamic feminisms in African-Islamic feminism.

Divided into five chapters, with each focusing on a specific novel by Alkali, Ali, and Gimba, each analysis pivots on the personal, private, and individual modes of a particular Islamic spiritual practice by African Muslim women, arguing that their expression of Islamic feminism bears no political or public ambitions. The opening chapter, "Connecting Vocabularies: A Grammar of Histories, Politics, and Priorities in African and Islamic Feminisms," begins this work by tracing the evolutionary concepts of both African and Islamic feminisms to expose the rather innumerable challenges African feminist theory has overcome, ranging from a complete absence of Africa in the social sciences to racist and ethnocentric scholarship on African women, calling for, as in the powerful words of Carole Boyce Davies, "a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies."<sup>92</sup> Toward the latter goal of factoring African women's realities, African feminists labored to explain African feminism through mutually allusive and overlapping terms like *Umoja* or togetherness, African womanism or feminism that derives from the African environment, nego-feminism or a feminism of negotiation and exchange, and motherism that grows out of harmony with the African environment. Likewise, a multitude of Islamic feminist thinkers have commendably grappled with the history, politics, and nature of Islamic feminisms to provide this complex weave of feminism with some semblance of usable, if political and activist, frameworks such as the theorist miriam cooke's "sharia activism" and the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf's evocative formulation that the "private is political."<sup>93</sup>

Both Islamic and African feminist studies nonetheless remain ill-served by their incomplete appreciation of what I call the African-Islamic feminist dimension. By focusing only on the Middle East, as do Islamic theorists, conceptually limiting themselves in the process to women's public and political activities, and by discursively excluding the African Muslim woman's positive engagement with Islam from African feminist discourse, as do African theorists, African and Islamic feminist theories

falter in the application of some of their own key injunctions to the African Muslim woman. Mediating African and Islamic feminist itineraries, the first chapter articulates the framework within which Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fictions situate themselves in the composite space of African-Islamic feminism to repatriate the African Muslim woman to African feminist discourse as an African Muslim womanist, an African Muslim nego-feminist, and an African Muslim motherist. For the African Muslim woman, as this chapter contends, her African and Islamic environments are not dichotomous as she embraces both. Furthermore, using three examples—Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria, models of Islamic feminism grounded in African history; the practice of physical seclusion or *kulle* in Hausa; and oral storytelling that Hausa women develop in the domain of their households—the first chapter argues that the African Muslim woman's roles in society belie conventional understanding of the nature and aims of Islamic feminism. Together, *kulle* as practiced in northern Nigeria, the goals of Nana's and Amina's political leadership, and oral storytelling enjoin a fuller exploration of feminism, especially by Islamic feminists in the Middle East and Arab world who rather strenuously focus only on public, political, and legal aspects of women's rights in Islam as venues of feminist expression. In so doing, this chapter maps Nigerian Muslim women's feminism on a matrix of methods and goals to stage African-Islamic feminism as a mutually beneficial conjugation of both African and Islamic feminisms in the futurity of feminisms.

Chapter 2, "Noetic Education and Islamic Faith: Personal Transformation in *The Stillborn*," addresses a woman's individualized and personal response to religion in a small village in northern Nigeria in Alkali's first novel, *The Stillborn*. As Islam is never part of the main protagonist Li's practice or personal choice in the first half of the story, this chapter studies the example of women whose personal engagement with Islam is a function of noetic transformation, a result of personal cognition. Alkali mentions that when she created Li, she thought that "she would come out a typical ordinary Northern Nigerian woman who has to grapple with the strange ailment called culture conflict."<sup>94</sup> But, as this chapter contends, Li's journey from an adolescent seeking an education to a mature young woman is not entirely divested of a spiritual conscience that transforms her both emotionally and psychologically. Through the Islamic notions of *aqiliyyah* or cognition, and the resultant *nafsiyyah* or disposition, Li is spurred to accept Islamic monotheism or *shahādah* as the foundation not only for her personal Islamic praxis but also for her future relationships and actions. Moreover, Li's acknowledgement of Islamic monotheism, as this chapter argues in greater detail, is also actuated by her realization of

her sister Awa's contributions to Li's success, not hitherto appraised as an example of Islamic feminism. Awa's uncomplaining adherence to Islam has been unanimously read by critics as a sign of Islamic indoctrination of subservience. Surprisingly then, as a little-discussed nego-feminist, Awa is an example of both African and Islamic feminist orientations as she negotiates, compromises, and coordinates with her African and Muslim environments in the pursuit of her goals. Li's own acceptance of *shahādah* can also be read through the lens of *Umoja* and even motherism as her acceptance of Islam follows her efforts of harmonizing her environment—her family and her husband—in the expression of her feminism. Equally, Li's transformation is an example of stiwanism or her active involvement in personal change.

Chapter 3, “Historical Templates and Islamic Disposition: Personal Journeys in *The Virtuous Woman*,” delves into a physically handicapped Muslim teenager's private engagement with Islam from a small village in northern Nigeria as she matures into a young woman in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*. While the preceding chapter examines the process of acquisition of an Islamic personality—the ways, circumstances, and people that engineer Li's acquisition of Islam—this chapter dwells on the enactment of an Islamic personality by Nana Ai, the seventeen-year-old physically challenged main protagonist of *The Virtuous Woman*. In contrast to Li, Nana Ai already embodies an Islamic disposition, and manifests it through *akhlāq* or Islamic virtuous disposition, an ensemble of desirable virtues and qualities. As the organizing principle of her personality, *akhlāq* drives Nana Ai's decisions during the long journey back to her school after the holidays in her encounters with diverse people and situations on the way, including managing her own physical handicap with dignity. As Nana Ai deals with difficult travel companions, a tragic accident, and her feelings for a young man she has befriended on the journey, Bello, along with her own emotions of poor self-esteem on account of her physical disability, her use of *akhlāq* to guide her choices brings to the fore the purpose of an Islamic framework in tempering the emotional and physical maturation of a teenager. Critics relegated the novel to children's fiction, of the “school-girl adventure” genre. However, the novel, as this chapter shows, is a deep reflection of mature feminism as it delves into Nana's virtuous disposition, including her emotional conflicts. Nana's maturity, wisdom, and flexibility help her to ably negotiate diverse circumstances and people; the ability to be feisty and conciliatory and adapt to a broad range of emotions in being cautious and yet decisive, while grappling with poor self-esteem, all within the Islamic framework of *akhlāq*, imbues, moreover, her nego-feminist, motherist, and womanist stance.

Chapter 4, “Spiritual Legacies and Worship: Personal Spaces in *The Descendants*,” discusses the Islamic thrust of women’s purposeful engagement of Islamic rituals, spiritual habits, and observance of forms of worship or *‘ibadāt*—*ṣalāt*, *du‘ā*, *dhikr* or prayer—for the satisfaction and fulfillment of personal goals through a close reading of Alkali’s novel *The Descendants*. The novel details the story of the Ramta clan in northern Nigeria. Headed by Magira Milli, the main protagonist of the novel and a charismatic matriarch—leader, decision-maker, and visionary—not typically expected by critics of the novel to exist in northern Nigerian society, the Ramta family is influential and affluent, but also quite largely uneducated. Magira’s charge then comprises of ensuring the education and professional success of her granddaughters. Magira relies on her Islamic practice—*ṣalāt*, *du‘a*, and *dhikr*—to accomplish her personal goals. She uses the space of her prayers, especially during the *du‘a* or supplication and *dhikr*, or a form of prayer involving constant remembrance of Allah, to strategize her moves and plans on transforming her family’s future. In addition to drawing emotional sustenance from her prayers, Magira turns to prayer for spiritual and emotional respite as she stewards the heavy burden of her family’s responsibility. Although the critical apparatus of the novel claims that Alkali’s depiction of a matriarch in Hausa society is subversive in that the conservative Hausa society does not encourage women’s leadership, this chapter corrects such a reading by contending that Magira’s character is more illustrative of Hausa society than subversive as the personal, private, and individual domains of women’s Islamic engagement have not been sufficiently evaluated, something *Privately Empowered* does by rectifying such readings. Other female characters in the novel, Magira’s granddaughters—Seytu, Peni, and Mero (Magira’s granddaughter-in-law)—are doctors, housewives, businesswomen, and even those who fail professionally and personally. Through the diverse roles and ambitions expressed in Magira’s, Seytu’s, Mero’s, and Peni’s personalities and varying engagements with Islam, Alkali exposes the vicissitudes of personal and spiritual commitments that can be plotted on a broad spectrum of Islamic engagement. Within this spectrum of Islamic engagement also emerge the African Muslim woman’s commitments to various African feminist orientations such as her active involvement in change, or *stiwanim*; her ability to initiate her own agendas, or African womanism; dialogic action with her surroundings, or *Umoja*; and her genuine embrace of all differences, or motherism.

Finally, chapter 5, “Frequent Functions and References: Personal Solutions in *Sacred Apples* and *Destiny*,” most poignantly intervenes in the common critical stance on Islamic feminism in Africa, that of women’s

revolt against Islam when facing persecution and injustice, in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* and Ali's *Destiny*. Gimba's and Ali's protagonists, Zahrah and Farida respectively, experience severe emotional duress in their personal lives, particularly in their marital relationships. But instead of directing their bitterness toward Islam or resorting to assistance from women's organizations to counter the injustice in their lives, both women resolutely turn to the religion through a deeply-felt and personal desire to heal their losses, emotionally recover from personal setbacks, and reconstruct their lives and futures. Deploying *ṣalāt*, or the canonical prayer, and *dhikr*—a form of prayer involving constant remembrance of Allah and a reconnection with the Qur'an for answers on personal matters, especially when debating about polygamy and marriage—Zahrah and Farida abidingly grow in their reliance on Islamic praxis. The means for Zaharah's and Farida's happiness and satisfaction—*ṣalāt*, *dhikr*, polygamy, and education—inhere within their environment, which is conditioned by both African and Islamic influences and actors, including men, as the two African Muslim women actively partake in *Umoja*, stiwanism, African womanism, and nego-feminism to negotiate, coordinate, and ably manage difficulties in their personal matters.

African-Islamic feminism thus discursively intervenes in each chapter through personal, private, and individualized modes of Islamic practice as a conduit for personal satisfaction, bearing no public, political, or activist agenda. It intervenes, moreover, to address tendencies in both Islamic and African feminist theories that obscure women's personal engagement with spiritual practice or vilify the impact of Islam on African Muslim women. By mapping, as a point of departure, the trends in African feminist and Islamic feminist theories that have evolved from responses to colonial ideologies hostile to African Muslim women and eclipse the African Muslim woman's engagement with Islam, either by de-emphasizing its influence in her life or by stubbornly examining themes that are contextually relevant to societies in the Middle East, the following chapters seek to mediate a mutually beneficial conjugation of these two discourses and repurpose Islamic feminism.

## Chapter 1



### Connecting Vocabularies

#### A Grammar of Histories, Politics, and Priorities in African and Islamic Feminisms

A major flaw of feminist attempts to tame and name the feminist spirit in Africa is their failure to define African feminism *on its own terms* rather than in the context of Western feminism.

—Obioma Nnaemeka (emphasis added)

Because gender is preeminently a cultural construct, it cannot be theorized in a cultural vacuum, as many scholars tend to do.

—Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí

By simply living their lives, Muslim women are causing the Muslimwoman to crumble.

—Margot Badran

In a country like Iran, Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice but rather a legal and political system.

—Valentine Moghadem

One of the problems with current discussions of Islam and feminism is ahistorical generalizations.

—Afsaneh Najmabadi

This chapter presents a conspectus of African and Islamic feminist theories to historicize the evolutionary trends in their methods and agendas. It surveys the historical and ideological circumstances—European

colonialism, ethnocentrism, and an improper appraisal of African and Muslim women's situations—that motivated African and Islamic feminists to articulate such key discursive concepts as African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism, for African women and women's legal rights, public roles, and political participation as promulgated in the Qur'an, for Muslim women in the Middle East. In so doing, this chapter unravels the systematic de-emphasis of African Muslim women and of goals expressed through methods other than public and political activity by discursive practices in both African and Islamic feminist discourses. In their treatment of the "Muslim world," Islamic feminists elliptically reference Africa. *Privately Empowered* attributes this negligence to the fetishization of political and public engagements in Islam as is the case in most societies in the Middle East that are Islamic nation-states. As for African feminism, African theorists uphold Africa's plurality but excoriate Islam's influence on the African Muslim woman and call Islam "religious colonialism."<sup>1</sup> The African feminist injunction of "building on the indigenous," as Obioma Nnaemeka confidently recommends, where "African worldviews are capable of providing the theoretical rack on which to hang African literature," woefully falls short when African feminists read African-Islamic feminist literature, since Islam, as made plain in 'Zulu Sofola's words, "de-womanized" the African woman.<sup>2</sup> To a fortiori claim that Islam is a form of religious colonialism for African women has calamitous consequences for African literary theory. For one, it inaccurately arms the African Muslim heroine with an aggression and intense hatred associated with colonialism, inscribed, in this case, in Islamic systems, in its putative patriarchy and sexual subjugation that she must overcome for emancipation. Just as African feminists denounce European theorists for not factoring in their realities, "fantasizing a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women," as Ifi Amadiume rightly points out, and disrespectfully trivializing African realities, oddly enough African feminists themselves shrink from the idea of including African Muslim women in key feminist formulations despite promoting an inclusionary expression of African feminism.<sup>3</sup>

A biliterate African-Islamic reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction reveals that the African Muslim woman embodies key qualities of each of the foundational concepts of African feminist thought—*Umoja*, African womanism, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism—with an eye to abiding by her Islamic faith, for her African and Islamic identities are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, then, the African Muslim woman is an African *Muslim* womanist, an African *Muslim* nego-feminist, an African *Muslim* stiwanist, an African *Muslim* motherist, and so on. Paraphrasing



Nnaemeka, the African-Islamic worldview, I contend, is precisely the rack on which to hang the African Muslim woman's feminism that draws from her African *and* Islamic environments. This biliterate presence and function of African-Islamic feminism in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction emerges through a closer look at three examples of feminism in Islam in northern Nigeria—the pivotal roles and goals of Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria's leadership, the practice of seclusion (*kulle*), and Hausa oral storytelling—not only because they question conventional wisdom about the goals of leadership, the acquisition and use of linguistic skills, and economic autonomy in unusual ways, but more importantly because they mirror the personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam illustrated in Alkali's, Ali's and Gimba's fiction to instantiate African-Islamic feminism in apolitical means and ends. The African-Islamic feminist lens allows us, moreover, to ask where in patriarchal societies—northern Nigeria—do African Muslim women turn for personal, private, and individual fulfillment? If indeed, as African feminists—'Zulu Sofola, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Ama Ata Aidoo—insist that African Muslim women feel abused particularly by “patriarchal” and “sexist” Islam, then in the privacy of their homes, with no one watching or listening, African Muslim women would have no problem in abstaining from Islamic habits and rituals. More to the point, what does African Muslim women's voluntary and willing practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits reveal about their own feelings and thoughts about Islam? A reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's depictions of African Muslim women's voluntary and willing deployment of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits—prayer, veiling, virtuous behavior, and Islamic monotheism—therefore, produces surprising conclusions for African feminist theorists and Islamic feminists alike.

Catechizing conventional wisdom about economic activity in seclusion, education, and the goals of political leadership is vital to a reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels as it teases out, counterintuitively, the African Muslim woman's recruitment of spiritual practices and rituals to give expression to her feminism. Repatriating Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria to the list of those Aidoo calls “some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known,” from which Nana Asma'u and Amina are conspicuously missing, may not qualitatively modify African feminist thought.<sup>4</sup> Rather, a closer look at the goals of Nana's and Amina's leadership defamiliarizes the aims of political leadership as limited to public and social participation for women. Similarly, it is not to emphasize economic autonomy in the fact that secluded Muslim women control the local market from even behind

closed doors or are linguistically talented without ever stepping into a school, but to wonder, following biliteracy in exploring multiple sites of sources, themes, and aims, that if these modes of engagement can impact leadership, the economy, and even education, then personal, private, and individual engagements with the religion must yield expressions of feminism that have not been sufficiently evaluated.

Invoking these notable examples, I hypothesize the following: if women can be autonomous even without stepping out of the confines of their homes both economically and linguistically, as is manifestly the case in parts of northern Nigeria because of *kulle*, then they can also express their feminism without subscribing to political activism and public roles through personal, private, and individual engagements with Islam. Leadership, likewise, need not mobilize women for greater public participation and political activity. It can, using Nana Asma'u's and Amina of Zaria's examples, promote faith and right living in Islam within the familial fold. The private need not be political, as the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf suggests. It can remain just that—private and personal. Therefore, in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction, women may engage Islam not for public expression, legal reform, or political leadership but to organize personal and private affairs through a repertoire of spiritual habits—*ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, *dhikr*, *akhlāq*, *shahādah*, and *hijāb*. Or quite simply, they may not approach Islamic practice for these ends at all but simply perform their religious duties for spiritual and personal fulfillment. This repertoire of spiritual expressions, performance of prayer, rituals, and Islamic habits serves as the most accurate index for discerning what Muslim women think and feel about Islam. Such a means of Islamic feminist expression that *Privately Empowered* locates within the contours of African-Islamic feminism pointedly emerges in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels in their protagonists' practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits.

### African Feminist Thought: A Corrective to Eurocentrism

African feminist thought passed through a twofold process in its development: identifying the weaknesses of European and American feminisms to refute the application of ill-matched concepts to African societies and developing a feminist discourse that is accountable to African women's realities. African feminists aver that African feminism must be defined on its own terms, in frameworks cohering with the realities of African women and their environment rather than importing concepts from elsewhere. The most daunting task, as will become evident in the

following pages, was to identify and conceptually parry the misrepresentations of African women's realities, for the single most prominent idea expressed in the work of African feminists unequivocally describes Euro-American scholarship on African women as little more than an extension, a continuation, of colonial racism. Undoing the colonial grasp on feminist discourse on African women became the first salient feature of African feminist thought. As Oyèwùmí competently puts it, colonialism "spurred, commissioned and sanctioned scholarship on Africa" that was produced during a period of "unprecedented European domination of non-European peoples."<sup>5</sup> It then exported "gender imperialism" to other cultures, a discourse that contained the same racism and ethnocentrism of the European colonial enterprise, turning feminism into a natural heir of the production of an unmistakably imperialistic discourse on Africa.<sup>6</sup>

To deter researchers from making overly generalized pronouncements and without an explication of sociocultural histories and contexts of African realities, Oyèwùmí adduces gender—the very concept that she claims lies at the heart of Western feminist scholarship and whose episteme is radically different from its African conceptualization—to substantiate the urgent need for an informed approach to African women's issues. She argues that whereas gender has been "a fundamental organizing principle in all societies" and in Western culture gender is primarily "bio-logic," "woman" as a biological category did not exist in Yoruba communities in Nigeria "prior to their sustained contact with the West."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in Western societies, claims Oyèwùmí, "biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world" as a result of which social categories of gender in Western feminist scholarship on African women derive also from the Western assumption that "physical bodies are social bodies" because gender and sex in Western societies are understood as inseparable and synonymous.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to this notion, in Yoruba societies, avers Oyèwùmí, gender is premised not on biology but on social facts: "Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market . . . hence the nature of one's anatomy did not define one's social position." Nevertheless, because of poorly informed scholarship, ethnocentrism and even racism, varied meanings in social arrangements, and the implications of gender and social relationships, many other African institutions—such as polygamy, arranged marriages, levirate, and child betrothal—continues Oyèwùmí, are misrepresented as misogynistic and barbaric by Westerners.

Along similar lines, Ifi Amadiume's benchmark study *Female Husbands, Male Daughters*, an anthropological disquisition on the Nnobe peoples of

the Igbo society of Western Africa, powerfully reproves the ill-informed episteme of Western feminist theories on Africa and its methods of generalizing African cultures by terming it “disrespectful trivialization”<sup>9</sup>:

When in the 1960s and 1970s female academics and Western feminists began to attack social anthropology, riding on the crest of the new wave of women’s studies, the issues they took on were androcentricism and sexism. . . . The methods they adopted indicated to Black women that White feminists were no less racist than the patriarchs of social anthropology whom they were busy condemning for male bias. They fantasized a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women. . . . It baffles African women that Western academics and feminists feel no apprehension or disrespectful trivialization in taking on all of Africa or, indeed, all the Third World in one book.<sup>10</sup>

Terming the ethnocentric Euro-American scholarship on Africa as “new imperialism,” Amadiume persuasively argues that Western scholars were guilty of assuming the catholicity of Western episteme.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, to counter this discursive evacuation of the particularities of the African environment, African feminists paid meticulous attention to the fact that although women across the world share common concerns and causes, African women faced a different order of priorities.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the second salient feature proposed by African feminists was to judiciously focalize the plurality of African women’s situations. Obioma Nnaemeka eloquently underlines plurality as an indispensable factor in the study of African feminism, writing that it “speaks literally thousands of different languages across the African continent.”<sup>13</sup> She insists, with Oyèwùmí, that African women must be studied within the context of an “African environment,” where African feminism is rooted culturally and philosophically.<sup>14</sup> These two key injunctions—countering overly generalized, thinly pertinent, and racist pronouncements and defining African feminism within the pluralistic African environment, inhering to the realities of African women—fittingly provided the ideological impetus to reconfigure Western-derived discourse on African women. The first step in countering Euro-American scholarship, therefore, as Nnaemeka suggestively states, is to proactively describe African feminism:

To meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the *African environment*

that one must refer . . . It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. *Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance.*<sup>15</sup> (emphases added)

To this end, African theorists look with favor on key terms such as African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism, among others, to explain African feminism. Although these terms focus on a particular viewpoint by a specific African feminist theorist, they are mutually allusive in that they overlap, interconnect, and intersect as each of the African theorists who forwards these terms—Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Mary Kolawole, Obioma Nnaemeka, Catherine Acholonu, and Molar Ogundipe-Leslie—acknowledges the meaningful contributions of these descriptions in the discourse on African feminism.

### African Womanism: Locating African Peculiarities

Even as African theorists extrapolate African-American feminist ideas to the environment of the African woman—as does Chikwenye Ogunyemi's extension of the African-American feminist bell hooks's concept of "womanism," a form of feminism for the Black woman who is doubly marginalized by her own society's sexist attitudes and the White world outside it—Ogunyemi feels that "feminism and African-American womanism overlook African peculiarities."<sup>16</sup> She therefore asserts "a need to define African womanism," for the African woman knows that "she is deprived of her rights by sexist attitudes in the black domestic domain and by Euro-American patriarchy in the public sphere."<sup>17</sup> As a "counterdiscourse," then, African womanism revises "black men's and white women's discourses."<sup>18</sup> So while womanism is particular to the Black woman everywhere, concedes Ogunyemi, it is only when the African woman, in particular, names herself meaningfully as she has always done in her cultures that she is able to historicize and focalize her politics.<sup>19</sup> In other words, an African womanist anchors her feminism in the initiative to name herself instead of leaving it to others (especially to Euro-American feminists or to legacies of colonial ideologies), and she situates herself in African history (her local environment), that which Ogunyemi terms as "African peculiarities."<sup>20</sup> A number of vocal strategies, symbolic of women's figurative actions to militate against patriarchy—*kwemu*, a vernacular theory; palaver-*palava*; and a spate of textual excursions into women's spaces or the "discursive universe," as Ogunyemi calls it—abet the African womanist initiative.<sup>21</sup> Ogunyemi thus prescriptively concludes that

African feminism's "feisty spirit" is aimed at "confrontationality" and at making the African woman a "spokeswoman" who must establish a "counterdiscourse" to break centuries of silence imposed by colonialism and African patriarchy.<sup>22</sup> Not unlike Irene Assiba D'Almeida's conceptualization of African women's writing as a "prise d'écriture," on the one hand, African women wrest writing in the sense of a militant appropriation or seizing, "the deliberate action of those who take up arms to seize power."<sup>23</sup> Through a panoply of terms on militancy, aggression, and battle, these assertions frame the ideological agenda of African feminist discourse as an act of political and literary confrontation.

Within the framework of a "counterdiscourse" on Western feminism, then, as Ogunyemi continues, African womanism is a

conciliatory spirit, . . . to buttress the cause of peace and progress . . . because, when all is said and done, we still have to live with our fathers, uncles, husbands, sons, friends, lovers, and male relations. This spirit of complementarity is central to . . . womanism.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, Ogunyemi's opposition to Western feminism is meant to underscore African womanism's "flexibility, maturity, a maternal disposition" or "African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology with its focus on caring—familial, communal, national and international"—as its cornerstones.<sup>25</sup> This flexibility means that African women can be "pacifist" but also "cunning," "firm and truculent" but also "sassy" enough to question the culture around them.<sup>26</sup> Finally, African womanism eschews antagonism vis-à-vis men. African feminists—Carole Boyce Davies and Filomina Steady—concurrently insist that African feminism is a "less antagonistic feminism" and that it seeks men's cooperation to challenge female subjugation by "yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation."<sup>27</sup> As both a confrontational and conciliatory politics then, African womanism's complex inclusionary positions can be sighted when interpreting African feminist literature, including reading between the lines:

The vital unity of a people evolving a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women is a better approach to the wo/man *palava* than a debilitating and devastating political struggle for women's liberation, independence, and equality against men, to prove a feminist point. This inclusionary and very African stance demands strategies in reading the novels and sometimes necessitates probing on several levels to reach the subtexts.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, through meaningful dialogues with men and other stakeholders of the African environment, womanism “aims to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, ethical, class, religious, military, and political differences.”<sup>29</sup> Ogunyemi then takes African womanism’s central ideas—the African woman’s “inclusive, mother-centered ideology” and its “flexibility, maturity and a maternal disposition,” in particular, aimed at establishing “healthy relationships among people” and a philosophy “acceptable to both men and women”—to read a number of African feminist novels, including Alkali’s *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*.<sup>30</sup>

Surprisingly though, Ogunyemi reads African Muslim women in African-Islamic feminist literature as observing “the inequities of the religion” as Islam makes “sexist demands” on the women.<sup>31</sup> Ogunyemi finds it oppressive that the Muslim female protagonists remain hidden, invisible, and unheard behind a veil. She declares “misogyny and male self-centeredness” as features of “Islam’s oppression of women,” and Islam itself as a bastion of female oppression in African-Islamic feminist literature.<sup>32</sup> Ogunyemi’s reading of African-Islamic feminist texts markedly departs from the African womanist script she recommends for African feminist texts, in general, for as I discuss further in chapter 2 in a close reading of Alkali’s *The Stillborn*, African Muslim women in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction find little reason to complain about the religion. And finally, the Muslim women, as Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s novels illuminate, are anything but hidden, invisible, or unheard. In fact, reading *The Stillborn*, and all the other novels chosen for study in *Privately Empowered*, within an African-Islamic framework repatriates the African Muslim woman’s expression of feminism to African feminist discourse because African Muslim women, like the African womanist, meaningfully interact and dialogue with their Islamic environment and men to proactively develop their feminism. The overriding question, therefore, is whether African Muslim women attribute their personal, private, and individual problems to their practice of Islam. In the myriad of emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems African Muslim women face, do they view Islam as a hindrance *or*, as my analyses of African-Islamic feminism show, as an instrument that facilitates and eases them toward solutions to personal challenges? In continuing the discussion on describing and explaining African feminism, however, Mary Kolawole points out that the term “feminism” does not even have a synonym in most African languages, leaning toward “African womanism” that is an “Afrocentric conceptualization of African women’s reality,” but preferring the term *Umoja*, which she coins to privilege African feminism as “self-identity and a strong drive for cultural self-retrieval.”<sup>33</sup>



### *Umoja*: Dialogic Action and Self-definition

Kolawole reprises Ogunyemi's identification of the sources of "multiple subjugation" of African women by "patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism" that thwart her efforts of self-assertion.<sup>34</sup> To effectively counter "destructive traditions" and "imperialistic images of the African" in "Western feminism," Kolawole proposes dialogic action, a "coalition" with men and other actors and influences in the African environment that can address the multivalent layers of the African woman's "plurality of perspectives."<sup>35</sup> This plurality comprises of diverse attitudes to the woman's question, traditional, modern, national, international, religious, and ethnic interventions that impact African women's lives. Kolawole forwards the term "*Umoja*," the Swahili word for "togetherness, unity or coalition," as a way for dialogic action that "enhances the accommodation of diverse attitudes to the woman's question without undermining one's African identity. It underscores harmony in diversity and underlies the theory that African women's consciousness is a mosaic."<sup>36</sup> Unmistakably then, African womanhood, as Kolawole's metaphorical mosaic, reinforces its multidimensional ability to absorb and manage a variety of values. Most interestingly, Kolawole details marriage, motherhood, and family values as the canons of African womanhood. She continues:

African women's self-definition focuses on positive collectivity as opposed to individuality. It also endorses the overt manifestation of womanhood and motherhood with no apologia. Consequently, the average African woman's exaltation of marriage and family values and assertion of feminine outlook are important canons of African womanhood.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, *Umoja* is "wholesome self-expression" of African womanhood that respects "the family unit and motherhood," but its aim is to foster self-emancipation not just for women but for all Africans.<sup>38</sup> It is, as Kolawole asserts, "positive coalition" that "does not seek to achieve emancipation by hating men or non-Africans or people of other races."<sup>39</sup>

The chief features of African feminism as *Umoja* are consistently present in Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, and in Gimba's *Sacred Apples*. To briefly gesture to the African Muslim woman's use of *Umoja* here, each of the protagonists I examine in the novels—Li in Alkali's *The Stillborn* in chapter 2, Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* in



chapter 3, and Zahrah in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* in chapter 5—works in coalition with men in constructing her feminism. Nana's grandfather, Baba Sani, encourages her education; Zahrah's second husband Nousah and her half brother Ya-Shareef support her professional endeavors; and Li rebuilds her marriage by returning to her estranged husband Habu Adams soon after professing faith in Islamic monotheism. These women use a repertoire of spiritual habits such as Islamic monotheism, virtuous behavior, and Islamic prayer to shape their feminisms while working with men in the pursuit of their goals. Furthermore, the protagonists in the fiction under analysis here—Li, Nana Ai, Zahrah, and others—craft their feminisms in Islam within the core canons of *Umoja*, namely marriage, motherhood, and family.

### Nego-feminism: Meaningful Flexibilities

On similar lines of dialogic action within an evolving African environment, Nnaemeka identifies in the African woman her unique ability to adroitly negotiate and navigate through challenging situations. Also known as “nego-feminism” or “feminism of negotiation,” “negotiation has the double meaning of ‘give and take/exchange’”:

African feminism . . . knows when, where and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework.<sup>40</sup>

With Ogunyemi and Kolawole, Nnaemeka builds on the indigenous and roots African feminism in the African environment that “challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise.”<sup>41</sup> To explain the supple qualities of nego-feminism, Nnaemeka recruits the metaphor of a chameleon that shifts its color and adjusts to its surroundings to survive, move forward, and thrive. Furthermore, in minutely observing the chameleon's movements, Nnaemeka notes that it is “cautious, goal-oriented, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views.”<sup>42</sup> A nego-feminist must strategically embrace all of these qualities if she is to survive in an environment of multiple mutations, differences, and disruptions both within the African environment and outside it.

Revealingly, Nana Ai in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*, as I discuss more fully in chapter 3, displays unmatched patience, caution, and dignity on the journey she undertakes back to school from her village by using the Islamic framework of *akhlāq* when dealing with people and tragic situations, as does a nego-feminist. Likewise, resolute in her aim of pursuing an education, Ali's heroine Farida in *Destiny* in fact firmly proclaims that none other than God (Allah) will make her dream of education a reality—she patiently bides her time and prays regularly in the interim for her moment of success. Alkali's little-discussed nego-feminist, Awa, in *The Stillborn*, furthermore embodies extraordinary abilities to nimbly negotiate, accommodate, and compromise with changing situations and people as she responsibly cares for her family, including her sister, Li, all while finding no reason to complain about the Islamic framework of their lives.

### Stiwanism: Inclusion and Participation for Social Change

In evoking the well-known metaphor of mountains as obstacles to identify hurdles that African women must surmount in their struggle for autonomy and liberation, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie extends and particularizes Mao Zedong's image of the Chinese man with three "mountains," or burdens, on his back to the situation of the African woman whose suffering is "a product of colonization and neo-colonialism, comprising poverty, ignorance, and the lack of scientific attitude to experience and nature."<sup>43</sup> To Mao's three hurdles—"foreign intrusions," or oppression from outside, "feudal oppression or authoritarianism," and the Chinese man's "backwardness"—Ogundipe-Leslie adds three more, namely the African woman's race that contributes to "imperialism and neo-colonialism"; man, "who is steeped in his centuries-old attitudes of patriarchy"; and the African woman herself or her negative self-image that has led her to interiorize patriarchy and gender hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> Ogundipe-Leslie is particularly concerned about the "so-called voicelessness of African women" that gives rise to what she terms as "ventriloquisms" by "women of European descent." In other words, Ogundipe-Leslie feels that Euro-American feminists make no effort to explore what African women have to say about themselves or think it worthwhile to listen to them. Therefore, African women, continues Ogundipe-Leslie, are called upon to "play the role of ventriloquists' puppets, speaking to other people's agenda."<sup>45</sup>

To overcome these daunting hurdles and to pursue an exploration of "feminism in an African context," in the "tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women,"

as Ogundipe-Leslie puts it, she advocates the term “stiwanism,” deriving from the acronym STIWA, or Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Resisting imitation of Western feminism, stiwanism pays careful attention to the needs of African women aligned with African traditions via strategies organic to African indigenous feminisms. A “stiwa” feminist conceives of feminism not only as inclusion but also as participation in the “social and political transformation of Africa.”<sup>46</sup> Stiwanism includes issues around a woman’s “body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation, her continent and their locations within the international economic order.” It is sensitive to specificities and perceptively asks, when speaking of an African context, “do we mean: a Christian or a Muslim Africa . . . ?”<sup>47</sup> Ogundipe-Leslie rightly insists that Islam “demands our respect in its own right” as one of many actors in Africa’s plural environment.<sup>48</sup>

However, when Ogundipe-Leslie specifies the first “mountain” in the way of the African woman’s social transformation, Christianity and Islam top her list of “foreign intrusions” for their destruction of the indigenous religious order: “In the religious cultures of societies, colonization introduced Christianity which destroyed the old religions or subverted them, as did Islam.”<sup>49</sup> She concludes that both religions were indirectly responsible for “prostitution, vagrancy, mass proletarianization, lack of self-respect and self worth etc.” in Africa.<sup>50</sup> Although both Christianity and Islam assign subordinate roles to women, argues Ogundipe-Leslie, Islam is so patriarchal that “the very idea of female leadership in Islam is inconceivable.”<sup>51</sup> Unrelenting in her condemnation of European colonization and Islam for destroying and subverting traditional societies, Ogundipe-Leslie furthermore blames them for “politically and legally creating new oppressed and subjugated status and roles for women,” resulting in the cataclysmic creation of “economic and emotional voids.”<sup>52</sup>

Such contumely against Islam is familiar and recurrent. It can be countered not by merely demurring, but by first identifying the manner in which Islam is consistently de-emphasized, minimized, to tendentiously credit other influences on African Muslim women, namely African indigenous institutions. Such subtle gestures that discount Islam’s impact on African Muslim women are more challenging, I believe, but also soluble insofar as biliterate modes of engagement—African and Islamic—are recruited to calibrate African-Islamic feminism. Three brief examples exemplify the concern that female leadership, economic autonomy, and social mobility are attributed not to their congruence with Islamic beliefs and practice but to the fact that traditional African institutions inherently promote women’s emancipation. Ogundipe-Leslie writes:

Even in purdah, in Islamic northern Nigeria, where, in the early nineteenth century, Islam took away many of the historically established and strong social rights of the Hausa women driving them indoors, even there, women work in purdah and sell their products through emissaries.<sup>53</sup>

A closer look reveals that Ogundipe-Leslie is not lauding Islam's encouragement of women's economic activity. Rather, she is attributing such an occurrence to the emancipatory features of African indigenous societies that promote women's economic activity and social rights. Toward a similar end, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen explores power relations in indigenous African societies and employs a polarized vocabulary to declare that Islam and Christianity "are historically associated with *foreign* power structures, ascribing a well-known *subordinate* place to women that *contradicts* precolonial African religious beliefs and their social manifestations" (emphases added).<sup>54</sup> Enid Schildkrout's sophisticated inquiry into the dependence and autonomy of secluded Hausa women in northern Nigeria claims that "religion has thus played a part in curtailing the economic roles of women in many parts of the Islamic world."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, as Schildkrout continues, notwithstanding the "ubiquitous adoption" of purdah, what women in Kano "seem to be continuing is the long West African tradition of female involvement in economic life."<sup>56</sup> To summarize this pervasive theoretical stance, it is easy to see that African feminists persistently other Islam on the charge that it brought with it patriarchy to a historically matrilineal society and snatched many of African women's historically strong social rights. To Ogundipe-Leslie, Jell-Bahlsen, and Schildkrout, if African Muslim women are able to enjoy any degree of autonomy and social success, they owe it not to their adherence to Islam but to their African traditions that predated Islam. I respond to these postures after briefly examining one more dimension of African feminism, namely motherism, as several features of African feminism—the African woman's collective cooperation with men, her adaptable flexibility and navigational prowess in managing diverse attitudes, her fostering a meaningful dialogue with her African environment, and her initiating her self-naming in African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, and stiwanism—resonate in Catherine Acholonu's idea of motherism.

### Motherism: Humanistic Feminism

Catherine Acholonu promotes a humanist approach to African feminism by detaching herself from its more radical and aggressive avatars for

solving “women-related problems.”<sup>57</sup> In particular, she distances herself from the Western imperialistic view that gender determines socio-economic status by clarifying that it is economic power in Africa that defines social status: “The truth is *what determines social status in Africa*, in all parts of Africa, is *economic power*, and hardly gender”<sup>58</sup> (italics in the original). As for African-American womanism, continues Acholonu, it omits “vital concepts such as the family, the child, nature, mothering and nurture.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, excessively radical, bitter, and pessimistic visions of African feminist writers, argues Acholonu, such as the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, who portray male characters in “exaggerated states of idiocy, irresponsibility and insensitivity” have also filtered through into the criticism of their novels, negatively impacting the “reader response” to their work that views the African woman as a violent radical.<sup>60</sup> As a consequence of these three miseducated opinions that inscribe unreasonable aggression in the African woman in her unfounded opposition to males, in female subordination owing to gender and not to economic power, and in opinions that overlook the centrality of motherhood and family, Acholonu argues that Eurocentric feminism continues to dominate the African feminist agenda.

As a corrective, Acholonu proposes a more humanist conceptualization of African feminism and applies it even to African literary criticism, where writers

must be able to strike a balance between outright aggressive radicalism and finding a hologrammatic approach, a dynamically organic approach to writing that will encourage mutual understanding, cooperation and acceptance among the sexes . . .<sup>61</sup>

At the core of such humanism or “man/woman relationship” is the concern for the “African experience of its characters; the Afrocentricity of its setting,” particularly “the concern for the female experience in it.”<sup>62</sup> As a terminology, such complementarity and cooperation between genders in the harmonious construction of women’s issues is “motherism,” deriving from Africa’s status as the mother continent of humanity. A motherist feminist, a man or woman, plays multiple roles, including ordering, re-ordering, creating, building, and rebuilding.<sup>63</sup> Embracing the entire gamut of human struggle, a motherist regards the whole of humanity as her constituent:

A MOTHERIST loves and respects all men and women irrespective of colour, race, religion, ethnicity; a motherist respects all cultures

and religions . . . A motherist protects and defends *family* values . . . a Motherist is a man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity. The weapon of Motherism is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation, as has been the case with radical feminism.<sup>64</sup>

Most of all, a man may also be a motherist as the concept pertains more to a disposition than to biological identity. Motherism values cohesive action and a conciliatory stance rather than confrontational politics, and therefore embraces humanism, universalism, and “male/female cooperation.”<sup>65</sup>

However, Acholonu does adopt a confrontational position vis-à-vis one of the many spiritual and cultural components that constitute Africa’s plurality, namely Islam. She labels it as a form of “religious colonialism,” equating it to European colonialism on the charge that it subverted African indigenous systems.<sup>66</sup> Acholonu polemically claims that Islam imposed “fetters” on African Muslim women, equating polygamy in Islam to prostitution in harems as women have “no identity of their own” because

men make *harlots* of their daughters or sell them off to the highest bidder in order to enrich themselves. Women are gathered in harems in tens and hundreds to please the men, for sexual pleasure only . . . *Harems cannot be compared with polygamy in traditional Africa.* In polygamy a woman retains her personal autonomy and freedom of choice and action . . . A harem woman is a *sex object*, bought with the sole intention of providing pleasure to the man.<sup>67</sup> (emphases added)

Acholonu somewhat tendentially contrasts precolonial female autonomy of Muslim Yoruba women (explicitly attributable to female emancipation inherent in Yoruba society) with the social demotion and ignominy of Muslim women in Hausa society (attributable to the institutionalization of sexism and female subjugation in Islamic law), in addition to pointing out the lukewarm reception of Islam by African Muslim women:

In places where Arab culture did not become entrenched as a way of life, the women still enjoy the relative autonomy provided for them by their own traditional African way of life. Thus, we find that whereas Islam did/does not limit the autonomy and freedom of the Yoruba woman, it has placed many Hausa women in positions of confinement and the lower rung of the society.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, in polygamous situations, concludes Acholonu, whereas Yoruba Muslim women (in Southern Nigeria) are able to salvage their autonomy and dignity because of the inherently women-friendly safeguards in traditional African institutions that are conspicuously absent in the observance of similar institutions in predominantly Islamic communities in Africa, the Hausa Muslim woman is condemned to a life of ignominy and social demotion in a polygamous “harem.”

Likewise, in her claim on the relatively unproblematic and welcome compatibility of economic power and social status that is attributable to indigenous African systems, Acholonu writes “even in the Muslim North, rich women and the Alhajahs are great socio-political and socio-economic power brokers.”<sup>69</sup> Acholonu’s tone, concessionary choice of words—“even in,” “entrenched”—and aims can be placed squarely on top of Ogun-dipe-Leslie’s, Aidoo’s, and Steady’s bruising remarks that African traditional institutions are friendlier to women’s social progress, that *even* in Islamic communities in Africa, Muslim women owe their wealth, social status, and well-being to indigenous systems, and that in places where Islam did not become “entrenched” as a way of life, women are happier, freer, and richer.

A biliterate, reconciliatory, African-Islamic feminist reading of Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction, to respond to the minimization of Islam’s compatibility with women’s emancipation, produces two things. First, the African Muslim woman need not be one or the other—African or Muslim—she instantiates both. Islam is not, as African theorists have been rather unconvincingly treating it all along, a foil to the African Muslim woman’s African womanhood, for she crafts all her talents for self-development toward “wholesome self-expression,” to appropriate Kolawole’s resonant terms, within her African *and* Islamic environments. All of the above African articulations of feminism—*Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, motherism, and African womanism—vociferously advocate the African woman’s proactive engagement with her environment. In the case of the African Muslim woman, her environment is profoundly conditioned by Islam. As a result, she consolidates both these coexisting components of the African environment, becoming an African Muslim *nego-feminist*, an African Muslim *womanist*, an African Muslim *stiwani*, and an African Muslim *motherist*.

Likewise, and this is the second crucial point of African-Islamic feminism, what obtains from an African-Islamic reading of African feminist literature is that even in such patriarchal societies as those found in northern Nigeria, where Islam is said to have snatched women’s historically strong social rights, of all the possible resources, Muslim women

instrumentalize none other than their Islamic practice—spiritual habits and rituals—to organize their personal and private lives. The following examples briefly illustrate this point. As I discuss at length in chapter 4, Magira Milli in *The Descendants* displays leadership, courage, and adaptability to situations and people as she manages the affairs of her entire family, drawing inspiration, sustenance, and energy by turning and returning to prayer—*salāt* and *duʿa*. Zahrah’s example in *Sacred Apples*, as my study in chapter 5 makes plain, shows that African Muslim women do not always feel socially or culturally demoted in polygamous situations. Zahrah’s second husband, Nousah, is already married when he proposes marriage to her. Zahrah engages the Qur’an and Islamic literature to work through her ambivalence and hesitation vis-à-vis polygamy before accepting Nousah’s proposal. In Li’s case in *The Stillborn*, as I argue in chapter 2, it is through her acceptance of Islam that she also comes to meaningfully interact with her family and environment, which she despises at the start of the story. Notwithstanding the exhortation to be proactive and not reactive, as Nnaemeka recommends, in explicitly distinguishing their agenda from that of Western feminism and warning against ethnocentric “sisterhood,” when reading the African Muslim woman’s feminist activity, however, these same theorists reveal tones that can be termed as ethnocentric and even racist vis-à-vis African Muslim women.<sup>70</sup> The “inclusionary” foundational concepts of African feminist thought—African womanism, *Umoja*, motherism, stiwanism, and nego-feminism—are momentarily set aside when platonically evoking the presence of Islam to celebrate Africa’s bewildering diversity.

My focus here is that such a standpoint has gloomy implications for African-Islamic feminism, as sighted in the diffuse critical corpus by African feminist theorists on African Muslim women, for it pivots on the undiminished currency of a rather friable notion that Islam is foreign to Africa. It is, as Amina Mama calls it, “somebody else’s religion.”<sup>71</sup> The heft of the critical scaffold on Islam in Africa thus lies in the tenuous dialectic between indigenous (intrinsic to the African continent) and foreign (originating elsewhere or external to the African continent). All critical postures, particularly African feminist, as seen above, derive from this overly simplistic equation, including the repugnance for the religion on the pretext that it is patriarchal, patrilineal, misogynistic and it denies women freedom, education, and social rights, evolving into some of the most deprecatory interpretations, such as equating Islamic customs to prostitution and human trafficking.<sup>72</sup> The historical and investigative foci of the nature of African social systems, in an effort to unearth the deterioration of African societies, invariably constellate around two incommensurable



conflations: European colonization of Africa and the arrival of Arabs in Africa that predated European colonialism.

In this regard, Wole Soyinka's bald critique on Islam in Africa must be briefly mentioned here, for it has single-handedly added the greatest discursive weight to critical iterations on the virtual illegality of Islam's presence in the continent. Soyinka's persistent assessment of the religion that enslaved an entire continent, positioning Islam as a contestant in a soul-grubbing match—"the contest for the African soul by the two religious superpowers," "first by Islamic, then Christian invaders"—unravels the predicament at the core of the polemics on Islam in Africa in his declaration that "the cross-over line considered between a free man and a slave was often contiguous with a readiness for conversion."<sup>73</sup> Although Soyinka's infamous altercation with the Kenyan critic Ali Mazrui, which I mention below, is often considered as the point of departure on the weighty polemic on Islam in Africa, I believe that Soyinka's nuanced censure of the religion can be traced back to a decade before he tangled with Mazrui and before he received the Nobel Prize in 1986. This conjuncture in 1976 that predates his influential argument with Mazrui is just as crucial as it represents and constitutes the critical pattern deployed by African feminist critics in their analysis of Islam in Africa, and therefore is more reflective of the stance of the African critical apparatus vis-à-vis Islam. Briefly, Soyinka's standpoint in his essays on African literatures in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, in 1976, can be plotted on three main axes. First, he identifies the coordinates of the African socio-spiritual sphere as an unremitting competition between indigenous African religions, Islam, and Christianity. Next, he identifies works of Islamic vision that employ "aggressive or subtle influences upon African indigenous values," and finally he locates works on Islamic ideology that illustrate an Islamic "sensibility that occasionally, very occasionally suggests the animism of traditional beliefs."<sup>74</sup>

Armed then with this well-heeled notion of a tripartite combat raging between Islam, Christianity, and the relatively peaceful African indigenous religions, in which Muslims are merciless proselytizers who, if looking for humanism, can find it in indigenous African systems, Soyinka's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1986, reiterating the notions of Islam vying for the soul of the African and of Muslims as invaders on African soil, is quite familiar. In his speech, he unsurprisingly reprises his views on Muslims as slave traders, despots, and fundamentalists (referring to the Sudanese leader el-Nimeiri and Libya's Gaddhafi) who denigrate "African authentic spirituality," and predictably recapitulates the tensions between Islam and other African religions as indigenous and foreign, authentic and alien.<sup>75</sup>

In the same vein of competition between these spiritual systems, Soyinka then criticizes the television series on Africa directed by the Kenyan critic Ali Mazrui and produced by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) as “another expensive propaganda for the racial-religious superiority of seductive superstition” in that Mazrui expressly de-emphasizes, even denigrates, authentic African cultures to portray Africa as an Islamic (Arabized) continent since Mazrui is Muslim, or an “alienated African.”<sup>76</sup> With this statement, Soyinka inaugurated the protracted broadside with Mazrui on the validity of the presence of Islam in Africa. The altercation between Soyinka and Mazrui took place in the form of essays in academic journals where each of them defended his point of view about religions in Africa. In his defense, Mazrui suggests that he had no intention of eclipsing the indigenous tenor of African cultures or of embellishing the Islamic influence on the continent to the detriment of the former. He does nonetheless suspect the provenance of Soyinka’s critique as the Nobel laureate’s distaste, even prejudice, for religion or “seductive superstition” that has little relevance to contemporary Africa.<sup>77</sup> And Soyinka dauntlessly re-equips himself with a lexicon, by now familiar and predictable, to declaim that Islam “subverted” many African practices and “alienated” the African from his environment and traditions.<sup>78</sup>

In Soyinka’s scathing comments on the desire for purported “racial-religious superiority” by Islam and Muslims and in the dialectic of authentic versus foreign and African against Arab, however, one senses the inability and perhaps unwillingness on the part of African theorists to uncouple Islam and Arab culture or to see it as anything less than an embattled existence between Islam and Christianity for African converts. The only way, it seems, Soyinka, Ogundipe-Leslie, Acholonu, and Sofola, to name but a few of Islam’s harshest critics, have continued to engage with Islam is by insisting, in antagonistic, competitive, and belligerent terms, that the African is the other to the Arab, that Islam and Christianity are “other cultures,” to maintain the salvo of oft-repeated brickbats.<sup>79</sup> It is no accident then that the warp and woof of the postulations of a number of African feminist theorists reveals a pattern similar to Soyinka’s musings on Islam and its African practitioners. As discussed above, in their efforts to deconstruct the African woman’s socioeconomic and political status in the process of “self-retrieval” and “self-naming” and toward a humanistic African feminism, prominent African feminists—Aidoo, Ogundipe-Leslie, and Schildkrout—have turned to historical African social and spiritual systems in ways that often repeat Soyinka’s ideological itinerary vis-à-vis Islam.<sup>80</sup> In response to this prolonged diatribe on Islam in Africa and the many excellent questions that Soyinka and Mazrui’s exchange has

pertinently, if self-servingly, broached, it is more meaningful to examine whether such a critical stance is an isolated occurrence. It is not. What implications then does it have for African Muslim women to explore what African Muslims themselves think and feel about Islam as portrayed in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction? It merits exploring, for instance, if the question of the authenticity of Islam in Africa enters the minds and praxis of African Muslim women themselves or if they feel enslaved, as Soyinka would have us believe, to practice Islam. Such postures that codify the means and aims of the practice of Muslims discursively, rhetorically, and textually suffuse even the Islamic feminist discourse that uniquely valorizes the political, public, collective, and legislative dimensions of feminism in Islam.

### Islamic Feminism: Evolving Consciousness beyond the "Muslimwoman"<sup>81</sup>

This section focuses on the manner in which some themes accrued salience as the goals of Islamic feminism in the Middle East for women's groups crafting agendas around public service, political activity, and activism. An abidingly influential goal of Islamic feminism, as this section demonstrates, is the inordinate conscription of scriptural literature, the Qur'an and *hadith*, as primarily legal rather than spiritual references to advocate for women's rights and gender justice. From its earliest articulation, then, in its eagerness to counter colonial legacies on Muslim women in the Middle East, most notably the tendentious colonial belief that Islam was injurious to Muslim women's social emancipation, Islamic feminist theorists labored to encode women's contributions to society as public, visible, and viewable activity. The most tangible way Islamic feminists were able to do this was by stretching Islam's stance on spiritual egalitarianism to mean gender egalitarianism. Inscribing even the Qur'an within the same grammar of justice and rights, within a "movement" animated by Muslim women as its agents, Islamic feminist theorists defined an unchanged calculus of goals—sexual freedom, gender equality, and public participation—around intersections of nationalist, state-oriented or Islamist, and activist labor, primarily contextual to the Middle East. In its reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels, however, *Privately Empowered* defamiliarizes such goals by foregrounding the spiritual functions of the Qur'an that facilitate the accomplishment of personal and private goals. In so doing, it shifts the encryption of participation in community affairs as publicly viewable activity to private, personal, and individual channels.

As programmatic offsprings of reactions to colonial and intellectual impositions, both Islamic and African feminist discourses trace their earliest expressions to a counterdiscourse on the ethnocentric articulations in Euro-American scholarship on Islam and Africa respectively. Zakia Salime asserts that both “‘feminism’ and ‘Islamism’ have genealogies rooted in colonial representations about Islam” and that gender lay at the center of colonial pronouncements on Islam in Islamic societies.<sup>82</sup> The question of women’s oppression in Islam, avers Salime, was instrumental in legitimizing the colonial discourse on women’s emancipation, their participation in public life, and, of course, on several hot-button topics, most significant of which was the use of the *hijāb* by Muslim women.<sup>83</sup> Leila Ahmed’s field-defining historical inquiry *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, on the lives of Muslim women in pre-Islamic Arabia till the early twentieth century, expertly engages with the nefarious connections between colonialism and feminist discourse as employed by British colonial administration to discredit Islam, Islamic practice, and Muslims, in general, in much of the Middle East, and in Egypt in particular:

Male imperialists known in their home societies for their intransigent opposition to feminists led the attack abroad against the “degradation” of women in Muslim societies, and were the foremost champions of unveiling.<sup>84</sup>

But the systematic codification of Islamic practice as inimical to Muslim women’s interests did not originate with the British in Egypt. Ahmed traces the precipitous disappearance of Muslim women’s sexual freedoms and publicly viewable autonomy in Islamic societies to the first Islamic community during Muhammad’s lifetime, which was upheld from thereon in subsequent Islamic dynasties that ruled much of the Middle East and the Arab world:

Their autonomy and participation were curtailed with the establishment of Islam, its institution of patrilineal, patriarchal marriage as solely legitimate, and the social transformation that ensued. . . . Implicit in this new order was the male right to control women and to interdict their interactions with other men. Thus the ground was prepared for the closures that would follow: women’s exclusion from social activities in which they might have contact with men other than those with rights to their sexuality; their physical seclusion, soon to become the norm; and the institution of internal mechanisms

of control, such as instilling the notion of submission as a woman's duty. The ground was thus prepared, in other words, for the passing of a society in which women were active participants in the affairs of their community and for women's place in Arabian society to become circumscribed in the way it already was for their sisters in the rest of the Mediterranean Middle East.<sup>85</sup>

Locating women's exclusion from the social sphere and the loss of their sexual and social autonomies specifically in the contradictory presence of two competing voices within Islam, Ahmed believes that Islam's spiritually ethical vision is at variance with the inequality between the sexes in the marriage structure that it established. She unequivocally states: "The egalitarian conception of gender inhering in the ethical vision of Islam existed in tension with the hierarchical structure instituted by Islam."<sup>86</sup> For Ahmed, the spiritual egalitarianism (the equal expectation of prayer, observance of rituals and piety, and the corresponding reward for such behavior) that Islam unambiguously emphasizes in the Qur'an stretches into the "identicalness of men and women" implied in *ḥadīth* literature (identical human biology in terms of the male and female contributions to conception) that is discordant with the pragmatic regulations of the religion as its androcentric rulers and lawmakers don't quite always privilege the egalitarian ethic of the Qur'an.<sup>87</sup>

Ahmed's demonstration of female subjugation, inaugurated by Muhammad's actions and gradually institutionalized by the Islamic community in much of Arabia following his death, and her insistent encoding of active social participation as a visibly public and viewable activity, I would argue, sow the very first seeds of a discursive impulse that has resulted in the obscuring of Muslim women's issues outside Middle Eastern societies. Ahmed's view on Islam's curtailment of Muslim women's autonomies is notional, at best, as it limits the scope of Muslim women's contributions to society. She lists, for instance, warfare, presence in mosques, and public performance of the arts, among other activities, from which women were increasingly absent in the first years of the Islamic community and following Muhammad's death.<sup>88</sup> Secondly, Ahmed's focus remains limited to the Middle East. When she lists the loss of women's powers—the loss of matriliney, women's physical seclusion, men's control of women's sexuality—institutionalized primarily as mechanisms of male control, she describes a society and culture very Middle Eastern in habit and practice: "women's place in Arabian society [became] circumscribed in the way it already was for their sisters in the rest of the Mediterranean Middle East."<sup>89</sup> As my discussion on some of the same practices in northern

Nigerian Muslim societies reveals, restrictions on physical movement are empoweringly inscribed by women in the observance of Islam and their long involvement in economic and creative activities. Although Ahmed maintains that Islam consistently undergirds an ethically egalitarian vision and that it is the interpretive stress on gender inequality—the sexual hierarchy instituted in marriage in Islam—that led to women’s literal and ensuing figurative exile from community affairs, it is the same interpretive stress that Islam does not require women’s physical seclusion or interdict their participation in public activity in northern Nigerian societies that has prevented African Muslim women from encoding active contributions to society within publicly manifest activities. It is the same interpretive stress, then, that incurs in us an appreciation of the privately empowering and enabling ways African Muslim women engage with Islam for economic and creative involvement. It is perhaps also for the same reason that gender egalitarianism, as my reading of *The Virtuous Woman* in chapter 3 reveals, and as Alkali provocatively states, is irrelevant as the quality of the human being matters more. As Alkali sketches her protagonist Nana Ai’s personality, she insists on the overall quality of the individual and not on a woman’s efforts for identicalness with men.

Islamic theorists attribute restrictions on women’s physical mobility to the degrees of interpretive stress on Islam’s hierarchical sexual relations in marriage, as Ahmed blames Abbasid society for secluding women and evacuating them from mosques, battlefields, and all arenas of the “community’s central affairs.”<sup>90</sup> Along with Ogundipe-Leslie and Acholonu, a number of African theorists of note have held that Islam drove African Muslim women indoors to the detriment of historically strong social rights accorded to them by African indigenous systems. Within the counterdiscursive provenance of Islamic and African feminist theories as discourse to refute colonially motivated and ill-informed perceptions of Muslim and African women respectively, the overriding question about the concerted approach to these defining topoi—gender equality, veiling, seclusion, and social rights—may again be posed. Since African theorists regard Islam as oppressive, and Islamic theorists in the Middle East hold androcentric interpretations of Islam as responsible for rendering women invisible in the public sphere of life, do secluded African Muslim women also believe that Islam’s influence on their lives—especially since the religion does not mandate physical seclusion—hampers their participation in the community’s affairs and their active social contributions to society? And by extension, for non-secluded African Muslim women, do only political and public and activist channels yield participation in community affairs, if this is at all a goal of their feminist engagement with Islam?

The insistence that such radical egalitarianism is upheld in the Qur'an, explains why, as Badran traces the evolution of Islamic feminism in Egypt, feminism in Islam in the Middle East and the surrounding regions rapidly developed as inseparable in means and purpose from legislative and political goals. The tight embrace between politics, Islam, and nationalism, argues Badran, enabled Islamic feminists to recruit political discourses to legitimize their own agendas, gradually broadening the scope of Islamic feminism to include social justice and gender equality as its principal aims while incorporating "intersecting Islamic, nationalist, and humanitarian (later human rights), and democratic discourses."<sup>91</sup> As a result, continues Badran, "Islamic feminism uses Islamic discourse as its paramount—although not necessarily its only—discourse in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice."<sup>92</sup> Forced to review their roles as "citizens of the national state (*waṭān*) and as members of the religious community (*umma*)," Muslim women began to view Islamic feminism as a "rights-centered feminism," and themselves as "as active participants in national liberation and revolutionary movements."<sup>93</sup> Mir-Hosseini provides the clearest articulation of the historical role of politics in Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Arab world when she asserts that "political Islam gave them [the women] the language to sustain a critique of gender biases in Muslim family laws in ways that were previously impossible."<sup>94</sup> As social justice and gender equality became enshrined as goals of Middle Eastern and Arab Islamic feminist agendas, so did the means; political Islam and Islamism, in Badran's words, "connoted *activist* politics directed at eradicating injustice and corruption at the state level by replacing 'secular states' with 'Islamic states'" (emphasis added).<sup>95</sup> Irrefutably then, as Badran writes, the notion of Islamic feminism, continually articulated as an activist and rights-seeking movement, has grown from its very definition as a retort to "patriarchal interpretations and practices of Islam [to] offering in its stead an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an."<sup>96</sup>

Unsurprisingly, a feminist reading of the Qur'an develops within the same grammar of rights, justice, and equality that co-opts the Qur'an as primarily a reference for women's equality in all spheres of life. Islamic feminists, therefore, seek it out to emphatically anchor gender rights and social justice in a hermeneutic reading of its verses. In this vein, Amina Wadud claims that women have been treated as a "sub-category" of the social order in which justice is administered, and the Qur'an serves as the text that helps solve this imbalance: "from the Muslim perspective, the Qur'anic world-view provides the most efficient avenue for comprehensive alleviation of problems of oppression and should, therefore, remain



ever-present.”<sup>97</sup> In her influential approach to Qur’anic hermeneutics, Wadud underscores the “‘reading’ of the Qur’an that would be meaningful to women living in the modern era.”<sup>98</sup> It involves studying its context, the grammatical composition of a verse, and the whole text or its worldview in order to foreground its egalitarian message by recognizing that it “does not support a specific and stereotyped role for its characters, male or female.”<sup>99</sup> Wadud further adds that the Qur’an is a “moral history” and proposes moral values that are “transcendental” in nature.<sup>100</sup> She thus elaborates on the ethos of the Qur’an, a concept that honors the human role of women, not necessarily a gender-specific role, deriving from the Qur’anic term “nafs,” which treats humans—men and women—first as individuals with regard to their recompense, actions, and qualities, the conclusion that “there is no distinction between male and female with regard to individual capacity . . . with regard to personal aspirations, they are also the same.”<sup>101</sup> Hence, even when positing Islamic feminism as a discourse that unfolds within a “religious framework,” “expressed in a single, or paramount, religiously-grounded discourse taking the Qur’an as its central text,” as Badran states, the emphasis on feminism as a struggle, a fight for equality and justice, obtains:<sup>102</sup>

In developing their feminist discourses, women have looked to the Qur’an as Islam’s central and most sacred text, calling attention to its fundamental message of *social justice* and human equality and to the rights therein granted to women.<sup>103</sup> (emphasis added)

This mood is best captured in cooke’s pithy formulation of Islamic feminism as “sharia activism.”<sup>104</sup>

Claiming to move away from feminism’s goals of legal reform and political activity, as Badran, Wadud, Mir-Hosseini, and others have strenuously favored *sharī‘a* activism, Saba Mahmood’s elegant study on the mosque movement examines the larger Islamic Revival (or Awakening) in present-day Egypt, turning to the role of religion in inculcating spiritually virtuous behavior that suffuses all manner of existence. Through explicit observance of such strategies as are taught by the teachers of the mosque movement, participants—Muslim women of various ages, classes, and sections of Egyptian society—acquire behaviors that will eventually become part of the larger focus of social life, community, and state. Mahmood’s meticulous analysis pivots on a socially organized movement where women collectively adopt such skills through classes in mosques, explicit instruction from trained teachers, collective participation in lectures, discussions, and conscious techniques on Islamically correct behavior to



“ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living.”<sup>105</sup> The women’s mosque movement emphasizes the interiorization of feelings, even thoughts, through the exterior, physical actions, or gestures. Mahmood’s study is situated well within the activism of collective organizations under the stewardship of learned Muslim women—the *dā‘iyāt* or religious preachers or teachers—who impart to the participants skills and strategies in the finer aspects of Islamic practice. Mahmood intimates that the mosque movement is an important subset of the trend in the Islamic Revival; belonging to the network of “socioreligious nonprofit organizations that provide charitable services to the poor and perform the work of proselytization,” it organizes its activities under socioreligious activism or *da‘wa*, “an umbrella term . . . to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety, and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct.”<sup>106</sup>

In contrast to the methods of the mosque movement, the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf, also known as Heba Rauf Ezzat, conceives of an innovative approach to Islamic feminism by calling life in Islam a “very political existence,” ironically banishing the divide between private and public.<sup>107</sup> Rauf provocatively declares that the “private is political,” gesturing to the family as a springboard for Muslim women’s greater political and social participation for subsequent state reform.<sup>108</sup> Mir-Hosseini has similarly stated that the “personal is political” to argue against the possibility of divorcing politics from religion.<sup>109</sup> Borrowing from the influential Islamic thinker Sayyid Qutb’s idea that the family is the basis of society, Rauf’s proposition is innovative not because it disavows putative political functions by turning inward to the space of the family or the private. Rather, it is novel because it engages the porosity of the public-private division to render the political as both a means to and an end of the feminist process in Islam. In this sense, women’s (political) functions in the family are the means for their eventual (political) role in society and the state. Rauf’s logic rests on the simple self-evident truth that the caliph, or head of the Islamic state, functions with the assistance of a council of elected members, or *shūrā*, in consultation that underwrites political governance in Islam. Just as the caliph is the head of a state and as people endorse his leadership based on consultation and his ability to reasonably and wisely perform his tasks in accordance with Islamic principles, the family provides analogous opportunities as its affairs are also conducted using the principles of consultation, discussion, and action. By extension, therefore, the family serves as the platform for women to be publicly political.

In an interview, Rauf clarifies her innovative model on women’s political roles: “Social movements cannot be understood in an Islamic social

system without analyzing the extended family as an economic and political unit.” She effuses about the analogy of the family and the state:

You can't have a totalitarian patriarchal system in a family in Islam. The family should be run by shura. The same values and laws count in the public and the private arenas. Marriage is like voting for or choosing the khalif (the successor of the prophet). We do have a family head but he is like the khalif and should be chosen freely. If he is unfair, he should be denied the right to be the head of the family, as people can withdraw their homage to their khalif, women can divorce their husbands.<sup>110</sup>

Briefly, the family, “a micro-process of the state,” is the legitimate instrument for political power.<sup>111</sup>

Though Mahmood distinguishes between the aims and methods of the mosque movement and Rauf's stance that religion should be practiced to play a greater role in society, to engender, as Mahmood terms it, “a certain kind of polity” and social change, and since the mosque movement, she claims, “fails precisely to make this linkage, keeping matters of worship and piety incarcerated within what for them is a privatized world of worship,” the mosque movement, as I will discuss further in chapter 3, also falls within the purview of socially organized and conscious efforts to preach and practice religion.<sup>112</sup> Its methodology is not as privatized, for it is a conscious effort, learned collectively and publicly through pedagogically imparted techniques by skilled instructors. I also elaborate on Rauf's theorization of Islamic feminism more fully in my reading of *The Descendants* in chapter 4.<sup>113</sup> A biliterate framework for African-Islamic feminism that is both historically and conceptually relevant to African Muslim women may, however, address the theoretical inertia beyond the political, public, and viewable avatars of women's activity, particularly outside the Middle East and its neighboring regions.

### **African-Islamic Feminism: Biliteracy in History, Themes and Goals**

The relevance of a sustained personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam, I believe, can be best understood by reframing both the means by and ends for which African Muslim women interact with Islam. Since my study draws attention to personal, private, and individual modes of interaction with Islam in contrast to the political and public ways, the means of interaction are discernibly established. To complete

the other half of this equation, the ends, or goals, must also be reframed and redefined, for reframing the goals returns renewed focus to the relevance of the means of spiritual engagement or, quite simply, the personal, private, and individual ways of interacting with Islam. Toward this rather reflexive end, I invoke three examples from Hausa society—the goals of Nana Asma’u’s and Amina of Zaria’s leadership, women’s oral Hausa storytelling, and secluded Hausa women’s economic activity. Reframing the goals means shifting emphasis from African Muslim women’s entrepreneurial resourcefulness from *even* behind closed doors and from their unique linguistic talent and expertise in oral storytelling, for these have been amply documented by numerous researchers, including Polly Hill, Beverly Mack, and Ayesha Imam, whose work I, too, rely on in probing the African Muslim woman’s personal engagement with Islam. My reframed focus instead lays emphasis more on the goals of women’s economic and creative activities. In other words, in my study of these three examples, I find Muslim women *relying on*, *recruiting*, and *maintaining* personal, private, and individual ways to promote their undertaking of these activities toward different ends. I therefore repatriate Amina of Zaria’s and Nana Asma’u’s names to the list of African female leaders not to prove that African Muslim women were and are indeed great leaders, but to emphasize the goals of their exemplary work geared toward the personal and private in Islam. Moving onto physical seclusion or *kulle*, I focus on women’s ability to *mobilize* precisely the personal, private, and individual ways to control the local economy without economic control or autonomy being the aspired end of their economic activity. And, on the same lines, I show how personal, private, and individual talent, geared most importantly toward fulfilling maternal duties, serves as the *fulcrum* of education for an entire society in Hausa oral storytelling to foreground and broaden the discussion on Muslim women’s feminisms.

### Nana Asma’u and Amina of Zaria: First Feminists in Faith and Right Living

The Hausa, who have historically been Muslim, boast of a long line of women leaders, as David Jones observes:

Among the (neighboring) Hausa, women commanders led migrations, founded cities and conquered their enemies. . . . The Hausa Empire composed of seven states—Daura, Kano, Gobir, Zazzau,

Katsina, Rano, and Garun Gabas—came into existence in A.D. 1050, the end product of continuous rule by a line of seventeen queens.<sup>114</sup>

Chief among the seventeen queens was Queen Amina of Zaria or Zazzau, who ruled Kano in the early fifteenth century. Her reign lasted for about thirty-seven years. Oral traditions uphold Amina as a brave queen who fearlessly fought for her people and brought organization and stability to her kingdom. Marilyn French notes that Amina was the first ruler to unify the Hausa empire.<sup>115</sup> She is mentioned in numerous chronicles and oral accounts that acknowledge her reign and political contributions. Dan Fodio's son, Muhammad Bello, the Caliph of Sokoto, credits her as being the first to establish government among the Hausa. Jones delves into Amina's role in a long account of her accomplishments and her legacy:

In the sixteenth century, the Hausa Empire was led by Queen Aminatu (also known as Amina), the senior daughter of Queen Bakwa of Turunku, the queen of Zazzau . . . Aminatu took control of the Hausa in 1536 and reigned until 1573. Her first efforts were directed toward territorial expansion, leading a twenty-thousand-man (and woman) army, she annexed several non-Hausa states. For thirty-four years, she commanded and protected her realm with a firm hand. The remnants of several fortresses seen in central Africa today are still identified with her name. Queen Aminatu forged trade routes through the Sahara to North Africa, and tradition credits her with introducing kola nut into local cultivation. Nigeria honored the eminent queen by erecting a life-sized equestrian statue of her, sword raised, on the grounds of the National Theater in Lagos. Modern citizens of West Africa have demonstrated their regard for the great Hausa queen by naming many educational institutions after her.<sup>116</sup>

Several aspects of Muslim women's leadership can be gleaned from this lengthy description of Amina's reign in that she wore many hats: She was an able ruler, relentlessly expanding her kingdom by annexing other kingdoms. She built fortificatory walls around Zaria, known as *ganuwar Amina* in Hausa, or Amina's walls. She was an efficient economist who developed trade and agriculture for her kingdom. She ruled for no less than three decades, during which time she excelled in all areas of political administration and warded off numerous threats to her sovereignty from local kingdoms. Amina is remembered to this day for her powerful personality, consecrated in her statue, brandishing a sword and mounted on a horse, several similar public sculptures, and even commemorative

stamps in Nigeria to memorialize her political stature. Nor have her contributions disappeared from the annals of Nigerian history, for she also lives in the educational institutions named after her as a testament to her multifaceted talents—a role model of leadership, courage, and abilities for Hausa women today. Amina continues to inspire as Hausa girls learn about her in African history.

Amina's example is thus a useful rejoinder to the oversight of African-Islamic leadership by regions that arrogate to themselves pioneering leadership in Islamic feminism. Ahmed, for instance, titles one of her chapters "The first feminists."<sup>117</sup> Appositely rooted in the demographic changes in Egypt in the nineteenth century, she then identifies Egypt as a "mirror or precursor of developments in the Middle East in this period," when activists wrote in women's journals and in the mainstream press:

They founded organizations for the intellectual improvement of women, the Society for the Advancement of Woman . . . Another, the intellectual Association of Egyptian Women . . . Others followed, the Society of the Renaissance of Egyptian Woman, the Society of Mothers of the Future, . . . the Society of the New Woman. A lecture series for women, held at Egyptian University on Fridays . . .<sup>118</sup>

In providing names of the "first feminists"—Huda Sharawi, Mai Ziyada, Doria Shafik, and Zeinab Al-Ghazali—as eminent examples of the divergent voices in feminism in Egypt, Islamic feminism bears the imprint of a Middle Eastern society and its agendas.<sup>119</sup>

Moreover, Amina is not the only first feminist for African Muslim women. Nana Asma'u's extraordinary intellectual, organizational, and religious contributions also left an indelible imprint on Islamic feminist history in West Africa. African-Islamic theorist Ayesha Imam historicizes the tone for Islamic feminism in West Africa by acknowledging Asma'u's iconic role and that the earliest Islamic societies in northern Nigeria laid the foundation for Muslim women's positions in West Africa that persist even to this day: "Dan Fodio felt strongly that women have a right to education, both religious and in worldly dealings."<sup>120</sup> Imam specifically alludes to Nana's creation of the *yan-taru* movement to illustrate the texture of female education in Islam in Nigeria.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, as Beverly Mack observes:

Nana Asma'u's role as a scholar was multivalent: she was multilingual, an author of both oral and written works, a scholar known throughout West Africa and the Maghreb, and a teacher of women

and men, and of scholars and students, as well as a trainer of teachers. . . . In contemporary times, she is the model for women throughout the Maghreb who choose to study; they note that her life gives legitimacy to their pursuits.<sup>122</sup>

More importantly, as Jones points out, Amina was not an exception, as she came to power in a long line of seventeen queens that ruled over the Hausa in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Mack adds that Asma'u was not the only one either; "several of Asma'u's sisters, equally well educated and erudite, remain unknown because their works are unpublished," adding that Asma'u's father, dan Fodio, "had been educated by his mother and grandmother."<sup>123</sup>

For the African Muslim woman, her leaders lie in Amina and Nana. While the prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha may have stepped onto the battlefield, as Ahmed recounts her military exploits, the prophet's favorite wife was also an unmatched spiritual exemplar.<sup>124</sup> The interpretive stress, then, on spirituality, wisdom, and piety for the African Muslim woman resonates in Asma'u's works that immortalize women such as Asma'u's sister-in-law, Aisha, her half-sister Fatima, Zahratu, a notable student of Asma'u's, and others who exemplified Muhammad's *sunna* in their wise and pious lifestyles. Asma'u used her erudition and literary talent for no other purpose than to instill Islamic behavior. The goals of her influential works, such as *The Path of Truth*, *A Warning II*, *Lamentations for Aisha I and II*, are straightforward—advocate proper behavior in practical action (the pillars of Islam) and the intention behind the activity.<sup>125</sup> For instance, in *Lamentations for Aisha I and II*, Nana mourns the death of her sister-in-law, Aisha. She extols Aisha's piety and spiritual personality in the following verses: "Of the pious women humble to their Lord; of the women who have memorized the Qur'an by heart and who do extra in prayers, alms-giving, then recitation of the Qur'an."<sup>126</sup> And again, Asma'u notes Aisha's spiritual excellence: "I praise her for her worship, her modesty, religion, morals and glad kindness; for the way she said her *dhikr*, *wird* and prayer beads as well as her reading of the Qur'an."<sup>127</sup> As elegies on the exemplary lives of Muslim women, this edificatory literature reinforced Asma'u's goals of pursuing an Islamic lifestyle.<sup>128</sup>

The core of Asma'u's goals abidingly center on piety and spiritual wisdom even in the *yan-taru* movement that she revived for Muslim women and children in the Sokoto Caliphate. In existence since the sixteenth century as a movement of moral reform, the *yan-taru* taught Muslim women the values of Islam to be imparted to their families as wives, teachers, and mothers to produce God-fearing citizens. But it was believed to be

systematized by Asma'u in the nineteenth century with the aim of making its citizens, particularly women, adopt behaviors that resonated with the mission of the Sokoto Caliphate. Meaning the “collective” or “those who congregate” in Hausa, the *yan-taru* was the backbone of women’s and children’s Islamic education in Nigeria and surrounding regions. As Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd explain, its ideological methodology rested on two principles, namely a woman’s obligation to promote the good of her community and the good of her own soul.<sup>129</sup> In other words, Asma’u was ensuring that women first, then their families, and, by extension, the entire caliphate under her brother Bello, would be enlightened about the ways of the Qur’an and the *sunna*. Mack and Boyd locate Asma’u’s investment in the Islamic education of women and children in the caliphate in her mobilization of a cadre of literate, itinerant teachers, known as *jajis* in Hausa, or leaders of a caravan.<sup>130</sup> Asma’u personally trained the *jajis*, providing them with useful lesson plans to spread her instructive poetic works among the masses by traveling to far corners of the caliphate, to even secluded women, with the primary purpose of imparting knowledge for pious behavior and rudimentary Islamic skills in the practicalities of daily life, to “reshape the common details of their life into Islamic form”—how to dress, how to pray, practical things.<sup>131</sup>

In this sense, Asma’u’s movement was political insofar as she was supported by the state of which her brother was the leader. As Mack illustrates the topography of the *yan-taru* movement, it becomes evident that the scope of Asma’u’s project parallels the mosque movement, contemporized in present-day Egypt:

Nana Asmau’s training of the *jajis* and the ‘*yan-taru* was community work whose primary tool was the spoken word . . . captured Hausa men and women were new in the Caliphate, and needed to know practical things: how to dress, how to pray, how to reshape the common details of their lives into Islamic form. Asma’u’s works not only informed women on these matters, but also reinforced Sufi characteristics and the principles of the Sunna by outlining in praise poem the spirituality and moral characteristics that made a person noteworthy.<sup>132</sup>

Mahmood summarizes the transformation effected upon Egyptian society by the mosque movement in changes that can be indexed on the behavioral transformation of Muslims, including “changes in styles of dress and speech, standards regarding what is deemed proper entertainment for adults and children, patterns of financial and household

management,” by making “moral precepts, doctrinal principles, and acts of worship relevant to the organization of everyday life.”<sup>133</sup> Although not state-sponsored like the *yan-taru*, the mosque movement’s driving force, *da’wa* or socioreligious activism, has involved much of the same activities with the purpose of diffusing Islam in Egyptian society: “establishing neighborhood mosques, social welfare organizations, Islamic educational institutions, and printing presses as well as urging fellow Muslims toward greater religious responsibility, either through preaching or personal conversation.”<sup>134</sup> As do the *dā’iyat* in Egypt, the role of the itinerant teachers or *jajis* was to catechize Hausa women, facilitating their education with pedagogical devices, all rendered through personal conversation and visitations to their homes or at a neighborhood location.<sup>135</sup>

And yet it is not the *yan-taru* movement, however, but Asma’u, the individual, whose impact is felt even to this day. As Mack and Boyd state, “in nearly every case, contemporary women cite Nana Asma’u as their exemplar in seeking knowledge as a necessary pursuit in their lives.”<sup>136</sup> Notwithstanding the common historical precedents of socioreligious activism and piety in the *yan-taru* in northern Nigeria, and the Islamic Revival that the contemporary mosque movement in Egypt derives from, the mosque movement continues its socioreligious activism to galvanize piety in the personal domain of women’s lives, and Asma’u’s message, more than the movement itself, has been incorporated in the private sphere within the private domain, gesturing to the texture of the reception, the presence of piety, and its percolation in everyday life. In northern Nigeria, therefore, African Muslim women have imbibed piety by settling it within the individual dimensions of their existence as opposed to feeling the need to engage in collectivized, socio-religiously activist forms, as seen in the mosque movement.<sup>137</sup>

In its resonance today, two important aspects on African-Islamic feminism can be distilled from Amina’s and Nana’s political leadership. Despite such a clear political objective, and even under the aegis of the state, Nana’s and Amina’s leadership did not espouse goals for women’s political or public participation. The *yan-taru* aimed at the personal and private Islamic education of women—how to dress, pray, eat, and live in accordance with Islamic fiats on a daily basis. Such education was an end in itself and not a platform for public activity. The purpose of such leadership then—inculcating Islamic knowledge for Islamic behavior—is the goal of feminism that Hausa women aspire to even today. Together, Amina’s example as a historical exemplar in military, political, and administrative leadership, and as an unparalleled Muslim Hausa ruler, attesting to the Islamic heritage of Muslim women’s historically strong



social rights and status, and Nana's teachings pivoting on faith and right living, provide Hausa Muslim women with a positively emancipatory iconography of a Muslim woman's abilities.

### **Skillful Education, Personal and Economic Autonomies: Other Loci of Power and Rewards**

The emphasis on Islamically correct personal living and faithfully deploying Islamic behavior—prayer, rituals, and habits such as dressing and eating—in one's private affairs assumes salience in Hausa women's long tradition of oral storytelling and their economic involvement through extra-market retail. Both of these examples summoned to validate women's personal and private expressions of feminism in Islam first and foremost point to women's prioritization of Islam—the primacy of religious observance (their limited physical movements, and the fulfillment of their religious, marital, and household duties) within expressions in economic and creative venues. Furthermore, both these activities—economic engagement and oral storytelling—have evolved from the forms of and times since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Oral storytelling in Hausa among women has evolved into women using their growing literacy to write their own poems and publicly perform them for economic gain. In modern times, this form has evolved into radio programs in Hausa society, and, as demonstrated in Beverly Mack's extensive profiles of several influential Hausa women poets, Hausa women have increasingly taken up poetry writing and radio broadcasting.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, non-secluded Hausa women have transformed their economic activity from small-scale house-trade to thriving businesses in food production and catering. Notwithstanding these social changes over the years, Hausa women still privilege the personal and private dimensions of their linguistic and economic talents, and continue to pursue these activities in private.<sup>139</sup> My interest, therefore, in the personal, private, and individual nature of such activities, including the personal and private origins that I briefly discuss below, determinedly pulls back from the public arena, into which Hausa women have of late extended their creative energies, and fixes on the private ways that women continue to pursue these engagements.

Physical seclusion is not Islamically mandated for Muslim women. The physical seclusion of married women during their childbearing years, as widely practiced in northern Nigerian societies, owes its observance to a number of historical, partly religious, and local customs and

factors.<sup>140</sup> Not all northern Nigerian Muslim women are secluded; they never were. Furthermore, the practice of seclusion varies between rural and urban areas, across socioeconomic classes, and even across Muslim women's ages.<sup>141</sup> Women's restricted physical mobility, nonetheless, remains misinterpreted, pervasively received as a sign of women's social and economic subservience. Beverly Mack helpfully sums up this belief as a "poor reflection of the reality of women's lives in Northern Nigeria."<sup>142</sup> She insightfully notes its practical use in that seclusion is most expected during a woman's childbearing years so she may focus on child-rearing, as her work at home is also commensurately labor-intensive (cooking, housekeeping, and child care) as that of a wage-earning woman outside the house:

The practical, idealistic aim of wife seclusion is to free a woman of childbearing age to focus on the family without obligating her to engage in wage-earning activity . . . it is a misperception to think that seclusion constitutes men's imprisonment and control of women by preventing them from acting in public.<sup>143</sup>

Like seclusion, oral storytelling, too, has varied over time and an evolving social landscape in northern Nigeria.

In the same vein of re-examining received wisdom on Muslim women's leadership roles and goals, it must be noted that the widespread popularity of orature in Hausa literature does not stem from illiteracy of the Hausa population or imply it. Again, as Mack points out, measures of literacy in Nigeria are predicated on "Western educational programs without accounting for levels of Qur'anic education."<sup>144</sup> So, if by literacy one means knowledge of the English language, then most Hausa women may indeed be classified as "illiterate." But given the Islamic mandate to read the Qur'an and the profound relevance of Islam in Hausa women's lives, it can be stated with a large measure of confidence that a vast majority of Hausa women is literate in at least *ajami*, the Arabized script of Hausa, for the purposes of fulfilling their religious duties. To the Hausa, as Tom Verde puts it, *ajami* is like a "badge of identity," a badge of not only their Islamic but African-Islamic identity.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, as Mack notes, Hausa women also avail of adult education programs and even night classes to enhance their literacy in English, gesturing to the flexible, negotiable, and evolving nature of Hausa women's activities that are thought to be nonexistent.<sup>146</sup>

Despite the myriad manifestations of Hausa literary genres, both written and oral, as Graham Furniss's breathtaking work on Hausa literature shows, the popularity of orature nonetheless shifts focus to the reasons,

nature, and settings of its use.<sup>147</sup> It is these aspects that are sensitive to women's personal, private, and individual creative engagements with Islam as they mirror this personal engagement in the literary texts of which I present readings in *Privately Empowered*. As it existed even before British colonialism in Nigeria among the rural Hausa, oral storytelling was a domain where a Muslim woman's skill in choosing, preparing, rehearsing, and presenting the stories required intelligence, creativity, and oral and linguistic facility. Sani Abba Aliyu's unique assessment of Hausa oral storytelling in rural parts of northern Nigeria pointedly reveals many crucial facts about African-Islamic feminism. First, as Aliyu clarifies, even in pre-colonial Hausaland, before the arrival of the British, women's seclusion fostered their expertise in the finer aspects of oral narration. It facilitated, in several ways, the honing of skills that allowed women to fulfill many other more important functions, namely educating their children, in addition to being influential repositories of the community's wisdom:

When the men embarked on post-harvest migrations, leaving the women and children behind, or set off on distant errands on behalf of traditional rulers, it was only logical that the stable, domesticated women should perfect their oral artistry in weaving entertaining episodes around serious moral lessons, fulfilling their function as the children's first socializers.<sup>148</sup>

More importantly, the woman's multifaceted role of being the child's first socializer and tutor, avers Aliyu, "the closeness of Hausa women to children, principally as mothers and agents for the transmission of norms and values, strengthens their position as influential narrators."<sup>149</sup> The goal of such an undertaking, as Aliyu makes clear, is fulfilling the duties of motherhood—a personal, private, and individual objective. Owing then to her influential position as the storyteller and guardian of traditional wisdom, with the aim of fulfilling her maternal duties in her society as the menfolk are occupied outdoors in the fields, the Hausa woman incurs the enormous responsibility to tutor her progeny in the customs of their community. As a result, explains Aliyu, "the average Hausa woman is a more versatile and proficient deployer of linguistic resources than men in society" and takes it upon herself to continue the "aesthetic refinement of oral storytelling."<sup>150</sup> She must polish her skills in eloquence, narration, confidence, and imagination.

In this private universe of the household, then, for equally private goals such as motherhood, the Muslim woman relies on her personal and individual resources of oral skills, creative talents, her education in

traditional stories, and her judgement to transmit a trove of tales for her audience. She must patiently and resourcefully choose the stories, organize her narration, rehearse the tone, tenor, and tempo of her delivery, and perform the stories with confidence and skill to fulfill her maternal duties of entertainer and educator to her children and family. The African Muslim woman thus conjures a broad register of skills and talents—intellect, eloquence, creativity, and imagination in narrative techniques, pedagogy, and self-confidence—through personal, private, and individual preparation, and perseverance without external tutoring, styling, or guidance. Her stewardship of this art form, given its significance in the Hausa community, therefore is vital to the continuity of the Hausa language and its orature that for most critics remains hidden as it reveals no manifest value or use as externally visible, viewable, or public activities do. Most of all, and contrary to the belief espoused by African theorists that Islam promotes “sexist demands” to keep Muslim women hidden, unheard, and invisible symbolically and literally behind the veil, Aliyu instructively adds that “male members of society view storytelling by women as functional, facilitating the inculcation of socially desirable values such as hard work, honesty, thrift and wisdom . . . teaching them the richness of their language and culture.”<sup>151</sup>

And on the same lines of validating women’s personal and private engagements with Islam, I examine the robust presence of “extra-market retail” among northern Nigerian Muslim women, though the phenomenon is also prevalent among Muslim women in southern Nigeria and among Hausa women in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ghana and Niger. Since Polly Hill’s groundbreaking discovery, successive efforts on extra-market retail among Hausa women and among Muslim women, in general, even in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, have observed the same.<sup>152</sup> In her pioneering fieldwork on the “hidden” trade in Hausaland, in a small village on the Nigerian border with Niger, about twenty kilometers from Katsina, in Batagarawa, Polly Hill discovered the peculiar absence of a traditional marketplace in the village and found instead a highly developed form of “extra-market retail,” a parallel economy, operated by fully secluded “Muslim women” from the confines of their household compounds, successfully running a marketplace of “incomparably greater importance” than the ones established after several attempts in the village.<sup>153</sup> A traditional marketplace, claims Hill, would typically be located at the juncture of a group of ten small towns, or *gari* in Hausa, serving a population of about ten thousand people. Trade and retail in such a space would take place in food items, vegetables, and condiments, among other products such as food grains, cattle, and meat. In place of

the traditional market in Batagarawa, however, Hill found small vendors, mostly outside of homes in doorways or in the privacy of their husbands' compounds, where secluded women retailed in foodstuffs, vegetables, and small quantities of food grains. My interest in such a phenomenon lies not in the sophistication of this parallel economy, where, as Hill states, a woman's "economic autonomy is often sufficient to insulate her from her husband's poverty" and where "despite their virtual incarceration for the first thirty-five years of their married life, the women of the *gari* enjoy a considerable degree of economic independence."<sup>154</sup>

I am more interested in closely examining the site that has allowed women to upstage the existence or presupposition of a traditional market, the heart of economic activity in West African villages and towns, namely the homestead, that is a personal, private, and individual place of dwelling that women use as their base to operate production, marketing, and retail of their products. It is also the personal, private, and individual dimensions of this space that prompt women to insist on anchoring their operations in it and shun trade in the larger marketplaces. The women traders in Batagarawa oppose the establishment of a public marketplace even though it may be more lucrative for them to trade in the same goods through emissaries, "runners," and couriers, mainly their male relatives or non-secluded women, in the larger market area, serving a wider population as is common practice in other Hausa societies where house-trade is prevalent.<sup>155</sup> This opposition to trade through emissaries that would undoubtedly enhance their profits indicates the women's insistence on internalizing and privatizing their economic functions where economic emancipation or even economic independence is secondary to maintaining the personal dimensions of house-trade. This is furthermore evidenced by the products they produce and sell. It becomes clear that the women traders retain the business within the purview of their personal expertise (for which they have received no formal training, mechanized assistance, or special knowledge), namely cooking to retail foodstuffs.<sup>156</sup> Hill takes up in more detail the main products of house-trading that the women themselves prepare—groundnut oil that they process at home, millet porridge, gruel (*fura*), cakes, snacks, vegetables they cultivate in the tracts of land adjoining their compounds, and small quantities of food grains that their husbands procure from distant markets. This implies that even the choice of products remains tethered to women's domestic functions within the household, that of cooking.

To be sure, the personal, private, and individual domain of the house (the site of fulfilling their religious roles—child care, Islamic duties, housekeeping, and cooking) empowers the women to engage in economic

activity (house-trade). The women's economic involvement is subordinate to the preeminence of Islam in their lives, for only after a house trader fulfills her religious obligations at home does she set about converting her house into a trading place. The scale of these women's economic activity attests no doubt to their economic ingenuity in that they have rendered the conventional marketplace rather insignificant in the Katsina Emirate, as a result of which, as Hill remarks, many small towns and villages in this emirate remain without public marketplaces. But the scale of the women's operations brings into focus the means by which they have inverted the external, public, viewable, and visible to the domains of the personal, private, and individual in their compounds. In the privacy and individuality of their households, the women who engage in house-trade manage, coordinate, and sustain separate individual trading units. They do not partner with other women, nor do they combine their products with one another. Each woman is the individual proprietor of the operations of the business she runs. They maintain the individuality of their businesses and therefore rely on their own individual skills of time management as they must also attend to equivalently labor-intensive household chores of food preparation for the family, child care, and housekeeping. In addition, the women traders must plan, resource, and budget for their retailing in foodstuffs before marketing their wares. They must, therefore, rely on themselves to be highly organized, meticulous, and shrewd in successfully sustaining their businesses.

So when Hill concludes that the marketplace is important but *house-trading* is far more important than the marketplace, she gestures to the personal and private means by which women reinscribe the public within the personal, private, and individual domain of their lives, where it is still more important to fulfill their religious duties of Islamic behavior, child-care, marital duties, and managing a household. But more importantly, as she concludes, the parallel economy in this tiny northern Nigerian village is not a special case. Or more significantly, as Hill ponders, along with Abner Cohen, who studies similar economic activities of Hausa women of Ibadan (in Yorubaland) in the south of the country, the "most significant paradox" of Hausa society, as Cohen calls it, is that women dominate the cooking industry and the retail business, displaying a high degree of specialization and economies of scale, not just in parts of northern Nigeria but also in the south, so "that they can engage in business and amass wealth for themselves when they are in the bondage of seclusion and wifhood."<sup>157</sup> The paradox for *Privately Empowered* lies not in correlating the restriction on physical mobility with successful economic activity. Rather, *Privately Empowered* is invested in the personal, private,

and individual ways that empower African Muslim women to partake of some of the same activities—economic engagement and education. As African Muslim women interact with Islam in the personal, private, and individual domain of the homestead, these three examples—the aims of political leadership for faith and right living, and economic and creative activities with restricted physical mobility—provide the clearest articulation of what the women themselves feel and think about Islam. Women's spiritual habits, likewise—prayer, Islamic practice and rituals—expose most accurately their feelings and thoughts on Islam.

### Reading through the African-Islamic Feminist Lens: Biliterate Conjugations of Histories, Themes, and Locations

As a blueprint for the future of African and Islamic feminisms, African-Islamic feminism employs biliteracy in northern Nigerian fiction to determinedly locate Islamic feminism outside the Middle East and Arab world and outside topoi pertinent to political, public, or legal engagements with Islam. Equally, African-Islamic feminism appropriates aspects of African feminist discourse—*Umoja*, African womanism, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism—to enrich the African Muslim woman's feminism as an African Muslim womanist, an African Muslim nego-feminist, an African Muslim stiwaniist, and an African Muslim motherist. Steady effectively detects that the core that animates African feminist research lies in “the fact that alternative systems exist which recognize other loci of power, authority, and rewards” and in a “‘cross-cultural’ focus for studying women that is inclusive in its methodology” to gesture to a humanistic vision of African feminism.<sup>158</sup> It follows then that African Muslim women's worldview may lie in private leadership, emulating Nana Asma'u's mandate for faith and right living. It may also lie in economic and educational autonomy in skills and sites not typically found in the marketplace or schools. By extension, it may be discerned in a private, personal, and individual engagement with Islamic rituals and habits such as prayer, virtuous behavior, and embracing Islam by professing monotheism, as a reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's heroines unravels. Recognizing that Muslim women's loci of rewards may be different foregrounds the principled approach that the goal of African-Islamic feminism is not to accord Islam an indigenous status (as opposed to foreign) in Africa, as indigenoussness does not assure critical immunity. Rather, it is to genuinely treat Islam as a cognate of African diversity to expose well-meshed, biliterate connections between various feminist orientations.



Middle Eastern and Arab-Islamic feminism must likewise inclusively transact in transnational connections and communicate translocal realities to embrace Muslim women's engagements with Islam outside regional boundaries. Middle Eastern and Arab-Islamic feminism must also privilege the spiritual functions of the Qur'an, in addition to its legal purposes, in the expression of feminism in a move to societies that are not Islamic nation-states, where women express feminism outside the aegis of the state and other publicly and politically organized activities. Discovering that African Muslim women's personal, private, and individual engagements with the same topoi have preoccupied Muslim women in the Middle East—feminist leadership and its aims, the encryption of active community participation in publicly viewable and visible activity—exposes a different set of means and goals in engaging with Islam. It furthermore summons the question on what Muslim women themselves regard as constitutive of the goals and themes of their interaction with Islam. Moreover, can these goals be universally inscribed in Muslim women's agendas without examining what Muslim women themselves think about Islam?

African-Islamic feminism transforms and sharpens our growing understanding of feminism in being not only representative but also constitutive of the different means by which African Muslim women express feminism and of the different goals they may attain, as a particular practice may have a different valence for them than for their counterparts in the "Muslim world" in the Middle East. While the interpretive stress on physical seclusion appears to have fettered women's publicly viewable participation in community affairs in the Middle East, it is empowering for northern Nigerian Muslim women who observe seclusion as a socio-religious custom. In this way, Alkali, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction are generative of new meanings for feminism in Islam as they reformulate our assumptions about the means and ends of Islamic feminism. To globally impact feminism, both African and Islamic feminists must imperatively enact thematic and regional biliteracy and inclusively harness the common foci of their preoccupations.<sup>159</sup> The rest of *Privately Empowered* maps African-Islamic feminism as a mutually beneficial conjugation of African and Islamic feminist discourses, as a repatriation of the African Muslim woman's feminism to African feminism, by probing the personal, private, and individual engagement and its goals with Islam through *ṣalāt*, *du'a*, *dhikr*, *akhlāq*, *shahādah*, and *ḥijāb* in northern Nigerian fiction.



## Chapter 2



# Noetic Education and Islamic Faith

## Personal Transformation in *The Stillborn*

When Li lies to her father about the hole, implying that a dog might have made it, she is referring to woman's existence in Islam as a dog's life.

—Chikwenye Ogunyemi

While in the theorization of African feminism, African women are seen to holistically engage their environment, negotiate with it, harmonize its conflicts, and work cooperatively with men, infusing their feminist stance with collaborative and nurturing gestures and dispositions, the African Muslim woman is perceived as inexorably poised to subvert, oppose, and battle patriarchy, epitomized by Islam, in an effort to escape it. Zaynab Alkali's fiction has long been read in support of this claim. African feminists have discoursed on Islam as a foreign and repressive presence, "somebody else's religion" in Africa, as Amina Mama calls it, to conduce to regimented opinions, as evidenced in Ogunyemi's trenchant comment in the epigraph.<sup>1</sup> The religion is viewed as a soft target that African Muslim women find easy to subvert. A number of other African novels on Islam in the seventies and eighties—Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, for instance—have also been evaluated as the novelist's desire to expose Islam as a cruel and patriarchal religion.<sup>2</sup> The pattern of critical assessment that is premised on framing the African Muslim woman's feminist efforts as iconoclastic has not changed since. Alkali's first novel, the award-winning *The Stillborn*, continues to be read as the revolt of its main protagonist, Li, against religious restrictions, to emerge victorious, emancipated, and, most of all, unfettered by social, religious, and familial limitations. *The*

*Stillborn* has received relatively more critical attention than Alkali's other work, bagging the Association of Nigerian Authors prize in 1985.

Revising the inscription of an African Muslim woman's feminism in a dialectic of religious subversion and desire to escape Islam, propped up on Islam's putative oppression of women as the foremost cause of all ills from which the African Muslim woman must save herself, this chapter addresses a Muslim woman's personal response to religion by focusing on Li's noetic transformation—the realization and self-correction of her flaws—in the development of her African-Islamic feminism, culminating in her discernment of *shahādah*, Islamic monotheism. Li's noetic transformation is actuated also by her observation and acknowledgment of her older sister Awa's choices and decisions. Li's African-Islamic feminism, therefore, owes its genesis to the self-correction of her flaws, through personal lessons of reverence, sensitivity, and responsibility from observing Awa. Li's African-Islamic feminism develops in two distinct but inter-related ways. First, she undergoes a noetic transformation, acquiring the *aqiliyyah* or mentality needed to perform Islamic behavior (*nafsiyyah*), and gathering a range of tools or emotions that, in this case, she has not felt before—guilt, regret, empathy, and, most of all, respect and sensitivity—for the people she had previously despised, including her family. Second, the noetic transformation in Li's thoughts is catalyzed through her keen observation of Awa as her older sister makes choices within an unarguably Islamic framework. As Awa models African-Islamic feminism, Li acquires the *aqiliyyah* and *nafsiyyah* toward the embodiment of feminism in Islam, revealed in a series of personal, private, and individual processes of emotional and behavioral self-corrections, culminating in her pronouncement of the *shahādah*. One of the consequences of discursively reading African-Islamic feminist fiction as efforts to rebel against Islam is the inattention to Awa primarily because she does not express her feminism as a revolt. But it is on Awa's poise and selflessness that Li scripts her own success and expression of African-Islamic feminism, thereby revising some of the critical assertions on the novel that shoehorn it into a dialectic of a Muslim woman's repugnance for Islam as a desire to escape it and another's uncomplaining adherence as meek subservience to it. But equally important, Awa is an unsung nego-feminist in her poorly-discussed abilities and courage to negotiate, exchange, and navigate diverse circumstances when caring for her family, including Li and her daughter Shuwa, and in being instrumental in Li's emotionally, personally, and socially upward progression as an African Muslim woman. Thus, both her interpersonal relationships with Awa, whose choices serve as a template for the main protagonist to construct her own

African-Islamic feminist expression, and her noetic transformation—the acquisition of a series of emotional and behavioral corrections—buoy Li’s African-Islamic feminism.

Framing Islamic feminism in personal, private, and individual self-correction or noetic transformation enables feminism in Islam to center on processes of emotional education—Li’s evolution from a state of immaturity and impatience to an emotionally responsible and generous disposition. Since she is neither mentally nor behaviorally mature to fulfill the expectations of Islamic praxis at the start of the story, the Islamic feminist tenor of the novel is a “trial and error” journey, as Alkali puts it, for Li sets about to acquire the *aqiliyyah* for the proper *nafsiyyah*.<sup>3</sup> Chief among the obstacles, or “mountains,” to again evoke Ogundipe-Leslie’s metaphorical hurdles facing an African woman, that Li must conquer, I believe, are her own shortsightedness, numerous personal and emotional flaws, and judgmental errors. The “mountains” are more personal or internal than social or external, as critics so far have put forth the problems Li faces, for Li’s greatest obstacles are her inability to heed good advice from her family, her unfounded hatred for them, and her disdain for anything associated with tradition, order, or society, leading to the disastrous start to her marriage and all her decisions pertinent to it. To therefore emerge as the “model of the heroic and truly liberated woman,” as Seiyifa Koroye calls her, Li must first undergo a noetic revision—self-correction—of her thoughts and feelings: guilt, empathy, regret, and renewed respect for others.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, this chapter argues that Li’s self-correction can be Islamically contextualized as a woman’s personal engagement with the religion from a state of ignorance, emotionally incongruent with an Islamic personality, to self-knowledge that resonates appreciably in the perception and acquisition of an Islamic personality. This is a personality that has many fruitful connections to African feminism’s key concept of *Umoja*, togetherness and coalition, an integrative struggle where the woman works in concert with the man and not against him, to harmonize her goals with her environment. *Umoja* is particularly pertinent to Alkali’s novel as Li decides to return to her estranged husband Habu Adams in the end. To these ends, this chapter will elaborate on three main aspects of the novel: Li’s less-than-admirable personality and choices at the start of the story, her gradual transformation as she realizes her follies, and Awa’s ignored but crucial role in anchoring Li’s acceptance of *shahādah*. In order to do so, it will track the changes in Li’s personality, thoughts, and gestures from the first to the latter half of the novel. It will then contrast Li’s choices with Awa’s decisions to finally emphasize the Islamic expression

of feminism framed by *aqiliyyah* and *nafsiyyah* that prompts Li to profess *shahādah* at the end of the novel and return to her husband, Habu.

### Cognition and Enactment of Islamic Monotheism: *Aqiliyyah, Nafsiyyah, and Shahādah*

Li's African-Islamic feminism is located within the conceptual framework of *akhlāq*, or virtuous behavior. Derived from the Arabic *khuluq*, meaning disposition or character, as used in the Qur'an, *akhlāq* is mentioned in two places in this sense. In the first occurrence *akhlāq* refers to behavior, but in the second verse it specifically refers to good disposition as a desirable model to emulate, in that it directly alludes to Muhammad's personality as the model of good behavior that Muslims must aspire to embody: "We have indeed in the messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern of conduct."<sup>5</sup> However, Li's engagement with Islam rests not on the manifestation of virtuous conduct but on the cognitive process by which she acquires it. Her engagement, therefore, is best understood through the idea of Islamic behavioral disposition, or *nafsiyyah*, and the mentality that promotes it, *aqiliyyah*. Rather than focusing on the embodiment of *akhlāq*, this chapter emphasizes Li's acquisition of *aqiliyyah* since she does not a priori embody Islamic disposition. *Aqiliyyah* derives from *al'aql*, or intellect in Islam, the process of cognition or, as Glassé explains it, "'reason' or thinking."<sup>6</sup> In its publication on the elements of an Islamic disposition, deriving from Qur'anic verses and the *ḥadīth* on righteous conduct and sincerity, the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* explains *nafsiyyah* and *aqiliyyah* as the overarching principles of an Islamic personality:<sup>7</sup>

The personality of every human being (*shaksiyyah*) is composed of the mentality (*aqiliyyah*) and disposition (*nafsiyyah*). The mentality (*aqiliyyah*) is the tool used for understanding things, meaning it is the mode for passing judgment on reality according to a specific standard which man believes and trusts. . . . the behavioral disposition (*nafsiyyah*) is the method for satisfying man's instincts and organic needs i.e. the manner in which they are satisfied according to a standard which man believes in and trusts. <sup>8</sup>

It enunciates the equilibrium between these two aspects of the Islamic personality as the basis of one's religion, as *aqiliyyah* and *nafsiyyah* are complementary. Furthermore, both these dimensions are adduced as goals that a Muslim strives for in embodying an Islamic personality:

The more a Muslim increases in his Islamic culture to develop his mentality, and the more he increases his performance of his recommended actions to strengthen his disposition, the more he will proceed towards the sublime ascent.<sup>9</sup>

Good disposition is insufficient if not accompanied by accurate knowledge. For instance, fasting on days that it is forbidden is an example of incomplete *nafsīyyah* as the behavior or act is not accompanied by the right *aqiliyyah*, the mental processes that involve comprehension of the reason for performing the deed.<sup>10</sup> Cohering with Qur’anic injunctions on good conduct and conscience as vehicles of an Islamic personality, the Qur’anic verse most exhaustively describing these imperatives, while warning against vacuous formalism, underlines the importance of a keen consciousness in the enactment of deeds:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; But it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the last day . . . to spend of your substance out of love for him for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer for those who ask . . . and to be firm and patient in pain and adversity.<sup>11</sup>

In his commentary of these verses, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains them as such: “Faith is not merely a matter of words. We must *realize* the presence and goodness of Allah” (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> That belief is the first step to Islamic consciousness, and good behavior must accompany this consciousness. Throughout his commentary in various other verses, Ali points to the insistence on “righteous conduct” and sincerity as a condition of faith.<sup>13</sup> As this chapter will show, Li’s emotional labor is directed at acquiring the behavior that aligns with her acceptance of Islamic monotheism when she gestures to the recognition of one God with her utterance that ends the novel.

Known as the *shahādah*, or witnessing of the truth, this testimony of faith forms the core of Islamic belief and practice. Lynda Clarke explains its meaning—“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God”<sup>14</sup>—and succinctly summarizes its status:

Recitation of the *shahādah* (literally “witness”) is the first of the five pillars of Islam. The formula is not in the Qur’an, although the book speaks often of the “witness” of various articles of faith; the phrase “there is no god but God” is found (37:35, 47:19), as well as the same declaration many times in similar words; and Muhammad is

constantly referred to as a messenger. The formula is recorded, however, in several different contexts in the prophetic traditions (*hadith*).<sup>15</sup>

Mahmoud Ayoub likewise elaborates on the relevance of Islamic monotheism:

The foundations (*arkan*) upon which the religion of Islam rests are known as the five pillars, a belief based in a saying of the Prophet, reported in both Sunni and Shi'i *hadith* tradition, "Islamic is built upon five [fundamentals]." The five are the profession or witness (*shahadah*): "There is no god except God and Muhammad is the messenger of God"; regular observance of the five daily prayers (*salat*); the offering of welfare alms (*zakat*); performance of the pilgrimage (*hajj*); and fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan.<sup>16</sup>

Underlying the formulation of belief is the debate on its sincerity, the dichotomy between words and actions. As Clarke and Ayoub both attend to the controversy over the profession of faith using just the *shahādah*, they assert the importance of the verbal articulation and its enactment, a genuine understanding and acknowledgment: the ability to distinguish between sincere and hypocritical profession of faith. Glassé's explanation is perhaps more to the point that the *shahādah* as the declaration carries both "the ritually effective and sacramental force of the words" in not just uttering the truth but simultaneously perceiving it to be as such.<sup>17</sup> This simultaneous, dual function is vital to Li's own acknowledgment, as Glassé puts it: "When it is accepted sincerely—or 'seen'—the consequence is surrender (*islam*) to God, Allah, and becoming muslim."<sup>18</sup>

So crucial is belief or faith in the oneness of God that all collections of the *hadith* devote chapters to it. Bukhari, for instance, introduces the "Book of Belief (faith)" with the statement "Islam is based on five principles" and "belief is both saying and acting, and it increases and decreases."<sup>19</sup> He then reports numerous sayings that corroborate the accident of Islamic belief. In his collection of the *hadith* in the "Book of Faith," Muslim reports a *hadith*, in particular, about the angel Gabriel dressed as a man in a garment that was "exceedingly white," "with no signs of travel on him," who asked Muhammad the meaning of Islam.<sup>20</sup> Among Muhammad's answers to Gabriel's questions was "Islam means bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah," among other elements of Islamic faith to illustrate the core of Islamic belief.<sup>21</sup> The *shahādah* thus codes both the cognition of the truth (*aqiliyyah*) and its enactment in Li's

changed behavior (*nafsiyyah*). The entire novel is, therefore, a preparation of how its main protagonist arrives at the consciousness that culminates in her profession of Islamic monotheism.

*The Stillborn* is a story of three young women, Li, Awa, and Faku, spanning twenty years in a fictive village called Hill Station in northern Nigeria. Li is thirteen years old when the novel opens and thirty-three when it ends. At the start of the story, Li has just completed part of her schooling and is returning to her village. Full of dreams of living in the city and enjoying its easy life, Li's ideas and personality conflict with her family as she feels imprisoned by the restrictions of her household. She soon falls in love with Habu Adams, a man from another village. The cultural context of a northern Nigerian village comes to light in view of Li's love affair with Habu. For instance, the villagers and her family regard Habu as a foreigner since he is not Muslim. His family practices the indigenous religion—his grandfather's brother is an herbalist. Despite her family's opposition to the marriage, Li stubbornly marries Habu but initially must remain in the village as he leaves for the city to earn a livelihood. However, Habu does not send for his bride immediately. Frustrated in the village, yearning to escape an atmosphere that she finds suffocating, Li reunites with her husband in the city after four years only to be received by a very different Habu. Her life takes a turn for the worse as Habu spurns her. Lonely, distraught, and now pregnant, Li is shocked by Habu's indifference. She discovers that he has been living a double life, having clandestinely married a coworker before Li's arrival in the city. Li soon gives birth to a daughter, Shuwa, but Habu is just as uncaring toward her and Shuwa. Heartbroken, Li returns to her village, leaving Shuwa in Awa's care to resume her schooling in a town nearby. She acquires a teacher training certificate and starts working, becoming one of the most prosperous women in her village. The novel ends with Li deciding to return not only to the city with Shuwa, now ten years old, but also to her contrite husband by forgiving him.

The other young women in the novel are Li's friend, Faku, and Li's older sister, Awa. Faku, like Li, yearns for romance and stability in life, dreaming of the city and its easy life. She hastily marries and moves to the city only to be disappointed in her marriage, and soon turns to prostitution to escape poverty. At the end of the novel, however, Faku becomes a social welfare worker. The third woman in the story, and undoubtedly the most underexamined character, is Awa. Five years Li's senior, Awa is also educated in the mission school in the village and teaches there. But unlike Li and Faku, Awa does not harbor dreams of an easy life by escaping to the city. She is relatively sober, patient, and far more considerate.

Moreover, she is grounded in the awareness of her Islamic identity and expresses a preference for the religion, seeing no reason to complain about it. Although the novel allegorizes the aspirations and futures of three young African Muslim women, it also depicts the deeply personal choices that Li and Faku—petulant and irreverent—make in their early youth, stumbling from one folly to another before maturing into responsible, caring, and successful women, who have not been fully assessed to appreciate Alkali's African-Islamic feminist aesthetic.

### Critical Patterns: Admiration for Subversive Battles to Escape Islam

Three identifiable patterns of critical formulations on a Muslim woman's feminism emerge in the novel, namely Li's admirable qualities as a model for young Nigerian women; her feminism as a subversive struggle to overcome adversity exemplified most eminently in Islamic restrictions; and her subsequent victory over the same. Even when critics like Rotimi Johnson detect the role of local wisdom in Li's emotional development, noting Alkali's use of "proverbs, philosophical dictums, self-knowledge," the effort to de-emphasize the Hausa and Islamic origins of such *sententiae* is unmistakable. Johnson elaborates on the use of proverbs in the novel as wise sayings of the people and their "collective wisdom" that "equips the individual with sharp visions," enhancing their "just perceptions of realities."<sup>22</sup> But the specific provenance of the proverbs as prevalent among the Hausa is omitted to maintain that Alkali presents Li as a model for her social vision, representing the collective consciousness of Nigerian feminists. Recognizing Li's own acknowledgment of Hausa and Islamic *sententiae* in her personal and emotional transformation would weaken the critical stance on Li's feminism as escapism from Islam. Very few critics, with the exception of Wehrs and Ogunyemi, identify Islam as a major theme or parse its palpable presence on the protagonists' lives, with Wehrs being the only one perhaps to offer a coherent examination of Islamic ideology in the novel. First, critics concur that Li has admirable qualities. Margaret Hauwa Kassam regards Li as a vivacious personality at odds with tradition.<sup>23</sup> Omolale Ladele calls Li a young woman with "positive qualities."<sup>24</sup> Ogunyemi sees in her "a young, ambitious, fearless girl."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Seiyifa Koroye declares Li to be the embodiment of the "new woman," "wiry and tough-minded, undefeated," who, through the "ascetic ideals of 'determination' and 'virtue,' emerges as the model of the heroic and truly liberated woman Mrs. Alkali clearly sets out to celebrate."<sup>26</sup>



The second pattern in this critical enclave accentuates the African Muslim woman's ability to overcome "conflicts and frustrations" that confront a "precocious girl-hero," as Ladele frames it. She inscribes Alkali's social vision within a subversive struggle against social forces, an "escape from the oppressive societal restrictions which seem to suffocate her."<sup>27</sup> Hannah Chukwu reads Alkali's work as an engagement that advocates "cultural and social changes," attributing Alkali's vision to an "iconoclastic view which is harsh to the logical feminist expected stance of the modern woman" and terming Li's struggle as a process of "self-fashioning" or a clash: "[the novel] presents the clash between Islamic culture and Western values in Black women's self-fashioning."<sup>28</sup> The function of African Muslim women's "self-fashioning" is subversion of the "expectation of their religion and culture as they engage alternatives in the modern society and the onus of control over their destinies."<sup>29</sup> Chukwu sees Li burdened by the regulations in her society and family, a victim of religious bondage and stifled by restrictions placed on her: "at home Li is restless because of the many regulations and restrictions in her Islamic household."<sup>30</sup> Catherine Acholonu locates Li's feminism on a similar register, that of fierce radicalism, discontent, and "revolutionary" actions.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Stuart Brown dubs Li a rebel who is "brought up to accept the values and norms of a traditional society," but instead "breaks several taboos in her quest for self-fulfillment" and resists the pressures of society to build her own future.<sup>32</sup>

And finally, the most prominent pattern of criticism emerges in the presentation of Islam and Li's father as chief agents of obstruction to Li's emancipation. Amina Mama describes the setting of the novel as that of "patriarchal Islam, of Islamic family compounds," of rebellion against her father who "epitomizes austere disciplinarianism."<sup>33</sup> Kassam identifies Li's struggle not "against 'tradition' per se, but . . . against those aspects of tradition which her father wields high-handedly in his efforts to confine her to the house and restrict her movements in the village."<sup>34</sup> In similar fashion, Ogunyemi declares the novel as a piece of writing that boldly raises "socioeconomic questions and institutionalized injustice."<sup>35</sup> For Ogunyemi, Islam is the most visible form of institutionalized injustice, embodied by Li's father, Baba:

Through her portrait of Baba, *Alkali* also attacks Islam's oppression of women. She prefers the freedom entrenched in the "heathens" of indigenous Nigerian religions, as represented by the old grandfather, Kaka.<sup>36</sup> (emphasis added)

Further, Ogunyemi draws attention to Alkali's criticism of an Islam that sequesters women and veils them to avoid polluting men. In particular, she alludes to the example of the hole in the fence made by Li to defiantly attend the village dance, holding this proscription as the primary reason for Li's disdain for Islam:

Li makes a hole through the fence that her father has built to restrict the women, figuratively destroying the wall that incarcerates women in Islam. Through purdah, or the veil and the enveloping clothes that woman is forced to wear because man cannot control his desire, Muslims keep women apart so as not to pollute men. This apartness, this exile, Alkali posits, destroys the communal effort necessary for building the home and nation. . . . when Li lies to her father about the hole, implying that a dog might have made it, she is referring to woman's existence in Islam as a dog's life.<sup>37</sup>

Ogunyemi's dialectic is reminiscent of Ahmed's unconcealed admiration for *jāhiliyyah* society that gave women more sexual freedom, as does the religion of the heathens, evoking a familiar discursive posture vis-à-vis Islam in that it curtails women's freedom.<sup>38</sup> "Heathenism, in contrast, is liberating," declares Ogunyemi when citing Li's grandmother as an example of women's unbridled autonomy in being able to marry fourteen times and divorce all fourteen husbands:

Though Grandma's fourteen marriages to men she had met in the marketplace are troubling. They emphasize Grandma's *dynamism* and the lackluster of men as well as the liberty that women associate with the marketplace. From this place of exchange, Grandma satisfies her "quest for modern living."<sup>39</sup> (emphasis added)

In comparison to some of the aforementioned analyses, Wehrs's well-rounded study of the "ethnically heterogeneous environment of the village" locates Li's motives within the religious context of a predominantly Islamic society.<sup>40</sup> Drawing extensively from European philosophical concepts, frequently invoking Michel Foucault's, Emmanuel Lévinas's, and even Fatima Mernissi's interpretations of the conflict between liberal individualism and postmodern resistance, Wehrs reads the novel as an inspiration of the Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria's mandate of providing a wholesome development of Muslim women. To this end, he quotes the Hausa journalist Bilkisu Yusuf's conception of FOMWAN as an organization that "hopes to develop the full personality of Muslim

women as a model for other women, based on the belief that true Islam makes adequate provision for women.”<sup>41</sup>

Wehrs particularizes Li’s brazen embodiment of the heathen spirit of freedom from restrictions, her unrestrained sexuality, and her irrepressible desire for pleasure within a lexicon of Islamic terms, such as *fitna*, connoting “rebellion, disorder, and chaos,” also understood “as resistance to the hierarchy among goods that Islam would enforce: the spiritual over the material, the rational over the natural.”<sup>42</sup> Wehrs also recruits the Islamic concepts of *bid’a*, *shirk*, and *hawa*, each with a view to contextually examine Li’s repugnance for Islam, her insatiable desire for freedom, and the resultant lack of modesty, only to concur with other critics by placing Li’s behavior in the early part of the novel “within frameworks of liberal individualism or postmodern resistance” and stating that “all this can only be read as triumphs of self-assertion.”<sup>43</sup> To circumvent Islamic restrictions on self-assertion, Wehrs attributes Li’s frequent daydreaming to Alkali’s clever use of the dream function that helps Muslim women escape the stifling atmosphere of Islamic society: “through the use of prophetic dreams and through the aesthetic ‘autonomy’ of novelistic discourse, Li subverts and frees herself of ‘patriarchal brutality.’”<sup>44</sup> As for Awa, Wehrs argues that her preference for Islam and disdain for heathenism represent centuries of Islamic acculturation, “intensified after the Fulani jihad of 1804–12,” and calls Li’s father a “cowardly authoritarian.”<sup>45</sup> Reading Li’s decision to return to Habu and embrace Islam as Alkali’s compromise within the religious environment of northern Nigerian society, since the novelistic discourse, the aesthetic integrity of Alkali’s narrative, and her feminist vision of presenting women as rational thinkers, as sexually free, and as autonomous individuals are problematized within an Islamic context, Wehrs stresses that any other conclusion would risk bearing overtones of *bid’a*, *shirk*, or *hawa* that are essentially disapproved in an Islamic society.

Along this vein, Chukwu regards Islam’s role in the novel as “ambivalent,” attributing Li’s final decision to accept Islam and return to Habu and the city to a compromise between Islam and modernity, as the former is unable to align itself with Western civilization and its attendant modernization sweeping over northern Nigerian society. Ladele echoes this view by stating that Li’s dreams are stillborn precisely because she decides to return to Habu.<sup>46</sup> Ogunyemi finds the ending of the novel puzzling and inexplicable as Li “is made to wait for an irresponsible husband.”<sup>47</sup> The possibility of a woman voluntarily accepting Islam as Li does by realizing her follies, or, as Onyemaechi Udumukwu expresses in a rare voice,

by not seeking to “escape from her milieu,” is preemptively declared a compromise by other critics like Ogunyemi and Wehrs.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Udumukwu observantly points out that the difference between the Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta’s literary feminism as “iconoclasm” and Alkali’s is that the latter creates a “sense of harmony between men and women.”<sup>49</sup> As each critic perfunctorily analyzes the socio-religious background of the novel to hold on to the view that Islam blunts Li’s progress, they are rent by other inconsistencies. Kassam states that Li’s father is a Christian: “her father, Baba, holds uncompromising Christian principles which fuel the crisis in his own home.”<sup>50</sup> Others identify him as a Muslim. Even so, the fragmented cultural composition of the village, comprising Islam, heathenism, and Christianity, bears upon Li’s earliest thoughts and amplifies her noetic journey to Islam.

### Let Me Be “Heathen”: Freedoms, Follies, and Futures

Hill Station’s religious pluralism is introduced at the start of the novel, accentuating Islamic, Christian, and heathen influences, and the frame in which Li is exposed to Islam. One of the earliest indicators of the Islamic culture in the village is when Li irreverently draws up the difference between Islam, the adopted religion, and heathenism, the indigenous spiritual system—“Let me be heathen, I’d be much happier. At least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck to know where I’ve been to”—expressing deep antipathy for Islam that she considers a hindrance to her desire for uninhibited freedom (*TS*, 3). Half Muslim from her father’s side and half heathen from her mother’s side, who converted to Islam, Li finds life in the village “hell,” riled by the restrictions in the household that she attributes to Islam’s influence (*TS*, 13, 4).

The presence of multiple religions is also evoked with regard to Li’s naming—she does not have a Muslim name. But if the Hausa had named her, she would have been called “Mairiga” (*TS*, 5). Her name, however, is Libira or Li. Furthermore, her grandfather, Kaka, accepts all three cultures—Islamic, Christian, and indigenous:

When he felt sick, he visited Heman, the herbalist in secret . . . In the privacy of his room he worshipped his gods. Behind the Hill Station, among the hills, he sacrificed to the gods of his ancestors. Whenever there was a Christian or Muslim festival in the village, he attended both diligently. (*TS*, 25)

Owing to his affiliation to all three, the family is unable to decide how to bury him, as he “never went with the people of the book, nor was he ever known to perform an ablution,” pointing to his preference for herbalism, as he rejects both Christianity (Christians are referred to as “people of the Book” in the Qur’an) and Islam (referring to the habit of performing ablutions before prayer) (*TS*, 101).<sup>51</sup> This multireligious environment in Hill Station, coupled with Li’s emphatic preference for heathenism over Islam, includes Awa’s preference for Islam over other religions. It is also against this visceral distaste for Islam that Li will undergo a transformation. The religious composition of the novel is therefore equally crucial to understanding Li’s final choice, for it brings to light the genuine reasons behind her defiance of Islam.

Li’s personality at the start of the story is far from positive or admirable. As such, her journey from an adolescent to a matriarch must be revisited. Few of the novel’s critics, with perhaps the exception of Brown, helpfully acknowledge Li’s less than exemplary personality as a protagonist who grows from the “naïve, impulsive schoolgirl she was when the novel opens,” resenting her family and religion and disparaging traditions, into a “mature, tolerant, worldly-wise . . . woman in her own right,” who eventually recognizes the religion she had been shunning all along.<sup>52</sup> Early in the novel, she is described as “impatient and stubborn,” and again as impetuous and critical of people (*TS*, 4–5, 94). On returning to the village after completing her “primary seven in the neighboring village,” she feels uncomfortable (*TS*, 1):

The thought of seeing her numerous brothers and sisters made her want to clap and sing with the others. For a moment she thought of her parents and a dark shadow crossed her mind, threatening to dampen her happiness. She quickly warded it off. This was no time to indulge in unhappy thoughts. (*TS*, 1)

The faintest thought of her parents—the passage makes clear—irritates Li. In particular, she abhors her disciplinarian father, whom she calls a “shortsighted bigot,” and who, according to Li’s grandmother, is “never tired of playing god with his children” (*TS*, 20, 24). Li has little respect for him but expects it of her younger siblings: “Be silent, crooked nose, or I’ll teach you how to respect your elders,” she hypocritically shouts at Sani, her younger brother (*TS*, 4–5). She shares an uneasy relationship with her parents. Not being close to either of them, Li envies Faku for being able to talk to her own mother about intimate details of her life: “Your mother said that? Li asked, thinking how close Faku must be to her mother to

talk about such intimate things” (*TS*, 33). No reason is provided for Li’s cold relationship with her mother. Is she, too, like Baba, uncaring and a bigot? (*TS*, 13). Briefly, Li shares a positive and healthy relationship with no one in her family. Furthermore, she is described as “restless as a goat in labour, as stubborn as a tired donkey and as arrogant as a dethroned chief” (*TS*, 86). When examined closely, she is likened to three things that allegorize her gratuitous behavior at the start of the novel—a goat in labour that cannot be reasoned with, connoting lack of reason and self-control; a donkey that cannot work more but stubbornly plows through, pointing to Li’s disregard for well-meaning advice; and an erstwhile chief who continues behaving with hubris with little reason to do so, gesturing to Li’s wanton arrogance.

Li’s characteristic insensitivity resurfaces when her uncle is sick, and her father must leave to take care of him. With nary a thought for their well-being, Li is relieved that she can now attend the village dance for the end-of-the-year festival: “inwardly she had blessed her uncle who she thought couldn’t have chosen a better time to fall ill” (*TS*, 48). Uncompassionate, she enjoys a self-centered reverie: “she closed her eyes and imagined herself dancing tonight under the watchful eyes of the full moon” (*TS*, 48). Furthermore, she is superficial and vain, feeling fulfilled by going to the dance even though her father has forbidden her. She vainly craves attention: “I’ll be noticed. Someone will probably sing in praise of me in the dancing arena,” she enthuses (*TS*, 16). Obsessed by her selfish pursuits, she chases after Habu Adams whom she spots at the dance. After a chance meeting at the dance arena, where she brazenly chats with him, irreverently revealing to him that she loathes her father, Li secretly arranges a meeting with him on the pretext of gathering firewood and embarks on a heady courtship with Habu (*TS*, 42). Shortly after sparring with her family over petty matters, compounding her dissatisfaction with village life, Li briskly begins dreaming of the city,

a place where she would have an easy life, free from slimy calabashes and evil-smelling goats. One of these days she would be a different woman, with painted nails and silky shining hair. (*TS*, 55)

Enveloped in dreams of shallow appearances and a glamorous lifestyle, she yearns to escape the chores of village life (*TS*, 55). She dreams of becoming a teacher and moving to the city with “no end to the luxuries the city could offer” (*TS*, 57). Fixated on an easy life in the city with painted nails and silky hair, Li fervently pursues her plans. Four years after the same annual dance where she first met Habu, Li is nineteen and

married to Habu but still scrubbing dishes in the village, surrounded by “slimy calabashes and evil-smelling goats” (*TS*, 7, 55). Habu has become a salesman instead of a doctor; his family paid the bride-price soon after the annual dance festival. But Habu writes to say that he travels a lot and that Li should wait in the village till he sends for her (*TS*, 57). In sum, Li’s quest for self-fulfillment is a superficial one, nourished by an irrational hatred for her family, an awkward relationship with her parents, and contempt for her household and village, which she calls “hell” (*TS*, 1).

During the long wait for Habu, overcome by familiar feelings of resentment for her family and village, Li grows restive and approaches her grandfather, Kaka, for advice: “She experienced an intense desire to escape from them all. To run away from the pressure at home, from the constant advances of other men and the mockery in the eyes of the villagers” (*TS*, 63). Kaka wisely guesses the real reason for her frustration: “But be patient. You will soon be free” (*TS*, 63). Though she loves him, “a warmhearted man,” as “the thought of the old man warmed her heart,” she cares little for his vatic wisdom: “that ancient one will cheat me out of this life” (*TS*, 55, 13). Even when he is ill, Li lies to him by saying that she does not want to leave him and return to the city, for it is only a “half-truth” (*TS*, 64). He then recommends that she be more responsible around the house: “For now you are the man of the house. Your sister is of great help, but there is so much she has to do with the children around her legs” (*TS*, 63–64). On the suggestion of assuming responsibility of her family members, however, Li “did not like the trend the conversation was taking” (*TS*, 64). She is determined to escape her family, the village, and her responsibilities toward her family. Kaka reiterates his advice: “Learn to be patient, he repeated. You never lose anything by being patient” (*TS*, 64). Being too self-centered, Li does not fully appreciate the import of his advice. Not long after this conversation, however, she will appreciate this wisdom as Habu finally sends for her to join him in the city.

She eagerly joins him in the city only to find out that Habu is a changed man—cold and distant. When she sees him for the first time in four years since their wedding, Li finds “an unsmiling welcome awaiting her”; he stares at her unflinchingly as if he had never seen her before (*TS*, 69). Now a stranger to her, Habu often comes home drunk and violent (*TS*, 70). Li feels that he treats her like a dog (*TS*, 71). Bitter, wounded, and confused, Li soon becomes pregnant and feels trapped in a dispiriting situation:

For four years she had yearned to be in her husband’s house. She had dreamt of the moments when she would cook his meals, wash

his clothes and cuddle him to her breasts. Such moments were rare now. The meals she cooked remained untouched as his homecomings became later and rarer. And whenever he was at home, the former lion of the village was as unapproachable as an angry god. Li often wondered if Habu had really wanted her to come. (*TS*, 69)

The same “boyish man with an incredible smile and a mischievous twinkle in the eye” is now a drunken brute who cares for her as much as for a dog: “he treats me as he would treat a dog, with disgust” (*TS*, 70). Not long ago, however, she had felt the same in the village—in her father’s compound—despising her father for placing restrictions on her movements. In particular, she and Awa sneak out to secretly attend the village dance, and her father suspects his children of foul play because of a hole in the thatch wall. He convenes a meeting with the ones he suspects could have disobeyed him. In her usual protective way toward her siblings, Awa lies to him, saying that nobody left the compound. But in her wonted impetuosity, Li retorts, “A dog could have done that” (*TS*, 20). As noted earlier, Ogunyemi attributes this comparison to Li’s feeling about Islam’s treatment of women as dogs. Kassam, too, reads Li’s behavior as a rebellion against her father’s authority and the restrictions he places on her (*TS*, 119). If her father’s house is so distasteful and oppressive, as Li herself frequently describes it, and several critics have eagerly deduced this as the main cause for Li’s desire to escape the restrictions of his household, symbolic of Islamic oppression of women, is the life in the city with the man of her dreams, whom Li chooses of her own volition by defiantly marrying him, now, any different?

It is at this juncture that Li will undergo a noetic shift, for all the plans she fervently pursued by resenting her family, escaping them and the village, and behaving selfishly come to naught as her vivacity, positive qualities, and her purportedly feminist ambitions result in her failure, thus suggesting that perhaps the qualities that critics admiringly read into her actions can also be construed as the impatience, hubris, and egoism of a shortsighted woman, incapable of successfully adjusting to the responsibility of her own choices. It is also at this point that she will begin to acquire *aqiliyyah*, the mentality congruent with her pronouncement of the *shahādah* at the end. Li’s friendship with her Hausa landlady—a woman from a culture that Li abhors—perceptibly ushers this shift in her thoughts. As a result, three important changes announce Li’s transformation: her realization of her servile feelings for Habu, her revised feelings for her family, Awa, and her newfound appreciation for Hausa culture.



### Noetic Shifts: Self-Reliance, Hausa Wisdom, and Awa

Spurring Li on her noetic journey—the acquisition of *aqiliyyah*—from a self-possessed girl to a responsible woman, the Hausa landlady’s tactful wisdom tempers Li’s first steps. Li realizes the delicacy with which the woman reveals the cause of Li’s woes. The Hausa woman is aware of Li’s marital problems long before she even arrives in the city, but thinks it dignified not to interfere directly in her marriage. Therefore, through the services of an “herbalist” that the landlady hires, Li learns that the cause of all her marital woes is another woman. Along with the truth about Habu’s mistress, the reasons for his late homecomings, and his ill-treatment, Li learns yet another way of handling affairs delicately that her Hausa friend embodies from the tact with which she makes the herbalist expose Habu’s cheating: “she came from the south” and became pregnant but could not disclose the news to her family (*TS*, 88, 91). In trying to abort the baby, she loses it and Habu is forced to marry her or face legal action from the family: “Habu was given a choice between a court action and a forced marriage. He picked the latter” (*TS*, 91). Three years after this incident, Li joins him in the city with Habu now living a double life—renting an apartment for his second wife in the other end of town, shuttling between his two homes in bitter silence (*TS*, 91). Li obstinately pursued Habu and married him despite disapproval from her family of her wild ways. More importantly, that decision is her own, for at no point in the novel is she coerced into marriage or into moving to the city. Now stripping herself of the adventure and heady romance she had dreamed up, Habu’s deception has a sobering effect on Li: “Truly Habu was nothing. Just another passing stranger, who had come to her when she was ripe for love and deceived her . . . Yes, he had fanned the flame of her love but she was determined to quench its embers” (*TS*, 63). And again, she realizes that her foremost folly lay in her servile fixation of Habu, likening it to a dog’s life:

All these years she had waited for a man who cared nothing about her. Was it not obvious from the beginning that he had lost interest in her? Was she to wait for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master’s plate? (*TS*, 85)

The change, therefore, in Li is brought about by the self-realization of her follies in spurning her family, shunning their advice, and hastily marrying Habu to escape the village. Awa wonders if Li’s emotional hardships or the city are the cause of the change in her: “‘The city has changed you.’

‘No, not the city. I hardly knew the city.’ ‘He changed you then?’ Li nodded” (*TS*, 88).

Cured of the servile infatuation for Habu, Li will now begin revising her opinion about her family. The Hausa lady’s presence, personality, and advice continue to temper Li’s transformation. The kind Hausa woman reminds her of her own grandfather, Kaka. The same man, who Li once said would cheat her of her happiness, is now reverently remembered for his wisdom: “Li closed her eyes and imagined her grandfather. This gentle woman shared something with her grandfather. Li could not put her finger on it, but whatever it was, it was beautiful. It sustained them and gave them their hold on life” (*TS*, 73). This is also the first instance that she positively reminisces about her family. Moreover, the Muslim landlady compassionately shares her wisdom with Li as she counsels the younger woman on the importance of counting her blessings. The wise Hausa widow is the first to explicitly communicate to Li God’s power over things when Li expresses resentment at her pregnancy out of bitterness for Habu’s ill-treatment: she states that “birth like death is ordained by Allah,” to explain her own experience of having misunderstood her late husband’s love for her despite her inability to provide an offspring (*TS*, 73). In the context of her personal pain, the kind landlady instructs Li on the importance of patience: “Patience, as our people always say, does not sour no matter how long you keep it, and a patient person could cook a rock and drink the soup” (*TS*, 73). But this certainly is not Li’s first encounter with the merits of patience, for the proverb and its underlying sagacity, which Li petulantly rejected not too long ago in Kaka’s well-meaning advice, bear several lessons that mold her self-correction. It summarizes Li’s greatest flaw—impatiently rebuffing her family and friends in the selfish pursuit of her plans to marry Habu. The proverb also gestures to Li’s sense of poor judgement, just as the Hausa landlady had misjudged her late husband, believing him to care only for his other wives as they produced heirs for him, thereby hinting that Li, too, may have hastily judged Habu, her father, her grandfather, and her family, especially Awa, who she believed to be too submissive and weak to rebel against Baba. And, of course, the proverb reproduces Kaka’s advice, providing Li with the answer to her question above about the intriguing similarities between the Hausa landlady and Kaka.

And, once more, the wisdom of the Hausa will leaven Li’s self-realization of her obsequious infatuation with Habu through the popular Hausa proverb, “A woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan,” summing up her own servile idea of marriage (*TS*, 85). Ironically, from the great wisdom of the Hausa, the Muslims she has despised her entire life,

having virulently mocked the lack of freedom that she perceived Islam to sanction, she learns about the value of self-reliance in women. Now, not only cognizant of the wisdom of the Hausa, but spurred by it, Li resolutely wipes off the dust from her class seven certificate and vows “to go back into the world and make an independent life for herself” (TS, 85). Such is her transformation that she believes that depending on a husband, taking him for a father on whom to depend for all her needs and not as a partner in self-reliance, “destroys dreams” (TS, 94). Her return to the village is thus precipitated by the gradual realization of her follies shepherded by the sagacity of the people whom she had earlier despised, the Hausa. It is not only a resumption of schooling but also a re-education of her opinions on her family and friends. The change, therefore, in her mentality occurs in tandem with the change in her attitude toward the Hausa and her family, also marking the debut of her *aqiliyyah*.

But most of all, Li's observation of Awa appreciably buoys the gradual transformation in her. In the unanimous effort to promote Li as a champion of female autonomy, critics have continued to read Awa as a dull, weak, and ineffective foil to her sister's vivacity, ambition, and positive qualities. As she takes a closer look at Awa, Christine Loflin remarks that “Awa marries an alcoholic,” a drunken brute who abuses his wife.<sup>53</sup> Awa's husband, Dan Fiama, takes to the bottle on being demoted from headmaster to a lower-level teaching position in the village school once the government takes over. But Li, too, suffers abuse at the hands of Habu, who, incidentally, is also ruined by alcoholism. In fact, Li is far more tormented by her marital problems than Awa. In addition, Wehrs describes Awa as someone indoctrinated into submission by centuries of Islam.<sup>54</sup> Contrasting Li's strong personality stifled by societal restrictions with the personalities of other characters, Ladele states that Awa is portrayed as “weak and ineffective” as she is devastated by her experiences.<sup>55</sup> C. U. Ogbuehi believes Awa to be complicit “in her own repression and urges Li to do the same.”<sup>56</sup> And Kassam terms Awa's quiet strength a “coping strategy” that “makes her a victim of the patriarchal society to which she sacrifices her life,” making it impossible to undo the critical posture that hails aggression as strength and compliance as weakness.<sup>57</sup> Most of all, Li's feminism is mapped on her economic independence and stability and contrasted with Awa's lack of it, as Chukwu evaluates her: “So Awa neither gains herself nor her husband, nor does she contribute anything to society except that she is the culturally respected wife of the chief alcoholic.”<sup>58</sup>

Far from subordination, weakness, or ineffectiveness, it is Awa who proves to be the “man” of the house, displaying more resolve, magnanimity, and fortitude than any of her family, particularly Li. Indeed, a closer

look at Awa and her choices reveals the import of her African-Islamic feminism as it emphasizes her engagement with Islam and with nego-feminist maturity, intelligence, and foresight in managing emotionally and materially tough situations. Like a nego-feminist, Awa is guarded, cautious, and most of all goal-oriented, but her feminism remains critically disparaged for she undertakes no rebellion against Islam. In more ways than one, Li will become an African Muslim nego-feminist like Awa. The common denominator of their outlooks being Islam, while Awa operates from within its framework, having embraced its expectations, Li will come to acquire it through a noetic transformation. The feminism of an African Muslim woman is thus framed in Awa's quiet strength, deep wisdom, and, above all, rare prescience—metrics that account for women's choices not mediated by rebellion.

Awa is five years older than Li and the oldest child in the family. She is eighteen at the start of the novel and has completed her class seven at primary school. When Li returns to the village for her end-of-the-year holidays from school, she finds Awa working as a school teacher in the mission school (*TS*, 3). Not only “a beautiful shining ebony black,” Awa's face also carries “a weight of responsibility” that is conspicuously absent in her younger sister, for “she shouldered half the responsibility of the house” (*TS*, 3, 17). As teenagers, Awa surreptitiously joins Li in some of her intrigues, such as sneaking out to attend the village dance, revealing her puckish appetite. She even lies to their father when summoned to expose the culprit who tore through the fence to secretly attend the village dance (*TS*, 20). Moreover, she accompanies Li and Faku to meet the three young men, their future husbands—Habu, Dan Fiama, and Garba—on the hill when gathering firewood (*TS*, 37). Brimming with new ideas and dreams as she enthusiastically shares her vision of the future, Awa looks forward to enjoying life to the fullest. She dances, young and care-free: “Awa's eyes glowed and her teeth flashed as she wriggled her hips in rhythm to the drums. She was intoxicated by the drums, the full moon and the freedom of the night” (*TS*, 57).

Foremost among the metrics used to gauge Awa's failed feminism is her refusal, or as the critics choose to call it, her inability to rebel against Baba. Li believes that Awa has a “mortal fear of Baba, a fear that made her humble and submissive beyond reason.” Awa would “never dream of disobeying their father,” and she is “too dull to react” simply because she will not rebel against him (*TS*, 13, 3). Li's hasty judgment of Awa, in fact, exposes her own frustration in not finding support for her disrespectful agenda in unfairly resenting Baba and his household, exposing, once again, self-serving criticism of others, especially of her own sister. On the

other hand, Li's unfair assessment also reveals Awa's character and maturity, for despite her predilection for adventure as seen in her camaraderie and escapades with Li, Awa is not swayed by Li's wayward behavior to resent Baba. Although Li frequently taunts her sister for being submissive and not rebellious, Awa is steadfast, displaying not only sobriety, but also strength of character.

Early in the story, Awa expresses her opinion on Islam as the rationale for her own behavior when she reproves Li for her irreverence—"Li, you have nothing to complain about . . . would you rather be in one of the heathen houses?"—gesturing not to her passivity internalized from centuries of the Fulani jihad, as Wehrs assesses Awa's choices, but, in fact, to her consciously stated preference for Islam as she makes it clear that there is nothing oppressive about her condition or her sister's (*TS*, 3). In addition to her strength of character, it is also this consciousness of an Islamic identity that keeps Awa from disrespecting her father, for she genuinely believes, as she emphatically states above, that there is nothing to complain about (*TS*, 3). Furthermore, although she is as educated as Li, Awa proves to be far more imaginative than her sibling in presaging the changes that sweep over the village, for she predicts with rare prescience that "the city will come to us. The government will soon take over all schools and hospitals. That means rapid development. A secondary school will be attached to the primary school . . ." (*TS*, 56). Awa is cautious in not rashly and impatiently rushing to the city for an easy life and its luxuries. In fact, she is the only one who is not bedazzled by the city and is prompt to flay its allure when told about family arrangements and society in the city: "there are no farms in the city . . . Besides you never get to know the girl's relatives" (*TS*, 45). Awa's indignant response to this—"that's not marriage! That's prostitution"—reveals her belief in a *gemeinschaft* that she will resourcefully use to prospectively expose her keen intelligence, independence, and leadership (*TS*, 45).

But Awa's contribution to Li's success is conveniently and eagerly obscured. When critics hail Li for resolutely wiping the dust off her primary school certificate to resume her education, they overlook the crucial fact that she is ably assisted by Awa, for it is in Awa's care, after all, that Li leaves her daughter, Shuwa, to become a successful grade I teacher. With Li away at a neighboring town completing her training at the Advanced Teachers College, the older brother Sule out of the country in Niger, the other siblings too young or irresponsible to care, her own husband Dan Fiamma weakened by alcoholism, and her parents too sick to earn a living, it is none other than Awa, again, who single-handedly shoulders the responsibility to feed the family—comprising of her twin boys, Hassan

and Hussain, with another one on the way; Li's daughter, Shuwa; and Sule's abandoned and illegitimate child, along with her own aging and sick parents and grandparents (*TS*, 58). Awa soldiers on, resourcefully relying on community support and cooperation in the village. Quite simply, she anchors the family—a rock that others, especially Li, build on to accomplish their own goals. Awa embodies restraint by staying back and not scampering to the city only to return empty-handed, and responsibly caring for the household, including Li's own infant, thereby exemplifying qualities that Li herself will come to embody—responsibility, resourcefulness, wisdom, and generosity.

Unmistakably then, in three short conversations with Li, as she explains her ideas and undying optimism, Awa's rationale for her choices and her body language double as the template for Li's self-correction. First, Li observes that Awa is far from bitter about her predicament. She has not lost hope and wears her optimism like a badge of courage. When her dreams do not come to fruition, she does not resign to her responsibilities in the household. Instead, she dreams on, spirited and optimistic as ever. She tells Li:

“I have always wanted to do something big in the village. This is the chance I have been waiting for!” to reiterate her choice of staying back in the village. Big words, noble intentions. Awa's eyes glowed and her teeth flashed as she wriggled her hips in rhythm to the drums. She was intoxicated by the drums, the full moon and the freedom of the night. (*TS*, 56–57)

Although she had rightly predicted about the village modernizing to the rhythms of the city, and the government taking over the schools, Awa also confronts with dignity the harsh truth that her own education is not satisfactory when the government revamps the village system and demotes her and other employees, including her own husband, to lowly jobs such as sweeping the classrooms and running errands. Awa stoically explains her choice, revealing her sense of dignity, and elucidating, once more, the template for Li's transformation into a caring, responsible, and sensitive person. She tells Li:

The government took over the mission school just as we had hoped. A secondary school was added to it. But it wasn't my man they made head over the school. They said he wasn't educated enough to take his place . . . My man was pushed into the junior classes to teach. Those of us that could barely read were asked to work anywhere in the school except the classrooms. . . . I had a choice Li, the children

and old people at home, so I left. I didn't have to stay to be humiliated by other people's children. (*TS*, 87)

Above all, Awa's vivid descriptions of her hardships, following the transformation of the village, vectors Li's cognitive transformation, as knowledge of her parents' roles prompts her to realize her follies and inadequacies:

My husband had to stay. We needed the money. He stayed but it wasn't to feed the children. You know now where his money goes. I wouldn't have known how to cope without Mama. We live on the proceeds of her farm. The woman would go to the farm at cockcrow and won't come back until the chickens have gone to roost! (*TS*, 87)

On learning of her mother's role in fending for the family, Li feels guilty, perhaps for the first time, as she introspects, fraught with remorse for her actions—"Li listened silently, feeling guilty. She had done nothing herself but add to the growing number of mouths"—but not without realizing that Awa is the person who "has given her life for the happiness of others" (*TS*, 87, 102). It is also at this juncture that Awa notices the change in Li from a stubborn, impetuous, and critical person: "this was a different Li, tolerant and understanding," maturing to become "a better person with a finer soul" (*TS*, 94). Li's noetic transformation continues as Sule, Li's older and favorite brother, once as undisciplined and restless as Li herself, opens her eyes to their father's role in their lives:

The experiences I had, taught me a lot of things about life. It softened my heart towards my father. I can now understand why he was obsessed with discipline. I could have ended up in prison, Li, but for the conscience my father instilled in me. (*TS*, 100)

The "shortsighted bigot" who rules his household with an iron grip, as described earlier by Li, is now his children's "conscience," appreciated for the discipline he instilled in them, thereby also vindicating Awa's earlier stance in not wanting to disrespect their father.

### *Embracing Umoja and Shahādah*

The most palpable impact of Awa's feminism on Li, however, is seen in her decisions to return to Habu and to accept Islam, in that they

underline Li's Islamic feminism. While most critics—Ogunyemi, Ladele, and Wehrs, in particular—read Li's decisions as her failure to materialize on her hard-earned success, this analysis finds, in such a stance, the failure to genuinely extend the concepts of African feminism—like *Umoja*—to the African-Muslim women. In extending *Umoja* to the African Muslim woman and genuinely including the Muslim woman in its discursive formulations, African feminist study moves in directions hitherto uncharted.

As seen above, Ogunyemi finds Li's decision to return to Habu "inexplicable." Wehrs considers it as a compromise that Alkali operates within the novel to appease the conservative Muslim male clerics, and Ladele's views tie the title of the novel itself, "stillborn," to Li's decision by provocatively declaring that all her dreams from now on will be stillborn as she decides to return to Habu. Li's reconnection with Habu and her entire noetic transformation in rebuilding ties with her family, however, eloquently announce *Umoja*, unity, and collaboration, a harmonious cooperation with men that theorists have envisioned for the African woman who harmonizes her environment in the pursuit of her goals.

Years after Li has left Habu to become a successful teacher, Habu, a changed man himself, frequently returns to the village to beg Li to return (TS, 91). Now thirty-three, a "successful teacher and an owner of a huge modern and enviable building," Li has undergone "fierce emotional struggle" (TS, 102). But Li decides to return to the city to Habu to reaffirm the bond between them through Shuwa (TS, 104). Soon after another episode of daydreaming where she envisions her great-granddaughter's wedding, she sees that she has not left Habu, whom the great-granddaughter remembers as her great-grandfather. Li quickly understands the vatic power of her dream: "In a few seconds, Li had gone fifty or more years into the future. She knew now that the bond that had tied her to the father of her child was not ruptured" (TS, 104–5). Her decision to return to the city revives her old dream of making it big and of a happy life with Habu when she was younger. Only now, she is emotionally and psychologically charged to bear that responsibility with a transformed temperament, "and in spite of everything, in the soft cradle of her heart, there was another baby forming. This time Li was determined the baby would not be stillborn," for now, onward, she will respect the wisdom of the Hausa on self-reliance by not taking her husband as a father: "I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk" (TS, 105). Interestingly, Alkali explains Li's decision to return to Habu:

All I am advocating in *The Stillborn* is understanding between men and women, togetherness between husband and wife; but some people



don't understand this. My intention is to uphold *God's law of mutuality, coexistence*. Equality between men and women doesn't arise at all. Men are like the brain and the women, the heart.<sup>59</sup> (emphasis added)

It is, as Li tells Awa, "time to learn to walk again," symbolic of the second chance she gives not just her husband but herself as well to embark on another journey (*TS*, 105). This realization becomes amply clear with Li's next statement.

As Awa blesses her decision, "May the gods of your ancestors guide you," Li briskly corrects her: "May the good God guide us all" (*TS*, 105). Li takes the first step toward Islamic praxis, to stand on the first pillar of Islamic faith, sealing her commitment to Islam. Armed with the *aqiliyyah*, mentality, that she has acquired through self-reflection, self-correction, and self-realization as she revises her opinion on marriage and Habu, to respect her family, care for them, and assume responsibility, she prepares a *nafsiyyah*, disposition, revealing both the perception and enactment of the commitment to Islam in her statement on Islamic monotheism. The *shahādah*, profession of faith in Islam, is crucial because of its semantic and spiritually rich significance. From the verb *shahida*, meaning to witness, to observe, to perceive, and to testify, the noun, *shahādah*, according to Glassé,

has double significance typical of the genius of the Arabic language: it embraces the acts of seeing or perceiving and then of declaring that one has seen or perceived. The key to this is the link between acts and speech which, in the Arabic soul, is so swift and spontaneous that many words bear a double significance reflecting it.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, in pronouncing the *shahādah*, one is actually also saying that they "live out the truth that has been perceived."<sup>61</sup> This noesis in Li clarifies the entire process of her transformation from the start of the novel to its finish. As mentioned earlier, one utterance of the *shahādah* is oftentimes not enough to ascertain the depth of an individual's perception of the truth or commitment to it. The reason for this is the same one that Ali provides about righteous conduct in his commentary on the Qur'anic verses; implicit realization is crucial until, as Glassé puts it, "through concentration upon the truth, and virtue, the individual substance is transformed and made itself adequate to the truth."<sup>62</sup> At the start of the novel, Li was not adequate to the truth, but makes herself adequate to it following a profound emotional and psychological shift, or noetic transformation.

As seen earlier, several critics find it disturbing that Li accepts Islam and returns to Habu. By reading Alkali's novel within the ideological universe of Islamic concepts and by rightly pointing out that the novel "questions Li's forms of rebellion in ways consistent with Islamic suspicions of impious, Western-influenced confections of identity with self-will and happiness with self-fulfillment," Wehrs is, in fact, suggesting that Alkali's own subversion of the Islamic order—by presenting a liberal and rebellious woman—is *remedied* by making Li accept Islam at the end:

To link a defense of women's capacity for ethical rationality to the aesthetic integrity, the autonomous "power," shared by dream images, concrete sensuous experience and artistic representation is to confront distinctive problems within an Islamic context.<sup>63</sup>

Specifically, Wehrs identifies two important events in the novel—Li's decision to return to Habu and her acknowledgment of Islamic monotheism—as examples of Alkali's compromise to fit a conclusion logical with the Islamic environment of northern Nigeria. "Li's willingness to return to Habu remains *disturbing*" as the novelistic form of her discourse, her artistic integrity, and aesthetic interpretation are all irreconcilable with Islamic doctrine (emphasis added).<sup>64</sup> Having rebuffed Islam all along, Li's acknowledgement of Islamic monotheism, argues Wehrs, is "puzzling" and "incomprehensible" since Islam cannot promote or encourage aesthetic production that upholds women's rationality.<sup>65</sup> As a corrective then to Li's subversive habits of daydreaming, claims Wehrs, Alkali makes her acknowledge Islamic monotheism at the end of the novel and return to Habu. Simply put, Li's decision to embrace Islam indicates Alkali's cognizance of the expectations of the social order in northern Nigeria rather than a genuine change in Li's personality or her voluntary acceptance of Islam:

Thus, the very cross-cultural ethical rationality that emerges from the aesthetic integrity and coherence of novelistic discourse would seem to risk, from the perspective of Islamic piety, the disturbing overtones of *hawa*, *fitna*, *bid'ca* and *shirk*.<sup>66</sup>

Wehrs's instructive analysis rightly reads Li's unfounded disdain for her family, her disrespectful interactions with them, and her gratuitous intolerance of village life as incompatible with Islam, as forms of *bid'ca*, or Islamic innovation (incongruent with the logic of the Islamic universe), and *fitna*, or moral and psychological chaos.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, each of Li's

thoughts and actions, starting with her unfounded hatred for her parents, her stubborn disobedience by marrying Habu, her dislike for the village and Islam, and her selfish pursuit of city life, powerfully capture the absence of the mentality and disposition to embrace Islam. She truly represents an unstable personality causing instability in the Islamic environment, not unlike Wehrs' imaginative allusion to *fitna*, *bid'a*, *hawa*, or *shirk*. Nevertheless, from the start of the novel to the end when Li accepts Islam, Wehrs overlooks the interim period marked by a perceptible shift in the content of her reveries or her profound transformation as she gradually compiles attitudes compatible with Islamic praxis. Even the content, form, and timing of the dreams bracket her noetic transformation to align the *shahādah* as a logical outcome of her transformation.

Li's first reverie occurs early in the novel as she is trying to escape the chores of village life, its stark landscape, and vapid lifestyle:

Mechanically she began washing pots and calabashes, her mind divorced from her fingers. She was dreaming of a paradise called the "city." A place where she would have an easy life, free from slimy calabashes and evil-smelling goats. . . . One of these days she would be a different woman, with painted nails and silky shining hair. She was going to be a successful Grade I teacher and Habu a famous medical doctor, like the whitemen in the village mission hospital. The image of a big European house full of houseboys and maids rose before her. Li smiled to herself. The bushy stream, the thorny hillside and the dusty market would soon be forgotten, in the past. (TS, 55)

And again, she will dream of "the Grade I teacher, the big European house full of servants, the smooth body, the long silky hair" and of the endless luxuries the city could offer (TS, 57). Her reveries are made up of material pleasures and comforts and escapism from family, home, and the unalluring village. On the other hand, her second dream occurs at the end of the story:

A young girl of about twenty stood there, tall and graceful, her skin ebony black . . . The girl bent down and peered closely into Li's eyes. "Great-grandmother," the girls called. "You've been sitting here for hours. Everybody is in the courtyard performing the marriage rites." . . . "What occasion?" Li asked absentmindedly. "My marriage, great-grandmother! Have you forgotten I am getting married today?" . . . "I am not alone" . . . "I have never been alone. I have Habu Adams." . . . "By God, my late great-grandfather." (TS, 103-4)

The shallow content of Li's early dreams can be traced to her vacuous personality that is unworthy of admiration at the start of the novel. Her early dream, therefore, extends her less than exemplary personality, impatience, impetuosity, and unwarranted criticism of others. The dream at the end of the novel, where she fast-forwards to fifty years in the future as a great-grandmother, on the other hand, instructs her to return to Habu and to rebuild her relationships. It anticipates building, nurturing, and returning, or *Umoja*. It reflects her changed thoughts—patience and togetherness. It portends relationships and family, connectedness and cooperation. No material comfort is mentioned. In the interval between the first and last dream, Li has undergone a change, and the content of the second dream is aligned in spirit to her changed attitudes. The impact of the dreams on her actions is also significant in that soon after the first dream, Li brazenly embarks on her pursuit of Habu, marries him, and then experiences life-changing disappointment. On the other hand, the instructions in the last dream augur her impending actions, that of reconnecting with Habu, toward stability to build a progeny reaching as far into the future as her great-granddaughter's wedding. The noetic transformation between the two dreams thus scaffolds the visualization of a future with Habu, vividly envisioned in the second dream.

Li's decision to return to Habu must, therefore, be situated on this continuum of the noetic maturation of her personality. At the start of her marriage to him, she did not have an emotional grasp on her own situation. But as she realizes her follies through the contributions and wisdom of others—the kind Hausa landlady, Kaka, Baba, Awa, and her mother—she decidedly rebuilds her relationship with Habu, assuming the responsibility that an emotionally mature woman can successfully steward. Just as she reconnects with each member of her family with a renewed sense of responsibility and sensitivity, Li's decision to return to Habu suggests the actions of a woman who is different from the brazenly irresponsible girl whose behavior was incompatible with the expectations of an Islamic personality. Wehrs's evocation of Li's enactment of *bid'a*, *shirk*, *hawa*, or *fitna*—moral and spiritual impoverishment and chaos—is precisely the way Alkali *maps* the progression of a Muslim woman's journey from rejecting Islam to the acknowledgment of Islamic beliefs, for Li does not abruptly embrace Islam but does so gradually. It is a disposition that she must first acquire before she can accept the responsibility of the spiritual imperative of Islam. In other words, it is a process, *aqiliyyah*, of introspective creation, reinvention, and revision of her earlier follies that provides her with a disposition, *nafsiyyah*, attuned to the finer soul she has become.

In sum, the process of noetic transformation or self-correction that is part of the process of acquiring *aqiliyyah* debuts with the renewal of relationships, first with the Hausa landlady and then with a revision of Li's feelings toward her family, especially her own father, who acts as Sule's "conscience," and her mother and Awa, who have made innumerable sacrifices to support the family, including caring for Li's own daughter, Shuwa. Li's observation of Awa's choices and decisions—choosing the village over the city, being optimistic and enthusiastic about her future, not feeling bitter or defeated but stoically supporting her family—validates a framework that Li recognizes when she is overcome by guilt for having done little for others. In essence, Li's Islamic feminism develops in the critical self-gaze of the African woman, sharply focusing on the personal, private, and intellectual processes and goals of her engagement with Islam. Finally, this study aligns the conclusion of the novel—Li's decision to return to Habu and her entry into the pale of Islam—as a logical outcome of the processes of Li's noetic revision.

This chapter has also rearticulated Alkali's depiction of Awa's Muslim nego-feminist heroism, which does not fit the metrics critically employed in studying African Muslim women in that Alkali's portrayal has been framed in by Awa's subservience to Islam and her inability to revolt against it. Awa's balanced outlook nonetheless is emotionally better grounded than Li's personality. An appreciation of Li's success, indeed, cannot bypass Awa's role in nurturing Li's daughter to allow Li to pursue her training, as she catalyzes Li's transformation into a more tolerant, worldly-wise, and, most of all, respectful woman, thus questioning the valence assigned to socioeconomic success alone as an index of women's expression of feminism. Ultimately, what is empowering is not education in the narrow sense of schooling that allows women to earn a living and afford economic autonomy in society, as has been discussed in the bulk of the critical analyses of the novel. The novel, therefore, fits well into the current theoretical discussions on African and Islamic feminisms by eloquently exemplifying Alkali's portrayal of feminism as Muslim women's personal and spiritual journeys that evolve on interpersonal levels outside the ambit of political and organizational affiliations and activities.



## Chapter 3



# Historical Templates and Islamic Disposition

## Personal Journeys in *The Virtuous Woman*

The question of equality is irrelevant. There are more than enough roles in life to accommodate us all. . . . A woman can never be anything else but a woman. Her role in life is as important as that of the man, but not the same.

—Zaynab Alkali

In nearly every case, contemporary women cite Nana Asma'u as their exemplar in seeking knowledge as a necessary pursuit in their lives.

—Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd

Since winning the ANA prize for *The Stillborn* in 1985, in almost every interview, Zaynab Alkali offers insights into the literary purpose behind her writing. As seen earlier, while critics enthusiastically celebrate her presence on the literary scene for being a rare voice from the northern part of the country and for being the first woman from northern Nigeria to write in English, few stray from the consensus that her fiction derides Islam in northern Nigerian society. Both Alkali's interviews and the critical appraisal of her work, therefore, serve as crucial clues to her literary stance since little attention has been paid to her other novels, such as her second work of fiction, *The Virtuous Woman*, also misrecognized as a clarion call against women's oppression. In view of Alkali's literary ideology—outlined below in her interviews—that upholds the Islamic perspective, her motivation to depict women living according to the expected norms of society, and her tribute to Nana Asma'u's Islamic

feminist legacy emphasizing faith and right living, this chapter foregrounds the enactment of the novel's main protagonist Nana Ai's virtuous behavior on a journey that she undertakes from her village back to her school at the start of a new term. Indeed, by choosing a young Muslim woman as her main protagonist, Alkali depicts rather than subverts Islam in northern Nigerian society. In its emphasis on correct Islamic behavior, *nafsiyyah*, *The Virtuous Woman* continues where *The Stillborn* leaves off; it dilates the manifestation of specific qualities in personal, private, and individual Islamic practice. While *The Stillborn* emphasizes the acquisition of *nafsiyyah*, *The Virtuous Woman* underscores its implementation, evoking the very specific Qur'anic concept of *akhlāq*, the enactment of particular virtues such as honesty, compassion, courage, and wisdom by the novel's central character, Nana Ai.

This chapter reads Alkali's engagement in *The Virtuous Woman* with Islamic and African feminist discourses on multiple levels to underscore the biliterate terrain of African-Islamic feminism. First, Alkali salutes and intuits the impact of Nana Asma'u's vision by amplifying, through Nana Ai, a young Muslim woman's mental effort, personal discipline, personal choice, and highly individual response to the instruction on faith and right living. Second, Alkali engages with Islamic feminist discourse on the private, personal, and individual manner of instruction of *akhlāq*, which is available to Nana Ai in the familial fold through her grandfather Baba Sani's teachings, and its application for equally private, personal, and individual satisfaction. Furthermore, the shaping influence of Nana Asma'u's message of faith and right living that leads Nana Ai to enact exemplary mental effort, self-control, and personal discipline is indicative of her African womanism, nego-feminism, and her ability for dialogic action in *Umoja*, as Nana Ai acquits herself admirably in interacting with a number of emotionally and physically challenging situations and people during her journey. To parsimoniously correlate feminism with the ability to question norms is to omit its expression in quiet strength, self-control, dignity, and restraint, which Nana Ai embodies. Nana Ai chooses to navigate the difficult situations not by defying patriarchy as is expected of her by other readers of the novel, but by manifesting qualities equally emblematic of feminism—courage, good judgment, beneficence, firmness, and even-tempered wisdom. These qualities are eminently enshrined in such articulations of African feminism as nego-feminism, African womanism, and *Umoja* that Nana Ai, as an African Muslim woman, manifests by drawing predominantly from her Islamic beliefs in *akhlāq*. As such, Alkali's depiction of Islamic feminism in the novel differs not just in form from collectively organized efforts of feminist expression, but also



in purpose, in that its ends are self-improvement and enhancement of self-esteem.

To understand Nana Ai's virtuous disposition during her journey back to school within the framework of *akhlāq*, three important, if overlapping, components that Alkali herself evokes in the novel and recurrently clarifies in her interviews—living according to the expected norms of the society, consciousness of women's greater potential, and the Islamic perspective—merit further exploration, for it is during this arduous journey, both literal and figurative, that Alkali adduces the intersection of Islam and women's lives in northern Nigeria. Nana Ai is tested not only externally in such difficult circumstances as dealing with uncooperative traveling companions, like her friend Laila, and a terrible road accident that kills many of her co-passengers, but also internally as she wrangles with her feelings, frequently engaging in daydreams, introspections, and conflicting monologues owing to her physical handicap and poor self-esteem. As Nana Ai's journey comes to a close, each station of her physical voyage of a thousand kilometers—people, passengers, delays, accidents, anecdotes—symbolizes a station in her journey of life, presenting her with the opportunity to manifest *akhlāq* while confronting her fears and managing emotions she has never experienced before.

Such complex dimensions of a young woman's personality and experience in equally challenging situations such as poor self-esteem, road accidents, deaths, and difficult interpersonal relations therefore occasion a relatively nuanced understanding of Alkali's literary stance, essentially her conception of women's roles. Although she persistently clarifies in her interviews on the recurrent question on women in northern Nigeria that the Nigerian woman, and not just the Muslim woman, "suffers from inherited responses" that engender a feeling of inferiority in her, and briskly reiterates this concern—"I am irked by the fact that most women have been trained to see themselves as 'weak' and 'incapable' of attaining the highest peak of intellectual development"—this declaration has had little effect on the sustained and polished critical consensus that Islam oppresses women and that Alkali's main literary purpose is to denounce such oppression.<sup>1</sup>

### Embracing and Defying Stereotypes: "Living According to the Expected Norms of Society"

Women fulfilling conventionally traditional or "stereotyped roles" as wives, mothers, or teachers, diverging here from Wadud's conceptualization of

identical equality with men, according to Alkali, is not a sign of inequality. It is more a matter of playing a role, fulfilling a potential, from the Islamic perspective of personal satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> It is, as Alkali continually asserts, “the quality of the child,” or the quality of women’s roles and functions, that takes center stage in her work.<sup>3</sup> Ogbuehi, nonetheless, quotes Alkali as having said that she writes in a society “where the image of soft-spoken, down-cast eyed obedient woman is still placed at a high premium” by adding that Alkali writes about a society that “has unrelenting second-class status for women”:

An ideal woman in this society is one who is submissive, secluded and veiled either physically with a piece of cloth or metaphorically with down-cast eyes. In fact, the situation in Alkali’s society is currently being exacerbated by the fresh relevance Sharia law is gaining in some states in northern Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

In other interviews, Alkali talks at length about the dilemma of “backward tradition and modern values in Hausaland,” and that “the backstage stance which she [the Muslim woman] adopts has to do with the concept of her role as a Muslim woman.”<sup>5</sup> Even so, in the same interviews, she clarifies that she doesn’t feel that the northern Nigerian woman is “repressed”—“I think repressed is not a good word after all. I think they are not repressed as such. But I will prefer the word neglected rather than repressed”—and that northern Nigerian Muslim women, “rural or urban, do not feel inferior to men.”<sup>6</sup>

To this end, then, and in response to the most commonly held critical view that she and her protagonists flout social norms epitomized by Islam, Alkali opens an interview with the following:

I see myself as a typical Nigerian woman who wants to get married, raise a family and *live according to the expected norms of the society*. I write to reflect such a woman and to change the image of women in Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

To address not just self-deprecation but also their neglected representation in literature, Alkali insists on portraying women as mothers, wives, professionals, or students, roles that realistically reflect their functions in society, giving the story what she calls “life-likeness,” since male writers relegate women to minor characterization, most often in such demeaning roles as prostitutes. She therefore specifies that it is not only the portrayal of women but the kind of women she represents that is important: “it’s

not gender but the ‘quality of the child.’”<sup>8</sup> To stress this, her assertion that “the question of equality is irrelevant” because “a woman can never be anything else but a woman,” in fact, celebrates women’s potential to truly explore possibilities of self-fulfillment and desists from the temptation to frame feminism uniquely as the appropriation of men’s roles.<sup>9</sup> By not envisioning equality as a goal of her feminism, Alkali does not subscribe to inferiority or propound inequality. She is well aware that women can and must have access to opportunities. Rather, she distances herself from the eagerness to wrangle with men as an agenda of feminist expression that deters women, in her view, from the consciousness of their potential. At variance with Wadud’s thesis on the gender-neutral grammar of the Qur’an, where Wadud claims that “the Qur’an does not support a specific and stereotyped role for its characters, male or female,” Alkali’s fiction thus centers on self-fulfillment that raises the “consciousness of women to their greater potential,” thereby nudging the compass of women’s agendas in the direction of a greater consciousness of individual potential.<sup>10</sup> A key feature of this consciousness, according to Alkali, is recognizing the gravity of women’s roles, even if they are perceived as stereotypical, traditional, conventional, and therefore backward:

Women as mothers, wives and teachers have a great deal of responsibility. If every mother turns out even one God-fearing person, then she would have contributed her share to development and a powerful literature on the image of the Nigerian woman would have evolved.<sup>11</sup>

She uses the term “God-fearing” to pinpoint the core idea of her feminism, for in yet another interview she states, “with a thorough understanding of religion things should be better in society.”<sup>12</sup> Alkali then fuses both ideas—women’s self-fulfillment and their responsibility of instilling religious values—to buttress her literary framework:

I view the position of women in the society from the *Islamic perspective*. If by women’s liberation we mean equality of the two sexes, this should not be the issue. Both have roles to play. We are created for different reasons.<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added)

To recapitulate Wadud’s approach, it is useful to evoke the hermeneutical model that jettisons conventional interpretations of the Qur’an, especially those that present women as fundamentally inferior to men. Wadud argues that historically the Qur’an has been interpreted by men who consistently portrayed women as “inferior” and “unequal” to men,

and consequently weak, inherently evil, and even spiritually lacking.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, and for the purposes of this analysis, Wadud claims that the

woman has been restricted to functions related to her biology. The man, on the other hand, is evaluated as superior . . . an inherent leader and caretaker . . . enjoying completely the choice of movement, employment, and social, political and economic participation . . .<sup>15</sup>

Wadud thus frames her reading of the Qur'an within a claim for "gender equality" of the text as a reference for women's rights for the same.<sup>16</sup> Underlying Wadud's entire critical exercise is her effort to disabuse any belief that the Qur'an upholds men's superiority,

that men are "in charge of women"; that men have a more significant role in the continuation of society; that men are natural leaders; that men should "rule" the family and get obedience from women.<sup>17</sup>

Alkali, however, validates some roles that Wadud would term stereotypical, and therefore submissive, such as those of a wife, mother, and teacher, including living according to the *expected norms of the society*, without insisting that these are the only roles that women must necessarily fulfill or that fulfilling such roles implies male superiority.

### Virtuous Disposition: *Akhlāq*, Faith, and Right Living

Virtuosity, likewise, is not gender-specific. Also understood as ethics, *akhlāq* has been vigorously discussed in Islam and Islamic philosophy. Deriving from the Qur'an, the philosophy on ethics spans centuries of deliberations in schools of philosophical and theological thought, and spawns multifarious pronouncements by dialoguing not just with the Qur'an but with Greek and Roman philosophies on the subject.<sup>18</sup> According to Ibrahim Kalin, the discussion centers on concepts of reason and free will as the Qur'an intimates that humans possess the capacity to make moral choices, distinguish between good and evil, and have been created "in the best manner" (95:4). The debate on ethics in Islam, explains Kalin, has also involved "the ontological status and origin of moral values and the extent to which humans can know and identify good and evil by reason alone without the aid of revelations."<sup>19</sup>

For the specific purpose of focusing on women's personal engagement with Islam in their daily praxis, this chapter recruits the definition of

*akhlāq* as virtuous behavior and good qualities, drawing primarily from Qur’anic injunctions and the *ḥadīth* as templates for the enactment of behavior premised on Muhammad’s example, or *sunna*. *Akhlāq* is mentioned in the Qur’an, *ḥadīth*, and other sources of Islamic literature. In addition to the two verses specifically exhorting the adoption of good disposition (26:137; 68:4), notes Kalin, it is emphasized throughout the Qur’an to stress the “significance of leading a virtuous life.”<sup>20</sup> In frequent injunctions to embody good qualities such as patience, humility, beneficence, compassion, and politeness—“the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, . . . and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so . . .” (33:35); “Allah loves those who are patient” (3:145); “the dutiful are those who restrain their anger and pardon people”; “Allah loves those who do good to others” (3:134); “speak good words to all people” (2:83); and “the servants of the Beneficent are those who walk on earth in humility” (25:43)—among a phalanx of other verses, Muslims must strive for the embodiment of exemplary conduct.

The adoption of *akhlāq* on a daily basis also draws from the *ḥadīth*. Most compilations report numerous instances of Muhammad’s sayings on the importance of good conduct to the extent that the *Sahīh Muslim* cites him as having said, “Indeed I have been sent to complete the best of character (*akhlāq*).”<sup>21</sup> In his book on etiquette and manners, “Book of Adab (Good Manners),” Bukhari reports extensively on the gestures, words, and actions that constitute good behavior and virtue, to affirm the centrality of *akhlāq* and the means to acquire it.<sup>22</sup> Though the history and doctrine of the *sunna*, its implementation, and its various components (*sirah*, *isnad*, and the legal status of its usage) are dense and often disposed to dynamic interpretations and even dispute, the essential notion of *sunna* for a Muslim would entail its chief meaning and function, that of acknowledging and observing Muhammad’s behavior and sayings as paradigmatic of Islamic practice.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, through the ages, as Glassé notes, Muslims have searched out

the traditions of the Prophet’s life to guide the faithful in situations not touched by the Koran. As primordial man, or as the expression of the plentitude of human possibilities, the Prophet in his life may well have manifested all the possibilities of Islam by act, thought, speech or gesture.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of Muhammad’s actions arises from his role as founder of the religion whose example serves as the best interpretation of the

Qur'an or God's commandments to Muslims. In this regard, Kalin mentions that Muhammad is often called "*makārim al-akhlāq*," or someone sent to "complete the refinement of good character." In the Qur'an, he is described as the "best example," the normative model, "a beautiful pattern of conduct" (33:21). As Kalin notes, even collections of *hadith*, such as the "forty hadith," "bring together those sayings of Prophet Muhammad that emphasize virtues and ethical norms" to underscore the valence assigned to good conduct in Islamic praxis.<sup>25</sup>

*Akhlāq* finds ample resonance in the history of Islamic feminism in Nigeria in the *yan-taru* movement, affirming the context—locally anchored in African-Islamic feminism as emphasizing faith and right living—used by African Muslim women. It is not coincidental that Nana Ai and Nana Asma'u are namesakes. Mack observes:

Nana Asma'u's role as a scholar was multivalent: she was multilingual, an author of both oral and written works, a scholar known throughout West Africa and the Maghreb, and a teacher of women and men, and of scholars and students, as well as a trainer of teachers. . . . In contemporary times, she is the model for women throughout the Maghreb who choose to study; they note that her life gives legitimacy to their pursuits.<sup>26</sup>

As seen earlier, at the heart of the *yan-taru* movement, in its methods and actors, lay the pursuit of an exemplary disposition, right living and faith. To this end, Asma'u's literary corpus was aimed at the good Muslim, avoiding the use of gender-specific pronouns, emphasizing repeatedly that Qur'anic obligations are incumbent upon every Muslim without losing sight of the woman's crucial role in educating others for the "good of her own soul," spiritually underwritten by the "need to follow the Sunna, the example of Prophet Muhammad." But as Mack explains, the movement was spurred by the idea that women's roles were central to the promotion of good of the community.<sup>27</sup> Nana Asma'u's work pivots on the Qur'an and the *hadith* as she amply draws from Muhammad's character as the organizing principle of her mission. Mack and Boyd thus describe faith and right living as the ideological impetus of Asma'u's work:

Asma'u's works [ . . . ] reinforced [ . . . ] characteristics and the principles of the Sunna by outlining in praise poems the spirituality and moral characteristics that made a person noteworthy. It was not a person's wealth or political achievements that were significant, but

faith and right living . . . personal goodness—patience and generosity—is what makes a person pious.<sup>28</sup>

*The Virtuous Woman* is set in the 1960s in a small fictitious village in northern Nigeria, Gidan Zuma. It centers on Nana Ai, a seventeen-year-old cripple, on a journey from her village to her school at the end of the school year vacation. Nana lives with her grandfather, Baba Sani, as she is orphaned at an early age when her parents die in a car crash. Baba Sani raises Nana with great care and even saves her life when she faces a life-threatening illness, losing partial function in one leg to polio. Baba Sani has profound knowledge of herbs. His unusual ken in traditional medicine earns him the respect of the village and has a deep impact on Nana as she grows up wanting to study medicine like her deceased father and Baba Sani. Nana is academically accomplished, having won a scholarship to study in a prestigious girls' school. On their way to the school, Nana and her friend Laila, who is traveling with her cousin the ten-year-old Hajjo, meet strangers from all walks of life, including Bello and Abubakar, two young men, students of the reputed Kings College, also returning to school at the end of their vacation, among many others. The girls encounter strange and challenging situations that test their characters, exposing their divergent personalities and thoughts. Nana even develops feelings for Bello. The novel ends with the girls safely reaching their school. Figuratively, the novel ends with Nana having passed into a different station of her emotional and psychological journey in life.

### Literary Levity: Children's Fiction

In comparison to Alkali's first novel, *The Virtuous Woman* remains consigned to circles of children's fiction with no apparent gravity or literary significance, redolent of the sustained critical impulse to focus attention only on those examples where Muslim women readily defy Islam, rather than use it to fashion their lives. The relative lack of critical interest in this novel also points to the perception that Islam never became entrenched as a way of life, evoking Bangura's familiar observation about the "denial of Islam," a disavowal of its presence in African fiction.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Ogunyemi builds her compelling analysis of the novel on Alkali's epigraph from the Bible: "she uses the biblical idea of the virtuous woman to conceptualize Nana."<sup>30</sup> Ladele, too, recognizes the influence of religious teachings that guide the "moralistic overtones" of the novel but does not specifically identify Islam.<sup>31</sup> Wendy Griswold calls the novel a

“political allegory as well as a parable about gender,” where the lorries traveling to the district headquarters represent Nigeria’s three regions “rushing headlong toward disaster in the 1960s.”<sup>32</sup> Since the three heroines of the novel, Nana, Laila, and Hajjo, argues Griswold, are each in their own way disabled—Nana is polio-stricken, Hajjo is an orphan, and Laila is boldly sexual in her desires—they “will not be the virtuous wives unblemished, sequestered, obediently delivering male babies of conservative Islam. But their education—merging virtues of north and south, West and indigenous—may make them enabled.”<sup>33</sup> Underwritten by the derisive presumption that such education—schooling—is not sanctioned but disapproved by Islam since the religion expects women to deliver male babies, Griswold, nonetheless, relies on a feminist reading by referring to womanism, “the form of black feminism described by Alice Walker” that is “non-Western, egalitarian, and strong but gentle; it embraces men and carries a vision of how woman’s virtues enable both sexes to move ahead toward freedom.”<sup>34</sup> *The Virtuous Woman*, therefore, continues Griswold, can be read as “a womanist healing of Nigerian divisions.”<sup>35</sup> Such a reading remains anchored in the presupposition that Islam suppresses female education and freedom.

In this context, two main patterns emerge from the critical literature on the novel. First, as critics have put forth, the novel lies in the tradition of “school-girl adventure series,” as Omolale Ladele questions the utility of virtuosity and good behavior when contemporary women are “striving to free themselves of oppressive traditional (male-oriented) perceptions of women.”<sup>36</sup> Buoying perhaps this alleged lack of literary significance is Alkali’s own explanation on the purpose and tone of the narrative, calling it deliberately moralistic:

*The Virtuous Woman* is a novel written especially for adolescents. It is deliberately moralistic, written in the spirit of the W.A.I. campaign. I feel our children are in desperate need of morals, so I created some character models.<sup>37</sup>

The W.A.I. campaign, or the War Against Indiscipline exercise, refers to the movement led by Nigerian president General Muhammadu Buhari in the early eighties to curb indiscipline in society.<sup>38</sup> Loflin also considers the novel to be a “morally pointed work,” echoing Alkali’s comment above.<sup>39</sup> Though Adetayo Alabi observes the novel’s context as sociologically situated in northern Nigeria, commending Alkali for being one of the first female writers from the region, she strengthens the consensus on feminism



as flouting norms.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Theresa Njoku and Ezenwa Ohaeto read the novel as a subversion of the “socio-religious restrictions” on women in northern Nigerian society by stating that the motif of Nana and Leila’s journey to school “ensures the loosening of the Muslim woman’s confinement.”<sup>41</sup> Secondly, when not read as subversion, it is contrasted with *The Stillborn* to present Nana as a foil to Li. Alabi thus describes the difference between the two protagonists:

Unlike *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman* does not have a strong female character . . . Nana is not aggressive but coy, not boisterous but quiet, not assertive but compromising; hence she is a “virtuous woman whose price is far above rubies.” Unlike Li in *The Stillborn* who tries to question gender exploitation, Nana does not. . . . Unlike *The Stillborn* which attempts to interrogate the position of the African woman in a patriarchal society, *The Virtuous Woman* takes this position for granted and no serious questioning of the gender issue takes place in the novel.<sup>42</sup>

The significance of the novel as a work of feminist literature that, in fact, broadens the scope of African and Islamic feminisms by presenting a feminist character who, instead of narrowly struggling to free herself of male perceptions of women, enacts feminism through strength of character in calamitous circumstances, or as a work that depicts more than subverts Muslim women’s engagement with Islam, thus remains inadequately evaluated.

### **Faith and Right Living: Education, Instruction, and Application in “Personal Goodness”**

Any analysis of Nana’s personality must account for her socio-religious and cultural milieu—the environment in her village and the outlook of its inhabitants. Alkali announces it in the epigraph of the novel, “Strength and Honour are her clothing and she shall rejoice in time to come,” from the Bible, suggestive of the multireligious context of Nana’s village, Zuma. Just as in *The Stillborn*, which describes at length Hill Station and its polycultural society made up of heathens, Christians, and Muslims, Alkali uses Gidan Zuma, a fictitious village in northern Nigeria, as a backdrop to describe the characters in the novel. Zuma boasts of a diverse milieu:

Another attraction of the village is the diversity of languages which also means diverse cultures, customs and religions. There are about as many ethnic groups as there are household heads so, in reality, the village would have been more of a settlement, but for the permanency of its buildings. (TVW, 1–2)

A small but economically self-sufficient village, Zuma's inhabitants depend on the land for their livelihood: "it was unheard of for anybody not to farm" (TVW, 1). Notwithstanding its small size, Zuma is resourceful, having "provided itself with essential amenities in strategic places—a primary school, a dispensary, a market and places of worship" (TVW, 1). Its provincial headquarters are in Birnin Adama, another fictional town, derived perhaps from Birnin Kudu, a local government area in the south of Jigawa State, close to Kano. But the provincial headquarters are a distant presence for the villagers, immersed in their own lives and routines (TVW, 1). The village, however, considers it a great achievement that its children are academically successful: "Out of fifty pupils who sat for the Common Entrance Examination, forty were successful" and secured places in various nearby secondary schools (TVW, 2). Alkali thus describes Zuma's collective outlook:

The most exciting thing was that two girls were offered places in Her Majesty's college in Kudu, a distance of about 1000 kilometres. Zuma was proud. It wasn't easy getting a place in Her Majesty's College, a famous Girls' Boarding School. One of the best in the Federation. (TVW, 2)

Wasting no time in illustrating the socio-spiritual milieu in which Nana's African-Islamic feminism develops, Alkali reinforces the primacy of female education in the village. Framed by the depth of a multicultural and multiethnic outlook of its residents, who uphold female education, Alkali introduces her main protagonist through her academic qualifications:

A brilliant child by the name of Nana Ai had received a similar offer for her outstanding performance in the Common Entrance Examination. The chief of the village had held a big feast in her honour and many local musicians had graced the occasion with their presence. (TVW, 3)

Even the journey that Nana and Laila undertake is to return to school to complete their education, making it both a literal and symbolic means

and a goal for self-esteem. Furthermore, Nana nurses the idea of becoming a doctor like her late father and her grandfather who is an herbalist (TVW, 10). She wonders how “it never occurred to her that it was in her to be whatever she wanted to be” (TVW, 10). In her journey back to school, Nana will, indeed, grow in self-confidence.

Alkali then describes Nana’s spiritually and mentally rich personality as “beautiful, intelligent and very kind” (TVW, 6). She is gentle with little children though she herself is only seventeen. Warm and affectionate toward other minor characters in the novel, like the little Hajjo who will accompany her and Laila on the journey back to school, Nana’s composure sets her apart from her peers: she is “quiet and good natured” and “more composed than many an adolescent woman. She never hurried and had a positive outlook on life” (TVW, 7, 10). She is reputed to have “a maturity that was conspicuously absent in her age-mates” (TVW, 11). But her solicitude assumes pronounced significance in light of her physical disability. Despite being polio-stricken in her left leg, she conducts herself with “utmost dignity” (TVW, 11). In an interview, Alkali sums up the purpose of portraying Nana’s academic and personal accomplishments:

The main character is crippled, not badly crippled but she is conscious enough of the fact and it affects her psychologically. Gradually, she discovered herself, and she started identifying with the society. She realizes then that she is more than just a leg, that being a whole person is not a matter of being physically fit. It’s supposed to be mental, spiritual . . . she was chosen over two other “whole” girls because of her “spiritual and mental richness.”<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, her character is contrasted with Laila’s, who also wins a scholarship to attend the prestigious girls’ school but is not only academically inferior to Nana—she had to repeat different classes three times before passing the Common Entrance—Laila is also a flirt, lacking Nana’s reserve and dignity (TVW, 83). Frequently on the journey, Laila will display her ill-mannered and crude ways that clash with Nana’s sweetness; “a short buxom girl of sixteen, who looked much older,” Laila is a lazy and disorganized young woman (TVW, 6).

That Nana’s good qualities, her spiritual and mental richness, are paradigmatic of *akhlāq*—goodness, beneficence, and dignity—is evident from two things. First, the spiritual focus of her life develops through her relationship with her grandfather, Baba Sani. He is the “strong pillar” she clings to for support, an “immovable building” that shelters her from storms (TVW, 85):

Her grandfather meant so many things to her at various times. In times of insecurity, when the cold waves of loneliness threatened to engulf her, he was the undying fire that kept her warm. His wrinkled, solemn face had been engraved in her heart since childhood. When she cried at night, it was his loving coarse hands that cuddled her to his heart. When she fell, it was the same firm grip that lifted her up and the same reassuring hands that had travelled thousands of times from the bowl to her mouth. (TVW, 85)

Discernible in Nana's choices throughout the journey is the imprint of Baba Sani's teachings—honor, probity, and self-restraint. Both of them pray together, reinforcing the strong spiritual bond between them. He blesses her with a long litany of supplications, echoing the Islamic manner of invoking a short supplication or *du'a* at the start of an undertaking: "May god guide your path," and "May God go with you" (TVW, 13–15).<sup>44</sup> He reminds her of his teachings, and Nana responds respectfully, "Amin," "I take refuge in God," and, again, "we take refuge in God" just before starting her journey, responding to his blessings with a prayer (TVW, 20, 32). Nana almost unconsciously acknowledges God in her conversations: "if God wills it," "it is the will of God," or *Insha'Allah* in Arabic, evoking consciousness, oftentimes a supplicatory acknowledgment of divine power (TVW, 15–16). And again, she invokes his blessings: "May God have mercy on us" (TVW, 38). All three formulations—"āmin," "if God wills it," and "I take refuge in God"—point to the customary, involuntary, and recommended responses that resonate with a deep and frequent consciousness of God. Glassé explains the use of *āmin* as "an assent to the prayers uttered by others, the preacher at the Friday prayer, for example."<sup>45</sup> Bukhari reports a *ḥadīth* about the superiority of uttering *āmin*: "Allah's Messenger . . . said, 'if anyone of you says *Amin* and the angels in the heavens say *Amin* and the former coincides with the latter, all his past sins will be forgiven.'"<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the pious expression "if God wills" derives directly from a Qur'anic injunction that subordinates actions and events to divine will, expressing "conditionality and dependence" on God's will, as Glassé notes.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the prayer of protection or formulation for refuge against evil, "I take refuge in God," is also inspired directly by the Qur'an where the pronouncement of a host of verses is recommended for comfort from stress and calamity. Chiefly, the last two chapters of the Qur'an, "Al-Falaq" (The Daybreak) and "Al-Nas" (Mankind), among several others, serve as inspiration in numerous paraphrasings for invoking protection.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the girls resume their journey from the provincial headquarters only after the "*Azahar*

prayers” (*TVW*, 34). On the journey as well, the passengers stop to pray: “At four in the evening, the driver stopped to allow his Muslim passengers to say the La’asar prayers. ‘We praise God for his journey,’ ” revealing a deep consciousness of Islamic habits (*TVW*, 38).

Admittedly, Nana’s personality is praiseworthy but Alkali presents a young Muslim woman who is not unrealistically virtuous. Alkali elaborates three facets of Nana’s multilayered personality that encompass her complex and contradictory emotions—Nana can be feisty; she suffers from poor self-confidence; and she can quickly intuit situations. While doing laundry at the riverside, Nana picks a fight with two girls who pass unsavory comments about Baba Sani:

There is a limit to what one can take, she reasoned. When patience exceeds its bounds, it becomes cowardice not strength. She stood in front of the short one and said in a threatening voice, “Tell me what you have in mind against my grandfather?” (*TVW*, 16)

She does not stop at just confronting the girls. She even responds to their insults accordingly: “A resounding slap arrested the rest of the insults. . . . Nana was beside herself with anger and dodged the tall one to get at the fallen girl” (*TVW*, 17). Livid, Nana presses on:

They grappled, rolled and tore at each other’s clothes, the short one panting and cursing. Nana fought with complete abandon. It was the first real fight of her life. She had always avoided quarrels, conscious of her deformity. She was not as much afraid of physical injury as she was of an emotional one. Now here she was, rolling and tearing and screaming, feeling good and a little ashamed. (*TVW*, 17)

Nana also exercises rare self-restraint and foresight in knowing when to refrain from quarrelling. In particular, she is angry when her travel partner Laila encourages her to show interest in the young men at the transport secretary’s office—Bello and Abubakar—who are also traveling back to their school: “she was sufficiently angry to hiss back, but did not. They had a long way to go, and saw no point in making enemies of her traveling companions” (*TVW*, 28).

An adolescent with mixed emotions, Nana realizes that “she was no longer a child but a woman” (*TVW*, 37). She often indulges in fantasies about her future, for her favorite pastime is daydreaming (*TVW*, 35). Reveries of a handsome young man enthuse her, “a handsome man tall with broad shoulders, . . . spell-bound by her beauty,” feeling great comfort

in her daydreams that keep her company, “warm and secure. Away from home she felt deformed and inadequate” (TVW, 35, 36). Her feelings of inadequacy become more pronounced on account of her limp that becomes obvious when she is tired, adding to her awkward movements and thoughts in the presence of others (TVW, 29). At other moments, her limp slows her down as she often trails behind in a group (TVW, 21). She feels humiliated and confused at the thought of not being whole like the others to run and jump, and confesses her disturbed feelings to a close friend: “Was there a man on the face of this earth who would look beyond her physical disability?” (TVW, 37, 57). Ironically, she longs to be like Laila who is outgoing, dynamic, and gregarious: “Nana on the other had thought sadly ‘How wrong you can be. If only I could talk the way you do, but no, I am dumb, dumb, dumb . . .’” (TVW, 61). And again

she envied the younger woman her easy confidence and wished at that moment she was in Laila’s place. She wondered if she could ever bring laughter to the lips of the tall one. . . . she would give anything to be smart and full of self-confidence but her nervousness made life difficult for her. (TVW, 52)

This elaborate introduction to Nana’s personality and qualities—her close emotional ties with Baba Sani, the influence of his teachings, and her complex emotions—serves as the platform on which she will enact Islamically correct behavior, *akhlāq*.

The Islamic framework is writ large in Nana’s mannerisms from the start of her journey. She will put to good use her grandfather’s teachings through several facets of her disposition—maturity, patience, modesty, and compassion—simultaneously manifesting the faith and right living that her legendary namesake envisioned in her work, echoed in Baba Sani’s rehearsal of his advice shortly before she leaves:

“Remember all the things I have been telling you about long journeys” . . . “What did I say about accepting favours from strangers?” he asked sternly . . . “That includes free car rides, monetary gifts and clothes” . . . “And you?” the ancient one pursued. “Not to offer favours, except help where it is needed.” The man smiled benignly. He had taught and the pupil had learnt well . . . “shun whatever action makes you feel ashamed . . .” “avoid doing anything you know I will not approve of” . . . “whatever you do child, be strong and honest.” (TVW, 14)

Though Nana is bored of this repetitive lecture, she understands well the value of its wisdom (*TVW*, 15). On the first day of her journey, she shows good judgment and respect in heeding Baba Sani's advice by discreetly demurring an offer of a lift from a stranger who is eager to take the girls from the bus stop to the government office, where they will meet their government-appointed escort for the rest of the journey. Despite Laila's gleeful eagerness to ride with the stranger, urging Nana to take the "free ride," Nana is unmoved, for the stranger does not appear "responsible" to her (*TVW*, 32). This stranger, however, turns out to be a mandarin in the local government, a government secretary charged with appointing an escort for the girls. He then punishes Nana's refusal by vindictively choosing for the girls an aged male escort with poor sight who walks with great difficulty—Mallam Jauro, "an old Fulani man of about seventy. He walked with a stick, either because of the big ulcer on his left leg, his age or both" (*TVW*, 34). Laila blames Nana for the secretary's revenge, but Nana does not regret her decision.

In fact, Nana belies the purported setback by extending great care toward Mallam Jauro. Her steadfast refusal of a free ride, pointing to her acknowledgment of Baba Sani's advice and wisdom, her manifestation of sound judgment, coupled with her compassion toward Mallam Jauro, extend throughout the story. Her manifestation of *akhlāq* furthermore comes to the fore in her firmness when, in the middle of the journey, Laila callously suggests that they send their aged escort back as he is a burden on them: "Why bother, Nana? Let's send him back . . . the man will waste our time. After all, what is he to us? . . . we are traveling with a dead man on our hands" (*TVW*, 59). Predictably, Nana refuses: "The man is ill, but if we can get him some medicine, he should be all right" (*TVW*, 59). Her decision also exposes her dignity and sense of self-reliance, since Laila mentions to her that Bello and Abubakar will take care of the girls once Mallam Jauro leaves. Nana, who has developed feelings for Bello, should welcome the offer to enjoy his attention. Instead, she refuses and remains steadfast in her dignified decision, reminding Laila that Mallam Jauro is still officially their escort, "just an escort Laila, and a government one at that. We are in his charge and he has to make the decisions, not us" (*TVW*, 59).

Nana's choices expose qualities—courage, strength of character, and decisiveness—that comprise strong feminism. As Laila flirts with Bello and Abubakar, Nana shows self-restraint, although not without feeling the change in her (*TVW*, 28). She is confused and scared on observing Bello and Abubakar: "He looked simple but not ordinary and exuded a dignity that surpassed material wealth. Bello gave the impression of self-discipline and caution, and evidently acted as bridle in controlling his

friend” (*TVW*, 30). Furthermore, as Laila excitedly joins the jostle to get on the train, enjoying the “elbowing, pushing, tugging and pulling back other passengers in the fight to board the train,” Nana waits patiently, wisely reminding herself, “if you were patient enough and waited for the mad rush to be over, there was always enough time to get on board. It might take some time to secure a seat, but she had never had to travel down south standing,” once again revealing her sanguine mannerisms and a maturity far beyond her years (*TVW*, 71).

Nana’s intellect lies in being a student not only of a prestigious school but also of life as she encounters diverse experiences with an open mind. In particular, she chats with a fellow-passenger: “she felt the woman possessed wisdom and could impart to her a number of things she did not know about human behavior” (*TVW*, 45). Nana learns quickly, absorbing invaluable lessons in life as the co-passenger narrates the tragic story of her brother-in-law who turns mad. The story vindicates the value of women’s education, grit, and strength that buoy Nana’s own confidence and her ideas on women’s abilities. It is about Musa Dogo, the clown and mad man on the journey, who was once a prosperous farmer. Dogo’s story instructively conveys a lesson on gender relations and perceptions in northern Nigerian society. More importantly, Dogo’s story contains a message about women’s uncommon courage as Dogo’s daughters and wife boldly take charge of the economic and emotional well-being of their household. Admittedly, Dogo’s reasons for opposing his daughters’ schooling reveal misogyny and stereotypes about female education in northern Nigerian society, but by no means is misogyny unique to northern Nigeria or to Islamic society, nor does it discount the dynamic outlook of the inhabitants of Zuma, Nana’s village, an all but insignificant hamlet in northern Nigeria, that proudly champions female education. If Dogo’s standpoint on women’s education—his disappointment at not having enough male heirs and his opposition of his daughters’ schooling—illustrates conservative northern Nigerian Islamic society that critics also believe expects women to be unblemished, virtuous wives who must produce male babies, to evoke Griswold’s assessment, then Zuma’s progressive stance, Baba Sani’s own belief in Nana Ai’s abilities, and his unstinting encouragement of her education are equivalently illustrative of the same society.

Dogo’s “misfortune was that he had only one son, the rest were daughters,” and he did not send any of his daughters to school either, believing that “the father of a female child is a loser” (*TVW*, 46–47). Things take a turn for the worse when his first wife sends the older daughters—Adama and Talatu—to school. Dogo promptly disowns the girls, cutting off all



support to his family to stress his disapproval of girls' education. He believes that girls are no more than "consumers and they let other people consume your wealth" (TVW, 47):

What is the use of sending a female child to school? If she turns out well, the man she marries gets the benefit of her education. If she gets spoiled in the school, I get the blame. It's my name that gets dragged into the mud. It's my house that becomes her refuge. Whichever 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. (TVW, 47)

But his wife remains undeterred by Dogo's regressive reactions. She takes to farming, working tirelessly to pay for her daughters' schooling (TVW, 47). When Dogo's first and only son returns from abroad, he forces him to marry to ensure a lineage, but the young man refuses, angrily leaving the house and meeting an untimely death in a road accident, prompting Dogo's insanity and present condition as a madman. In the meantime, Dogo's daughters, Adama and Talatu, have become teachers and "are the pillars in Dogo's household. They finished school a long time ago, set up a small trade for their mother and bought farming equipment for their father," the co-passenger tells Nana (TVW, 51).

Most of all, Nana's qualities are the result of a conscientious disposition that she autonomously manifests. This is particularly clear in her comportment of dignity, revealed when her headscarf flies off in the wind, exposing her bare head (TVW, 57). The veil, headscarf, or *hijāb* is undoubtedly the single most fraught and contentious topic in Islamic culture.<sup>49</sup> Widely considered as the most tangible marker of Muslim women's backwardness, the *hijāb* has lent itself to weighty polemics in all spheres of Islamic practice as Muslims continue to find themselves in the eye of a storm in non-Muslim societies, as seen most recently in France.<sup>50</sup> The voluminous literature on the headscarf continues to grow.

In its attempt to parse the headscarf, this chapter examines its embodied affordance as a private and personal function of *akhlāq*. Leila Ahmed has scrupulously and perhaps most exhaustively discussed the rich history of the veil in the Middle East, pointing to its discursive roots in colonial history as proof of Muslim women's oppression, even in cultures outside the Arab world:

Veiling—to *Western* eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol now of both

the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.<sup>51</sup>

Though she historicizes this stance within the colonial history of Egypt, this view is also espoused by African feminist theorists, as seen earlier in Aidoo's opinion on the absence of the veil as a marker of African Muslim woman's emancipation rather than subjugation in that African women eschew the veil since they are not as subservient as their North African and Arab counterparts. To briefly recapitulate Aidoo's stance on the headscarf,

but even for the West African Moslem woman, the veil is no more than a couple of meters of an often pretty gossamer fabric. This she normally and winsomely drapes over the back of her head and her shoulders. Indeed, the effect of this type of veil is to make its wearers look more attractive and decidedly unhidden.<sup>52</sup>

In the novel, however, Alkali presents a countervailing reality on the *hijāb* in an African Muslim woman's reactions. When delayed by the road accident and forced to stop for the night, the girls look for a stream early in the morning to wash up. Nana's head wrapper flies off in the stiff wind on their way to the water source:

As they all walked back to the group, they were caught in a whirlwind. The boys held onto their caps while the girls struggled with their wrappers and scarves, a feat that proved too much for Nana. Her scarf flew off, exposing one of her greatest physical assets, a mass of black, silky hair. She was embarrassed, but could not run after the scarf. She imagined her movements with a growing sense of humiliation. As the boys stared at Nana, Laila felt uncomfortable for a different reason. For an unpredictable moment, she had been eclipsed in the eyes of the two men. She remembered her own short kinky hair and grew sullen. (TVW, 57)

This passage makes plain Nana's natural modesty, revealed through her instinctive feelings of embarrassment and awkwardness. The *hijāb* does not bestow her with modesty, nor does it enable her to feel awkward without it. Instead, Nana's modesty precedes the *hijāb*, stemming from her character or *akhlāq*—her embodiment of modest speech, manners,

and kind behavior. Furthermore, her instinctive reaction of embarrassment and awkwardness indicates that she is not forced to wear the *hijāb*.

To understand Nana's embodiment of modesty and dignity more fully, her reaction to her headscarf flying off can be contrasted with Laila's. While Nana is embarrassed when her scarf flies off, so is Laila, albeit for a different reason; as Bello and Abubakar stare at Nana's beautiful hair, Laila becomes envious of the attention her friend receives. Laila's envy intensifies:

Nana is so beautiful, so calm and intelligent, both boys are scared stiff to talk to her for fear of rebuff. But Laila, the true child of her mother, daughter of the iron people, pride of her clan, stands plain as a clay god compared to her. She looked at her dark skin against Nana's light one. (TVW, 61)

Laila's awkwardness springs from vanity and envy, as her skimpy mop of hair stands in contrast to Nana's thick black mane. On the other hand, Nana's awkwardness points to modesty in her disposition, or *akhlāq*, rather than the values associated with the headscarf, as her reactions are organic to her mannerisms—she is known to be modest, not loud like Laila; reserved, not outgoing like Laila; and wise, not rash like her friend. Alkali presents the *hijāb* as part of a woman's ethical disposition to distinguish it from a mere piece of clothing sufficient to cultivate modesty.

Nana's disposition with regard to the *hijāb* can further be understood through Mahmood's findings among the participants of the mosque movement, for it revolves on the notion that donning the *hijāb* cultivates modesty which eventually becomes organic to a woman's disposition. As Mahmood writes, the *hijāb* is an “integral part of an entire manner of existence through which one learns to cultivate the virtue of modesty in all aspects of life and not just a matter of custom or expression of culture.”<sup>53</sup> Mahmood's analysis, therefore, centers on wearing the *hijāb* “as the necessary means to the realization of a pious self” and as part of the “critical instruments in a teleological program of self-formation.”<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the veil, as discussed by the teachers or *dā'i'yāt* of the mosque movement, “is . . . part of an entire process through which a pious individual is produced . . . it encompasses an entire way of being and acting that is *learned* through the practice of veiling,” facilitating modesty in all aspects of one's life (emphasis added).<sup>55</sup> In short, the veil “enable[s] the cultivation of Islamic virtues in the entirety of a Muslim's life” (emphasis added).<sup>56</sup> The motivation for wearing the veil can be best understood

through the following logic underlying Mahmood's observation of the participants of the mosque movement. Mahmood explains:

Desire thus is not the *antecedent* to, or cause of, moral action, but its *product*. The techniques through which pious desires are cultivated include practices such as avoiding seeing, hearing, or speaking about things that make faith (*iman*) weaker, and engaging in those acts that strengthen the ability to enact obedience to God's will. The repeated practice of orienting all acts toward securing God's pleasure is a cumulative process, the net result of which is, on one level the ability to pray regularly, and on another level, the creation of a pious self.<sup>57</sup>

Since desire, argues Mahmood, is neither natural nor is the fear of God, it must be created through a set of disciplinary acts to teleologically cultivate behaviors that will become congruent with Qur'anic virtues.

On the other hand, Nana's reactions to her headscarf flying away are not the product of a teleological training for self-formation. They reveal that her modesty is, in fact, antecedent to her moral actions as she impulsively (not creatively or performatively) feels embarrassment and awkwardness. It is here also that the purpose of a private engagement with Islam, as seen in Nana's case, can be situated in opposition to Mahmood's subjects, who congregate for lessons on Islam in local mosques as part of the Islamic Revival. The chief reason for such a social collective for religious instruction on Islam, as Mahmood notes, is

to inculcate values that were previously part of a social and familial ethos . . . but which are no longer available in those arenas . . . an organized attempt to address what has come to be conceived as a practical need, one grounded in recent historical and social circumstances.<sup>58</sup>

By contrast, Nana's Islamic feminism, as seen in her interactions with her grandfather, is part of a familial ethos, a personal engagement outside efforts of organized collectives or suggestions to make religion usable in one's quotidian affairs. Nana's religious consciousness develops at home through Baba Sani, who tutors her about the utility of religion in daily affairs by specifically evoking such examples as accepting free rides from strangers or helping others in times of need with self-restraint and composure—teachings that she briskly puts to use on embarking on her journey. Nana's training in Islam, if it can be called that, takes place at the heart of the family with her grandfather's "catechism," as she calls his repeated lessons on honesty, good manners, self-restraint, and honorable

conduct, when he cautions her, “remember what our people say, ‘to die is better than to commit a disgraceful act’” (TVW, 14–15). Indeed, Baba Sani’s instruction is part of the private education that Muslim children accede to within a familial fold as part of the broader set of values inculcated in their upbringing. Once acquired in the family, Nana will manifest autonomous volition in a vast array of emotions and thoughts that point to her conscientious cognizance of ethical behavior. This instruction then suffuses her emotions without her having to practice them by first wearing the headscarf. Furthermore, Nana manifests the qualities or *akhlāq*, in addition to wearing the headscarf, pointing to the a priori embodiment of virtue imbibed at home. For Laila to acquire such a disposition, she will have to make a mental effort through personal discipline that is not yet part of her personality.

But to fully grasp Nana’s embodiment of virtue as separate from a conscious action to acquire it, thereby distinguishing it from Mahmood’s suggestion of a conscious cultivation of Islamically desirable behavior, the notion of “autonomous morality,” proposed by Nimat Barazangi, is particularly suggestive, for it draws from a woman’s cognitive ability or “conscientious moral choice” to choose and strike a balance between good and bad, virtue and vice.<sup>59</sup> Barazangi’s probe on women’s role in interpreting the Qur’an and other Islamic literature revolves around the Qur’anic concept of “self-identity” and women’s capacity for moral autonomy as endowed to them by the Qur’an itself.<sup>60</sup> To this end, Barazangi quotes the Qur’anic verse “and no [personal entity] shall carry the burden of another,” among several others, to argue for women’s “autonomous morality” where a woman actively participates in enacting the religion (6:164). For Barazangi, a woman therefore

herself generates the meaning within the framework of self-identity with the Qur’an while maintaining the core concepts of Islam . . . Hence, the state of affairs of the Muslim woman is not merely what we have been reading about in the last two hundred years—the problems of polygyny, divorce, child custody and so on—but it is the lack of self-identity with the Qur’an.<sup>61</sup>

Self-identity with the Qur’an means that women seek active engagement with it in generating Qur’anic meaning and guidance.<sup>62</sup> A woman must, therefore, be a “*muttaqi*,” or “the person who is able to balance the ‘moral-religious exhortation’ with reason to implement Qur’anic pedagogy as a process of learning, knowing, teaching, and living Islam.”<sup>63</sup> This, Barazangi derives from the Qur’anic criterion of human beings

(not just women) as “moral, cognizant human beings—the conscientious human” or *muttaqi*.<sup>64</sup> Barazangi, therefore, focuses on the “Qur’an’s emphasis on the all-pervading relations between Islamic identity and conscious (self-reflective) cognition (*tafakkur*) of the Qur’an” where both men and women can directly, independently, and freely understand the Islamic belief system without depending on “intermediary secondary sources or identifications” to achieve self-identity with the Qur’an, or “autonomous morality.”<sup>65</sup> Following Barazangi, Nana’s manifestation of virtuous behavior can be understood as part of her conscientious self-commitment to the religion, an autonomous enactment, that produces Islamically desirable behavior. The emphasis on enactment, therefore, as seen in Nana’s choices, made without a repetitive or conscious effort to embody them with a teleological end in mind, reflects Barazangi’s proposition of active engagement with the book where a woman as an individual cognizes it autonomously and not through organized pedagogical persuasion or social suggestions. Nana’s enactment of virtue thus provides a glimpse into her personal and private autonomous engagement with Islamic principles without the conscious presence of devices and techniques for performing virtuous behavior. This commitment is particularly useful since Barazangi’s thesis is prompted precisely by the absence of women’s active participation in interpreting Islamic literature, primarily the Qur’an and *hadith*, in a tradition where ironically she repeats the well-known fact that Aisha is said to have been the source of more *hadith* than anyone else.

Furthermore, Nana’s feminism in Islam powerfully reinforces itself in her ability to manage a complex gamut of emotions, underscored during the tragic lorry accident that soon follows the incident with the headscarf. In the ensuing mayhem, Nana bravely approaches the site of the wreckage, frantically scouring the scene to locate the people she knows: Bello, Abubakar, and Mallam Jauro. Determined to find familiar faces in the chaos, she firmly takes charge by grabbing Laila’s hand to tear her companion away from the grisly scene, comforting and consoling victims and their kin, as her weak-willed friend wails helplessly at the sight of dead bodies (TVW, 63). Nana prays, “Oh Allah, not another storm, not in this situation,” for a storm would only exacerbate the rescue efforts and loss of human life (TVW, 69). Despite feeling distraught by the grotesque images in front of her, Nana does not lose composure as the site of mangled bodies, blood, and debris expose her raw emotions, showing uncommon concern for others (TVW, 62). When comforting the little children who have lost their parents in the accident, she is painfully reminded of the mishap that robbed her of her own parents and brother:

“she could no longer bear the sight of such unhappiness. The tears stung to her eyelids. Her head ached from the sad experience” (*TVW*, 69). Finally, for her companions’ sakes, she collects herself to return to the lorry and wait patiently for the site to clear up, indicating once again her ability for self-control in a trying situation.

On reaching the hospital, she forgets her own duress and promises to help Bello by letting his principal know that they are delayed by an accident (*TVW*, 70). As she gathers herself to resume her journey by train to the next station, Nana discovers that she has feelings for Bello. Against the backdrop of her romantic dreams, her self-control, and her mature wisdom, she has evolved into a woman:

The main character had taken a definite shape, against her better judgment. She was safe as long as the tall, strong young man remained faceless. For years, since she felt the stirring of womanhood, she had felt safe and free with her dreams. Of recent, she had lost that freedom and was now experiencing the beginning of fear, self-doubt and enslavement, as the dream gradually lost the features of a harmless pastime. She grieved the loss of her innocence, yet, she could not regret it, for somehow, she was beginning to grasp the true meaning of life. The only thing she regretted was the tragic end to their meaningful journey. (*TVW*, 73)

Moreover, she is overjoyed on seeing him again a couple of weeks later in the train, but first inquires about Mallam Jauro, revealing again her wonted compassion for others.

Their meeting this time presages Nana’s future. Her changes are emotional and psychological as she feels different, visceral sensations she has never experienced before:

Nana experienced slight shivers at the base of her spine. Followed by a warm feeling of security, yet, she could not surrender completely to her emotions. As yet, she was afraid. Once she had witnessed a man touch another woman in her presence. How was she to know that what she felt for him was mutual? She had to find out soon, before the journey was over. (*TVW*, 82)

And again, she grows increasingly self-conscious in Bello’s presence: “she could hardly breathe and wondered if the thundering in her chest was audible” (*TVW*, 82). Bello’s and Nana’s interactions are also different this time. The two are more pointed in their feelings, expressions, and gestures

toward each other. Their understanding is deeper, naturally manifesting itself in their communication as they “engaged in silent conversation with their eyes” (*TVW*, 81). Surprisingly, Laila notices their connection: “these two speak the same language . . . they belong together” (*TVW*, 81). Nana has reached another station in her life, poised for a journey of a different kind:

No one had mattered in her life before, except her old grandfather. But now, Bello had crept into her life, and as yet she was still afraid to acknowledge his importance. She was content to accept the fact there was a rhythm between them, that with him, there was no need for words . . . (*TVW*, 82)

But Nana’s monologue, her whirlwind emotions, and even her silent dialogue with Bello are not meant to romanticize the narrative that ends in excitement as the two young people have found in each other a soul mate. Rather, it is to foreground *akhlāq* that underwrites the dignity with which Nana manages her emotions as she calmly rationalizes them by comparing her feelings toward other men she has known, such as her grandfather. Bello, on his part, responds to her with the same dignity:

Bello had not thought to see Nana so soon after the accident. Ever since the meeting on the hospital corridor, and even before, he had thought a great deal about her. Now he knew his judgment of her was right. He also knew something else, that what he felt for her was not just a passing emotion, it had its roots deep within his being. (*TVW*, 81)

Furthermore, Bello believes, “When the Almighty created this woman he must have omitted that dark spot that seems too obvious in the lives of many people,” indicating his own acknowledgment of God while considering Nana as nothing short of a blessing (*TVW*, 81–82). To address the persistent critical reluctance to read Nana as anything else but weak, compromising, and coy since she defies nothing, as Alabi describes her, that stops short of acknowledging her Islamic personality, and to address the critical impulse that attributes that personality to the biblical quote in the novel’s epigraph and de-emphasizes the Islamic presence in the story or sees feminism as a struggle for freedom from, as Ladele puts it, “oppressive (male-oriented) perceptions of women,” this chapter has reconfigured the calculus of qualities such as courage, determination, beneficence, wisdom, and honor or *akhlāq* as goals of feminism that



Nana manifests in the teeth of perilous and challenging circumstances (TVW, 310–311, 331).

Chief among the dimensions of African-Islamic feminism, as this chapter has discussed, are Nana Ai's complex embodiments of *akhlāq* that she enacts through a personal mode of instruction from her grandfather, in the familial fold. Her academic brilliance is enhanced by her well-rounded personality that encompasses all emotions and qualities mandated in the Qur'an as *akhlāq*—she is pleasant and friendly but also feisty when needed. She is patient and calm, displaying wisdom beyond her years, but also suffers from poor self-esteem due to her deformity. Her frequent evocation of Allah for protection, her prayers, and her acknowledgement and enactment of her grandfather's advice and wisdom, leading to her mindful behavior and mannerisms in her interactions, underlie her spiritual consciousness. Drawing locally from Asma'u's edificatory spirit of faith and right living, Nana Ai's African-Islamic feminism is, indeed, biliterate, inhering within both Islamic (personal and private engagements with Islam in *akhlāq*) and African feminist discourses (African womanism, stiwaniism, nego-feminism, and *Umoja*). Nana's similarity to Nana Asma'u posits, moreover, the kind of feminism Asma'u preached—becoming god-fearing Muslims through *faith and right living*. African-Islamic feminism, therefore, reorients emphasis on the Qur'an as a reference for spiritual conduct in personal, private, and individual interactions, responding also to the critical posture in African feminism that reads African literature on Islamic feminism as symbolic of the ability to surmount hurdles and flout (patriarchal and Islamic) norms. African-Islamic feminism re-evaluates the idea of feminism as uniquely a battle against patriarchy. Lastly, the complexity of Nana's emotions and her maturity affirm the novel's valence as more than a message just for teenagers. All along, the title signals this idea, for it is, after all, *The Virtuous Woman*, and not *The Virtuous Girl*.



## Chapter 4



# Spiritual Legacies and Worship

## Personal Spaces in *The Descendants*

Those who believe, and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for without doubt in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction.

—The Qur'an (13:28)

By the term *devotion* I mean all the elements of personal investment—energy, feeling, time, substance—that characterize communal and individual response to the experience of God's revelation and involvement in human affairs . . . I use the term *ritual* to denote a range of religious actions with which Muslims express their response in faith to what they believe are God's ways of dealing with them.

—John Renard

In the discussion on the manifestation of such skills as efficient management of resources and family affairs and consultations and negotiations within the family, Hiba Rauf has famously enunciated on the nature of women's familial interactions by stating that the "private is political" and that women's activities within the family serve as a platform for their public roles. This chapter argues that the acquisition of the aforesaid skills does not translate into the assumption of public or political roles in Zaynab Alkali's more recent novel, *The Descendants*.<sup>1</sup> Women's investments—time, energy, emotions, and ideas in the enactment of these skills—are powered by their religiosity, as seen in their habit of praying toward personal satisfaction, emotional respite, or peace of mind. The

privacy of the manner in which women engage Islam toward commensurately private goals is most aptly illustrated in *The Descendants*'s central character Magira Milli's observance of ritual prayer in Islam—*ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*—as the spiritual and emotional fulcrum of her preoccupations, the source from which she derives energy and inspiration to pursue her goals. As the title, *The Descendants*, suggests, the story details the saga of a dynastic clan. The novel is considered as Alkali's most complete work to date as it refers to the lasting feminist legacy of a matriarch in a family spanning three generations with a spate of characters.

This chapter centers on the intertwined lives of the major and minor female protagonists—Magira, Seytu, Peni, and Mero—as Alkali effectively covers feminism, not always fully exhausted in her main protagonists, through a discussion of minor characters—Peni and Mero. Against Magira's devotion, this chapter also dwells on Seytu's nonobservance of Islamic habits, as well as Peni's disengagement from Islam in her practice of superstition to cover contradictory and ambivalent attitudes toward the religion. In Mero's example, this chapter emphasizes women's voluntary choices as expressions of feminism that are often inscribed in discourses as examples of female oppression and suffering in Islam. In thus describing the significance of *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, *dhikr*, and a host of Islamic rituals such as birth (*aqīqah*), death, and casual utterances that invoke the consciousness of God, Magira's, Seytu's, Peni's, and Mero's complex and varied spiritual engagements span a spectrum of Islamic practice, fraught with fluent but also difficult interactions ranging from dogmatism, diligent observance, ambivalence or confusion, and desperation to a complete disengagement with the religion. Such empirical, spiritual, and emotional richness makes it easy to see that Alkali's agenda is not to disrupt Muslim society but to expose the knotted overlay of feelings toward Islam, giving a voice to women who resolutely, if quietly, work in their personal spaces to accomplish their goals. Through Magira, the matriarch, and Seytu, Peni, and Mero, the young legatees, this chapter probes women's spiritual stances in two generations of Muslim women from northern Nigeria as they occupy different cardinal points of feminism shaped by age, religious habits, and personal preoccupations. They exemplify the complexity, contradictions, and even inconsistencies in women's expression of African-Islamic feminism that cannot be fettered by conceptualizing feminism as primarily the ability to overcome obstacles and dance around landmines symbolic of patriarchy, social taboos, and inequalities, as in African feminism, or as uniquely the ability to politicize spiritual practice, as in Islamic feminism. In this contradictory complexity,

then, if Alkali captures examples of such failed and oppressive marriages as Seytu's, Peni's, and Mero's first marriages, she also presents productive and positive marital interactions in Mero's second marriage. If she presents women's failures in Peni, she balances them with stories of their successes in Magira and Seytu. Accordingly, Alkali includes contradictory and even inconsistent impulses within the same character as the successful ones fail, as Magira succeeds in Seytu but fails in Peni; the happy ones have their share of sadness and tragedy. The contradictions and the diverse spectrum of choices, feelings, and lives themselves, I would suggest, are connected to Alkali's effort to textualize and record the complex weave of feminism in personal, private, and individual realms of spiritual expression.

The African Muslim protagonists in *The Descendants* embody, successfully and unsuccessfully, several such facets of African feminism as motherism, *Umoja*, stiwanism, and African womanism. Magira works with men and with her environment to secure her family's success. As a motherist, she displays great tolerance, foresight, and acceptance of the situations and people around her. Her granddaughter-in-law Mero is portrayed likewise. She is orphaned at an early age and then widowed. But as a motherist, stiwanist, and African womanist, Mero works within her environment, valuing motherhood and marriage while negotiating the changing circumstances in her life. Even Peni, Magira's other granddaughter, who is not as successful as her cousin Seytu, is seen as operating within her environment, if in her failed efforts, as an African womanist and motherist. Through her signature trope of pairs—Li and Awa; Nana and Laila—Alkali offers Magira Milli and Seytu. The granddaughter is a foil to Magira in her spiritual habits as Laila is to Nana in *The Virtuous Woman* or as Li is to Awa in *The Stillborn*. As with her other two novels, *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, the story of *The Descendants* is moored to the cultures of rural and urban landscapes in northern Nigeria and the tensions between the two—the absence and presence of amenities, the quality of life and the sentiments associated with each location. Set in small towns such as the fictitious Ramta, and larger metropolises as Makulpo, the demographics of the novel are also crucial to its thematic focus insofar as they engage women's decisions and activities pertaining to education, family, and employment. In addition, several events of the novel occur in neighboring towns and cities in northern Nigeria, Borno, Maiduguri, Damboa, and Garpella, anchoring the cultural presence of Islam in a narrative set in a predominantly Islamic society and culture.

*The Descendants* tells the story of Magira Milli who strives for her family's success. After losing all but one of her children, Magira's stewardship of her family's future—building generations from her surviving son's family and from grandchildren from her deceased sons—forms the main theme of the novel. The story unfolds the relationships of the Ramta family members as Magira adroitly manages all aspects of their lives. Divided into two parts, the first part introduces the members of the Ramta clan. Magira Milli is widowed and constantly overwhelmed by tragic events such as the deaths of four of her five sons. Her one surviving son is Aji Ramta. She also has several grandchildren from her deceased sons Illia, Abdullai, Madu, and Isa. Her son Abdullai's children, Peni and Abbas, are secondary characters in the novel, but have important roles to play. Peni is forcibly married at an early age. Her life is contrasted with that of her cousin, Seytu, Magira's other son Illia's daughter, who is a successful pediatrician. Abbas is an engineer whose wife Mero is also a secondary character. Mero loses her parents early in life and must marry a man old enough to be her father. She then finds true love and happiness with Abbas but their blissful marriage is short-lived as Mero dies in childbirth. Other minor characters such as Mallam Isa, a Hausa trader married to Aji's half-sister, Meramu, make up the large Ramta clan and their immediate social circle.

Although the Ramta family is both influential and affluent as Magira's husband, the late Lawani Duna, was the chief of Ramta, Magira is keenly aware of the severe lack of education in her family that causes it to fall prey to disease, springing from superstitions and blind beliefs, precipitating the deaths of her four sons and husband. These tragedies prompt her to resolutely move the family from the rural and underdeveloped Ramta to the more modern, technologically advanced, and urban Makulpo, also the seat of the regional hospital and medical center with easier access to proper medical care and educational facilities for her grandchildren. From first having only moved to a bigger township, leaving their ancestral home behind, the Ramta family steadily grows in affluence, owning multiple businesses and properties. Much of the family's current stature derives from the multiple family-owned businesses headed by Magira and Aji, along with Binta Yawanki and Meramu, the former being the first wife of Aji's friend and business partner Usman. Usman then marries Mero to assume guardianship of the girl and of her late father's wealth that is entrusted to him. The second part of the novel marks a generational shift, and focuses on Magira's granddaughter, Seytu, and Magira's other grandchildren—the eponymous descendants of the narrative—now grown up. In more ways than one, the second part bears testimony to

Magira's endurance and her visionary efforts in ensuring her family's success, especially in the futures of her deceased sons' children, Seytu, Abbas, and Peni. For their part, the descendants contribute to the construction of hospitals and services, actively generating jobs through their businesses both in Ramta and Makulpo. The novel ends with Magira's death. A prayer in her honor in Hausa sums up her achievements that underwrite the prosperity of her descendants. The legacy of the founders of the family—Magira and Lawani Duna—lives on in their descendants.

### Critical Stance: African-Muslim Women's "Passion to Outdo Men"

Critical appraisal of the novel is relatively scarce and predictably reinforces the unisonant stance that Islam stifles women's progress. It is for this reason that none of the critics regard Magira's leadership as natural, inherent in the Islamic social system, but as the fruit of subversion. As another dispiriting result of such assessment of Islam, Alkali's own literary motives are also fitted into the same critical optic. Of the few analyses so far, Sule Egya, Muhammad Alkali, and Muhammad Razinatu unanimously read Alkali as a social crusader who exposes the injustice of Islam animating her protagonists with the desire to overthrow and subvert repressive social structures. All structures to Alkali, these critics seem to be saying, are oppressive to women—marriage, parents, family, and society. As Ogunyemi found Li's decision to return to her husband baffling and a waste of her feminist energy and capital in *The Stillborn*, and Alabi read Nana as an example of wasted feminism since she defies nothing nor does she catechize gender inequality in *The Virtuous Woman*, critics of this novel, too, proceed from the recognisable assumption that Muslim women's feminist engagements are framed solely within subversion, "the passion to outdo men," as Sule Egya contends, and the drive to radically alter the condition of their gender constrained by Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Egya makes plain that Alkali unsettles "male-invented conventions" inimical to the development of women in African society.<sup>3</sup> Egya's methodology maps the "backgrounds" of the authors—ethnic and regional—to point out northern Nigeria as "a region that is, more than other regions, educationally backward," to consequently read Alkali's fiction as a reparation of cultural regression in northern Nigerian society. He quotes Alkali on her own feminist stance, transforming her from a "shy feminist" to a writer who depicts Seytu as the liberated woman, and appends to it his own analysis of Seytu as

a symbol, she crystallizes Alkali's quest or new-found purposive programme, that imaginary transcendence, which not only shows how today's woman can surpass socio-cultural barriers but also her courageous, damn-the-consequence leap ahead of man.<sup>4</sup>

In a familiar critical vein that frames the African Muslim woman's feminism as a "passion to outdo men," Egya attributes Magira's dominance to Alkali's deliberate move to counterpoise the patriarchal conventions of northern Nigerian society, and suggests rather hastily that Aji, Magira's son, is "ridiculed" by Alkali as she makes him share power with his mother in a northern Nigerian society.<sup>5</sup>

In an ostensible contrast to Egya's critical assessment, another critic, Muhammad Alkali, furnishes an evaluation to firmly emphasize Islam as the "lived experience" in northern Nigeria: "the northern region is purely dominated by the Islamic religion, and there are observable Islamic continuities in the works from the region."<sup>6</sup> Helpfully, he examines the nature of prayer in Islam, its significance in the lives of Muslims, and its function as anchored in the Qur'an to foreground Magira's long prayers, which are not casual or careless gestures. However, relapsing into a familiar critical echo, Muhammad Alkali states that "the novels are, indeed, religious ideological projects in feminism" in that Muslim women cleverly circumvent Islamic dictums of gender hierarchy and inequality in their effort to control men.<sup>7</sup> The novel's female protagonists, he argues, are shrewd strategists who set out to gain their "rightful position" in society.<sup>8</sup>

Muhammad Razinatu likewise reinforces the consensus that Alkali subverts the social order of male dominance that figures most prominently in "parental and matrimonial" structures, which parade

women under conditions of varying torments—physical and psychological . . . by specifically offering this seeming dossier of failed or frustrating marital relationships. Alkali's study on how men's treatment of women under the institution of marriage, especially, given the structures of power in their hands, could naturally produce conditions which will make the search for alternative ways of living by women, appear exigent.<sup>9</sup>

Razinatu concurs with Egya that Alkali subverts the status quo by making Magira the head of the family. The opening pages of the novel, however, reveal a different stance vis-à-vis Aji's alleged discomfort of having his mother as the head of the family or of Magira's leadership as an act of socio-spiritual subversion.



### Shifting Generations, Preoccupations, and Outlook— Magira, Seytu, Mero, and Peni

Magira's personality exemplifies no less the qualities of a superb leader as she courageously transforms her family's fortunes. She is authoritative but gentle, stern yet caring, a pillar of strength in times of trouble. In braving the vicissitudes of life, confronting changing fortunes and tragedies while still leading her family with quiet dignity and imperious presence, "Magira Milli had become an institution, like an ancient monument. She had become part and parcel of Makulpo's landscape" (*TD*, 214). Her powerful personality is the driving force of the family as she is its matriarch, and its members derive their identities from her. Even her son Aji Ramta, the main male protagonist of the novel, is proud to have her as his mother. Contrary to Egya's claim that Aji feels humiliated to take orders from a woman in northern Nigerian society, Aji, in fact, is known as "'bzir Magira' (Magira's boy). He held no resentment Magira Milli was his mother, and felt a certain pride to have her as his mother" (*TD*, 2). He frequently seeks Magira's counsel in family matters (*TD*, 2). He admires her, wishing to be like her: "he often wished he had his mother's charisma, courage and brains" (*TD*, 2). For instance, following a discussion with Magira on family matters and its numerous problems, Aji "got up from the stool slowly and stretched his limbs. Magira Milli patted his feet affectionately, as he moved away from her hut into the larger compound, *feeling lighter in spirit* than when he had entered half an hour ago" (*TD*, 80–81, emphasis added).

Part of Magira's charisma resides in her unflinching authority that can be frequently glimpsed in the strength of her convictions as she defends the family's honor: "None is going to put this family to shame," she tells Aji in a "characteristically authoritative manner" (*TD*, 77). Her exemplary leadership aptly earns her the title of "field marshal" as she ably commands the Ramta clan (*TD*, 125). But Magira's ability to lead the family's initiatives from the front is not only due to her adroit management of their complex lives. She is a genuine leader because of her remarkable endurance. The family suffers severe jolts from a never-ending series of deaths. First Magira's sons and husband pass away, then Aji's own son dies of a fever, and finally the family reels under the stress of numerous health and emotional problems, faced, in particular, by Magira's granddaughters Seytu and Peni. Depression becomes "one of the features of the once-happy household" (*TD*, 56). Magira, nevertheless, is a "towering pillar of strength" (*TD*, 231). Even when Aji dies, she manages the funeral with a clear and calm head, holding the family together and on

track with all of their plans and projects (*TD*, 231). Outside the familial fold as well, Magira proves her mettle. Despite her advancing years, she displays unmatched enterprise by spearheading “four chains of businesses with the grain stores in the lead, followed by the restaurant,” in partnership with her stepdaughter Meramu, Aji, and Binta Yawanki (*TD*, 126). She continues to add to her empire with a small grocery store, a plastics store, a prosperous construction company, and the implementation of mechanized farming to sell grains outside Makulpo, tirelessly enhancing the family’s “stupendous riches” and unmatched stature in Makulpo (*TD*, 125).

Underneath her authoritative and stern exterior, however, Magira is also gentle and loving. She displays deep affection toward her family: “the children lay in various positions, some cushioned their heads on Magira Milli’s lap” (*TD*, 34). And again, Milli is a picture of affection when the family congregates for an evening of light banter: “Hawwa would usually sit by Aji’s chair, but as the night wore on, she would creep quietly to where Magira Milli sat, and putting her head on her lap, would go to sleep between several toddlers” (*TD*, 9). But, far from being unequivocally revered, Magira is viewed as a meddling and imperious dictator. In particular, her own daughter-in-law Dala, Aji’s wife, holds Magira responsible for the family’s misfortunes:

Magira Milli had taken it upon herself to run the affairs of her sons’ families single-handedly. No wonder, they died from being oppressed, Abdullai, her dead husband, and all her children had been under Magira’s control . . . the old woman was perverse. (*TD*, 24–25)

Though Magira dons many caps—leader, counselor, loving mother and grandmother—viewpoints such as Dala’s illuminate the broad sweep of perceptions even of charismatic and magnificent women such as Magira.

### **Spectrum of Personal (Dis-)Engagements with Islam: Prayer, Birth, Death, Herbalists, and Dogmatism**

The fulcrum of Magira’s charisma and the family’s busy lives is their Islamic faith, both a source and an extension of their matriarch’s personal engagement with Islam. Three important Islamic events and the accompanying rituals—prayer, birth, and death—illustrate the spiritual template of their personal actions and motivations. For instance, the family prays regularly:

The muezzin called for morning prayers, fajr, and members of the large extended family woke up one by one, and moved around on silent feet, looking for water to make ablution, ready for the early morning prayers. (*TD*, 213)

And the day's activities begin with prayer: "just after the fajr prayer was over, people simply trooped to the house on hearing the disturbing news" (*TD*, 231). Both these references gather relevance on closely studying the deeper meaning of this prayer in Islam. Also called *Ṣalāt al-subh* or prayer of daybreak, the *fajr* is one of the five compulsory prayers performed by Muslims, with a multitude of Qur'anic verses affirming its importance: "Establish regular prayers—at the sun's decline. Till the darkness of the night, and the morning prayer, and reading: for the prayer and reading in the morning carry their testimony" (17:78). Again, "and establish regular prayer at the two ends of the day" is among many injunctions to pray at the special hour of the morning (11: 114). In his commentary of these verses, Ali explains the special status of the *fajr*:

The morning prayer is specially singled out for separate mention because the morning is a "Holy hour" and special spiritual influences act on the soul awaking from the night's rest. Special testimonies are borne to the prayers of this hour by the angelic host. (*TD*, 696)

On a pragmatic level, the prayer is significant because of its timing, testing a Muslim's willpower to rise from deep sleep and focus on God. Similarly, in the Qur'an, it is particularly favored for the same. The Ramta family is deeply aware of the spiritual value of this prayer by opening its daily activities with it. In addition, the consciousness of God's presence is consistently rehearsed in well-known short supplicatory prayers in quotidian conversation: "Ya Ghafur Rahim," seeking mercy and forgiveness, and "Alhamdulillah," offering thanksgiving for God's blessings (*TD*, 83–84).<sup>10</sup> I return to the deeper significance, function, and kinds of prayer in Islam later in the chapter.

In addition to prayer, the Ramta family observes other Islamic rituals, such as marking a birth by the ritual sacrifice of goats. Also called *aqīqah*, Glassé describes it as a

non-obligatory tradition of shaving the hair of a child on the seventh day after birth. Thereupon a sheep is sacrificed and the weight of the hair in silver is distributed to the poor. It is an old Arab practice confirmed by the Sunnah, or example, of the Prophet.<sup>11</sup>

In the novel, Aji is on his way to buying the animals for sacrifice when he meets his untimely end. The example of Muhammad sacrificing sheep or goats at the birth of a child is also duly recorded in the book of *aqiqah* in the various collections of the *ḥadīth*. In particular, Bukhari notes, “the sacrificing of one or two sheep on the occasion of the birth of a child [is] as a token of gratitude to Allah, two for a male child and one for a female child.”<sup>12</sup> Symbolic of welcoming the baby into the Islamic fold, the *aqiqah* entails the following: shaving the infant’s head, uttering the call to prayer in the baby’s right ear, and moistening her lips with the juice of a date, for her first taste must be something sweet. Also called *tahnīk*, the ritual of wetting the infant’s lips or a “process of chewing some sweet food (e.g., dates or honey) and inserting it into the baby’s mouth and rubbing its chin to train it to eat and pronouncing the *Adhan* in the baby’s ear and giving a name to the baby” attests to the observance of recommended birth rites in Islam.<sup>13</sup> Specific rituals are also performed during death. In the novel, Magira says the funeral prayer “inna lillahi wa Inn lillah rajiun (from God we come and to God we shall return)” —ironically though, given that she has now outlived all her sons—for her last surviving son, Aji, when he dies in a road accident (*TD*, 232). The verse that Magira pronounces is the customary supplicatory prayer expressed on hearing the death or some tragic news of a Muslim. It appears in the chapter *Al-Baqarah*: “To Allah we belong, and to Him Is our return” (2:156).<sup>14</sup> Also reported in a *ḥadīth* in *Sahih Muslim*, this short, often involuntary, invocation frames the consciousness of a believer in God’s power to ease her pain and the motivation to turn to God for doing so:

There is no Muslim who is stricken with a calamity and says what Allah had enjoined, Innalillahi wainna ilaihi rajiun. *Allahummajurni fi musibati was akhlif li khairan minha* (Verily to Allah we belong and unto him Him is our return. O Allah, reward me for my affliction and give me something better than it)—but Allah will compensate him with something better.<sup>15</sup> (italics in the original)

A profoundly personal supplication for emotional and physical relief, the utterance of this verse, when being afflicted by a misfortune or calamity, is therefore considered as the *sunna* of Muhammad.

The spiritual relationship with Islam veers from diligent observance, as seen above in the family’s observance of prayer and rituals, attesting to a deep belief in religion as a solution to problems and for personal satisfaction, to noncompliance with Islam. Aji’s wife Dala, for instance,

“had given up prayers. . . . she had closed up . . .” after the death of her son from measles (*TD*, 48–49). But more importantly, Dala’s reaction, the refusal to personally engage with Islam, points to Islamic disengagement that is not always a result of religious oppression. It coheres with a personal choice just as praying and observance of rituals and spiritual habits underlie the personal desire to do so. Dala’s personal spiritual stance, moreover, and Peni’s desperate measures, as outlined below, expose their underlying emotions and desperate measures that would otherwise not be obvious as they cannot be indexed in political or even public manifestations of Islamic activity. Peni, Magira’s granddaughter, and Sulaiman Dapchi, Aji’s friend, consult herbalists to solve their personal problems. Peni is embittered by her misfortunes in life, prompting her desperate move to consult an herbalist in the hopes of influencing her cousin Seytu’s mind. More a charlatan than a practitioner of indigenous medicine, Peni’s herbalist simply takes “the dried powdered vegetable from his wife’s pot in the kitchen,” palming it off to Peni as magic powder and instructing her to add it to Seytu’s meals (*TD*, 163). Each has intense passions to protect in their personal choices—Peni’s intense hatred for Seytu, her frustration with life, and Dala’s inconsolable grief.

Also part of this broad spectrum of religious habits is Mallam Isa, Magira’s stepdaughter Meramu’s husband. A Hausa trader and a part-time Qur’anic teacher, as his title “mallam” in Hausa suggests, Mallam Isa is a devout Muslim.<sup>16</sup> Like the Ramta family, he strictly observes the obligatory prayer: “Often when it was time for prayers, Mallam Isa would cast disapproving looks at Usman (Aji’s friend and business partner), who would get up with difficulty and drag his ailing limbs to perform ablution” (*TD*, 36). But in her description of Mallam Isa’s Islamic habits, Alkali underlines the significant contrast on two crucial points—ignorance versus education, and reasonable religious practice versus dogmatism. For instance, the Mallam’s habits are thus described: “As such when he was not praying or telling stories, he would count his prayer beads and watch his wife’s every move” (*TD*, 36, 38). Furthermore, he does not believe in modern medicine. Being infertile, he refuses to let a medical doctor examine him as he cannot accept his shortcoming. His intolerance for modern medicine can be traced to the awkward truth that he is responsible for the couple’s childlessness:

He was thinking and fuming that the doctor, a male for God sakes, did not have the fear of Almighty Allah to even suggest that Meramu’s barrenness could be his fault, and to suggest that in front of the woman! (*TD*, 50)

Moreover, Mallam Isa feels disgraced that the doctor pokes at his manhood (*TD*, 50, 53). Through Mallam Isa's rigid observance of Islam, Alkali thus delves deeper into the habits and practice of Muslims who narrowly interpret the religion. Therefore, as a counterweight to Mallam Isa's odd habits, Alkali presents meaning in Magira's practice of Islam that Isa's mechanical performance fails to register, establishing not only the difference between her spirituality and Mallam Isa's, but also the expression of her feminism that is moored to her ability to reflect, develop, plan, and strategize her goals as she reverentially conjoins the spiritual with the worldly for personal gains. Her courage, motivation, and goals are constantly echoed in her prayers as they discursively sustain the thematic strain of the novel—the futures of the descendants of the Ramta clan.

### Spirituality—*Ṣalāt*, *Duʿa*, *Dhikr*—Shaping Feminism, Feminism Shaping Spirituality

To understand Magira's feminism in Islam as the fulfillment of her spiritual duties, the overall and underlying impact of *ʿibādāh* (pl. *ʿibādāt*) is immensely suggestive. So pervasive is *ʿibādāh* that any act of worship, ritual prayer, ritual enactment, or casual habit must be located within it as evidenced by Magira's and her family's observance of *ʿibādāh* and its various forms, including the expression of such casual utterances as "*Alhamdulillah*," to express gratitude (*TD*, 83–84). In this section, I elaborate on the nature, purpose, and kinds of three types of prayer—*ṣalāt*, *duʿa*, and *dhikr*—to emphasize the centrality of spiritual worship in a Muslim's life as Magira's feminism in Islam pivots on her active recruitment of these spiritual acts—*ṣalāt* or the canonical prayer, *duʿa* or the supplicatory prayer, and *dhikr* or pious remembrance, evocation, or reminder. Together, *ṣalāt*, *duʿa*, and *dhikr* comprise *ʿibādāh*, or worship that lies at the heart of religiosity (ritual prayer or even remembrance of God), expressing the relationship between humanity and God in the Qur'an. As laid down in the Qur'an—"I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me"—the purpose for which human beings were created is to serve God (51:56). Tariq Al-Jamil eloquently explains *ʿibādāh*, "the demonstration of service or worship by the servants of God (*ʿibad Allah*) is ultimately the prescribed goal of all existence."<sup>17</sup> It is believed that no other Islamic act has been enjoined as much in the Qur'an as prayer with over seven hundred Qur'anic verses dedicated to the act, its types, purpose, times, and other dimensions.<sup>18</sup>

The canonical prayer or *ṣalāt*, in particular, is the cornerstone of *ʿibādāh* and consequently of Islamic behavior. *Ṣalāt* is mandated five times a day

at fixed times as a constant reminder of God during the daily activities of a Muslim. Performing all five prayers would mean rhythmizing one's life to the habit of remembering God regularly. It circumscribes daily life and by extension a Muslim's entire existence. The Qur'an exhorts prayer in a phalanx of verses to consistently emphasize its performance, stating "guard strictly your (habit) of prayers," among numerous other injunctions to perform it (2:238, 98). In his commentary on the purpose behind prayer, Ali explains, in several instances, that even if the times of the prayers are mentioned, in such verses as "celebrate the praises of thy Lord in the evening and in the morning," and evening and morning are pinpointed as the best times for contemplation and spiritual effort, the phrase "evening and morning" may quite simply mean "at all times" (40: 55).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in a note on another verse enjoining prayers, Ali explains:

The special times for Allah's remembrance are so described as to include all our activities in life—when we rise early in the morning, and when we go to rest in the evening; when we are in the midst of our work, at the decline of the sun, and in the late afternoon. It may be noted that these are all striking stages in the passage of the sun through our terrestrial day, as well as stages in our daily working lives.<sup>20</sup>

Of the five fundamental components of Islam, also called its pillars, prayer or *ṣalāt* is the second, performed as a reiteration of faith that is first expressed when pronouncing the *shahādah*. Each time a Muslim performs prayer, she reinforces her faith in the oneness of God (*tawhīd*) and in Muhammad's prophetic mission. Shawkat Toorawa explains that although all Muslims must pronounce the *shahādah* at least once, "most utter it repeatedly, especially within the ritual prayer" as a testimony of faith.<sup>21</sup> Neal Robinson points out that *ṣalāt* is mentioned more than eighty times in the Qur'an, with all its steps, postures, and times elaborately described in its various verses.<sup>22</sup> The essential steps of *ṣalāt* entail purification or ablution (*wudūʿ* or *taharah* or *ghusl*), intention (*niyyah*), bowing (*rukūʿ*), and prostration (*sujūd*), in addition to attention to the timing of the prayer, direction, covering or clothing, and recitation of Qur'anic verses. The verses customarily recited at each prayer during the various *rakaʿāt*, or units that comprise a prayer, are a means to acknowledge God's presence in the universe. The *rakaʿāt* are made up of a sequence of movements—standing upright, bowing from the waist, standing upright again, prostrating, sitting, prostrating again, and then returning to the sitting position—while reciting Qur'anic verses. The number of *rakaʿāt* varies according to the prayer that is being performed. Furthermore, as



Robinson explains, prayers must be offered while facing the *qiblah* (direction of Mecca), if it can be determined, and in a clean location.<sup>23</sup>

The value of prayer depends on a person's intention. Before performing the prayer, Muslims express the intention with which they perform it. According to Robinson, this "prevents the lives of Muslims from degenerating into a series of meaningless formalities."<sup>24</sup> Each aspect of the canonical prayer—the state of ritual purity, the frequency of the prayers, the postures and times of the prayers—is infused with a purpose that renders the act of praying more meaningful. As Glassé explains the underlying step in the performance of ritual prayer, he notes that intention or *niyyah* is a

legally necessary step in the performance of all rituals, prayer, pilgrimage, ablution, sacrifice, recitations . . . etc. The believer makes the intention out loud or inwardly to perform the ritual in question. In Islamic law the basis of judging someone's actions is his intention, The Hadith which defines it is . . . "Actions are according to their intentions, and to each man there pertains that which he intended." This Hadith opens the canonical collections of Muslim and Bukhari.<sup>25</sup>

As noted earlier, the five canonical prayers are performed at various fixed times of the day. These are the morning prayer, also called *Ṣalāt as-Subh*; *Ṣalāt az-Zuhr*, or the noonday prayer; *Ṣalāt al-Asr*, or the late afternoon prayer; *Ṣalāt al-Maghrib*, or the sunset prayer; and the *Ṣalāt al-Isha*, or night prayer. There are also numerous kinds of prayers depending on the occasions, such as *Ṣalāt al-Hajjah*, or prayer of necessity; the *Ṣalāt al-Istikhara*, or prayer of guidance, when trying to determine the best course of action; the *Ṣalāt al-Jumu'ah*, or congregational Friday prayer; the *Ṣalāt al-Khawf*, or prayer of fear, historically used by soldiers in times of imminent danger; among other prayers and even a *Ṣalāt al-Istisqa*, or prayer for rain.<sup>26</sup> Again, the frequency not just of the canonical prayer during the day but of the kinds of prayers for numerous occasions attests to its prominence in Islamic practice.

Inspired by direct injunctions in the Qur'an—"Then do ye remember Me; I will remember you" (2:152)—the *dhikr*, according to Michael Sells, is "both a concept and a meditative practice."<sup>27</sup> John Renard notes that the "root denotes 'remembrance and mindfulness,' not always distinct from the *du'a* in form or content."<sup>28</sup> But Ali's note to this verse eloquently captures its depth that the verb "remember" as a translation of *dhikr* is too "pale" a meaning for it.<sup>29</sup> *Dhikr* encompasses a rich ensemble of verbal and active signification such as "to praise frequently by mentioning; to rehearse; to celebrate or commemorate; to make much of; to



cherish the memory of as a precious possession.”<sup>30</sup> For Renard, *dhikr* may even be “simple praise and acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty without specific request for a grant from the divine largesse.”<sup>31</sup> The repetitive remembrance and celebration of God have come to be thought of as *dhikr*. It has also found its way, according to Toorawa, in the

liturgical lives of almost all observant Muslims, namely the repeating after the ritual prayer (and at other times too) of the phrases “God’s glory be proclaimed (*subhan Allah*)” and “To God is due all praise (*al-hamdu li llah*)” thirty-three times each, and thirty-four times “God is most great (*Allahu akbar*),” expressions described by the Prophet Muhammad as “the phrases most dear to Almighty God” (together with “There is no deity other than God [*la ilaha ill’Allah*]”) . . . For private remembrance, worshipers use a rosary, called a *tasbeih* or *misbaha*.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the supplicatory prayer or *du’a* is not bound by formal requirements or movements; it is an open-ended prayer, an appeal or invocation. A Muslim talks to God in a less formal manner, allowing her to develop her thoughts to relate spirituality with worldly matters, facilitating the connection of worldly affairs to the divine. It is a private communication that allows a Muslim to spiritually fulfill a deeply personal need. Esposito describes the *du’a* and its purposes as

an appeal or invocation; usually refers to supplicatory prayers in Islam. These are often performed kneeling at the end of the formal ritual prayers (*salat*) and are accompanied by a gesture of outraised hands with the palms facing up. Special *duas* follow formulas established by the Prophet Muhammad and other significant religious leaders. Examples of these special supplications are *dua al-qunut*, a supplication requesting guidance and protection, which is often recited during the dawn or single evening (*witr*) prayer.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Glassé references the posture of the *du’a*, performed using a customary posture, with “palms of the hands open to heaven; at the end, the words ‘al-Hamdu li-Llah’ (‘praise to God’) are said and the palms are drawn over the face and down, crossing over the shoulders, as if one were anointing oneself with a Divine blessing.”<sup>34</sup> The Qur’an enjoins the *du’a* to specify its purpose: “call on me; I will answer your (prayer)” (40:60).

Toorawa identifies seven different kinds of supplicatory prayers or seven types of requests that a Muslim can make. These are forgiveness,

mercy, blessing, favor, worldly success, intercession, and protection. Each kind of request derives from Qur'anic verses supporting the kinds of request that is made. For instance, the prayer for seeking forgiveness stems from the Qur'anic verse, "Our lord, we have wronged our own souls; If Thou forgive us not and bestow not upon us Thy Mercy, we shall certainly be lost" (7:23, 349). Toorawa intimates that this verse serves as the template for the "Forty Rabannas" or supplications that begin with the word *rabanna*, meaning "O our Lord."<sup>35</sup> In addition to asking for forgiveness, Muslims are encouraged to seek blessings and divine favor, and prayers through responses to sneezing or to good deeds—"may God bless you," "all praise is due to God," or "may God reward you"—are all part of the supplications for blessings.<sup>36</sup> As such, a Muslim's life is circumscribed by prayer, starting at birth when an infant is first made to hear the pious formulae that comprise the call to prayer and the profession of faith in Islamic monotheism and Muhammad's prophetic mission. Even at death, the funeral rites are performed with prayers for the soul of the deceased, thus making life a cycle punctuated by prayer:

There are supplications for every possible situation and event, (wearing a new item of clothing, on hearing a dog bark, on seeing the full moon, to ward off the evil eye, to begin one's fast, to increase one's learning, before setting off on a journey).<sup>37</sup>

Prayer permeates a Muslim's whole life, and "at practically every moment a Muslim has either just uttered or performed a prayer, or is about to do so."<sup>38</sup> Although different in form and manner, all three prayers—*ṣalāt*, *du'a*, or *dhikr*—fulfill the same purpose, that of remembrance of God, exalting him, and maintaining consciousness of him, and, therefore, of human fallibility, as frequently as possible. They are also means of communion and empowerment as the person praying feels an intimate connection with God to express his innermost feelings. *Salāt*, *du'a*, and *dhikr*, in particular, take on added significance in Magira's engagement of prayer in the expression of her feminism, for her admirable personality and her mission derive their strength from *ibādāh*, or worship.

### Strategic Spirituality: Magira's Prayers and Personal Mission

Magira's prayer immediately announces the private, personal, and individual shades of her feminism in Islam as she is introduced in the novel

through the contents of her prayer. Her prayer also doubles as the introduction to the novel and propels the narrative forward. Equally, the lives and preoccupations of the members of the Ramta clan and Magira's mission are embroidered in the prayer their matriarch makes for them and as she introduces each of them, their problems and lives, weaving life and spirituality in her expression of faith. By opening the novel, the prayer constitutes the tone of its main protagonist's engagement with life, reflecting in turn her engagement with the religion as the resource she deploys to solve her problems. The placement of the prayer is thus pivotal in motoring the narrative forward, anchoring its characters, themes, and plot in a spiritual universe to unravel Magira's deepest feelings. Briefly, Magira compresses the lives of her family members in her prayer to wed her spiritual and mundane preoccupations.

Magira's prayer falls into the category of supplications for mercy and blessings, or *du'a*. Her posture, from Glassé's description of genuflection and raised hands, reveals that her prayer is a *du'a*: "kneeling on a prayer mat, her hands raised to the heavens, Magira Milli was supplicating rather desperately" (*TD*, v):

O God, once more Milli is before you. Calling you to look down and have mercy on her, her children, her children's children and their children. Lord, I come without a gift, except a long record of requests, over a number of years. (*TD*, v)

She wastes no time in explaining the main theme of her plea (and the novel)—"from a child a dynasty is built"—and also divulging her self-image, as a caretaker who nurtures lives to ensure their well-being and continuity. In the novel, this supplicatory prayer is two pages long as Magira pours her heart out on every little detail that nags her. She also reveals that it is not the first time that she has brought the same before God. She thus reaffirms her continued relationship with Allah, her habit of praying to supplicate for her most important needs, and that her requests remain unchanged over the years—the well-being and protection of her children. She introduces all the members of her family in the opening supplicatory prayer:

Make Aji strong and prosperous . . . Abbas, son of Abdulai, make him prosperous . . . Peni, daughter of Abdulai, help her Lord . . . Seytu, the daughter of Illia, her affliction pulls at my heart strings. . . . Continue to help Lawani's other daughter, Meramu . . . Bless the Ramta family . . . (*TD*, v-vi).

Aji listens to her prayer and chimes in with the customary “amin” in response to some of her supplications to echo and reinforce his own requests to God, hoping they will be granted (*TD*, vii).<sup>39</sup> He also shakes his head and rolls his eyes at some of her requests that he finds preposterous, such as her requests to stop Abbas from eyeing Mero as Magira suspects that her grandson has feelings for Mero even though she is married to Usman: “let him not eye another man’s wife” (*TD*, vii). She ends her prayer with a supplication at the heart of her mission: “let each and every one of my descendants acquire education and become great (Amin, mother)” (*TD*, viii). In so doing, Magira reveals a private engagement, exposing her innermost thoughts and emotional intuitions in her prayer. Aji’s reaction indicates his knowledge of the intensely personal nature of Magira’s opinions on family and worldly matters that she expresses to God, and that he learns of only by overhearing her pray loudly.

Engaging spiritual habits to plan her worldly mission underwrites Magira’s expression of feminism as several dimensions of her feminism can be ascertained from her *dua*. Magira, who stands tall in the face of adversity, is genuflect; Magira, who has nerves of steel, breaks down before God as she expresses her intimate fears in all humility. For her, praying is the only act and time that she can describe the immense burden of emotional and financial responsibilities on her shoulders. The prayer, therefore, provides her with both comfort and strength in her unparalleled mission in life. But in her rather long confessions, she also finds the power to carry on her arduous responsibility of caring for her family. It is in conversing with God that Magira wades through the onerous problems she faces, thereby attesting her belief in the potency of prayer. With each prayer, she dips into a spiritual wellspring to revive her energy—a weary traveler pausing to refresh her wits before starting out again. Her prayer is more than just a religious ritual. It is steeped in her emotions.

Not very different in tone or content from the first one, Magira’s second prayer appears in the middle of the narrative. In fact, she repeats the content of the first prayer verbatim, reinforcing her unchanged mission, emotions, and personal investment in prayer. Once again, her posture is customary of the *dua*—kneeling on her prayer mat, her hands raised to the heavens—she is “supplicating—rather desperately” as again Aji watches her (*TD*, 72). The prayer opens in the same way as the first one—“O God, once more Milli is before you, calling you to look down and have mercy on her, her children, her children’s children and their children” (*TD*, 72). The content follows a familiar pattern: she exposes her preoccupations, that is, the well-being of her family; reaffirms her faith in prayer about Seytu’s operation, believing “with prayers the operation will succeed”;

and then individually names all the people she supplicates for—Abbas, Peni, Aji, and Mero, among others, outlining their problems (*TD*, 77). But this prayer is different in that she continues on with bitterness against her enemies. She is unsparing: “May they burn on earth first, before they burn in hell . . . may our enemies stumble, fall and break their necks before they carry out their evil plans” (*TD*, 74). She then concludes her prayer and remains seated to count her beads silently, performing the *dhikr* or remembrance of God to alleviate emotional stress (*TD*, 74). The second prayer occurs in the middle of the narrative to purposefully reiterate Magira’s mission in life. Both of Magira’s prayers, their types—the canonical, supplicatory, and prayers of remembrance—and their frequency, as indicated by Magira’s comment that she repeatedly prays, inscribe the purpose of prayer in a Muslim’s life as that of rehearsing God’s presence and reminding oneself of human fallibility. Hence, the humble supplication even after completing her prayer to evoke God’s presence during the *dhikr*, when counting her beads, is indicative of Magira’s continued need for divine comfort.

Alkali’s programmatic agenda of presenting the personal expression of feminism in women’s examples whose religious faith is organically woven into their daily lives becomes patently apparent in Magira’s devotion to education, especially since, she, like Mallam Isa, is uneducated. But unlike the mallam, Magira is acutely aware of the need for educating girls. The most significant decision, therefore, that Magira makes for her family is to move them from Ramta to Makulpo. The family has roots in Ramta, its ancestral village, from which it derives its name. But Magira’s priority to educate her grandchildren trumps all other connections. Her concern for her family’s well-being is not only an emotionally-charged desire, as seen in her frequent, unchanged prayers; it is strategic as she knows that with education they are assured of a measure of prosperity that guarantees the continuity of the family. That she strategizes all this in her prayers renders education a spiritually motivated and desired goal and an emotionally fulfilling duty, developed largely in the personal and private engagement with Islam.

Admittedly, making a case for education in a family largely unschooled is not easy, but Magira manifests courage characteristic of her imperious personality in order to prevail. Since her late husband never emphasized the value of education for their sons—Illia, Abdulai, Madu, Isa, and Aji—there is much resistance among her family members to her decision to move to Makulpo. Except for Aji, who gets an education only on leaving Ramta, the rest of the clan, including their leader, the late Lawani Duna, are illiterate, further validating Magira’s rare courage in her decision to

move. She disapproves of her other granddaughter Peni's marriage to an illiterate butcher and makes her views clear: "the least she could do for them was to encourage them to go to school. That way, later in life, they could make the choice of their own" (*TD*, 10, 13). Her outlook on education is thus described:

Magira Milli may be a yesterday's woman but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society. Ramta was not too far away from major cities. She was a good listener who constantly tuned in to 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. (*TD*, 13)

Furthermore, she courageously decides to shed the burden of superstition and ignorance:

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 travelled out of Borno to pursue an education, has escaped. (*TD*, 14)

Magira's rare foresight shapes Seytu's success as much as its absence results in Peni's early marriage and ensuing failures.

### Legacies of "Failures": Seytu and Peni

Aji, who is known as "bzip Magira," or Magira's boy in Hausa, is not the only one characterized by his association with Magira. His niece Seytu also derives her personality from Magira, for she is identified as the granddaughter of the "indomitable Magira Milli" (*TD*, 132). Seytu's story comes to the fore in the second part of the novel about nineteen years after the first part ends. Seytu is beautiful, elegant, and charming, much to the envy and chagrin of her cousins and peers (*TD*, 7, 43). So far, she has lived with Magira and is in her early twenties, raising her child Hawwa, and battling medical problems such as vaginal vesicular

hemorrhage, which she suffered as a result of an early marriage at the age of twelve to the district head of Dam (*TD*, 22). She has also suffered a miscarriage, prompting her to feel “beaten by life and chased by her own inadequacies” (*TD*, 88). However, with her grandmother’s unstinting encouragement, Seytu successfully undergoes surgery for her medical condition. Despite her illness and personal problems, Seytu studies hard to become a medical doctor and “came out of the West African school certificate with seven credits and three distinctions,” also winning an award for the best student in Pediatrics (*TD*, 132). At the start of the second part, Seytu is thirty-nine years old and still as elegant and charismatic (*TD*, 87). She now works as a pediatrician at a large hospital. While Seytu’s feminism lies in her ability to overcome hardships and succeed professionally, it is most discernible in her stoic responsibility toward her family members, especially her cousin Peni, and in Seytu’s reverential homage to her grandmother. It traces its roots to her youth when she selflessly involved herself in her family’s affairs, helping Peni with her unhappy marriage and patiently awaiting surgery for her own ailment. Seytu raises Hawwa with dignity while sharing the chores of the family with equanimity and grace much before carving a niche for herself as a doctor. This early education in the family shapes the foundation of her feminism as she learns greatly about responsibility from Magira.

This experience and the rudimentary skills it provides Seytu evokes Rauf’s challenging conceptualization of feminism in Islam, “the private is political,” as it fuses two distinct spheres, that in Rauf’s view, are not as distinct after all.<sup>40</sup> The Islamist thrust of assuring women greater political participation becomes clear in Rauf’s writings where she pushes for approaching the family as a micro-unit of all functions that serve as the platform for women’s eventual political representation, which seeks to empower them. As Karam notes, Rauf represents “the younger generation of Islamist women activist-leaders in Egypt.”<sup>41</sup> Rauf energetically interprets Muslim women’s roles in the family as eventually fulfilling political functions as heads of state and even judges to claim the futility of feminism and feminist advocacy. Rauf’s reason for eschewing feminist advocacy (in addition to it being “individualistic”) is precisely that Islam is not only a way of life but “a very political existence” that implicates not only women but men as well, the entire society as whole.<sup>42</sup> Taking this argument further along, as noted earlier, Rauf “criticizes the lack of political significance” assigned to the family by considering it as purely a social unit and thus provocatively elaborates its fundamentally political nature, summarized in her pivotal view that “the private is political.”<sup>43</sup> The reason Rauf provides for her stance is, in the view of this book, problematic, for

it assumptively places the goal of feminism even for engagements within the private sphere—the family—as a rehearsal for greater public or political roles in society, thereby eclipsing forms of feminism—Magira’s and Seytu’s, for instance—that remain circumscribed by personal satisfaction within the purview of their immediate family.

Magira’s role as matriarch, her astute management of her family’s affairs, and her leadership and Seytu’s early education in the family as she helps Peni with her difficult marriage while raising Hawwa and waiting for her own surgery would appear as instances that Rauf would claim are disposed to greater socio-political roles. In view of Seytu’s eventual professional success, this would not be inaccurate either. However, both Magira’s and Seytu’s feminisms, I would argue, differ from Rauf’s conceptualization as neither the goals as matriarch nor Seytu’s own maturation hold political or even public ambitions. Magira’s sole mission is to ensure the success of her family. It is a private goal for personal satisfaction. Seytu’s own struggle is to overcome her personal hardships, resulting in her stewardship of her family’s responsibilities as she helps Peni and secures her own professional success as a pediatrician. The private, therefore, in these two women’s cases, is just that, private, individualistic, and distinct from the political.

Unlike Magira, however, Seytu does not directly engage religion. She does not spiritually invoke Islam in her personal habits or life, nor does she pray. The shift in Magira’s explicit invocation of religion to its peripheral presence in Seytu’s life exposes two poles of Islamic presence, plotting the degrees of Islamic practice in the lives of Muslim women in northern Nigeria. In her marriage to Yerima Gamma, a wealthy heir from the local emir’s family, Seytu, who is separated from her husband, has neither divorced him nor reconciled with him. Her cousin Abbas reminds her that it is “un-Islamic” to remain in such a state, urging her to either reconcile with Gamma or dissolve the marriage as expected by Islamic custom (*TD*, 77). Abbas’s comment calls attention to marriage and divorce in Islam, where marriage is predicated on love, compassion, and mercy between the spouses. The Qur’an announces: “And among his Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them. And He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): Verily in that are Sign for those who reflect” (30: 21). Even the stipulation in Islamic divorce that prohibits separation during a pregnancy or menstruation and the waiting period, or *‘iddah*, underwrites the expectation of encouraging reconciliation in a marriage. Even though legally permissible, emphasis is placed on the protection and preservation of the marital bond rather than on severing it. Divorce is considered as a



last resort, as it is the most hateful thing in the eyes of God, according to a *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn Majah: “The most hated of permissible things to Allah is divorce.”<sup>44</sup> However, if no recourse is available and a divorce is imminent, in the interest of both parties, a marriage must be dissolved through a divorce in order to facilitate other actions and decisions that the concerned parties may take. This is outlined in the Qur’an: “the parties should either hold together with equal terms or separate with kindness” (2: 229). Abbas’s evocation also re-emphasizes the family’s observance of Islamic practice as seen earlier in their habit of regular prayers and performance of rituals. Seytu, of course, is unmindful of Islamic requirements by letting the separation from her husband continue indefinitely.

Equally, Seytu’s feminism nests in her admiration for Magira, revealing the depth of her own feminist outlook that holds in high esteem the nature of women’s abilities rather than the simple acquisition of education. When Seytu’s boss laments the lack of Western-style education among Nigerians—“without a Western education, a woman has very little chance to make a success of her life”—Seytu is quick to tip her hat in her response by evoking her grandmother’s vision: “not entirely true . . . there are exceptions . . . my grandmother, for instance, she is not educated in the Western sense, but she is enlightened and has guts. It is important to have guts” (*TD*, 189). She then reminds him that none other than Magira spearheaded the Ramta business empire, capturing the wisdom of women who value other qualities such as courage, vision, and strategy in actualizing goals, thereby paying rich tribute in words and sentiment to Magira’s accomplishments (*TD*, 190). When Seytu returns to Ramta, a success, her victory vindicates the legacy of a visionary:

Here in Ramta, she stood for something more important than just the daughter of Ramta, and a successor to the great medical chief. She was a model for young and aspiring men and women, a symbol of growth and progressive womanhood. She had left Ramta a young disabled girl with little hope, and had come back a conqueror. (*TD*, 221–22)

But most of all, Seytu’s acknowledgment of Magira’s legacy can be seen in her deeds, in her unswerving commitment to her family. As a successful pediatrician now, Seytu gives back much more to her family as she and Abbas agree to jointly sort out some of the family’s scabrous problems, namely caring for Peni and her children.

Seytu and Abbas think of Peni as a failure, someone with “enough time to create unhappiness for herself,” who is “all messed up spiritually” (*TD*,

152, 154). To be fair to Peni, however, her personal struggles must be elaborated. She is removed from school to be married off to the butcher much against Magira's will: "she abhorred the idea of interrupting Peni's education to be married" (*TD*, 10, 12). Peni suffers in her marriage as she struggles from physical abuse. Even though heavily pregnant, she is brutalized by her husband; she "looked different, painfully emaciated, her eyes vacant, her face bruised and swollen" (*TD*, 21). Peni is unable to sort herself out: "she considered herself the unlucky one who never got an education. She blamed this on her father's early death. . . . she was encouraged to marry that lousy village butcher" (*TD*, 159). Briefly, she is not wrong in thinking, "hers was a life she did not admire" (*TD*, 159). Convinced that "the adults should have forced her to go to school . . . it was their responsibility," she despises Aji for having stopped her schooling to marry her off and refuses to acknowledge Magira's support to help her with her marriage (*TD*, 159). Now, twice divorced, Peni lives with Seytu in the hopes of pulling herself together, but resents the dependence on Seytu, and is eager to control her cousin. To this end, she secretly visits an herbalist tens of times with the intention of impacting Seytu's decisions. Peni's feckless plans contrast her own lack of good sense with the prudence Seytu embodies in her work, for the herbalist—a charlatan in this case—manipulates to cheat and extract money from her. Incapable of managing even the little she has, such as the small kiosk she runs to feed herself and her children, Peni sinks further into despair and bitterness. And yet, Alkali shows Peni's caring nature in her bad timing and awkward sermonizing when she urges Seytu to reconcile with her estranged husband Yerima Gamma. In her gauche tirade with her cousin, Peni reveals not only the care but also the clarity with which she reflects on life. Seytu, too, admits that Peni is right but ignores her cousin's well-meaning advice by attributing it to bad timing as Peni broaches the topic when Seytu has just come home tired from a long day's work (*TD*, 163).

Seytu's professional accomplishments are undoubtedly admirable as Egya calls her Alkali's "new woman," a foil to Mero and Peni who have less than happy lives:

Seytu is Alkali's new woman, driven by the passion to outdo men, and succeeds in doing so. She becomes a public figure, the greatest pediatrician in her society. She is socially active, transcendental, and mirrors the essence of a radically altered gender. Seytu then is the fulfillment of Alkali's quest for providing an alternative discourse to the dominant, male-authored discourse of social struggles in northern Nigeria.<sup>45</sup>

Even so, such unqualified admiration limits the scope of feminism by failing to put into perspective the simple fact that Magira is also uneducated. Moreover, Aji's friend Sulayman Dapchi's son Hassan, a minor character in the novel, loses out on an education as well because of his own sister's mental illness (*TD*, 69). Peni's example as a woman who chooses rather irresponsibly to depend on others, wallow in self-pity and bitterness, and squander opportunities to rebuild her life, in fact, draws attention to Magira's own ambivalent position vis-à-vis her granddaughters. Though Magira is against the idea of Peni's early marriage and against her missing out on an education, she does little to stop the disastrous consequences. Magira's resolve, therefore, to see Seytu succeed is heightened by her determination that Seytu does not meet with the same fate as Peni. Magira is nonetheless equally responsible for Peni's failures. While Seytu is indeed her success story, Magira has undoubtedly failed in Peni. Furthermore, professional success alone cannot be a measure of a woman's feminism and achievements. It merits noting that both cousins—Seytu and Peni—are unsuccessful personally in that both have had their share of failures and trauma. Both, in fact, have two failed marital relationships behind them. Egya's statement on Peni and Mero as "specimens of damaged womanhood . . . objects of pity," and on Peni, in particular, as a "psycho-social sore," must, therefore, be qualified by factoring Magira's own failings in Peni's and Seytu's personal failures.<sup>46</sup> Peni's and Mero's examples temper the critical practice that considers only one woman's example as representative of Alkali's feminist agenda, namely Seytu's feminist success. Mero's example, in this regard, reinforces this commitment on Alkali's part to reconfigure qualities customarily associated with courage, choices, and education to underline the crucial differences between Peni's and Mero's abilities and temperaments and illustrate a complex variety of experiences.

Mero, Aji's best friend Usman's wife, is described as "a highly composed young woman" who "worked harder than anybody else in the household. She always had bags under her eyes . . . Highly strung and inhibited, she rarely laughed" (*TD*, 9). After her parents' deaths, the much-older Usman marries Mero, not yet fifteen, to "protect her and her father's wealth, which had been entrusted to him" (*TD*, 66). Her marriage at a tender age to a man old enough to be her father destroys her youthful spirit: "Numb to all feelings, she simply went through the motions of living," and having got a "raw deal" in life, first from her parents' untimely deaths and then from marrying an older man, "the once jovial and much-loved little girl, turned into an ageing woman overnight, sullen and indifferent to her future" (*TD*, 81, 66). Despite this blow, Mero manifests rare courage and

selflessness. As her “father-husband” Usman dies from an illness, Mero gives birth to a baby girl, Binta (*TD*, 183). During the delivery, however, she loses much blood and is advised against having another child (*TD*, 86).

But Mero is not an object of pity; she is a victim of tragic circumstances that result in her losing out on a much-needed education when she must marry the considerably older Usman. Soon after Usman’s death, Mero finds true love and a desire to live again. She falls in love with Abbas with whom she shares a near-magical relationship. Her gentle, sweet soul is rejuvenated. Mero blossoms once again as she and Abbas share a loving bond and build a household together for eight years. Mero makes Abbas very happy—she is his first love and fills his life with peace and contentment. The gentle Mero, however, will not make Abbas happy for long. In her second chance at happiness, she chooses to efface her own interests. She tragically dies in labor soon after giving birth to Shams—the only living bond between herself and Abbas (*TD*, 148). Mero’s death is more than a tragic sacrifice; it is an act of selflessness by a woman who deserved to be happy. Her *choice* to have a baby again, to give Abbas a child, underlines her selfless feminism, for she knows that she should not have conceived after giving birth to her first child, Binta. Out of love for Abbas, nonetheless, she *chooses* death to give life to Shams, creating and “cementing their bond of love” (*TD*, 184).

Her loss to Abbas is irreparable, and in reminiscing about her presence, quite naturally, Abbas blames himself for her untimely death as she had been warned of her condition. He now wonders why he gave into her, pointing to the knowledge that Mero was aware that having another baby would kill her. Abbas recapitulates Mero’s unparalleled contribution to his life:

She was the deep meandering stream and he was that solid rock surface. He watched out for her, cared and protected her, and she in turn realized the man in him. She brought out what was best in his nature and nurtured him with love into manliness. Whenever he was upset and lost his temper, it was Mero who put out the raging fire in his soul and restored him to serenity. She was a balm to his ego. The quiet gentle soul, who had experienced emotional pains from the hands of a father-husband, has finally found repose in the hands of a caring man. (*TD*, 183–84)

Unlike Peni, unable to turn personal tragedy into a positive experience, Mero’s maturity and generosity circumscribe her feminist power—her

ability to control her choices by choosing others over her own self even when she deserves more happiness in view of her tragic past. Like Seytu, who moves beyond her personal problems to positively construct her future, Mero's feminism lies in her courage to transform missed opportunities and untimely tragedies to constructively find happiness a second time. That she then of her own volition crowns her positive experience with selflessness, the gift of love to the man she loves, by voluntarily bearing a child, knowing that it will be fatal to her own existence, makes her feminism a matter of choice that she controls. Briefly, these women's choices to shape their personal lives underline their feminisms. As Seytu's beneficence touches the lives of her relatives, and Magira's service selflessly nurtures those around her despite having suffered emotional setbacks, so do Mero's selflessness, maturity, and composure impact the lives of those around her.

In sum, Alkali's presentation of feminism is iconoclastic not because she subverts Islam by portraying Magira as a matriarch. Rather, her presentation of feminism responds to the parsimonious critical stance that northern Nigerian Muslim women acquire success by subverting Islam by instead depicting, revealing, and exposing Magira as a matriarch. Alkali's representation of Magira serves, therefore, as an illustration of northern Nigerian society, not as a counterweight to patriarchy. Magira's stoicism and unflinching courage in the face of crushing tragedies make her a charismatic leader. She is abetted by her spirituality, manifested in her supplicatory prayers, not only as a means to cognitively strategize her family's well-being but also as her only source of comfort, to emotionally relax the onus of her responsibilities. Prayer thus serves as an important space that Magira often uses to express her personal agenda, to energize her personal charge. Prayers such as the ones Magira offers are also the lens that allow a glimpse into a woman's innermost thoughts that are hard to index on public and political platforms. Admittedly, Magira's accomplishments, her strategic mission, and the means she employs to actualize her goals are no less activist in their planning, management, and execution, which entail the same courage, vision, and determination as used in activist and political struggles suggested by Rauf. Magira's activism, however, is aimed at her descendants fetching up at various professional and personal points in their lives. Magira's intimate thoughts and goals remain as such—personal, private and individual—and do not serve as the stage for political or public roles.

Also, the novel and its structure—its two parts with the first one being dominated by Magira and the second by Seytu and Peni, interspersed by Mero's life and untimely death—emphasize the passing of the baton from

one generation to the other, a lasting legacy that is a compelling testament of one woman's vision. Magira's charge is to serve as the link between the past and the future—managing the present and handling it with grace, grit, and efficiency as she readies a lasting legacy for the future. Each of Magira's qualities—courage, wisdom, foresight, and perseverance, among a host of others—coupled with her extraordinary abilities to work with her environment and diverse people, to negotiate situations both happy and tragic, and to navigate successes and failures with equanimity, grace, and dignity, bears powerful testimony to her African womanism and its other sister expressions such as *Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism.

Although Seytu recognizes her grandmother's contribution, draws from Magira's foresight, and abundantly benefits from her grandmother's choices, she is not spiritually observant. She is nonetheless deeply devoted to her family and acknowledges her responsibilities as she inherits her grandmother's inner strength, compassion, and service to others. Seytu shows immense courage in overcoming personal hardship to succeed professionally and in generously caring for her less fortunate cousin, Peni, thus moving forward with Magira's legacy of selfless service. Both Peni's and Mero's examples of feminist expression parallel and contrast with Magira's and Seytu's choices in that they underscore women's resilience in Mero's case and a complete lack of it in Peni's inability to positively transform her misfortunes. Furthermore, Mero's strength is similar to Magira's and Seytu's in her ability to reconstruct her life after the barrage of tragic events that orphan and widow her at an early age. Such disparate forms of faith, as seen in Magira's frequent habit of praying, and spiritual ignorance, as Seytu and Peni care little for Islamic practice, of success and failure, of satisfaction and frustration, encapsulate women's diverse postures vis-à-vis Islam. Such a complicated variety of feminist expression—as seen in dialogic action as Magira works with her son Aji in managing the family's affairs; active involvement in change as Magira and Seytu transform their family; and give-and-take exchange as Mero negotiates with her changing circumstances and makes her own choices—summons such canons of African feminism as African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, and motherism. As a critical practice, at the confluence of African and Islamic feminist discourses, African-Islamic feminism has read *The Descendants* as a compelling testimony of African Muslim women's complicated personal and private interactions with Islam to broaden and sharpen our understanding of Muslim women in general.

## Chapter 5



### Frequent Functions and References

#### Personal Solutions in *Sacred Apples* and *Destiny*

*Ṣalāt*, in a sense, is the meeting point between the sacred and the secular in Muslim life.

—Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi

We are, individually, the real trouble with Nigeria. The character which Achebe cleared of all culpability is all that is wrong with us.

—Abubakar Gimba

As a centered subject in the novel, the feminine condition introduces a heterogenous range of themes that work to redefine new relationships to nation and history and impact on conceptions of space and time in the novel.

—Nana Wilson Tagoe

Continuing to discuss prayer as a space for emotional comfort and to foreground the Qur'an as a resource for answers to quotidian questions in their private lives, this chapter offers a comparative study of African Muslim women's frequent reliance on Islam in Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*<sup>1</sup> and Hauwa Ali's *Destiny*. Analyses of Zahrah's (Gimba's main protagonist) and Farida's (Ali's heroine) frequent invocations of Allah, encompassed by *dhikr*—dream sequence monologues, frequent references to the Qur'an and *hadith* during discussions on polygamy, self-reliance and education, and prayers, *ṣalāt*, in particular—reveal the universe of African Muslim women's most personal and private thoughts and

feelings on Islam. Toward this goal, this chapter will examine Ali's main protagonist Farida's individual and conscious decisions to voluntarily, almost instinctively, and frequently recruit spiritual practice in the resolution of her personal problems. Farida's regular choice to turn to *ṣalāt* in times of distress—a forced marriage, desire for advanced education, and a thwarted love affair—foregrounds her personal engagement with Islam, where a woman conscripts Islam as a solution to her problems. Likewise, Gimba's heroine Zahrah turns to *dhikr* and a number of other spiritual habits after a painful divorce and, similarly again, following the death of her second husband to seek out comfort.<sup>2</sup> Zahrah, in particular, evokes the Qur'an as *dhikr* to guide her in her decisions.

Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* can be said to lie in the great tradition of a literary genre that has no less than fifty million admirers in West Africa, namely the *Littattfan Soyayya*, the books of love. The second novel, Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples*, though not of the *Soyayya* genre, nonetheless represents, along with the writings of Alkali and Ali, the voice of northern Nigerian fiction in English.<sup>3</sup> Both novels capture the quotidian imprint of Islam in northern Nigerian women's personal lives in the form of casual conversations embedded in simplistic and flowing narrative styles that steadily focus on emotions, gestures, and acts.

### Daily Meanings and Uses: *Littattfan Soyayya* and Women's Issues

The currency of Muslim women's quotidian engagement with Islam in their private lives derives from the social and literary valence assigned to the popular themes of love and interpersonal relationships that *Soyayya* writers have predominantly textualized. Perhaps because of this crucial fact, Gimba's and Ali's novels figure as the sites for tangible evidence on what Muslims do about faith. With regard to Ali's novel, Barbara Fister appraises it as fiction that does not attempt "to penetrate very deeply," suggesting perhaps another reason for the scant critical attention to it so far.<sup>4</sup> But when reminded of the social and cultural value of *Soyayya* literature that captures, as a popular blog observes, "issues that speak to the reality of Hausa youth, and in particular, Hausa women of today," the oversimplified narrative styles, uncomplicated protagonists (nosy family members or parents who oppose relationships), simple dialogues, and predictable story lines, this light fiction becomes the most reliable and useful socio-religious canvas of northern Nigerian society.<sup>5</sup> As noted earlier, Abdalla Uba Adamu intimates that the *Soyayya* books originated from a deeply felt social need among the "young Muslim Hausa of Northern



Nigeria” to explore the interface between social customs and people.<sup>6</sup> From a cursory glance at the topoi of *Soyayya* novels—forced marriages, early marriages, education, tradition, and romantic love—pivoting on the domain of interpersonal relations, personal problems, and lives of the youth, the *Soyayya* books resonate the realities of the Hausa. Although this literature, argues Novian Whitsitt, shares “aesthetic, social and thematic similarities with the Onitsha chapbooks,” it caters to a Hausa audience and the influence of Islam on their lives:

Kano market literature possesses the same popular allure that the Onitsha chapbooks did forty years ago, and the plethora of book stalls attests to their success . . . The contemporary Hausa romance novel shares the Onitsha literary concerns of offering advice to a public experiencing social and cultural ruptures in an era when traditional values must negotiate the onslaught of modern life.<sup>7</sup>

However, continues Whitsitt, unlike Onitsha literature, which was written in the 1960s primarily in English and sold in Onitsha markets in southeastern Nigeria, Kano market literature is predominantly in Hausa. Furthermore, writes Whitsitt, the Kano genre is also more complex as it does not wholeheartedly, like Onitsha literature, embrace Western-style values, thereby “making literature an ally of change” but also mirroring the social processes of negotiation between the youth and the older generation.<sup>8</sup> The important underlying point, throughout this book, therefore, is that Hausa writers have their finger on the pulse of Hausa society, a culture suffused by Islam to the extent that their novels are always, without notable exception, about personal issues, relationships, customs, and tradition. Consequently, Muslim women’s personal, daily, and private engagement with Islam also nests in this thematic, literary, and popular discussion that is different from the political and collectivized channels for voicing Muslim women’s issues. In other words, the important linkage between the love story genre, popularized in Hausa fiction through the *Soyayya* tradition, and the role of Islam in a woman’s quotidian private preoccupations elicits an exploration of forms of feminism that would not otherwise be recorded in studies of the public manifestations of Islam since these novels do not curate politically, organizationally, or socially prescriptive modes of feminist expression or goals.

Ali’s novel, with a dozen illustrations, therefore, sits awkwardly between traditions, following the Onitsha choice of English but focusing on the topoi of Hausa culture as in the *Soyayya* books. Both her novellas *Victory* and *Destiny* focus on ordinary women trying to succeed in their

personal lives by engaging in simple interactions with their immediate environment—family, friends, and co-workers. But if read in the grain of the critical trend so far, Ali would be found as saying that the values of her protagonists—education, career, or even Europeanized tastes—are incompatible with the observance of Islam. *Destiny* is set in northern Nigeria in Kaduna, Kano, and neighboring towns such as Sabon Birni. The sixteen-year-old protagonist, Farida, is a student at a boarding school in Kaduna. She is passionate about a teaching career. She is also in love with Farouk, a schoolmate and childhood friend. Farida has been raised by her guardians, her paternal uncle Abba and aunt Nana. Her guardians are strict, and Aunt Nana, in particular, is domineering, conservative, and quite harsh with Farida, to whom she has never been close. Her guardians have ensured Farida receives a good education. It's in school that Farida falls in love with Farouk, the son of an ambassador currently stationed in the Congo. As for Farida's guardians, they prefer a Nigerian groom for their niece. They force her to marry Wali el-Yakub, a pompous local businessman who is against Farida continuing her education. Wali is egoistical, rich, and domineering, lavishing expensive gifts on Farida's guardians in an effort to convince them to marry their niece off to him. Wali and Farida share nothing in common, and there is a considerable age gap between the two. Their marriage makes Farida extremely unhappy, though she soon gives birth to Faisal, her first child, and adjusts to marital life without, however, losing hope of an opportunity to study further. In the end, destiny intervenes and Farida not only receives the opportunity to further her education, but is also unexpectedly reunited with Farouk as she divorces her unfaithful husband, Wali, who is involved in fraud and adultery and even remarries, taking Farida's cousin, Ayesha, as his second wife.

Though not of the *Soyayya* genre, the much longer *Sacred Apples* centers on similar topoi—romantic love, marriage, corruption, polygamy, and even organized crime along the lines of thriller novels. As for its central character, Zahrah, the novel presents a similar predicament to that of Farida's. The novel is a woman's preparation for her belief that the Qur'an is a woman's most fundamental spiritual and emotional resource. It centers on Zahrah's life, her early marriage and divorce and her effort to rebuild her life thereafter. In her mid-twenties, at the start of the novel, Zahrah is raised by her grandmother Zubaydah and her stepbrother Ya-Shareef. As a teenager, she falls in love with Yazid Awwal, a friend of her brother's, marries at eighteen, barely into university, and soon has three children. Her life revolves around Yazid but he divorces her because of a misunderstanding caused by a forged letter by a jealous coworker. The

fabricated letter accuses Zahrah of plotting Yazid's murder. Zahrah is grief-stricken by the false accusation, the unfair divorce, and most of all Yazid's lack of faith in her. Following the divorce, she returns to Zubaydah's house and begins to pick up the pieces. With Ya-Shareef's help, she finds a job and also befriends a Christian doctor, Miriam, who helps her in her new life as a single parent, working mother, and professional. In their frequent conversations, Miriam and Zahrah discuss their roles in Christianity and Islam. These dialogues provide Zahrah with a template to rebuild her life as a divorcée and to assess her choices. Soon, Zahrah falls in love with her boss, Nousah, and marries him. But her happiness is short-lived as Nousah's wives, Aalimah and Salimah (Salma), poison them both, causing Zahrah to miscarry Nousah's baby and Nousah to die. Once more, Zahrah is crushed by grief and stress. She undergoes an emotional renaissance yet again, after two marital debacles, often turning to the Qur'an for an articulation of her choices. The novel ends with Zahrah's children all grown up and facing some of the situations she herself encountered as a young woman. Zahrah enlists her experience now to counsel her daughter, Umaymah, having cemented her conviction that women's personal and emotional liberation lies in the Qur'an.

### Critiquing Islam: A "Culture of Silence"

Of the relatively few critical analyses of *Destiny* so far, Kassam's appraisal sees Ali writing from behind an attitudinal veil to expose "a culture of silence," even among educated women, to characterize "gender inequity" in northern Nigeria.<sup>9</sup> Kassam thus attributes Farida's problems to her passive acceptance of fate sanctioned by Islam, resulting in her meek acquiescence of Wali as a husband, concluding that there is a "strong connection between fate and Islam in the novel: for predicaments and misfortunes are generally attributed to Allah in the story," and that Ali condemns the use of religious discourse that is used to "mask the manipulation of young women to suit people's selfish interest in society."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Ezinwa Ohaeto adopts the view that, although female education in Nigerian society has become pervasive, northern Nigerian writers continue to depict the impediments that Muslim women face in their pursuit of education because of the practice of Islam and provisions in Islamic law, such as that of the *wali*, or guardian, who exercises control on a woman's marital decision. Like Kassam, Ohaeto puns on the symbol of the veil as a sign of oppression in the form of forced marriage, patriarchy, and women's subservience in northern Nigerian society, which Ali's

novel illustrates in Farida's forced marriage: "the veil must be shaken to catalyze and reconfigure gender relations."<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, relatively few analyses have discussed Gimba's novel or the Islamic discourse in it concerning Muslim women. A. K. Babajo admires in *Sacred Apples* Gimba's "improved scope in storytelling as the story here is much more intricate, complex and diverse than in any of his previous novels . . . a sign of commitment to his vision and mission."<sup>12</sup> *Sacred Apples*, observes Babajo, is an internal discussion, not a monologue, but not directed at social reform either; it is "entirely on private, personal, human and domestic matters. The story does not so much focus on politics or public affairs. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Muhammad Alkali sees the novel as harping on the feminist question and Zahrah's desire to continue her education as "suggestive of [an] extreme position in feminism."<sup>14</sup> Owing to the pointed analysis of religion in the novel, Ezekiel Fajenyo and Olu Osunde call *Sacred Apples* a "crisis of faith" where "Islamic dogma" is pitted against "occultic ritual practices."<sup>15</sup> I consider each of these views in my reading of Zahrah's personal engagement with Islam that highlights Gimba's varied stylistic approach to social issues in Nigeria.

Gimba is mostly read as an author who acts as the moral conscience of his society. His first major novels *Witnesses to Tears*, *Footprints*, and *Sunset for a Mandarin* scrutinize social and national corruption, inefficiency, and moral turpitude in government bodies. Abdullahi Yunusa reads Gimba's novels as corrections of "societal ills."<sup>16</sup> These novels present female protagonists—Nashaa, Farah, Zynah, and others—who are activist in their concerns, fearlessly outspoken and public in their demands for gender justice in African society. In *Sacred Apples*, however, that Gimba is able to examine feminism through what Abel Joseph calls "introspection" and through what Babajo terms above as "internal discussion" is most useful to my analysis of Gimba's female protagonist Zahrah's engagement with Islam.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on the personal stance is meant to offset those of Gimba's female protagonists in his other novels that enact the feminine condition in public and activist spheres. Equally, this emphasis on introspection and internal discussion intervenes in the discussion on novels of the feminine condition that view the redefinition of feminist discourse as necessarily destabilizing the social and national narratives. For instance, Nana Wilson Tagoe efficiently reflects on the African novel on the feminine condition to ask how fully the feminine condition in the African novel can be explored if it is marginalized within a hierarchy of discourses in the novel. Specifically, she cites Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, where the "power of articulation" pertaining to women's oppression belongs to the male character, as the female character in

the novel, Beatrice, contributes nothing to such a theorization.<sup>18</sup> Wilson Tagoe thus identifies a key feature of the African novel on the feminine condition:

As a political project committed to changing unequal power relations between the sexes, it has transformed the notion of politics from its male conception as a change-seeking interest and made it an integral part of day-to-day relations between women and men.<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to novels that simply add the feminine theme to the national narrative (she names Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bit of Wood* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*), Wilson Tagoe cites Nuruddin Farah's novels where "constructions of the feminine are *imbricated* in wide-ranging systems of oppression and power relations that are traditional, colonial, and postcolonial" (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> Such novels, argues Wilson Tagoe, have redefined the meaning of the political "to investigate how the private domestic space can redefine and transform the public and political space."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the usefulness of Wilson Tagoe's reading strategy is borne out by an *intertextual* reading of a variety of novels from "different ideological positions and standpoints."<sup>22</sup> Reading intertextually would reveal, as Wilson Tagoe rightly declares, that the novel "expands its boundaries to accommodate the contending narratives."<sup>23</sup> In the end, in a radically innovative African novel on the feminine condition, the woman would be not merely an appendage to national history, but, as Wilson Tagoe puts it, "a destabilizing force that questions and rethinks fundamental assumptions behind the construction of women in society."<sup>24</sup>

In this vein, Gimba's protagonist Zahrah's process of individuation—her choice to manage her problems by eschewing organized and public activism; her modes of working out solutions through introspection, self-doubt, casual conversations, and even dreams, without seeking to undo the dichotomies of the private and public spheres or as a change-seeking agent of society; her turning inward instead to the Qur'an to evolve as an emotionally secure person for the purposes of her own personal affairs—no doubt expands the constricted definition of feminine and the boundaries of the novel. But, in so doing, it also offsets some of Wilson Tagoe's proposed strategies for reading the feminine condition in Africa only within "social networks of power" or as the power of the private and domestic space to redefine and transform the public and political space that the woman then sets about to explore, understand, or even destabilize.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, for Wilson Tagoe, the feminine condition of the African woman in the novel is sublimated in self-understanding as

agency—a social being in a social world of power relations. My reading of Gimba’s heroine in *Sacred Apples*, on the other hand, calls attention to the female protagonist’s sublimation of the self that is fueled by private experience, self-doubt, and contradictory emotions as agency for individual emotional maturation, with no manifest intention to redefine male-female relationships in the wider society, nation, or history. In fact, I read *Sacred Apples* to approach Wilson Tagoe’s powerful statement on women as centered subjects in the novel who “redefine new relationships to nation and history and impact on conceptions of space and time in the novel,” by emphasizing instead that the means and goals that Gimba’s heroine employs for this sublimation contain little sensibility to the public or societal processes to destabilize the wider society, nation, or even history, and to refocus feminist preoccupations on such private resources as her engagement with the Qur’an, prayer, and *dhikr*.<sup>26</sup> The goal of such a personal and private engagement is undoubtedly for emotional maturation and self-development, and, indeed, it broadens the scope of feminism in Islam to include under-studied means and ends of feminist expression.

### Spiritual Frequency as Solutions: *Ṣalāt* and *Dhikr*

As discussed in the previous chapter on Alkali’s *The Descendants*, *dhikr* or pious remembrance of God appears most commonly as a constant allusion to God. Within this broad definition of *dhikr*, this chapter shows that *dhikr*—remembrance, a constant consciousness of Allah—also nests in prayer, personal dialogues, monologues, introspections, and references to the Qur’an or God’s word itself. In this sense, the most recurrent tool for Islamic engagement used by both Zahrah and Farida is the form of *dhikr* through prayer, dialogues, references to the Qur’an, and introspections to make sense of their lives. As Michael Sells notes, *dhikr* is not limited only to the specific act of remembering God or an act of worship or ritual to that end. It encompasses a wide range of Islamic activity, including rituals such as fasting, the pilgrimage to Mecca, charity, and, of course, direct remembrance, such as the various forms of prayer. But as Sells explains, *dhikr* is

beyond specific rituals, the life and words of the Prophet serve as a model (*sunnaḥ*) for the Islamic community everywhere, continually recalled through prophetic sayings (*ḥadīth*), the chain of authorities by which they are related (*isnad*), and the comprehensive way of life (*shariaḥ*) based on the prophetic model.<sup>27</sup>

A casual evocation could, therefore, also constitute *dhikr*. Several *ḥadīth* attest to the importance of remembering God at times of distress and for various other needs. Bukhari devotes an entire chapter to Muhammad's habits and ways of invoking God in a variety of situations in the "Book of Invocations," reporting *ḥadīth* on verses and prayers Muhammad customarily recited in different situations, including distress, protection from danger, thanksgiving, remembrance, and repentance, to name a few.<sup>28</sup> Remembering God under duress, invoking his mercy, expressing consciousness of his power over things, supplicating for help, referring to his injunctions, especially in the Qur'an, citing prophetic precedence in the *sunna* as a template for one's own actions—all constitute a form of *dhikr* that reinforce an effort to instrumentalize Islam in the service of one's daily affairs.

### Functionalizing Islam in *Ṣalāt* and *Dhikr*: Dream Sequences, Monologues, and Inner Thoughts

In three specific instances of *dhikr*—*ṣalāt*; casual chats and dream sequences; and explicit references to the Qur'an on personal topics such as marriage, women's status, divorce, and polygamy—Zahrah, the central character in Gimba's *Sacred Apples*, conscripts Islam to wade through her personal problems. In all these instances—Zahrah's conversations with friends and family, allusions to the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, and her monologues, echoing her grandmother Zubaydah's thoughts—Zahrah is mindful of consciously involving Islam at every important emotional juncture of her life. She thus anchors her actions in the Qur'an, drawing out God's own design and desire about matters of everyday life, underscoring a woman's choice of resources for sorting out her problems. The first example in *Sacred Apples* of the way women deploy prayer as a spiritual resource appears in the opening pages—similar in style to *The Descendants*, which Alkali inaugurates with a prayer—in the elaborate description of Zubaydah's supplication. It takes place at a time when Zubaydah is worried about Zahrah's return from her husband Yazid's house to begin her waiting period, or *iddah*, following her divorce.<sup>29</sup> Zubaydah is troubled and unable to contain her trepidation. Unsure if her granddaughter will arrive safely, she moves "to the prayer corner in the room," to cope with her sense of hopelessness, and goes

down on her knees and raised up both hands in supplication. She remained on her knees for about thirty minutes, then sat down. Her



hands are still raised in supplication. She was now, however, more relaxed; the prayer seemed to have calmed her. Once again, a stream of thoughts began to intrude on her, and, in vain, she tried to wrestle her worst fears out of her mind. Thus she suffered her concentration: her mind vacillated between prayers and the whereabouts of the gem of her blood. (SA, 2)

The passage limns the movements of the prayer—genuflection and sitting posture—as Zubaydah supplicates. The prayer quells her anxiety but she is overcome by doubt again. Essentially, the prayer is a way of placating her fears as she uses it to mentally channel her thoughts into positive emotions. The weight of her trepidation is far too strong, making her question the power of prayer—“Are you in doubt as to the efficacy of prayers?”—echoing her internal monologue on her worst fears as she ponders her motivation for praying (SA, 2).

This inner debate between her foreboding and concentration is buoyed by her superstition of the hooting that makes her lose sight of the potency of prayer (SA, 3). Her wavering focus emblemizes the tussle for the human soul between human frailty and unswerving concentration for the divine power. Again, Zubaydah’s emotions prove too strong for her:

She was startled by the cry of a nightbird. A hooting owl perched on the mango tree at the back of her house, for the first time, frightened her. Why this night? For many months now this owl had been such a consistent nightly visitor, virtually turning the mango tree into its nocturnal abode such that no night was complete without its hooting. . . . But tonight? She wrestled with a creeping superstitious thought . . . the owl is a bird of ill omen. And there seemed to be a distinctive ring to the bird’s cry tonight: a frightening loudness as if it was right atop the roof of her room. Why? (SA, 1)

The overpowering force of her torment persists in the constant effort to concentrate. Once more, she kneels in supplication, hoping to find comfort in her prayers. Absorbed in her supplication or *du‘a*, she fails to hear the knock on the door, announcing Zahrah’s return (SA, 4).<sup>30</sup> This long and vivid description of a Muslim’s effort to pray, concentrate, and synthesize her innermost feelings exposes the intimate canvas of emotions and belief that Zubaydah employs in her engagement with Islam.

The shaping influence of the Qur’an and of Islamic literature on Zahrah’s decisions are prominently pronounced at an early age in Zahrah’s life; they are a template that guides her decision to marry as a teenager,



her decision to pursue an education, and even in her gradual maturation into an emotionally independent and self-reliant woman following her divorce with Yazid. In the first prominent instance when Zahrah turns to the Qur'an for help, she solicits her half-brother Ya-Shareef's assistance to help her with her confusion about accepting Yazid's proposal of marriage. As Zahrah falls madly in love with Yazid, and he proposes marriage, she is predictably confused, feeling too young to marry and that marriage will interfere with her university education. "She wasn't amused by his request . . . I'm too young . . . can't imagine myself being called a housewife . . . I'm only seventeen plus . . .," she tells her grandmother Zubaydah, who feels otherwise and counsels her to accept the proposal (SA, 48). Unable to convince her grandmother of her reluctance to marry early, Zahrah secretly hopes that her brother Shareef will come to her rescue. And indeed he does, by extensively quoting from the Qur'an and *hadith* to make a case on Zahrah's behalf for her education. Shareef first argues that Zahrah is too young to understand relationships (SA, 50). But as the grandparents believe that "marriage was more important for her than her pursuit of higher education," Shareef effectively uses the Qur'an to support his point against early marriage:

I respect Yazid's grandfather, . . . but as a learned religious scholar he should know better. The first word revealed in our Book of Guidance is Read and not Marry. Marriage is therefore secondary to education. (SA, 50)

Shareef then explains the value of knowledge in Islam by interpreting this exhortation to mean the pursuit of all kinds of knowledge and not just religious knowledge. He refers to the all-encompassing wisdom of the Qur'an, beyond just the exhortation to fulfill rituals: "do we just learn only how to perform ablution, how to pray, how to fast, or perform our rituals and then fold our arms? No . . . the Book exhorts us to do much more" (SA, 51). He goes on to quote the widely circulated *hadith* on going as far as China in search of knowledge<sup>31</sup> and concludes, "taking a swipe at a cultural whim that had sadly acquired an aura of meritorious religious convention":

I believe it's such an encompassing knowledge that makes faith stronger . . . this is why, I think, if girls are to be forced to do anything at all, it should be to acquire education, learning and not marriage . . . A pity . . . the converse is the case; girls are forced to abandon education for marriage—a sorrowful inversion of divine priority. (SA, 51)

Zahrah knows from Shareef's cogent argument that her wish will be fulfilled, "with her brother's support . . . that she would at least continue with her education" (SA, 52). When Yazid promises that she can continue with her education and not start a family immediately, Zahrah feels reassured. Besides, she

loved Yazid. She would not lose him . . . Yazid, however, promised that barring any accident, he would do everything possible to ensure that Zahrah did not become pregnant before her graduation. It was a confidential undertaking between the two of them. A four year undertaking . . . and Zahrah was very happy. Yazid had meant everything to her. She rarely contemplated a life without him (SA, 53).

Several points can be noted from the foregoing. First, Zahrah is not forcibly married off. If Zubaydah pressures her to value marriage over education, Shareef supports her using even religion to scaffold his stance. Furthermore, Yazid reassures her that she can continue studying. Finally, as the passage makes clear, she loves her husband and is happy with him.

The second important moment when Zahrah enlists the Qur'an for personal assistance is shortly following her completion of the Islamically ordained waiting period, or *iddah*, after her divorce with Yazid. More frequently than before her divorce, Zahrah now deploys the Qur'an to shape her emotional maturation and self-reliance, consciously turning and returning to it to justify her actions in the Book. Zahrah and her friend Miriam chat about women's positions in society, selfhood, and even the "divine division of labour," among other topics (SA, 66). Miriam quotes the Qur'an that women need to take their husband's names after marriage, evolving into a conversation on dependence, woman's selfhood, and her own identity. "Call them by their father's name . . .," she quotes her husband showing her the verse in the Qur'an to convince her to keep her Christian name even after marriage, thus revealing to Zahrah that her husband Rashad, a Muslim, in fact discouraged Miriam from taking his name (SA, 67, 69). As for Zahrah, she reflects on her own marriage to Yazid and realizes that, during the nine years of marital bliss, she had done nothing but depend on him and live as an appendage to his name. Moreover, she had not taken up an occupation, "consciously surrendering her destiny in to the hands of a man, without any counterindemnity" (SA, 66). This casual chat with Miriam deepens into a conversation on emotional dependence as Zahrah grows in the realization that her self-reliance has steadily diminished over the years: "A small step in marital compromise . . . but a great leap towards marital subservience . . . an

unacknowledged sacrifice of identity” (SA, 68). She listens intently to Miriam with admiration as her Christian friend talks at length about the Qur’an:

Zahrah listened to her friend with admiration: that, she said to herself, was the wisdom of the Book which her nonmuslim friend seemed to grasp. She agreed with her, and nodded her head to signify so: she would indeed rather be the property of her father than that of Yazid. Yet, blinded by love, she agreed to be Mrs. Yazid . . . She carried his name tag, compromised to be his property! (SA, 68).

Zahrah thus reshapes her life by refreshing her knowledge of the Qur’an, drawing intimately from it to reconstruct her thoughts, stance, and future, by aligning her life with its recommendations. It merits noting that at this point in her life when this conversation about self-reliance with Miriam occurs, Zahrah is divorced due to a misunderstanding with Yazid, through no fault of hers, and shakily adjusting to life as a working mother, never having worked before. She has been attacked by a mob on her way back to her grandmother’s house shortly after the divorce, she is nearly molested by a wanted criminal on being abandoned by the mob, and yet she recognizes the “wisdom of the Book” (SA, 68). In short, she makes no connection between all the ills that befall her and Islamic practice.

This new phase in Zahrah’s life, as she moves past her divorce with Yazid and debates about accepting a polygamous proposal from her boss, Nousah, presents itself as the third main juncture in her life in her private engagement with Islam, underscored in the form of dialogues with Miriam and dream sequence monologues with her now-deceased grandmother, Zubaydah. Zahrah falls in love again, this time with her boss, Nousah, who is already married but estranged from his first wife, Salimah (Salma). As Nousah proposes marriage to Zahrah, she has another conversation with Miriam about polygamy. Zahrah makes it clear that she has reservations about polygamous marriage but not on account of polygamy itself as Nousah already has a wife: “It’s not that I’m against polygamy . . . no, I believe in its *divine mercy*. I don’t mind sharing, but the shattering hassles . . . I want to save myself the headaches” (SA, 127, emphasis added). But in addition to this dialogue with Miriam, Zahrah has now begun to dream about her grandmother, Zubaydah, who passes away soon after Zahrah’s divorce with Yazid. Zahrah feels that “she had lost a physical part of herself,” to refer to Zubaydah’s role in her life as a counselor and confidant (SA, 65).

Feeling the need for pronounced guidance in her decisions, Zahrah frequently dreams about conversations with her grandmother on topics where Zahrah most needs advice. More on the lines of dream-monologue sequences, describing Zahrah's intimate thought process as she wrestles with her feelings, Zahrah increasingly relies on Qur'anic guidelines for help. During one such imaginary dialogue—dream sequence conversation with Zubaydah—with regard to polygamy, her deceased grandmother chastises her for turning down Nousah's proposal. Although Zahrah convinces her grandmother that she “had no disdain for the institution,” she is unable to support her argument for demurring Nousah's proposal (SA, 129). But as if reading her own mind, Zahrah hears her grandmother advise her that relationships do not come with guarantees, “it's all trial and error” (SA, 130). Zahrah battles her reservations about polygamy and imagines Zubaydah telling her that since she has never been in a polygamous situation, and that relationships come with no guarantee, seeing as her monogamous marriage with Yazid also ended in failure, her fears about a polygamous arrangement are imaginary and that she may be overthinking the topic. Zahrah finally marries Nousah but refuses to move in with him as she prefers keeping her autonomy and independent dwelling. She even uses Islamic history, the *sunna* of Muhammad, to justify her choice against moving out of her flat, and in with Nousah, revealing without a doubt, that she seeks justification in the Qur'an and *hadith* for her decisions. She cites “prophetic precedence” only to be corrected by her brother, Shareef, that “the Prophet had someone at home: he was living with one of his wives” (SA, 153). Zahrah is hesitant and fears being abandoned but eventually relents and moves in with Nousah.

However, within the first year of their marriage, Zahrah's worst fears come true as Nousah remarries a young undergraduate, Aalimah. Zahrah is astounded but is aware that Nousah is already married to Salimah (Salma). Gradually, however, Zahrah adjusts to the situation and begins to like it: “polygamy, she told herself, wasn't so bad after all: a miniature community, a good tutorial ground for life in the larger society. She felt happy at the experience she was going through. She had tried to make the best out of a situation she loathed” (SA, 162). But she soon comes to realize that her co-wives are not as adjusting and benign as she perceives them to be. Overcome by intense jealousy, cupidity, and hatred for one another, in addition to being childless, the two co-wives plot to murder Zahrah and Nousah. Zahrah is now pregnant with Nousah's child, and, unbeknownst to her, Salimah sends them poisoned apples each day, hoping that the poison will eventually end their lives. Zahrah learns that the conspiracy to harm her and Nousah was orchestrated with the assistance

of a scoundrel, an-Najmu, a fake spiritual leader, as “Salma [Salimah] had been an ardent patron of soothsayers, marabouts and juju men” (SA, 173). From a police inquiry, Zahrah finds out that an-Najmu operated a gang of hoodlums, running a citywide scam on extortion, murder, and smuggling, including preying on women with marital and emotional problems such as Zahrah’s feckless co-wives, Aalimah and Salimah, to extort money.

Zahrah’s opinion on scoundrels who pose as spiritual intermediaries exposes her maturation as a Muslim. For the first time on her own, without tutoring from Shareef, Zubaydah, or even Miriam, Zahrah fiercely reveals her revulsion for marabouts or middlemen who destroy her marriage and kill her husband (SA, 179). Confronted by extreme emotional and spiritual crises—the ostensible tensions between faith and occultic practice as Fajenyo and Osunde have put it—Zahrah turns, once again, to the Qur’an to reveal her views.<sup>32</sup> She unequivocally equates the practice of consulting spiritual intermediaries, in most stringent or perhaps dogmatic terms, as previous commentators on the novel would say, to *shirk*, or associating other beings with God, a grave sin in Islam.<sup>33</sup> She boldly declaims to Miriam:

Such a belief is an odious insolence to our faith. *Shirk*, we call it. It ranks, in opprobrium, to the crime of high treason. God abhors it . . . it’s polytheism of sorts . . . She paused. She wanted to continue, in lamentation over the state of decadence in matters of faith; the change of religious practices into no more than fossilized rituals, banishing a true life of faith to the backseat. She lamented this degeneration that had created room for some few learned ones with insight and God’s blessings to arrogate to themselves professing to help others while cheating and sowing discord among them. (SA, 179)

But Nousah’s death causes deep emotional damage, and Zahrah suffers for months:

She remained a shell of her former self. She had lost weight: her lean, haggard, and dull look made that quite evident. She often wore a distant look like someone who, in search of a lost jewel, was trying hard to recollect where she might have misplaced it. She seemed to have lost her cheery, oftentimes vibrant personality. (SA, 222)

Weakened by the miscarriage and Nousah’s murder, Zahrah returns to the internal dream sequence monologue-dialogue with Zubaydah and the

Qur'an to make sense of her ill-borne fate. She fleshes out her original misgivings about polygamy to overcome her emotional confusion. She quotes the verse in the Qur'an about the restriction on polygamy and the permission at the same time, as if talking to Zubaydah: "in the book . . . He says, if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with them—women, then marry one . . . that will be more suitable, to prevent from doing injustice . . ." (SA, 245). Zahrah echoes the Qur'anic verse in *Al Nisa*, considered as the definitive ruling and restriction on polygamy:

Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hand possess. That will be more suitable for you, to prevent you from doing injustice. (4:3)

When her inner voice, or Zubaydah, in her dream responds to ask, "and you think he doesn't know that?" Zahrah replies, "He does . . . He even said so: You are never able to do justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire . . .," to echo the verse from *Al Nisa* (4:120). And then she is reminded by Zubaydah or she herself remembers a crucial point:

You're right . . . but why don't you recollect as well what He said in the same verse . . . He says, But turn not away from any of them altogether . . . Is that a discouragement? If God wants to discourage a thing, He doesn't mince words. God created us . . . He knew what he created. (SA, 254)

Zahrah argues that, based on the verse, since one can never be just with more than one wife, it is best to marry just one. Zubaydah's rejoinder comes also from the very same verse (4:120), that men are enjoined not to turn away from the practice either. Zubaydah even nuances the Qur'anic verse on polygamy to differentiate between obligation and permission, a general acceptance of God's wisdom and an incomplete understanding of it. She therefore exemplifies, I would suggest, a rare level of personal, critical, and spiritual sophistication in her interpretation of this verse as she says: "God has only permitted polygamy, not made it an obligation. Yet some loathe it as if it were an injunction which God made in error" (SA, 246). When Zahrah says she agrees with all this but doesn't understand why her "family was torn asunder—Nousah is dead," blaming polygamy for his death, her grandmother or her own voice, once again, makes her realize that "Nousah died not because of polygamy but because of man's greed and lust. It could have happened to him even if he were not

married” (SA, 245–47). Years later, this constant engagement with the Qur’an, a form of *dhikr*, where Zahrah has continually sought to recognize God’s law, invoked it, and abided by it, matures into the conviction that “the Book was the answer to women’s woes. She studied the Book more. She prayed more. And the *hijab* became the first outward manifestation of her conviction” (SA, 288). She defends her decision to adopt the *hijab* with the following explanation to her prospective son-in-law: “Let them call me anything . . . , . . . ‘fanatic, fundamentalist, born-again . . . And *hijab* is part of the culture of my community—of believers’” (SA, 288). And, again, she becomes more conscious of the prayers: “The muezzin’s call to the dawn *fajr* prayers interrupted Zahrah’s thoughts. Again, she checked the time. It was half past five. She got up. Took her bath, and said her prayers” (SA, 289).

The ending of the novel, moreover, is a culmination of this continued engagement, a summation of Zahrah’s monologues, conversations, and vetting of her knowledge on Islamic practice to become a more conscious Muslim for self-improvement and satisfaction. The ending also effectively juxtaposes Zahrah’s personal engagement with Islam with her involvement in the local chapter of a women’s organization, only to foreground perhaps Gimba’s own privileging of women’s personal and active involvement with the religion to solve their problems. Zahrah’s involvement then in “one of the national women’s organizations” that she earns by dint of her professional success and “*silent activism*” is part of a heightened sense of her own situation as a wronged woman (SA, 272, emphasis added). Zahrah uses the lens of her private experience to study women’s problems—her tempestuous marriages, her shaky growth from a shy and under-confident teenager to a self-reliant and mature professional and person—in the hopes of cracking the riddles at “the roots of women’s problems,” only to be deeply disappointed by women’s organizations (SA, 276). She feels she must continue to probe for a solution: “She would search. That was the challenge of the struggle. One day, she hoped, she would find answers. For now, however, her confidence in the women’s organization was waning. Her interest was palling. They would not deliver women to the promised land” (SA, 276).

In also presenting a response to the critical view that Muslim women rebel against patriarchy by depicting Ya-Shareef, Nousah, and Miriam’s husband Rashad as male voices for women’s education, selfhood, and personal growth, Gimba challenges the critical consensus that Islam is unambiguously represented as a patriarchal religion that northern Nigerian Muslim women seek to escape. As Alkali presents both kinds of men—patriarchal, like Habu and Dan Fiamia in *The Stillborn*, and

respectful of women, like Baba Sani, Bello, and Aji in *The Virtuous Woman* and *The Descendants*, respectively—Gimba, too, offers the same trope of presentation with Yazid and An-Najmu, but also counters them with Ya-Shareef, Nousah, and Rashad. Two tangential observations can be made from these depictions. First, Shareef, Nousah, and Rashad are well-meaning, loving, sensitive, and generous Muslim men. Secondly, both men rationalize the Qur'an to uphold its wisdom for women, as Shareef upholds Zahrah's desire to study and Rashad and Nousah encourage their wives in their professional endeavors. Both these orientations—Zahrah's voluntary and personal engagement with Islam by not seeing the religion as a hindrance but seeking out its presence or *dhikr* to guide decisions, and the balanced portrayal of misogynistic men with reasonable ones—are also the thematic focus of Ali's *Destiny*, which sits between the Onitsha novels, catering to the Western audience, and Kano market literature, speaking to the Muslim population, as the Hausa characters in the novel perform the musical “The Sound of Music,” making it earn the label, as Kassam calls it, a love story of the “Mills and Boon ‘forbidden love’ variety” (*D*, 14).<sup>34</sup>

Farida will turn to prayer—*ṣalāt* and *dhikr*—to overcome a number of personal predicaments, namely a forced marriage, an awkward understanding with her husband, and intense opposition from her family and husband to all her efforts. The first of the many insuperable problems during which Farida resolutely turns to *dhikr* is to cope with her guardians' refusal to let her accept a teaching offer in Kaduna, forcing her to stay in Sabon Birni and marry a suitor of their choice, the affluent but arrogant Wali el-Yakub. Farida and Farouk have a foreboding that Farida's guardians will persuade her to marry Wali, a pompous suitor of their choosing: “they feared that should Farida be posted to teach in a primary school in her home she might be forced into an unwanted marriage” (*D*, 18). Farida, therefore, requests the assistance of a kind teacher, Mrs. Attah, to secure her a teaching position in Kaduna and not in her hometown. For Farida, Mrs. Attah exemplifies the interlocked realities of a Muslim woman's desire for a career, marriage, and education, and is known to admirably manage her career and household. Her accomplishments mirror Farida's aspirations of a life balanced with marriage, career, and education:

Farida had always admired Mrs. Attah for her successful marriage and promising career, contrary to the general belief that a woman could only keep a home. Mrs. Attah had demonstrated the ability to perform both roles successfully. She was the most skilled teacher Farida



had ever known. She was highly intelligent. She was charismatic, with a generally warm personality and good disposition to people. (*D*, 7)

Furthermore, Mrs. Attah's husband is a senior staff member in the Ministry of Education, and is able to help Farida by assuring her of a teaching position in Kaduna, but Aunt Nana is furious and thwarts Farida's plans on the pretext that she is too young to be by herself in a large city like Kaduna (*D*, 18). Farida is not close to her aunt, for she "epitomized cruelty, envy and selfishness" (*D*, 30).

During this turbulent period in her life, marked by altercations with her guardians and extreme pressure to marry Wali against her will, Farida finds it difficult to focus on anything. She spends the entire day worrying about her future with Farouk. Yet, her day is rhythmized by prayer, remembrance of God, or *dhikr*:

Farida remained in her room all day except at prayer times, when she went to the shower room to make ablution for prayers. Fortunately for her, too, no visitor came to the house that particular day because she would have to come out and pay her respects. For that she was really grateful to Allah. (*D*, 20)

When grappling with this problem, under intense pressure and uncertainty over her future with no one to support her emotionally, Farida thinks about God; referring to her desperate search for a possible solution to her problems, "she and her aunt said the azahar prayers together" (*D*, 32). And "after the La'asar prayers, Farida rushed to the postal agency . . ." and finally, "as it was already evening and time for the 'magrib prayers,' she quietly went into the shower-room and cleaned herself in readiness for her evening prayers. She quickly returned to her room and began to pray" (*D*, 20, 25). Furthermore, she observes the Islamic decorum of greeting according to Islamic expectation: "'Salama Alaikum,' said Farida at the entrance of Mallam Tanimu's house" (*D*, 25). Following the visit with her neighbor, "on the way home she thought about God, her parents and Uncle Abba," and, on reaching home, Farida returns to her prayer, "as it was already evening and time for the Magrib prayers, she quietly went in the shower room and cleaned herself in readiness for her evening prayers. She quickly returned to her room and began to pray" (*D*, 28, 30). At every juncture, thus, Farida evokes God and observes the Islamic mandate of performing the canonical prayer or *ṣalāt*.<sup>35</sup> The entire description of the day—from the time she quarrels with her guardians about not being allowed to work in Kaduna to midday when she prays the *azahar*

prayers and then visits with her neighbor to her return for the *magharib* prayer—is circumscribed by *dhikr* in performing the prayer and in thinking of God.

Farida is soon relieved when Farouk visits her family to propose to her, and her guardians see no problem in sending her to Kaduna or even to Kano to begin her teaching career as Farouk requests this of them on her behalf. Her uncle is impressed with Farouk's manners and Farida is overjoyed. Farouk is also able to get Uncle Abba a job in Kano (*D*, 30–31). All is well for a brief period of time and Farida believes her guardians will marry her to Farouk. But when the imperious Wali el-Yakub hears of Farida's plans to marry Farouk, he hastily intervenes, and imposes on her uncle:

Why didn't you tell me all these years that you were tied up? I have failed in my duty as a true friend of the family. I did not know. I must make it up to you. Here is N 1,00.00. From today you shall not want. You should not even think of working in your condition. How much will the government pay you? I shall triple that figure, Wali claimed. (*D*, 40)

He thus seals Farida's fate and asks for her hand in return for his ostentatious generosity:

Wali told the elders that he may come to ask Alhaji Abba to marry Farida his niece. He then went out to his car and brought back two suitcases. They contained gifts of clothes and jewelries for Farida. They also signified his intentions to marry Farida. (*D*, 40)

The marriage is arranged without Farida's consultation or knowledge. On hearing her guardians' wishes for her to marry Wali, Farida instinctively wonders why "the Almighty Allah was forsaking her," again revealing consciousness of his power over her, or *dhikr* (*D*, 29). Her "faith in God begins to falter" and she believes that "nature was being unfair to her" (*D*, 29). Not only does this questioning signal Farida's instinctive evocation of God in times of trouble but, more importantly, it exposes her implicit consciousness of God as the author of all events. Her bewilderment only gestures to the spontaneity of her religious faith that this misfortune is caused by God. Dispirited and traumatized by her guardians' abrupt and self-serving change of plans and egoism, Farida "even ran in front of a running car to get run over . . . she refused so many meals . . . crying became a pastime" (*D*, 43). When she finally stops protesting, her close

friend Laila counsels her about *dhikr*: “Pray to Allah for the strength to bear the loss. Pray to him for guidance in your marriage. Only God knows why things have turned out this way for you” (*D*, 56). Farida succumbs to her guardians’ wishes and marries Wali, and the marriage takes place without her will: “regardless of Farida’s wishes, the marriage to Wali was contracted” (*D*, 61).<sup>36</sup> According to Islamic law, however, a woman’s consent is mandatory for the marriage contract to be valid.<sup>37</sup> Ali discusses no attempt at a legal recourse by Farida in a region where Islamic law or *shari’a* provides legal provisions against contraventions such as these. Farida’s struggles, on the other hand, are staged within the familial fold through interpersonal interactions with her family and the strength of her own personal willpower to overcome her setbacks, gesturing again to the personal and private measures undertaken to deal with personal problems.

Farida’s frustrations persist even in the second part of the novel as she wishes to study, thus relying again on *dhikr* during the second important juncture in her life as her *dhikr* becomes more pronounced in staking out a quest to join a teacher-training college. Like Zahrah in *Sacred Apples*, who faces a series of personal and emotional setbacks but continues with her plans, Farida, too, persists in her ambition. She tries to convince Wali that “a sound education . . . was the only guarantee to a successful business venture” (*D*, 63). At every given opportunity, she broaches the topic with him in long discussions on the merits of a good education: “a sound education is a passport to a better conduct of domestic affairs” (*D*, 65). Though enjoying motherhood and married life as “Farida had settled down to married life remarkably well,” she is unmoved by flattery when Wali tries to dissuade her from pursuing her plans (*D*, 63). He tells her that she is “a good wife and mother. You are conducting your domestic affairs successfully. Why then do you need a qualification higher than your Grade II Teacher education?” Farida calmly responds to this ostensible admiration for her all-round abilities—“flattery will get you nowhere”—and briskly resumes her speech on the value of a sound education, citing “self-fulfillment” and enlightenment as its worthy goals (*D*, 65).

But, more importantly, I would suggest, Farida does not blame her condition on her practice of Islam or resign to the passivity that critics of the novel have attributed to Muslim women. When she receives a fourth offer of admission to a teacher’s training college, she resolutely prays:

Dear God, help me make Wali permit me to go on to a higher institution of learning. In the alternative, let him permit me take up a

teaching job, she prayed. This boredom is killing me, she continued, as if complaining to the Almighty. (*D*, 67)

Unambiguously, she believes that only God can help her: “a degree I must have. Allah will make my ambition a reality” (*D*, 72). Re-energized by prayer and faith in God, she starts out again, this time reminding Wali that

a month after their marriage, he had promised her that he would only let her go on to a higher institution of learning if she has a baby for him. Allah had helped her keep her part of the bargain, why is he refusing to keep his? (*D*, 67–68)

Farida’s unshakable faith in God is sharpened through her resounding acknowledgment of God’s authorship in helping her bring her desires to fruition. Once again seeing God as her ally, she believes that it is because of him that she was able to fulfill her part of the deal of having a baby with her unrelenting husband. In each expression of her desire to study, Farida performs the *dhikr*, “Allah,” “Almighty,” and “Dear God,” not to impute frustration to her faith but to recruit it instead to realize her thwarted ambitions. After much persuasion, Wali does agree to let Farida study and even go abroad. She begins studying at a teacher’s training institute and adjusts well to life in London (*D*, 87). But soon after her arrival in London, Farida learns of Wali’s true character. He has taken another wife and has involved himself in a plot to find out if Farouk, Farida’s old love interest, has anything to do with Wali’s security clearance in getting visas: “Wali took on a second wife. While he was on his honeymoon, Farida moved out of their home” (*D*, 98–99). Farida also learns that Wali had been cheating on her with her old school friend, Tinu (*D*, 88). Farida expedites her divorce with Wali and is reunited with her old love, Farouk.

Instead of stressing Farida’s forced marriage as a submissive acceptance of fate, as critics of the novel—Kassam, Ohaeto, and others—have put forth, I would like to emphasize Farida’s tireless efforts to overcome her personal and emotional hardships. In particular, I focus on Farida’s strategies of persuasion and discussion with Wali to convince him to consent to her education that draw directly from the Qur’an and its recommendations for prevailing in one’s efforts. In this regard, Farida’s *dhikr* is afforded by the Qur’anic principle of patience and perseverance through prayer or reliance on God, and by never renouncing a struggle for a noble purpose. The Qur’an consistently and rather unambiguously echoes these virtues: “Nay, seek Allah’s help with patient perseverance and prayer” (2:45). In the note to this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali elaborates on the

many shades of the word in Arabic in the verse, “*ṣabr*,” that include “constancy, steadfastness and firmness of purpose,” three qualities that Farida manifests in her regular efforts to convince her husband about her plans to study further.<sup>38</sup> A verse in the Qur’anic chapter “Al Mumtahinah,” likewise, states: “There was indeed in them an excellent example for you to follow—for those whose hope is in Allah” (60:6). In a footnote to this verse, Ali explains the meaning of the words “in them” as the “attitude of prayer and reliance on Allah,” as Farida explicitly relies on Allah and even expresses it by stating aloud that none other than Allah will make her ambition a reality.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Farida’s perseverance parallels the Qur’anic principle of never losing hope in the struggle for a noble cause, as described in another verse in the chapter “Saba,” where the virtue of being tested in faith is lauded and valued.<sup>40</sup> In his discussion on *ṣalāt*, Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi interprets the Qur’anic emphases on patience and perseverance in a number of other similar verses as follows: “In general, the Qur’anic meaning of patience (2:153, 13:22 and 22:35) reminds the believer of the necessity of constant perseverance and struggle against the evils of the self and life’s hardships.”<sup>41</sup> All three verses that Abu-Rabi lists above repeat the words “patience and perseverance” when facing hardships. All three verses also very clearly suggest “prayers” as the solution to overcoming difficult situations, mentioned as “afflictions.”<sup>42</sup> If, as Kassam evocatively argues, misfortunes and fate are attributed to Islam, then, as seen above, there is also an unremitting persistence to fight passivity in Farida, using *ṣalāt*, or prayer, and a constant allusion to God as her ally through *dhikr*.

Kassam is not wrong in observing the self-serving patriarchal and egotistical interests epitomized by Farida’s guardians and her husband, Wali, and in reading the minute customs of Hausa society, as depicted in the gift-giving economy in the novel, that perpetuate greed and materialism in Farida’s guardians. Farida’s active engagement and unswerving persistence in her references to her faith in Islam as a means to accomplish her goals, thus validating a personal connection with the religion, however, is often subsumed in appraisals of the society and of predictable topoi such as patriarchy. Never does Farida internalize her guardians’ or her husband’s viewpoints on marriage as she unrelentingly finds ways to resume her education, never missing an opportunity to discuss with Wali her desire to study further. Furthermore, it may be argued that Farida succumbs to her guardians’ wishes of marrying Wali out of respect for their generosity in educating her and giving her a home upon her father’s death: “she was not sure any more if she had the right to deny her guardians the generosity of a rich son-in-law” (*D*, 45). Aunt Nana may mask

egoistic motives in religious talk, but Farida is not fooled by her aunt's duplicity or by Wali's vacuous flattery of her talent for motherhood and household management, for she continues to beseech God's help in realizing her ambitions. Indeed, when Kassam notes that Farida's guardians are eager to marry her off to Wali, as they want to be financially secure in their old age, she rather incorrectly presumes that Farida is unaware of their real motives and that she succumbs to fatalism disguised as divine will (*D*, 123). In view of Farida's independent spiritual actions, namely her voluntary observance of spiritual practices, it is hard to resist reading her as a woman with an underappreciated sense of critical independence and resolve in her thinking and actions who, much to the chagrin perhaps of the commonplace critical stance, does not equate her misfortunes to her adherence of Islam.

The active, instinctive, and voluntary engagement with religion in personal and private matters in the observance of rituals, frequently seeking out the Qur'an, and directly invoking God in a variety of situations, especially difficult ones, reveal Muslim women's intimate thoughts and feelings on Islam. More precisely, the *dhikr* fosters an understanding of the spiritual labor that is expended to accomplish their goals through a willful engagement of the consciousness of God. Such a consciousness—discernible in Zahrah's repeated efforts to search out answers to her personal problems in the Qur'an and Farida's constant invocation of God—underlines their voluntary acknowledgment of his power and authorship of all things and his ability to help and even obstruct. At no point does either woman see Islam as a hindrance or a source of their problems. Zahrah, in fact, matures by engaging the Qur'an to evolve her thoughts on life. Even in times of intense duress, Farida doesn't miss a prayer or renounce hope of succeeding in her pursuits, using *dhikr* to guide her along. Both women exemplify critical maturity and nuance in their thinking in being able to distinguish between individual egoism and their personal spiritual obligations when investing in their spiritual actions. Furthermore, neither woman engages Islam beyond the realm of a personal fulfillment of her goals and aspirations, pertaining to private matters such as marriage, interpersonal relations, and self-improvement, thereby evincing interest in the personal and private dimensions of the religion for Muslim women. Equally, Zahrah and Farida persevere, patiently waiting for opportunities to bring their goals to fruition by positively harnessing the resources in their environment—*ṣalāt* and *dhikr*—displaying in the process the core qualities of a nego-feminist and African womanist who is guarded, cautious, and goal-oriented when coordinating and managing different situations in her environment. Zahrah is helped by

her brother, Ya-Shareef, when he makes a case for her education, and she engages in dialogic action or *Umoja* with her husband, Nousah, as he supports her wishes. Indeed, African Muslim women—Zahrah and Farida—trace African-Islamic feminism on a mutually beneficial conjugation of African feminism with a personal, private and individual mode of spiritual engagement with Islam in Islamic feminism.





## EPILOGUE

### Exposing Regional, Conceptual, and Discursive Veils through African-Islamic Feminism

This book has located Islamic feminism within the compass of personal, private, and individualized modes of engagement with Islam that draw their energy from rituals, habits, and beliefs neither collectively articulated or deliberated, nor politically oriented toward such goals as public reform and gender justice. This book's ambition is not to evacuate socio-economic or even political realities from women's lives; quite the contrary, it is to wonder if all women insist on, as Badran claims, "public identification of themselves as committed Muslims."<sup>1</sup> Focusing, therefore, on the Qur'an as more than a source of *fiqh* or *sharīa* or as an instrument of "sharia activism," *Privately Empowered* has revisited the cornerstone of Islamic scripture for its spiritual promulgations in women's lives. It has approached women as quotidian practitioners of Islam rather than as "gender activists," with a biliterate expectation to broaden both the regional and conceptual scopes of Islamic feminism and to reconfigure the vocabularies and goals of Islamic feminism that have rendered African-Islamic feminism the underprivileged child of feminist discourse.

Not only disproportionately focused on an extremely small region of the Muslim world, namely the Middle East and the surrounding regions, but also (perhaps because of it) conceptually limited to the imbrications of the nation-state and collective participation as the wellspring for its agenda, the profuse critical iterations on Islamic feminism have unstintingly valued women's public, group, and political enfranchisement, obscuring, as this book has shown throughout, modes of feminist expression that do not accrue to these goals. In an effort to conjugate the common points between African and Islamic feminists, this book has conversed with both African and Islamic feminist theories by underlining a deficient regional and ideological grammar that leadenly connects Muslim women's expression of feminism to the historical evolutions of the Islamic nation-state, collective public projects, and legal goals. When Mahmood adroitly clarifies that the participants of the mosque movement in Egypt do not "directly engage the state and its juridical discourses," the assumption, as she continues that "all contemporary social movements find their genesis in a politics of

identity,” lacks accountability to the realities of African Muslim women for whom modes of spiritual engagement for personal, private, and individual fulfillment may not fall within the purview of social movements in the first place. Mahmood continues a couple of lines later:

To the extent that all aspects of human life (whether they pertain to family, education, worship, welfare, commercial transactions, instances of birth and death, and so on) have been brought under the regulatory apparatuses of the nation-state, the piety movement’s efforts to remake any of these activities will necessarily have political consequences.<sup>2</sup>

It is, as Mahmood quotes Charles Hirschkind to elucidate the political nature of even piety projects, “subsumed within (and transformed by) the legal and administrative structures linked to the state,” and for success, therefore, the “traditional project of preserving those virtues will necessarily be political.”<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, the piety movement has not “politicized” spirituality in quite the same way as state-sponsored programs, but by virtue of being a “project,” a “movement” that “must engage with the all-encompassing institutions and structures of modern governance whether it aspires to state power or not” for its efficacy, the purportedly tenuous connections even in such orientations that do not directly engage the state are precisely the vocabularies, as I have argued, that continue to implicate Islamism in discourses on Islamic feminism, complicit or athwart. For the women I have presented in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction, instances of birth, family, education, and worship do not have political consequences. These instances remain enveloped in personal, private, and individual concerns and actions as does the spiritual that is consubstantial with such concerns and actions. Thus, when Rauf ostensibly favors women’s private roles in the family and skills in piety, management, and negotiation, her goal for political empowerment underlying her formulations repeats the reflexivity of political agendas of feminist movements. Indeed, even when dis severing the goals of women’s activities from state-sponsored organizations, typically and conventionally encoded in legislative reform, electoral participation, or state-building, the public tenor of piety in Islam with underlying concepts of *da’wa* vitiates the salience of the private modes of spiritual engagement for equally private goals such as the ones I have explored in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction. Unmistakably, these private goals draw breath in the literary culture of *Soyayya* books where Hausa women spearhead writing on issues most relevant to them. In so doing, *Soyayya* authors reveal most faithfully the ambit of Islam

in women's private lives. More important, they reveal forms of feminist engagement in spiritual activity.

The cardinal points of Islamic feminism and gender questions will always be marked by politics, law, nation-states, and gender activism. So long as this nexus veils Islamic feminism, other modes of expression will remain woefully unexplored as other venues of Islamic engagement and practice will continue to be poorly theorized or simply ignored, especially in sites where Islam has not enjoyed a long history of political participation in governance and legal structures, in a continent of no less than five hundred million Muslims, but with only Mauritania as its solitary Islamic republic. Briefly then, cooke's recommendation of Islamic feminism as a "faith position" is most apt without, however, its extension as "sharia activism," or as a platform for gender rights and legal participation, for a personal, private, and individual faith position squarely invokes the specificity of Islam in women's lives that has often been, to evoke Kandiyoti, evacuated from formulations of feminism.<sup>4</sup> Following the compass of women's personal, private, and individual faith positions then, I have explored the various spiritual coordinates of quotidian practice in northern Nigerian Muslim women's lives, plotted on personal, private, and individual lines of prayer—*ṣalāt*, *duʿa*, *dhikr*, Islamic faith or *shahādah*, virtuous behavior or *akhlāq*, and modesty in the *ḥijāb* or veil.

In arguing along with other theorists like Alidou, Loimeier, and Bangura, among others, that not only have African Muslims been absent for so long from Islamic discourse and their realities de-emphasized, but that critics have constantly discoursed on Islam in Africa with an attitudinal veil, to borrow Kassam's expression, I have sighted a discursive veil, an attitudinal cover, that must also be shaken to expose engagements veiled by the persistent view. Even as recently as 2009, Kanchana Ugbabe writes that Alkali's views on marriage are

cynical: wives are abused, silenced, deceived and treated as inconsequential. Men disrupt the quiet and constant flow of a woman's life with their oversized egos and their selfishness. Women are kept in subjection, often without education, on account of cultural practices and religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Issuing from such critical comments as seen throughout this book—"somebody else's religion," as Amina Mama calls Islam in Africa; "the passion to outdo men," as Sule Egya describes the African Muslim woman's agenda along with her desire to "escape from her milieu" or to suffer the "culture of silence" that is Islam—as assessed by a multitude of

critics, this discursive veil is pinned on a dialectic that critically shuttles the Muslim woman between two neatly inflexible postures: subversion or unquestioning acceptance of Islam. The analytic lens used by a host of African theorists, when studying the African Muslim woman, is, therefore, programmed to capture this dialectic in African-Islamic feminist fiction. That the African Muslim woman also heals, repairs, and mends, that she also enacts *Umoja*, as African theorists have envisioned feminism, but also intuitively goes around (patriarchal and religious) landmines, in Nnaemeka's terms, as nego-feminists, African womanists, motherists, and stiwaniists do, that she possesses these mature, supple, and wise qualities and sensibilities as does her non-Muslim African sister, would mean turning to the African Muslim woman to listen for a biliterate *dhikr*, a remembrance, that echoes her consciousness of religion and not the oppression imputed to her. The fiction I have examined audibly plays such voices. In Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Li's older sister, Awa, critically evaluated as a victim of centuries of Islamic indoctrination, and, therefore, an example of subservience, in fact manifests courage, responsibility, and unwavering commitment to her dreams and decisions that need to be critically repatriated within both African and Islamic feminist discourses as African-Islamic feminism to emphasize African womanism, nego-feminism, and stiwaniism and a personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam. Posited as a facet of Islamic practice that has not been of policy interest to Islamic theorists, and consequently of little discursive value, the questions I have answered in this book, namely on the use of the voice of *dhikr*; on the details of women's prayer habits; on the insights into their habits of invoking God, or *dhikr*, when not plotted on the familiar calculus of publicly visible goals; and on their choice to become Muslim or not, can definitively nudge African and Islamic feminist theories out of their regional, conceptual, and ethnocentric inertia to mutually conjugate their orientations in African-Islamic feminism.

Within this spiritual universe of *dhikr* where the African Muslim woman may not necessarily view Islam as the source of her problems or legislative or political activity as solutions to them, the analyses in this book have dwelt on personal praxis that remain private in their goals. Together, the spiritual practices—*shahādah*; *ʿibādāt*, encompassing *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*; *akhlāq*; and *ḥijāb*—inscribe goals with consequences on private and personal lives. *ʿIbādāt* enfolds the entire range of acts of worship, ritual, or canonical prayer, such as the *ṣalāt*, and non-canonical, like the *duʿā* or supplication, the manner of existence as the very purpose of Muslim ontology is to worship God. Not far from this thought is *dhikr* that also foregrounds a constant remembrance, subordinating humans

to the divine. Along the same lines of worship are the necessary qualities or dispositions or *akhlāq* that shadow worship and are desirable for the exercise of piety in the entirety of one's personal, private, and individual life. These concepts, then, and their practice knit all manner of existence for a Muslim. The interconnectivity, and, more crucially, continuity of these themes in a Muslim's life threads the literary corpus I have examined, particularly in the way Li first acquires the disposition to accept Islam in her acknowledgment of Islamic monotheism, or the *shahādah*. This commitment is then continued in prayer or *ṣalāt*, *du'a*, and *dhikr* as evinced in Magira's, Farida's, and Zahrah's constant invocations of God. Undergirding the practice of ritual is the daily effort to acquire and manifest a disposition that coheres with an Islamic personality or *akhlāq* as evidenced in Nana's actions. The spiritual universe of these women steadily transacts in preoccupations that are not typically indexed in articulations of social and political processes as their acquisition and enactment are contained by the personal and private scope and consequences of their feelings and thoughts.

Very much to the point, therefore, is the thematic cornerstone of the analysis of these novels that connects the ways in which Muslim women in northern Nigeria enact these spiritual habits in ever-changing configurations of relationships. The theme of movement is consistent—deeply rooted in the geographical contextualization of the novels—it is embedded in the sociocultural milieu of the context of northern Nigeria. In concerning themselves with the world inside the energy of the family, as Li has to deal with her father and family; Nana connects with her grandfather; Magira, of course, commands an entire dynasty; Farida must constantly interact with her guardians and then her husband; and Zahrah networks with diverse people, friends, and family, these women engage Islam as limited to interpersonal interactions. Indeed, they anchor such interactions within marriage, family, and motherhood that are also central to the canons of African feminism as in *Umoja*, African womanism, and motherism. But these women also shift physically. Li moves back and forth from Hill Station to the city. Nana undertakes a journey of a thousand kilometers from her village Zuma to the district headquarters in Birnin Adama. Magira shifts from the rural Ramta to the urban Makulpo, her family in tow, and Zahrah shuttles between Rabbah, Min-sra, and surrounding towns. Lastly, but equally important, Farida will move from Kaduna to Sabon Birni, then even to London and back. In these complex navigations through physical and emotional migrations, the African Muslim woman disengages Islamic feminism from two levels of feminist discourse, namely the political and public representations of

women's activities and from all the motivations that prompt such participation, to sharply focus attention on private and personal spaces of engagement with Islam, through interpersonal relations or familial interactions, for instance. Li will learn by observing Awa. Nana learns from Baba Sani. Seytu is deeply cognizant of Magira's contributions. Zahrah's convictions are affirmed in a private and personal process through casual conversations and even internal musings and dreams with Miriam, Zubaydah, and Shareef. And, finally, Farida relies on herself. Specifically, such a private engagement can expose the variety of the kinds of Islamic feminisms that spatter the neat spaces and postures of subversion and unconditional acceptance of Islam onto which African Muslim women have been plotted—Li is not Muslim at first, she comes to the religion. But Nana readily manifests Islamic qualities in her interactions on her journey. If Magira strategizes feminism in her prayers to express it inside the familial fold, in her business and control of her family affairs, her granddaughter Seytu acknowledges her grandmother's role in her life and contribution to her success but does not explicitly practice Islam. Zahrah's and Farida's feminisms are overt allusions to Islam as they functionalize it for their personal success, but Awa in *The Stillborn*, Peni and Mero in *The Descendants*, and Laila in *The Virtuous Woman* add yet more dimensions to African-Islamic feminism.

Just as these women come to know things about themselves, Islamic feminism also needs a continuous revision that can expose biliterate avatars such as African-Islamic feminism that serve as a leaven for both African and Islamic feminisms. Continued preoccupation with Islamic feminism as a social activity and activism for gender justice is to foreclose those modes of engagement that prioritize a different matrix of goals. As we have been reminded since Edward Said's *Orientalism* that the accumulated force of discourse is immensely powerful and difficult to overcome, the unremitting persistence to see Islamic feminism, therefore, as little more than a fight for egalitarianism, in fact has unfortunately reduced it to a ledger for recording women's socialized, public, and organizational engagement with Islam. The future of Islamic feminism resides not in being continually moored to the same regions, processes, and goals, but in turning a corner to stumble upon, as in this case, that which Muslim women have been engendering for centuries in personal and private engagements with Islam. The confluence of African and Islamic feminist discourses, therefore, births African-Islamic feminism as a critical and discursive practice invested in personal, private, and individual expressions of feminism in regions outside those where feminism is frequently articulated as a coalition of religion and public politics.

## NOTES

### Introduction

The first epigraph is from “Jhumpa Lahiri > Quotes > Quotable Quote.” *Goodreads.com*. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/392519-fiction-is-an-act-of-willfulness-a-deliberate-effort-to>. The second epigraph is from Mir Hosseini’s interview in 2010 with Yoginder Sikand, “Understanding Islamic Feminism,” in *Countercurrents.org*. The third is from cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, x.

1. For an instructive explanation on Islamic law and its forms, *sharīʿa* (God’s law as divine and contained within the revelation), *fiqh* (jurisprudence or specifically human and scholarly activity), schools of law (Sunni and Shiʿi), reforms, civil law, and courts, see Norman Calder’s article that clearly defines the various dimensions of Islamic law. With regard to *sharīʿa* and *fiqh*, Calder helpfully explains that the word “fiqh” “connotes human and specifically scholarly activity. By contrast, *sharīʿah* refers to God’s law in its quality as divine. . . . Practitioners of *fiqh* (the *fuqahā*; sing. *faqīh*) try to discover and give expression to the *sharīʿah*.” Calder, “Law: Legal Thought and Jurisprudence,” 381.

2. Koinange, “Woman sentenced to stoning freed,” *CNN.com*.

3. Oduyoye, *The Shariy’ah Debate*.

4. “Sharia court frees Nigerian woman,” *BBC.com*.

5. Soyinka adds rather sardonically that the governor of an “obscure state,” Zamfara (a predominantly Muslim state), issued a *fatwa* against an innocent and unsuspecting journalist who, in her genuine and well-meaning effort to “control” the situation, archly stated that if Muhammad were alive, he would have not only approved of the pageant but would also have taken one of the contestants as his wife. According to Soyinka, this comment is a compliment to the Prophet’s eye for aestheticism. But the “stormtroopers” or Muslims butchered innocents over such a remark. Soyinka, “Psychopaths of Faith,” 13–16.

6. Duthiers, Karimi, and Botelho, “Boko Haram,” *CNN.com*.

7. Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change*, 1. Nigeria is not only Africa’s most populous state but also one of its most heterogeneous countries. In addition to the three largest linguistic groups—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—there are numerous other languages, such as Kanuri, Bini (Edo), Nupe, Tiv, and Fulfulde. The percentage of Muslims estimated is 45% of the total population.

8. Yusuf M. Adamu, “Between the Word and the Screen,” 203–13. For an extensive discussion on the history and types of Hausa literature and orature, see Furniss’s *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa*; Whitsitt’s “Islamic Hausa Feminism and Kano Market Literature,” 119–36; and Abdalla Uba Adamu’s “Loud Bubbles from a Silent Book,” 133–53.

9. “The Benefits of the English Language for Individuals and Societies: Quantitative Indicators from Cameroon, Nigeria, Rwanda, Bangladesh and Pakistan: A Custom Report Compiled by Euromonitor International by the British Council,” [www.euromonitor.com](http://www.euromonitor.com), last modified December 2010.



10. cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, x.

11. Alidou, *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women*, 5.

12. Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa*, ix.

13. Ibid.

14. According to Salime, the demands for reform of *sharī'a*-based family law in Morocco, also called the *mudawwana*, have become the “benchmark of the feminist movement, represented by hundreds of women’s rights organizations and research advocacy centers.” Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, xi–xii.

15. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 158. Several instructive biographies on Muhammad’s life and mission allow fuller appreciation of the nature of his role. See, for instance, Ramadan’s *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* and Gabriel’s *Muhammad: Islam’s First Great General*. Despite choosing to focus on different aspects of Muhammad’s life, as Ramadan describes the magnitude of his spiritual mission as an ordinary human being and Gabriel minutely studies Muhammad’s under-evaluated military prowess, both Ramadan and Gabriel acknowledge Muhammad’s multifaceted intellect and abilities and the unique nature of the roles he fulfilled as Islam’s prophet.

16. Sikand, “Understanding Islamic Feminism,” *Countercurrents.org*.

17. Siddiqui, “Law and the Desire for Social Control,” 50.

18. Kandiyoti, “Introduction,” *Women, Islam and the State*, 1, 3.

19. Moghadem, “Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents,” 1143.

20. Esposito El-Din Shahin, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Islam*, 2.

21. Villalón, “Islam and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 381.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 383. Paden and Loimeier furnish crucial insights into the history of the *Izala* movements in northern Nigeria by focusing attention on its legendary leader Abubakar Gumi. The *Izala* directly challenged the sufi leadership and influence on Nigerian Muslims, particularly the youth, and encouraged a “return to the basics”—the Qur’an and the *ḥadīth*. As a result, Gumi came to regard Sufism as an innovation, preaching an “anti-innovation and legalist approach” that each individual should have access to the Qur’an. Gumi is also credited with translating the Qur’an into Hausa and asking many of his former students to “interpret the Qur’an in the light of modern times” and not to adopt a literalist interpretation. On the same lines, and in a longer account, Loimeier provides an exhaustive examination of the history of the ‘*Yan Izala* in northern Nigeria since its foundation in 1978. The main points of the movement’s themes were the belief that the practice of intercession is un-Islamic and the belief that the pilgrimage to Mecca is more important than the visit to the tombs of saints. In fact, there were to be no saints in Islam as all Muslims are equally “holy.” Other points forbade the practice of tribalism, sectarian affiliation, or sectionalism. To become a member of the movement, a Muslim would, of course, need to renounce his membership to a Sufi brotherhood. Loimeier, in particular, notes women’s greater participation in the political process, especially to expand Islamic education, and the intensification of the conflict between the Sufi brotherhoods and their critics. Loimeier credits the ‘*Yan Izala* with pioneering effects on women’s education. Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change*, 207, 229; Paden, *Religion and Political Culture*, 248.



24. Majid opens his extremely pertinent thesis on Islam in a postcolonial world with an age-old debate on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. He chooses to cite a “syntactic slippage” that rather inaccurately frames any struggle in Islamic nation-states, such as Iran, within the conflict between Muslim forces and secular reformers, leading to the erroneous but predictable conclusion that Islam is incompatible with democracy and running a state on Islamic principles would most naturally be antithetical to democratic processes. Or that social justice, equality, and human rights are not easily found within Islamic political, legal, social, and spiritual systems, and that fighting undemocratic elements in an Islamic regime automatically presupposes a fight to restore democracy since democratic process are alien to the Islamic system of governance, politics, and society. Such iterations that Majid exposes, as he discusses in his essay on Islamic feminism, and as a host of Islamic theorists have pertinently sighted in European scholarship on Muslim women, are also widely prevalent in feminist studies of Islam in Africa as well, where African feminists a priori situate African Muslim women’s feminist expression within a struggle against Islam. Majid, *Unveiling Traditions*, 2.

25. Using an expression such as “Black Islam” or even “African Islam,” as Loimeier rightly points out, to represent the religion in the entire continent, cannot do justice to the complexity of the social realities of Muslims in Africa. Loimeier, *Muslim Societies*, ix–x, 11.

26. Badran provides punctilious accounts of Lawal’s and Husseini’s cases in both these studies to validate the momentum of political and feminist activism, “following the strenuous work of Nigerian activists” of the innumerable legal organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Baobab for Women’s Human Rights, and the Women’s Rights and Protection Association (WRAPA), among others, that “mounted wide publicity campaigns” to acquit these women. Badran, “Introduction: Gender and Islam,” 5, 9; Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 279–80.

27. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction*, 6; Irele, “Perspectives on the African Novel.” Irele has also made similar observations in his introduction to the influences on the African novel. In addition to the historicity of the ancient oral traditions, of course, Irele includes the colonial, and therefore Christian, imprint on the genre, to observe the much older interactions of African literature with the Qur’an and Islam. His point is similar to Wehrs’s in that the African writer draws from the influence of multiple and overlapping traditions.

28. Tunda Kolawole, “Meet the Mother of,” 7.

29. John Renard’s lucid account of the various thematic aspects of spirituality serves as an excellent discussion of the spiritual rhythms of Muslim life. For instance, Renard explains the status of *hadith*: “Next to the Qur’an, Islam’s most important documentary source is known collectively as Prophetic Hadith (*al-ahadith an-nabawiya*). As a literary source, Prophetic Hadith consists of thousands of reports of Muhammad’s words and deeds as transmitted by generations of Muslims, beginning with firsthand accounts from among the Prophet’s companions, the first generation of Muslims.” R. Marston Speight provides an instructive introduction to the *hadith*, its meanings, history, purposes, kinds, and status in Islamic literature and spiritual practice. She also covers the body of criticism, akin to a science, that has developed around the *hadith* and the modern

approaches to it. Speight describes the term as “specific reports of the prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds as well as those of many early Muslims . . . in order that the living memory of Muhammad’s example might influence the community of believers. . . . As preserved for subsequent generations, these reports, or *ḥadīth*, take the form of usually short, unconnected pieces, each of which is preceded by a list of its authoritative transmitters.” Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, 13; Speight, “Hadith,” 347–52.

30. Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, xix; Oyèwùmí, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 42.

31. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 9.

32. Very few analyses on Bâ tackle her discourse on Islam or on Islamic feminism. Diallo’s work has received relatively less attention, even though she is considered as a pioneer by critics of African literature. That both these writers amply engage Islam in their writings can be easily gauged from their novels. However, the scarce reception of Islam in critical literature on them attests to the lack of interest in the religion and its culture and customs, and lack of acknowledgement of its impact on West African women.

33. Other notable writers of fiction in English from northern Nigeria are Labo Yari, Mohammed Sule, and, more recently, Helon Habila, E. E. Sule, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, and Fatima Ba’aram Alkali, among others. Carmen McCain, “Nigeria: The Silent North—Problems in Studies of Northern Nigerian Literature,” *AllAfrica*, last modified October 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201212150166.html>.

34. In her entry on Ali, Fister remarks that Ali’s work revolves around “unpretentious romance that touches on regional, cultural, religious, gender and class differences without attempting to penetrate very deeply.” Such comments explain the negligible attention to Ali’s two novellas, even though there is much in her work that repays analysis. Fister, *Third World Women’s Literatures*, 12–13.

35. Babajo, *The Novels of Abubakar Gimba*.

36. Loflin, “Zaynab Alkali,” 39–44. The entry on Alkali lists a handful (four, to be precise) of critical works on the novelist, with the same number of interviews with her, and even fewer book reviews of her novels. Since the publication of this entry as well, negligible scholarship has been devoted to Alkali’s oeuvre.

37. Sonbol, introduction to *Beyond the Exotic*, xvii.

38. *Ibid.*, xviii.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, xvii–xviii.

41. cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 4, xxviii.

42. *Ibid.*, x.

43. On this quodlibetal issue of the theory and practice of including North African countries and Egypt as part of Africa, one should consider the critical practice so far when studying Islam and gender where studies tend to limit their representations of Africa to Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. See, for instance, essays by well-regarded theorists such as John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad’s collection where, from a quick glance at the table of contents, it can be noted that the focus is limited to the “Arab World,” the “Reality of Arab Women’s Lives,” and “Modernity in Egypt.” The only essay pertaining to Muslim women outside the Middle East and the surrounding region, comprising of Jordan,

Kuwait, Pakistan, Oman, and Bahrain, is on the Philippines. Here again in this collection, Egypt is made to stand in for Africa, for these case studies, in Esposito and Haddad's words, "reflect the broad sweep of the Muslim world from *Africa* to Southeast Asia, from Asia to the Philippines" (emphasis added). Esposito and Haddad, "Women in Islam and Muslim Societies," xviii.

44. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 153.

45. *Ibid.*, 3.

46. Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad*.

47. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 8–9.

48. *Ibid.*, 137.

49. *Ibid.*, 12.

50. *Ibid.*, 201–2.

51. *Ibid.*, 95.

52. Steady, "The Black Woman Cross-Culturally," 7–41, 10.

53. Aidoo, "The African Woman Today," 43.

54. Oyèwùmí, "The White Woman's Burden," 33.

55. Sofola, "Feminism and African Womanhood," 52.

56. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 143.

57. Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 174.

58. Imam, "Ideology, Women and Mass Media," 43.

59. Alidou, *Engaging Modernity*, 132.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Na'Allah, *African Discourse in Islam*, 32.

62. Whitsitt, "Islamic Hausa Feminism," 120. Whitsitt explains that the *Soyayya* writers insist on working within religious parameters but have been condemned by more conservative forces for corrupting moral behavior and conduct.

63. Yahya, "The Development of Hausa Literature," 10.

64. Paden investigates the broad nature of the *mallam* class in northern Nigerian society, especially in Kano, calling it "a specialized class of learned men who are regarded as repositories of religious knowledge . . . trained in Islamic knowledge and Arabic language. At minimum he is capable of teaching elementary Qur'an lessons." Paden notes that there are different kinds of *mallam* in Hausaland, ranging from those who teach elementary Islamic knowledge and Arabic to those who engage in advanced instruction, counselling of legal and spiritual matters, and interpretations of the religion. Many of them also support themselves through secondary occupations such as trade, tailoring, and farming. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture*, 56–57, 56.

65. Smith, "The Historical Impact of Islam," 318.

66. *Ibid.*, 318–19. See also Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* and "Uthman ibn Fudi," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*.

67. *Ibid.*, 319.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Falola and Genova, *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, 331.

70. Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria*, 35.

71. Yahya, "The Development of Hausa," 12.

72. Falola and Genova, *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, 331.

73. *Ibid.*, 331–32. The Sokoto Caliphate emerged as an amalgamation of numerous emirates in 1812 following a series of religious wars, or *jihad*, started

in 1804 and led by dan Fodio. Dan Fodio then divided the caliphate into two—Gwandu, to be ruled by his son Abduallahi, and Sokoto, for his other son Muhammad Bello. This provided religious independence and unity at the same time, with smaller emirates paying tributes to maintain loyalty to the caliphate. Slavery was an important facet of economic activity. Slaves worked in the fields and as domestic servants.

74. Smith, “The Historical Impact of Islam,” 327.

75. In an excerpt from an interview published in *The Guardian* on the subject, Maigari also clarifies that the *shari‘a* is meant only for Muslims and no non-Muslim is forced to observe it. The magistrates’ courts exist for non-Muslims. The presence of a legal system that covered non-Muslims existed even during the time of Muhammad and even in Nigeria during the colonial era. Oduyoye, *The Shariy’ah Debate*, 3.

76. Ogunde, “Islamic Development Bank Commits,” last modified March 15, 2012.

77. Dowd, “Civil Society: Sub-Saharan Africa.”

78. Tripp, “Political Parties and Participation.” Citing specific cases of women’s increased political participation in Islamic societies, Tripp details the role of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that has worked to reform the Family Code in predominantly Muslim countries such as Niger, including successfully securing seats for women in the Nigerian legislature and banning FGM or female genital mutilation. See also Callaway and Creevy, *The Heritage of Islam*.

79. Abdullah, “Women as Emergent Actors,” 150–67.

80. Abdalla Uba Adamu, “Loud Bubbles,” 135.

81. Yusuf M. Adamu, “Between the Word,” 204.

82. *Ibid.*, 204, 209.

83. Abdalla Uba Adamu, “Loud Bubbles,” 145.

84. Yusuf M. Adamu, “Between the Word,” 205.

85. Abdalla Uba Adamu, “Loud Bubbles,” 140.

86. *Ibid.*, 151.

87. Whitsitt, “Islamic Hausa Feminism Meets Northern Nigerian Romance,” 119.

88. Whitsitt, “Islamic Hausa Feminism and Kano Market Literature,” 141.

89. Anike, “Censorship and Contemporary Hausa Literature,” *Patheos.com*.

90. James, “Zaynab Alkali,” 31.

91. Babajo, *The Novels of Abubakar Gimba*, 37. Babajo’s book is one of few studies on Gimba in addition to being a complete analysis of Gimba’s works and the background that informs the novelist’s fiction. From numerous sources, available perhaps only in Nigeria, such as newspaper articles, interviews, reviews, and analyses on Gimba, Babajo articulates a detailed and methodical insight into Gimba’s commitment and vision as a writer.

92. Okome, “What Women, Whose Development?,” 68; Davies, “Introduction: Feminist Consciousness,” 9.

93. cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 91; El-Gawahry, “An Interview with Heba Ra’uf Ezzat,” 26–27.

94. James, “Zaynab Alkali,” 30.

### Chapter 1

The first epigraph for this chapter is from Nnaemeka, “Reading the Rainbow,” 6. The second epigraph is from Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 21. The third epigraph is from Badran, “Between Muslim Women and the Muslimwoman,” 105. The fourth epigraph is from Moghadem, “Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents,” 1148. The final epigraph in this chapter is from Najmabadi, “(Un)Veiling Feminism,” 31.

1. Acholonu, *Motherism*, 71.

2. Nnaemeka, “‘Nego-feminism,’” 369; Sofola, “Feminism and African Womanhood,” 61.

3. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 3.

4. Aidoo, “The African Woman Today,” 40. Aidoo names Lady Tiy of Nubia, Nefertiti, Nzingha, Mbuya Nehanda, Sibongile Mkhabela, and Winnie Mandela, among others, in a list of independent, innovative, and brave women from Africa.

5. Oyèwùmí, “The White Woman’s Burden,” 26.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, ix, 31.

8. *Ibid.*, 31.

9. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 3.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 2, 4.

12. Davies, “Introduction: Feminist Consciousness,” 9.

13. Nnaemeka, “Reading the Rainbow,” 6.

14. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 114.

17. *Ibid.*, 114.

18. *Ibid.*, 105.

19. *Ibid.* Ogunyemi discusses the novel in English by Europeans and Africans and African Americans to show how Black female characters come to acquire womanism as they are burdened both by sexism and racism. She states that her definition of womanism coheres with Alice Walker’s, whom she borrows the term from, but differs from Walker in that in her characters, as opposed to Walker’s, do not come to womanism because of an event or coming-of-age incident but because of the realization that they are Black and female—a predicament that is theirs.

20. *Ibid.*, 114.

21. *Ibid.*, 5.

22. *Ibid.*, 12, 95.

23. D’Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers*, 6.

24. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 106.

25. *Ibid.*, 119, 114.

26. *Ibid.*, 119.

27. Davies, “Introduction: Feminist Consciousness,” 8–9; Steady, “The Black Woman,” 23.

28. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 121.

29. *Ibid.*, 123.

30. *Ibid.*, 114, 119, 123.

31. Ibid., 319.
32. Ibid., 309.
33. Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 28, 193, 194.
34. Ibid., 25.
35. Ibid., 19, 35, 39, 193.
36. Ibid., 41, 194, 197.
37. Ibid., 197.
38. Ibid., 204. Steady posits the core importance of motherhood in African societies, calling it the “most fundamental difference between the African woman and her Western counterpart.” To this end, she boldly states, “no doubt the most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role for society as a whole.” Steady, “The Black Woman,” 29.
39. Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 203.
40. Nnaemeka, “‘Nego-Feminism,’” 378.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 382.
43. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves*, 35.
44. Ibid., 31–32.
45. Ibid., 10.
46. Ibid., 230.
47. Ibid., 216.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 31.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 31–32.
53. Ibid.
54. Jell-Bahlsen, “Female Power: Water Priestesses,” 101.
55. Schildkrout, “Dependence and Autonomy,” 107.
56. Ibid., 124.
57. Acholonu, *Motherism*, 91.
58. Ibid., 44.
59. Ibid., 90.
60. Ibid., 94.
61. Ibid., 93.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 111.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 115.
66. Ibid., 71.
67. Ibid., 70, 71.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 45.
70. Nnaemeka, “Reading the Rainbow,” 9; Nzigwu, “O Africa: Gender Imperialism,” 114.
71. Mama, “Tale of a Marriage,” 1547.
72. Acholonu, *Motherism*, 70.

73. Soyinka, “Religion and Human Rights,” 83.

74. Starting with the Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s well-known novel on Islam in Africa, *Ambiguous Adventure*, Soyinka elaborates the second axis of his analysis on Islam where Islam and indigenous religions are framed in “the contest for the soul of Samba Diallo.” Etched in a persistent lexis on Islam as an “alien civilization” whose overzealous literary proponents, such as Kane and Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ, make no attempt to dissemble their “direct catechising” in their rather “idealised” and “ideal projection” of the religion in Africa, Soyinka terms both Hampaté Bâ’s biography on the African Muslim saint Tierno Bokar and *Ambiguous Adventure* as little more than “misguided literature.” However, Bâ’s biography, continues Soyinka, to chart his third axis on Islam in African literatures, melds the influences of the three religions—Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs—to articulate a message of “universal humanism,” of a new African consciousness through the truth of Islam, but grounded first and foremost in African indigenous systems. So either Islam’s “fertile role” in literary creations is inspired by and, therefore, must be attributed to an indigenous African humanism, or its more aggressive influence upon African spirituality is a sign of its “unapologetic proselytizing” that produces “misguided literature” as the African did not and still does not, in Soyinka’s view, voluntarily embrace Islam. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 76, 77, 79.

75. Soyinka, “Religion and Human Rights,” 83.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.* Ahmed Bangura’s meticulous dissection of Soyinka’s and Mazrui’s discussion is one of few analyses on the issue of race, religion, and culture about Islam in Africa. While Bangura’s appraisal of Mazrui’s rather forced defense of Islam in Africa is refreshingly useful as it senses, in Mazrui’s rebuttal of Soyinka’s claims, an eagerness that does more harm than good to Islam’s case, Bangura’s stance about women’s status in pre-Islamic and Islamic Africa, as part of his critique of Mazrui’s defense, can be questioned. Bangura notes, in particular, Mazrui’s rather inaccurate statement about the status of women in pre-Islamic societies in Africa in his defense of Islam, leading Bangura to state that “the view that African women were better off in pre-Islamic African society than in African Muslim societies is one that many scholars do not share”; this is a view that I discuss at length in this chapter. It is a view, as I argue in this book, that anchors the entire African feminist discourse vis-à-vis Islam. Bangura, *Islam in the West African Novel*, 23–29, 27.

78. Appiah, “An Evening with Wole Soyinka,” 778. In this discussion about his Nobel prize, his work, and his debate on Africa with Mazrui, Soyinka responds to a question about Mazrui’s program. In his response, Soyinka clarifies his stance against Islam as that which opposes anyone who claims Africa as a historically Islamic continent. He also adds that both Islam and Christianity subverted traditional African religions and alienated the African from his traditions.

79. Soyinka, “Religion and Human Rights,” 83.

80. Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 25; Hudson-Weems, “Africana Womanism,” 160; Steady, “The Black Woman,” 36.

81. In the case of Egypt, Badran contextualizes public activity as the goal of Islamic feminism in 19th century Egyptian society by evoking the term “Muslim-woman” used by “Westerners and Islamists or proponents of political Islam” that customarily frames the Muslim woman as veiled, compliant and protected. As a



rejoinder to the Muslim woman's confinement in a "cage," an image sketched by Westerners and by Badran's own compatriot, the 19th century Egyptian poet Aisha al-Taimuriyya, who saw Muslim women as incarcerated in their homes, Badran asserts that "the rights-and-justice-seeking Islamic feminist movement is on a roll, chipping away at the Muslimwoman project." The Islamic feminist movement, she avers, is breaking the cages of confinement, battling to reform laws and rallying for the increased presence of women in the public sphere, arguing that "Muslim feminists have won many gains for women in Muslim societies, such as reform of Moroccan family law, nominations of judges in Egypt, or granting women suffrage in Kuwait." Badran, "Between Muslim Women," 101.

82. Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, 135.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 237.

85. *Ibid.*, 41–2.

86. *Ibid.*, 64.

87. *Ibid.*, 65.

88. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

89. *Ibid.*, 62.

90. *Ibid.*, 79.

91. Badran, "Feminism and the Qur'an," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*.

92. Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond," *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies* 1, no.1 (2005): 14; Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 249.

93. Badran, "Competing Agendas: Feminists, Islam and the State in 19th and 20th Century Egypt," in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 201; *Feminism in Islam*, 4, 253.

94. Mir-Hosseini, "Beyond Islam vs. Feminism," 72.

95. Badran, "Between Muslim Women," 112.

96. *Ibid.*, 119.

97. Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics," 37–38. For further commentary on Wadud's hermeneutic approach, see Haifaa Jawaad's insightful analysis "Muslim Feminism: A Case Study of Amina Wadud's 'Qur'an and Women,'" *Islamic Studies* 42, no.1 (2003): 107–25.

98. Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics," 37–38.

99. *Ibid.*, 29.

100. *Ibid.*

101. *Ibid.*, 34; Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 34–35.

102. Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 2, 300.

103. Badran, "Feminism and the Qur'an," 200.

104. cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 91.

105. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 45.

106. *Ibid.*, 3, 57.

107. Karam reads Rauf's activity as "advocacy in Islam" that brings political authority back into the family fold, giving it to women who then step out into the public domain, vested with this authority, to play a greater role in society, and eventually the state. Rauf is also known as Heba Saad Eddin and has published using both names. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 224.

108. *Ibid.*



109. Mir-Hosseini, “Beyond Islam vs. Feminism,” 74.
110. *Ibid.*, 27.
111. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 226.
112. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 53.
113. *Ibid.*
114. Jones, *Women Warriors: A History*, 83.
115. Marilyn French, *From Eve to Dawn: The Masculine Mystique* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2008), 173.
116. Jones, *Women Warriors: A History*, 84–85.
117. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 169.
118. *Ibid.*, 172.
119. *Ibid.*, 173.
120. Imam, “The Development of Women’s Seclusion,” 6.
121. *Ibid.*, 7.
122. Beverly Mack, “Muslim Women’s Knowledge Production in Greater Maghreb: The Example of Nana Asma’u of Northern Nigeria,” in *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*, ed. Margot Badran (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 24.
123. *Ibid.*; see also Horner, “Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*. Horner notes the contributions of Shaykha Khadija, a nineteenth-century Mauritanian teacher, who was also the Torodo revolution’s leader Abd al-Qadir’s instructor. Horner also documents the roles of several *muqadammat* or Sufi teachers from Kano, including Aisha, Safiya Umar Falke, Hijiya Iya, and Umma Makaranta.
124. Haylamaz, *Aisha: The Wife, the Companion, the Scholar*.
125. *Ibid.*, 78.
126. Mack and Boyd, *One Woman’s Jihad*, 168.
127. *Ibid.*, 170.
128. *Ibid.* “Fadima” in Hausa or “Fatima,” in Arabic, was Muhammad’s daughter, and also wife of the fourth caliph, Ali. “Hawau” is the Hausa variation of the Arabic “Hawa” or Eve.
129. *Ibid.*
130. *Ibid.*, 76.
131. *Ibid.*
132. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 76–77.
133. *Ibid.*, 4, 46, 56.
134. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 58.
135. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 79.
136. *Ibid.*, 76.
137. See, in particular, Mahmood’s description of the history of the mosque movement, tracing it to the Egyptian activist Zaynab al-Ghazali’s efforts on *dawa* through Islamic nonprofit organizations. It was al-Ghazali’s Islamic institute, explains Mahmood, that was among the first in Egypt to train women in Islam through mosque lessons, and to train their teachers in dispensing such lessons in the early 20th century. Although state-run organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the University of Al-Azhar, argues Mahmood, “were avenues for al-Ghazali’s activism,” they never really supported the women’s *dawa* movement. The mosque movement, the Egyptian state and the texture of nonprofit Islamic

institutions, nonetheless, as Mahmood admits, remain connected, related, even in their tensions and collusions. There is, for instance, as Mahmood, notes, an effort on the part of the Egyptian state to control, censor and police the activities of the mosque movement. This effort also includes regulating, even nationalizing thirty thousand non-government mosques. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 70, 75–76.

138. Na'Allah, *African Discourse in Islam*, 36. Na'Allah discusses at length the useful public role of Hausa women poets in employing their art as an instrument of social change by educating people on common topics such as polygamy, human emotions and other themes pertinent to everyday life in Hausa society in Rukayyatu Sabuwa Nasir Adakawa's and Hauwa Gwaram Umaru's creative contributions. Also see Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 79. Mack devotes a chapter to Hauwa Gwaram's work and the social function of her poetry in Hausa society. She lists poetry as a teaching device, especially in adult education programs, as fostering solidarity in the community through a common interest in the arts, and of course, as an instrument for political and social change by enlightening women about their environment and current affairs.

139. For the primacy of the "homestead" as the foremost area of performance in storytelling, see Gay Wilentz's *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xxv.

140. Physical seclusion is, as Ayesha Imam explains, a multivalent discourse that must be examined in the context of several factors such as the growth and rise of Islam in northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate, British rule of Nigeria, and the period leading up to Nigeria's independence from it. Imam begins by illustrating the nature of women's rights in the Sokoto Caliphate under dan Fodio, gesturing to the various economic forces that influenced the seclusion of women in northern Nigeria—the numerous crafts and economic activities such as cotton production, weaving, the sale of yarn, dyeing of cloth, and spinning that were mostly concentrated in rural areas, but increasing trade under the caliphate. British occupation led to the sedentarisation of the Fulani and to their exodus to urban areas, prompting greater needs for physical security, coupled with ways to avoid colonial taxation of each earning member of a household. Muslims, therefore, were motivated to show only one earning member in the household. The taxation system under the British included not only the nature of the occupation and its output but also a census. Since the British already accepted the claim that it was un-Islamic for strange men to enter Muslim compounds, it was a convenient material benefit for the Muslims to be under-counted and consequently under-taxed. However, Imam points out that these economic factors were not determinant in themselves, "but were bound up with ideologico-religious discourses about ideal social relations and the proper place of women in Islam." Imam, "The Development of Women's Seclusion," 10.

141. Coles and Mack, eds. *Hausa Women in the Twentieth Century*, 5; see also Callaway, *Muslim Hausa Women in Nigeria*.

142. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 3.

143. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 7.

144. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 6.

145. Verde explains that Ajami is not a language itself but the alphabet script is used to write a language: Arabic-derived letters to write a non-Arabic—in this case, African—language. Ajami derives from the Arabic *a'jamiy*, meaning

“foreigner” or more specifically, “non-Arab.” Ajami thus came to mean an African language written in Arabic script that was often adapted phonetically to facilitate local usages and pronunciations across the continent, from Ethiopia in the east to Sierra Leone in the west. Verde, “From Africa in Ajami,” 36, 39.

146. Mack, *Muslim Women Sing*, 7.

147. Furniss, *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture*; and “Contemporary Bards: Hausa Verbal Artists,” 145–46.

148. Aliyu, “Hausa Women as Oral Storytellers in Northern Nigeria,” 150.

149. *Ibid.*, 151.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*, 152.

152. See Coles and Mack, eds., *Hausa Women in the Twentieth Century*; also E. B. Simmons, “The Small-Scale Rural Food-Processing,” 147–161. See also VerEcke, “Muslim Women Traders,” 217–36.

153. Hill, “Hidden Trade in Hausaland,” 392, 393; *Rural Hausa: A Village and a Setting*, 22.

154. *Ibid.*, 398; *gari* in Hausa means “town.”

155. Simmons, “The Small Scale Rural,”; VerEcke, “Muslim Women Traders.”

156. Hill, “Hidden Trade in Hausaland,” 402.

157. *Ibid.*, 408. More recent studies on female seclusion, gendered spaces, and spatial praxis in Hausaland have been carried out to explore women’s socioeconomic and political functions. Robson’s work, for instance, covers all angles of women’s seclusion in northern Nigeria to conclude that women’s domesticity, a site of strength and autonomy, from which men are practically absent, is a way for women to “wield the potential for subverting male power.” In carrying out economic activities from the site of their domestication, therefore, Muslim women only appear domesticated as they resist it through “covert or indirect bargaining . . . in face-to-face relations with husbands, children, co-wives . . . with such strategies as diversion of food, income, or labor resources.” Robson, “Wife Seclusion,” 137.

158. Steady, “The Black Woman,” 25.

159. Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 287; cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, x.

## Chapter 2

The citation is “The epigraph for this chapter is taken from Ogunyemi’s *African Wo/Man Palava*, 309.”

1. Mama, “Tale of a Marriage,” 1547.

2. Makward, “Marriage, Tradition, and Woman’s Pursuit,” 171–81; Cham, “Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination,” 89–101; Edson, “Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family,” 13–25; and Wilcox, “Women and Power in Mariama Bâ’s Novels,” 121–42.

3. Ibeleme, “Women Writers,” 49.

4. Koroye, “The Ascetic Feminist Vision,” 50.

5. Ali, ed. and trans., *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 68:4, 26:137.

6. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 56.

7. *Hizb ut-Tabrir* is a political organization that seeks to unite all Muslims under the governance of the Islamic state and the rule of the caliph or ruler of such a state. Founded by Taqiuddin al-Mabahani in the 1960s in Lebanon, *Hizb*

*ut-Tahrir* means “party of liberation” and is active in many countries in the Arab world and in the West such as the United Kingdom. Their most important publication is the book used here, *The Essential Elements of the Islamic Disposition (The Nafsiyyah)*, issued by the organization in 2004.

8. Hizb ut-Tahrir, *The Essential Elements*, 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 2:177.
12. *Ibid.*, 70.
13. *Ibid.*, a number of verses, 3:15–17, 4:69, 6:69, 7:35, 128, 169–70, 13:35, 16:30, 97, 122, and several others, describe righteous behavior. In addition, verses on the importance of sincerity when performing good behavior are also numerous: 7:29, 31:32, 37:40, 37:74, 57:19, among others.
14. Clarke delves into the tradition of the *shahādah*, covering crucial questions about the evolution of its status such as if it were sufficient alone to establish belief and membership in the community, or if the person who recites it must have a real understanding of what he says in order to gain salvation. She notes that “it was generally agreed that true understanding of the basic tenets was necessary; sincere and heartfelt faith was also emphasized.” It is nevertheless still accepted as a declaration of acceptance of Islam by a convert. Clarke, “Shahādah,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 116.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Ayoub, “Pillars of Islam,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*.
17. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 477.
18. *Ibid.*, 476.
19. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:1, 15.
20. Al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim: English Translation of Sahih Muslim*, 1:93.
21. *Sahih Muslim*, 1:93–95; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:15.
22. Johnson, “The Social Vision of Zaynab Alkali,” 652–53.
23. Kassam, “Behind the Veil,” 119.
24. Ladele, “Zaynab Alkali,” 2:330.
25. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 64.
26. Koroye, “The Ascetic Feminist Vision,” 50.
27. Ladele, “Zaynab Alkali,” 2:328.
28. Chukwu, “African Womanist-Self-Fashioning,” 187, 191.
29. *Ibid.*, 187.
30. *Ibid.*, 192, 195.
31. Acholonu, “The Woman Comes of Age,” quoted in Alabi, “Gender Issues,” 26.
32. Brown, “Introduction to *The Stillborn*,” vii.
33. Mama, “Tale of a Marriage,” 1547.
34. Kassam, “Behind the Veil,” 119.
35. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 3.
36. *Ibid.*, 309.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Ahmed describes Hind in generous terms as a free and uninhibited woman, and equates her “free participation in community affairs” with the autonomy to

fornicate, commit adultery, and recite satirical poetry with ferocity on the battlefield. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 53, 58, 70.

39. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 309.

40. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction*, 52–53.

41. *Ibid.*, 65. For a brief description of FOMWAN's activities, see the introduction to this volume, n77.

42. *Ibid.*, 54.

43. *Ibid.*, 55.

44. *Ibid.*, 64.

45. *Ibid.*, 52.

46. Ladele, "Zaynab Alkali," 330.

47. Ogunyemi, "Women and Nigerian Literature," 1:64.

48. Udumukwu, "Post-Colonial Feminism," 50.

49. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

50. Kassam, "Behind the Veil," 119.

51. Also known as the "people of the Book" or *Ahl al-Kitāb*, Christians and Jews are those who received revealed scriptures, as mentioned in the Qur'anic chapter *Al Maidah* in verse 69. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 270–71.

52. Brown, "Introduction to *The Stillborn*," xiv.

53. Loflin, "Zaynab Alkali," 41.

54. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction*, 54.

55. Ladele, "Zaynab Alkali," 328.

56. Ogbuehi, "The Artist with a Herculean Task," 93.

57. Kassam, "Behind the Veil," 120.

58. Chukwu, "African Womanist Self-Fashioning," 120.

59. Ibeleme, "Women Writers," 49.

60. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 476.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, 477.

63. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction*, 62.

64. *Ibid.*, 67.

65. *Ibid.*, 55.

66. *Ibid.*, 62. Glassé states that *bid'ah* or "innovation" refers to a "practice or belief that was not present in Islam as it was revealed in the Koran, and established by the *Sunnah* on the basis of the Prophetic traditions; hence something possibly contrary to Islam." According to Charles Fletcher, *Shirk* or innovation is explained as a fundamental error in associating partners with God. Since God is indivisible, complete, total, and real, nothing can be added to or removed from him. Glassé states that "shirk is the fundamental state of being in revolt against God," another name for paganism, atheism; it is the opposite of surrender to God. As for other theorists, the terms are defined similarly. Literally translated as innovation, *bid'ah* designates an innovation in religious ritual or belief. It is considered as a sin because it assumes human invention when the religion has a divine source. *Fitnah* is also translated as many things, primarily ordeal, temptations, strife, or error. It has a negative interpretation. *Shirk* is understood as a rejection of faith. The interpretive stress in each of these sins is on qualities and actions that are undesirable, negative, connoting the absence of Islamic disposition. They are all in thought and action morally opposed to Islamic principles.

Li embodies the character traits of each of these concepts in her personality and choices in the early part of the novel. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 98, 491; Fletcher, “Shirk,” 150.

67. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction*, 68.

### Chapter 3

The first epigraph in this chapter is from Alkali’s interview with Chris Nwaumo, “Important . . . But Not the Same,” 1256; the second is from Mack and Boyd’s *One Woman’s Jihad*, 76.

1. Alkali, interview with Chris Nwaumo, “Important . . . but not the same,” *West Africa*, July 11, 1988, 1256; James, *In Their Own Voices*, 29.

2. Wadud, *Women and the Qur’an*, 29.

3. James, *In Their Own Voices*, 30.

4. Ogbuehi, “The Artist,” 90.

5. Ibeleme, “Women Writers,” 7; Nwaumo, “Important . . . But,” 1256.

6. Ofeimun, “Zainab Alkali,” 9; Nwaumo, “Important . . . But,” 1256.

7. Nwaumo, “Important . . . But,” 1256.

8. *Ibid.*; James, *In Their Own Voices*, 30.

9. In describing the common features of political Islam, Badran notes the diversity and similarities in Islamist approaches to women and gender across countries, “a rearticulation of separate roles for the two sexes grounded in biological difference that religion is said to consecrate” as a common feature of Islamist movements to gender. Badran, “Political Islam and Gender,” 114.

10. Wadud, *Qur’an and Women*, 29; Nwaumo, “Important . . . But,” 1256.

11. Nwaumo, “Important . . . But,” 1256.

12. Kolawole, “Meet the Mother,” 23.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Wadud, *Qur’an and Women*, 7.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 95, 97.

17. *Ibid.*, 96.

18. Well-known Islamic philosophers and intellectuals, Al-Ghazali and the *mutakallimūn* (theologians)—the Mutaʿzili theologians and the Ashʿari theologians—have discoursed on ethics, engaging with Plato’s and Aristotle’s works, translating them and weaving various aspects of *akhlāq* and human effort, free will, and intellect to enact it.

19. Kalin, “Akhlaq,” 95.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Numerous *ḥadīth* attest to the primacy of good behavior in Islam. In particular, Bukhari compiles such *aḥādīth* (plural) in the “Book of Al-Adab (Good Manners)” and Muslim does so in the “Book of Virtues,” covering such diverse aspects of manners as beneficence and good relations, the superiority of being good to others, being merciful and compassionate, avoiding anger, false statements, and slander, among hundreds of *ḥadīth* on the value of observing good behavior.

22. Covering a broad range of emotions, gestures and actions, in the “Book of Adab (Good Manners),” Bukhari compiles Muhammad’s repeated exhortations to hone virtuous conduct through acts of kindness, good temper, politeness,

among other qualities of good character: “Allah’s Messenger . . . used to say, “The best among you are the best in character (having good manners).” *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 8:61.

23. Nanji provides a brief history on the evolution of the *sunnah*, its meanings in the Qur’an, and its development and status in Islamic doctrinal and practical history. Primarily, Nanji explains that *sunnah* is mentioned in the Qur’an in multiple contexts, referring to tradition, custom, and usage, including the tradition of the prophets before Muhammad. Nanji elaborates on its various functions in the four schools of Islamic law and its philosophical interpretations over the centuries as well as the diversity in its application across the Muslim world. He defines *sirah* as the literary reconstruction of the narrative of the Prophet’s life and explains that the *isnād* is the chain of transmitters in the effort to memorialize Muhammad’s life and “ground it in a historically verifiable process.” Nanji, “Sunnah,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 253.

24. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 179.

25. Al-Nawawi, *An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith*. A compendium of Muhammad’s exemplary actions and words that focus on character and personality, these *ḥadīth* are also considered the most important summaries of the essential teachings of Islam. Some of the themes discussed are restraint of anger, enactment of good and charitable deeds, religious obligations, and other actions that foster perfection of religious practice.

26. Mack, “Muslim Women’s Knowledge Production,” 33.

27. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

28. Mack and Boyd, *One Woman’s Jihad*, 77.

29. Bangura, *Islam in the West African Novel*, 23.

30. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/Man Palava*, 310.

31. Ladele, “Zaynba Alkali,” 331.

32. Griswold, *Bearing Witness*, 184.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Ladele, “Zaynab Alkali,” 330–31.

37. James, *In Their Own Voices*, 31.

38. Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 214; “Nigeria’s Muhammadu Buhari in profile,” *BBC.com*, last modified March 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12890807>.

39. Loflin, “Zaynab Alkali,” 41.

40. Alabi, “Gender Issues,” 24.

41. Njoku, “Personal Identity and the Growth of the Nigerian Woman,” 178; Ohaeto, “Shaking the Veil,” 136.

42. Alabi, “Gender Issues,” 25.

43. Ofeimun, “Zainab Alkali,” 9.

44. For a meticulous discussion of this “postscriptural” or “extralitururgical prayer,” as Renard calls it, see chapters 4 and 5 in this book. Other texts crucial to this topic are Renard’s *Seven Doors to Islam*, 52.

45. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 49.

46. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:416.

47. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 247.



48. Glassé describes the background of the verses and chapters that are recommended as incantations to protect from evil or danger. The verses of the throne or the “Ayat al-Kursi” are 12:64. In addition, 13:11, 37:7, 39:62, and numerous other verses are invoked as “refuge” from evil. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 438–39.

49. Fadwa El Guindi, “Hijab,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*.

50. Scott, *Politics of the Veil*.

51. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 152.

52. Aidoo, “The African Woman Today,” 43.

53. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 51.

54. *Ibid.*, 128.

55. *Ibid.*, 51.

56. *Ibid.*, 52.

57. *Ibid.*, 126.

58. *Ibid.*, 57.

59. Barazangi, *Woman’s Identity and the Qur’an*, 83.

60. *Ibid.*, 34.

61. *Ibid.*, 45.

62. *Ibid.*, 48.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 21.

#### Chapter 4

The epigraph for this chapter is taken from John Renard’s *Seven Doors to Islam*, 35.

1. El-Gawahry, “An Interview with Heba Ra’uf Ezzat,” 26–27.

2. Ogunyemi, “Literature and the Nigerian Woman,” 64; Alabi, “Gender Issues,” 25.

3. Egya, “Infraction and change,” 101. Sule Egya also writes fiction in English under the name E. E. Sule, whose novel *Sterile Sky* won the Commonwealth Book Prize (Africa region) in 2013.

4. *Ibid.*, 102, 104–5.

5. *Ibid.*, 106.

6. Alkali, “The Poetics of Feminism,” 110–11.

7. *Ibid.*, 108.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Razinatu, “New Perspectives on Women and Community,” 175, 176.

10. The supplication, “Ya Gafur Rahim,” in particular, potentially combines two of Allah’s ninety-nine attributes to invoke his forgiveness, while acknowledging that only he can forgive, and that he is indeed merciful or forgiving. Hence, the forgiving or *Gafur* and the Merciful or *Rahim*.

11. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 57.

12. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 7:272–73.

13. Reinhart, “Birth Rites,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Reinhart enumerates the same rites—*tabnik*, uttering the *iqamah* or summons to prayer, shaving the child’s hair on the seventh day, and distributing the equivalent



weight of the hair as money to the poor—to collectively describe the *aqiqah* practice or birth rites in Islam.

14. Denny, “Funerary Rites,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Denny describes both the legal foundation and modern practice of funerary rites in Islam, including the *ṣalāt al-janāzah* or funeral service.

15. *Sahih Muslim*, 2:445.

16. See Paden, *Religion and Political Culture*, 56–57.

17. Al-Jamil, “Ibadah,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*.

18. Prayer is also widely indexed in the *hadīth* collections, particularly by Bukhari who details all aspects and components of prayer more than any other Islamic ritual or practice. For instance, Bukhari compiles narrations on the timing of the prayer in a separate book, “The Book of Times of *As-Salat*.” Likewise, he devotes an entire book on the call to prayer or *adhan*, “The Book of *Adhan*,” and other books on the ablutions (both *wuḍū* and dry), the Friday prayers or “The Book of *Al-Jum‘ua* (Friday),” “The Book of the Shortened Prayer (*At-Taqsir*),” in addition to the elaborate “Book of *Salat*,” where he focuses on the centrality of prayer in a Muslim’s life, its origins, among its numerous other aspects, to exhaustively cover details of its Qu’ranic status and Muhammad’s practice.

19. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 1220.

20. *Ibid.*, 1011.

21. Toorawa, “Prayer,” 265.

22. Robinson, *Islam: A Concise Introduction*, 96–97.

23. Robinson, *Islam: A Concise Introduction*, 100. In addition, as Robinson explains the details, *ṣalāt* must be performed by being in a state of ritual purity through the greater ablution (*ghuṣl*) and the lesser ablution (*wuḍū‘*) that involve washing of certain parts of the body in a certain order—hands, mouth, nose, face, forearms, head, and feet—or if water is scarce, the *tayyamum* or dry ablution is performed by placing the hands on clean earth, sand, or stone, and then blowing off the dust before wiping the face and forearms with them.

24. Robinson, *Islam: A Concise Introduction*, 107. Silent reflection is also recommended on the specific prayer to be performed, as is the expression of the intention of performing the prescribed number of *raka‘āt*.

25. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 547.

26. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. These prayers have been documented by Bukhari who compiles with great detail the various reports that describe their features, including their timings, occasions, exceptions, and benefits.

27. Sells, “Dhikr,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 69.

28. Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, 53.

29. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 62.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, 53.

32. Toorawa, “Prayer,” 266–67.

33. Esposito (2004), “Dua,” *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, last modified May 11, 2015, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e561>.

34. Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 139.

35. Toorawa, “Prayer,” 277.

36. *Ibid.*, 279.

37. Ibid., 280.

38. Ibid.

39. Bukhari reports accounts of the superiority of saying “amin” by noting that Muhammad is said to have told his followers, “Say *Amin* when the Imam says it and if the Amin of anyone of you coincides with that of the angels then all his past sins will be forgiven.” See also note 452. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 1:416; see also *Sahih Muslim*, 1:521.

40. Deriving from the influential Egyptian Islamic thinker Sayyid Qutb’s idea that the family is the “basis of society,” Karam traces the earliest influences on Rauf’s conceptualization of women’s roles in Islam. Noting her political motivations, Karam argues that “Rauf’s is primarily a political message against the existing state structure” since she cannot directly contradict her conservative male colleagues nor can she divest herself of women’s political roles. Karam thus sees Rauf as “cloaking” her language and motivations to connect with a large populist base that the Muslim Brotherhood enjoys in Egypt. For an elaborate description of Rauf’s views, see her illuminating “The Silent Ayesha: An Egyptian Narrative,” 231–57. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, 225, 227.

41. Ibid., 223.

42. Ibid., 225.

43. Ibid., 226.

44. Al-Qazwini, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 3:154.

45. Egya, “Infraction and change,” 106.

46. Ibid., 105.

## Chapter 5

The first epigraph for this chapter is taken from Abu-Rabi, “Salat,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. The second epigraph is from *The Sun*, last modified March 7, 2015, <http://sunnewsonline.com/new/abubakar-gimba-1952-2015-light-dims-in-the-city-of-crocodiles/>. The third epigraph for this chapter can be found in Nana Wilson Tagoe’s essay “The African Novel and the Feminine Condition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 184.

1. Originally published as *Sacred Apples* in Nigeria, the novel has also appeared as *Golden Apples* in the United States.

2. See Sells, “Dhikr,” for a concise explanation of this practice.

3. See the introduction to this volume, n33.

4. Fister, *Third World Women’s Literatures*, 12–13.

5. Anike, “Censorship and Contemporary Hausa Literature,” *Patheos.com*.

6. Abdalla Uba Adamu, “Loud Bubbles,” 133.

7. Whitsitt, “Islamic Hausa Feminism,” 139.

8. Ibid.

9. Kassam, “Behind the Veil,” 122–23.

10. Ibid.

11. Ohaeto, “Shaking the Veil,” 138.

12. Babajo, *The Novels of Abubakar Gimba*, 239.

13. Ibid., 178.

14. Alkali, “The Poetics of Feminism,” 117–18.

15. Fajenyo and Osunde, *The Writings of Abubakar Gimba*, 61.

16. Abdullahi Yunusa, “Abubakar Gimba: Adieu, My Invisible Mentor,” *Independent Newspapers Limited*, last modified March 9, 2015, <http://dailyindependentnig.com/2015/03/abubakar-gimba-adieu-invisible-mentor/>.

17. Abel Joseph, “The Nature and Development of the Novel in Northern Nigeria,” (Ph.D. diss., Ahmadu Bello University, 2005).

18. Nana Wilson Tagoe, “The African Novel and the Feminine Condition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 185.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 192.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 177.

26. *Ibid.*, 184.

27. Sells, “Dhikr,” 69–71.

28. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 8:211–81.

29. The waiting period, literally meaning “number,” “during which the divorce of a couple or at least remarriage of the woman is to be delayed. It is fixed by the Qur’an at three menstrual periods, with the exception of widows, who wait for four months and ten days.” Clarke, “Iddah,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, 510.

30. See chapter 4 for an extensive discussion on the different kinds of prayer, including the supplicatory prayer or *du’a* that is described here.

31. This *ḥadīth* is said to fall in the category of *mashuūr ḥadīth* but has not been authenticated by any of the known collections such as Bukhari or *Sahih Muslim*. It is of course almost always supported with the statement that the pursuit of knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim.

32. Fajenyo and Osunde, *The Writings of Abubakar Gimba*, 61.

33. Associating partners with God violates the “central Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), *shirk* is considered the greatest sin in Islam because it is the worst form of unbelief.” Fletcher, “Shirk,” 150.

34. Kassam, “Behind the Veil,” 122.

35. For further commentary on the canonical prayer, see my discussion on the various kinds of prayers in chapter 4.

36. As stated in the Qur’an in the surah *An-Nisa*, (4:19), “Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will.” Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, 190.

37. The injunction to marry women with their consent is also reinforced by Islamic texts such as the *ḥadīth*. Bukhari records that Muhammad had made it clear that a marriage contracted without the consent of a woman is invalid. In the book of *Nikah* (Wedlock), Bukhari reports, “Narrated Abu Huraira . . . : the Prophet . . . said, ‘A matron should not be given in marriage except after consulting her; and a virgin should not be given in marriage except after her permission.’” And “Narrated Khansa’ Bint Khidam Al-Ansariya . . . that her father gave her in marriage . . . and she disliked the marriage. So she went to Allah’s Messenger . . . and he declared that marriage invalid.” *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 7:51–2.

38. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 28.

39. Ibid., 1454.

40. Ibid., 1090. In the footnote to the verse on Allah testing a believer, Ali pertinently explains that the word “test” does not mean a real test for Allah knows all and does not need to test a human being. Rather, the word may be substituted with “know” to train our will and to help us subjectively by making us ask ourselves the question about our own faith in Him.

41. Abu-Rabi, “Salat,” 37.

42. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 62, 594, 830.

### Epilogue

1. Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 145.

2. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 193.

3. Ibid.

4. cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 63, 91; Kandiyoti, “Introduction,” 2.

5. Ugbabe, “Zaynab Alkali,” 17.

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