

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Shaking the Veil: Islam, Gender and Feminist Configurations in the Nigeraian Novels of Hauwa Ali and Zaynab Alkali

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vx5q5rv>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 24(2-3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, n/a

Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.5070/F7242-3016672

Copyright Information

Copyright 1996 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

SHAKING THE VEIL: ISLAM, GENDER AND FEMINIST
CONFIGURATIONS IN THE NIGERIAN NOVELS OF HAUWA
ALI AND ZAYNAB ALKALI¹

Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Through the depictions of interactions associated with gender relations, the issue of Islam and feminist configurations in Nigerian fiction is given prominence. Although it is obvious that modern trends in social activities have undoubtedly become pervasive, especially in terms of the importance attached to the acquisition of education, the female in Nigerian Islamic society still encounters some of the impediments emanating from gender relations contracted and encouraged through religious and cultural considerations.

The fundamental view of a gender relationship, like marriage, in Islam has never been in doubt, for I.M. Lewis states that "despite the control over a woman vested in her guardian (*Wali*), the *Shari'a* conceives of marriage as in essence a voluntary contract between individual spouses,"² and also that "the fundamental transaction is the explicit agreement of the bride (subject only to the constraint, *jabr*, of her guardian), and also requires the presence of a cleric, or *shaikh*, to perform the marriage ceremony."³ This conception of matrimony, however, impinges on the society in several ways. The varied reactions to it, as well as other associated inter-gender interactions within a basic Islamic framework, produces the tension that usually emanates from such actions and reactions.

Female writers from the localities in Nigeria where Islam is widely practiced clearly perceive those actions and reactions emanating from issues of gender relations, education, and the fulfillment of the female as essential in their creative portrayal of reality. Their fundamental concern relates to the delineation of the female in a family

¹ The author is grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Bonn, Germany. This essay benefited from conversational interactions with colleagues at Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Ower, Nigeria.

² I.M. Lewis, "Islamic Law and Customary Practice," in I.M. Lewis ed., *Islam in Tropical Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 53.

³ *Ibid.*

environment and through that environment they telescope the prevalent norms and mores that provide the tension of life in the society. The choice of Hauwa Ali⁴ and Zaynab Alkali is informed both by their northern Nigeria origins, and the relevance of thematic preoccupations in their novels to the essential aspects of Islam identifiable in Nigeria.

The acceptance of these female writers, especially Zaynab Alkali, as worthy of critical attention is emphasized aptly by a critic who states, while assessing her works, that "the entrance of Zaynab Alkali into the burgeoning fold of female Nigerian writers is significant in a historical sense as well as in the sense of the contribution to our literary tradition,"⁵ and also that:

from demonstrated creative potentials as well as her acute sensitivity to typically female issues, experiences and problems, we may well expect that Zaynab Alkali would contribute illuminatingly to the creative output of other important, predominantly 'Southern' female writers."⁶

That observation equally fits Hauwa Ali who comes from a similar cultural and Islamic tradition in which gender issues have not been given the prominence they deserve. Thus, we shall use Hauwa Ali's two novels entitled *Destiny* and *Victory*,⁷ in addition to Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman* to demonstrate the social dimensions, gender linkages and feminist intersections emanating from novels produced in an environment portraying socio-cultural aspects of life associated with the Islamic tradition.

It must be stated that these female writers do not conceive their works primarily from a position of overt rebellion in as much as some of their characters are overt rebels, and they as writers are aware of the need for reasonable socio-cultural changes in their society. It is

⁴ The information was given to me in Bayeruth, Germany, that Hauwa Ali died last year (1995) as a result of breast cancer. May her soul rest in peace.

⁵ Omolola Ladele, "Zaynab Alkali," in Yemi Ogunbiyi ed., *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present* Vol. 2 (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988), p. 327.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Dillibe Onyean, novelist and publisher, should be commended for making the novels of Hauwa Ali available to the public.

interesting that the two female writers are engaged in teaching at the University of Maiduguri, which is not distant from Kano, a town that has been examined in a recent essay and shown to be in the midst of social tension because "there are many overzealous Muslims in Kano city; there are even many who advocate the total rejection of the present system of government in favor of an Islamic one."⁸ However, the writer adds that:

for the majority the recourse to Islamism is the result of their frustration with the failure of modern measures to cope with the worsening social and economic problems. The slogan 'Islam Only,' therefore, is a way of saying that Islamic solutions to these problems are the only remaining options, all the others having been tried and having failed."⁹

With this resurgence of Islamism, gender relationships and the need to allow women to achieve fulfillment through education are greatly affected. Hauwa Ali, obviously aware of the incipient effects of the Islamic tradition on such aspects of life, creates her novel within that tradition of Islamic resurgence, while managing to interrogate the consequence of its rigid application in female lives, especially in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society like Nigeria.

In *Destiny*, the centering of the story on Farida, who completes her education in a Teachers' College where she falls in love with Farouk, a Senegalese with a Nigerian mother, is part of that creative interrogation. The issue of marriage thus becomes the pivot on which the novel revolves as Farida, while waiting for admission to further her education, is compelled by her guardian to marry Wali El Yakub whom she does not love. The major thrust of the novel is the dramatization of how the decision for such an affair is taken without due respect for the feelings of the young woman. The ostensible reason for this decision is to provide security for Farida, and her Aunt Nana insists:

⁸ Bawuro M. Barkindo, "Growing Islamism in Kano City Since 1970: Causes, Form and Implications," in Louis Brenner ed., *Muslim Identity and Social Change in SubSaharan Africa* (London: Hurst and Company, 1993), p. 105.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Just because you have gone to school you have the audacity to question my position. What do you know about life outside the confine of the boarding school? While at school you were protected by the school authorities and the school rules.¹⁰

Gogo, the mother of Mallam Tanimu confirms that view as she dissuades Farida from accepting a teaching appointment that would make her live in Kano, as "a young pretty girl in a large city is big trouble. Things can sometimes get really messy."¹¹ The moral consciousness associated with not only a reasonable cultural tradition, but also an Islamic tradition, is involved in the views of these two women.

This is complicated, however, as Wali El Yakub, in the bid to marry Farida, has provided financial enticements to the family of Aunt Nana and her husband. Aunt Nana therefore seeks to justify her action by falsely attributing it to Allah, and in this way, it will be justified according to the Islamic belief that Allah is omnipotent. Thus, she stresses that, "Allah knows best. It's only He who knows who will marry whom. Ours is only to pray that He guides our choice and gives us the understanding to make the right decision".¹² Ironically, that guidance of Allah is denied Farida by Aunt Nana because she is not allowed to choose her marriage partner.

This decision made by "the other" for Farida, a woman who is capable of taking such decisions, is the focus of Hauwa Ali's interrogation. The fact that two other women are involved does not mitigate it as a restrictive, gender-oppressive and ultimately insensitive decision. Ironically, one of the ostensible reasons for this decision is to protect Farida, although Wali El Yakub is incapable of providing that security. Farida would have been better secured, financially and socially, as an employed teacher. Subsequently, the education she has acquired would have enabled her to carry out her duties as well as attain self-actualization. Thus, this disruptive marriage affair with an

¹⁰ Hauwa Ali, *Destiny* (Enugu: Delta Publications, 1988), p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

individual who cannot relate to her at the same intellectual level is stifling and even stultifying. Hauwa Ali, through this decision affecting Farida, indicts some of her female characters as willing accomplices to the degradation of their fellow women in society.

This affair portrays Wali El Yakub as an individual who depends excessively on the power of his material acquisitions. In fact, the writer hints that it is through this dazzle of his wealth that he manages to convince Aunt Nana to compel Farida to marry him. The implication of this fact is that greed and covetousness often impair the ability of individuals to examine situations closely. Hauwa Ali's criticism of unbridled material consciousness in her society is thus widened to reflect how such inordinate materialism affects gender relationships, destroying the visions, hopes and aspirations of those affected. The implicated view in this case bears close resemblance to Elleke Boehmer's perception that postcolonial women writers stress the importance of "having the power to articulate selfhood".¹³ It is this power to articulate her "self" that is denied Farida through her marriage to Wali El Yakub and it is also this power that he deviously and sinisterly strives to erase permanently from her life.

It is the consequence of his decision to erase the selfhood of Farida that almost leads to tragedy, even as the unpleasant traits of Wali El Yakub, as a person, threaten the marriage. One of these unpleasant traits is an inferiority complex that transforms Wali into an arrogant man who strives to subjugate his wife. The novelist narrates that:

he was never known to have any problem that he didn't know how to solve. To him, failure was unmanly. His life must be one huge success and so he battled to succeed in all things. He had often prided himself with the belief that he had a hold on his destiny.¹⁴

Ironically, this view is interrogated through the fact that he ultimately fails to control his wife's destiny, especially when his

¹³ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 228.

¹⁴ Ali, *Destiny*, p. 74.

decision to prevent her from seeking higher education is circumvented by his own selfish motives. The intersections in this story are provided by Tinu's (Farida's former classmate and friend) marriage to Farouk (the man Farida loves) and the deliberate, vicious efforts of Wali El Yakub to destroy Farouk through Tinu. In addition, Wali's resort to polygamy is an attempt to reduce Farida to a level of subservience that would enhance his ego. The portrayal of polygamy in this novel indicates that it has become one of the most problematic of Islamic tenets as well as a social problem. Wali El Yakub engages in polygamy through selfish motives, believing that it will earn him the power to intimidate Farida. Thus, his engagement in polygamy reflects one of his socio-cultural abuses. A female critic argues that "the most misunderstood position in Islam is that relating to polygamy"¹⁵ and "the first point to note is that the Qu'ran does not oblige Muslims to practice polygamy."¹⁶ Second, it has to be noted that, "it is presented "in phrases of caution"¹⁷ with the intrinsic "fairness which is the condition under which it is permitted."¹⁸ That intrinsic fairness is not considered by Wali as a result of both arrogance and insensitivity to the feelings of Farida who yearns for emotional satisfaction.

Fortunately, events bring Farida and Farouk together in London where the plans of Wali are thwarted by destiny. Farouk divorces Tinu while Farida divorces Wali El Yakub in order to fulfill their emotional desires. What Hauwa Ali metaphorizes in *Destiny* is the fact that marriages contracted without due considerations for the views of the respective partners eventually disintegrate. It is this idea that makes relevant Farida's question quite early in the novel: "Is that what marriage is, an arrangement where only one of the principal partners is happy and satisfied?"¹⁹ It is the answer to this question which is the crux of the novel because in the scene where the affair is discussed it occurs only "after Farida left the room" and "Wali told the elders that he had come to ask Alhaji Abba" for permission to "marry Farida his

¹⁵ Hauwa Mahdi, "The Position of Women in Islam," in A. Imam, R. Pillin, and H. Omole eds., *Women and the Family in Nigeria* (Dakar: Codesria, 1985), pp. 60-61.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ali, *Destiny*, 48.

niece."²⁰ Alhaji Abba agrees, as he considers his role as a guardian in terms of the fact that it is his "responsibility, in the absence of [Farida's] father, to see that [she is] rightly settled".²¹ The exercise of that responsibility ostensibly under an umbrella of a socio-cultural and Islamic tradition is without the commensurate sensitive appraisal of the girl's feelings. Thus Hauwa Ali demonstrates its negativity in the ensuing matrimonial interaction in *Destiny* and makes it clear that in marriages, as in all gender relationships, the principal partners should all be happy and satisfied.

Obviously at the center of the novel is the impression that such marriages contracted with only the consideration of the male partner's interests undermine the self-fulfillment of the girl involved. In her second novel entitled *Victory*, Hauwa Ali presents Tinu as an individual who now assumes responsibility within such a relationship. Although some of the characters encountered in the second novel have their origins in the first novel, the novelist weaves a new pattern of events and incidents that are insightful for the analysis of human nature. Tinu, now a qualified medical doctor, is posted to Farfaru Hospital Kano where she is thrown into the company of other doctors and paramedical staff. The decision of the management to place her under the supervision of Dr. Sanusi introduces an element of romance that is illuminating. Sanusi is a Muslim while Tinu is a Christian, in addition to the fact that they are from different ethnic groups. However, the moral consciousness associated with Islam emanating from the novel comes from Sanusi when he tells Tinu that "being unfaithful to one's wife is not something a married man should be proud of. It is immoral and no religion in the world permits it. Even society disapproves of it."²² Implicated in that remark is, of course, the acknowledged view which has been stated as "Islam, like other religions, condemns adultery, fornication, and all sexual vices. It teaches Muslims to moderate their natural inclinations and to control their sexual behavior."²³ The lack of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²² Hauwa Ali, *Victory* (Enugu: Delta Publications, 1989), p. 41.

²³ Sonia Ghattas-Soliman, "The Two-Sided Image of Women in *Season of Migration to the North*," in Kenneth Harrow ed., *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 93.

that control which Sanusi perceives in Dr. Umar is portrayed as a negative, as it eventually leads to the endangering of Umar's wife's health in a quarrel she has with his girlfriend. In contrast, Sanusi epitomizes the sexual control which Islam stipulates as his relationship with Tinu develops and culminates in a mutual decision to marry.

Illustrating a novelistic purpose is the fact that the past history of Tinu, which should have militated against her emotional fulfillment, is not hidden or erased. The significance of this fact is that Hauwa Ali demonstrates that social and moral mistakes can be made by women, but that those affected can rise above such human frailties by consciously reordering their priorities in life, and imbibing ennobling human qualities. Tinu's rehabilitation in this novel, despite the fact that she had collaborated with Wali El Yakub in the earlier novel to destroy the emotional lives of Farouk and Farida, is an obvious indication that Hauwa Ali insists that women, who, like her female characters, are guilty of social and moral vices, possess the essential capability of positively transforming their lives. Thus the novelist is warning against stereotypical perceptions of individuals, groups of people, members of certain professions and even members of cultural communities as reflecting only certain eternal characteristics and attitudes. She illustrates that as members of a dynamic society, these individuals are constantly evolving and transforming into better human beings. This is certainly a hopeful vision and such literary perceptions emerge as convincing fictive constructs as Sanusi and Tinu proceed to fulfill that decision to link their lives in a marriage of equal partners.

However, their decision to marry is subjected to antagonism from the parents of both partners. At the same time the relationship receives support from Gidalo who advises Sanusi:

if she accepts you, as I am sure she will, try and convince your parents and hers to over-look your tribal differences. Our religion allows marriage between a Muslim and a Christian woman. She might accept your religion because of the love she has for you.²⁴

²⁴ Ali, *Victory*, 97.

Eventually the opposition to the marriage of Tinu and Sanusi fizzles out, as "their patience, determination and power of persuasion eventually won for them some acceptance from their parents."²⁵ Tinu decides to become a Muslim "and took the new name of Jamila."²⁶ It is significant that the remark that Tinu makes after the wedding is: "Allah be praised for this miracle,"²⁷ which indicates that she has absorbed the Islamic notion of attributing all successes to Allah, as well as illustrating her inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriage as a miracle. However, Hauwa Ali, the novelist, illustrates that significant impediments are posed to such inter-cultural matrimonial bliss within an Islamic society in which there are contending interest groups.

Nevertheless the discomfiting view that it is the woman who eventually converts to the religion of the husband problematizes the fictive focus of this novel. Although Hauwa Ali portrays, through Gidalo, the fact that the conversion is a choice that Tinu makes without force or undue social pressure, the same choice is not placed before Sanusi. Rather it is taken for granted that his religious beliefs cannot be compromised. Perhaps Hauwa Ali is hinting at the fact that such patriarchal notions make it necessary for the veil of Islam to be shaken and it is likely that it will be shaken by such a highly qualified female professional like Tinu in the course of her life as a Muslim woman engaged in her professional, civic and matrimonial affairs. Furthermore, this novel signifies the possibility of "shaking the veil" through the transformation of Tinu from a selfish, materialistic and vicious woman into a selfless, sympathetic and kind female medical doctor. Hauwa Ali deliberately transforms her into a center of consciousness in this novel as she radiates human characteristics that will enhance social harmony. In addition, Ali also shows through the fictive rehabilitation of Tinu in *Victory* that Tinu's frailties in the first novel *Destiny* are the consequences of ignorance and immaturity.

Similarly, the issue of contending cultural groups, marriages within an Islamic tradition and the need for female characters to fulfill themselves are present in the works of Zaynab Alkali. In the novel *The Stillborn*, Alkali who appears a good craftswoman, also presents the

²⁵ Ibid., 104.

²⁶ Ibid., 105.

²⁷ Ibid.

socio-cultural interactions associated with gender relations. Li, Faku and Awa, the three female characters in the novel who feature in those gender relations, develop their lives against a background of an Islamic tradition. This Islamic tradition has been affected by some aspects of Christianity and Traditional religions that have been gradually making it undergo changes in a new dispensation in the village. Nevertheless, the novelist creates harmonious links between the contending Traditional, Islamic and Christian religions in the village. This harmony is personified by Kaka (the grandfather of Li, the major character) because "whenever there was a Christian or Muslim festival in the village, he attended both diligently."²⁸ This kind of harmony is what the three girls seek in their own emotional and married lives as they link themselves in marriage with three young men: Li is linked matrimonially with Habu Adams, Faku with Garba while Awa and Dan Fiana become wife and husband. However, their notions of marriage are not necessarily dependent on the Islamic tradition, as the novelist demonstrates the importance of personal convictions.

Dan Fiana, for instance, contrary to the Islamic freedom for polygamy, "didn't consider himself a suitable candidate for polygamy;" Awa also "disliked the ideas of polygamy," because "in her opinion, the children of different mothers disliked and distrusted each other," and "the co-wives were always vying jealously for the husband's favour, thus creating a tense atmosphere in the home," but Faku "thought differently" and feels that "if the man could afford to feed a dozen other wives, who was she to object."²⁹ The various marriages and their evolution problematize those views as the characters develop and widen their social horizons. Li, who is vehemently opposed to polygamy rightly assesses the motivations of one of the suitors, Alhaji Bature, who is predatorily polygamous. She feels that "he was a greedy selfish man who spread his wealth to get what he wanted even at the cost of other people's happiness. He was a cunning, dirty man who showed no interest in a woman until another man did," and "he was a born hunter who adorned himself with the number of women he acquired."³⁰

²⁸ Zaynab Alkali, *The Stillborn* 1989 Edition (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1984), p. 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

This criticism of Alhaji Bature portrays Li as a woman capable of discerning negative human characteristics that necessitates the importance of "shaking the veil" in order to perceive the real features of the practitioners of Islam, as well as the effects of such negative attitudes to the female in the society. It is actually Alhaji Bature who reflects the attitude which a critic identifies and criticizes as the attitude that the "woman exists and functions to gratify the desire of the man."³¹ This critic also observes that "at the core of feminism is not just the matter of sex and desire, but the issue of power and discourse,"³² meaning that there is "the implicit moral aspect of the feminist method [hinged] on the recognition that it is wrong to thingify women or to relegate women to the backwaters of social organizations."³³ Thus Li's resistance symbolizes Zaynab Alkali's fictive statement on the necessity to resist, interrogate and criticize such attitudes. Thus, even if the view of Seiyifa Koroye, that the ascetic vision of Alkali indicates a willingness to forgive in spite of any pain suffered is accepted, it does not mean that the novelist is saying that this pain should be eternal.³⁴ All the same, it is not necessarily the idea of polygamy which generates such vehemently criticized matrimonial pain, but the ideas of those desirous of practicing it.

Nevertheless, despite these varied views and concepts concerning polygamous marriages, Zaynab Alkali illustrates that the environment determines the practice of the Islamic tradition within society. In the village, Dan Fiama and Awa exist within that tradition, notwithstanding the disasters they encounter, but in the city the marriages of Li and Faku are respectively subjected to the disconcerting effects of modernism. In effect, *The Stillborn* shows that in societies where the individual does not come under the influence of Muslim relatives and the Muslim ethos, there is the tendency for the moral injunctions associated with the religion to be ignored. Li's sad rumination captures the intrinsic aspect of that moral tension:

³¹ Onyemaechi Udumukwu, "Post-Colonial Feminism: Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*," *The Literary Griot* 6 (Spring 1994): 48.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Seiyifa Koroye, "The Asectic Feminist Vision of Zaynab Alkali," in Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo eds., *Nigerian Female Writers* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1989), p. 47.

this man wasn't the man she used to roll with on the sand in front of her father's compound. The man lying on the other side of the room was a well-dressed stranger who did not tally to a village woman. She held her breasts and her sobs stabbed deeper and deeper into her heart.³⁵

All the same, there are exceptions to the self-centred individualized city dwellers, such as Hajiya the Landlady who relates maternally to Li, encouraging her to overcome her tribulations. This relationship is Alkali's way of depicting essential bonds of Muslim sisterhood. Interestingly, through Hajiya's confessional statements made to console Li when Habu Adams becomes insensitive, the author enables the reader to perceive the Islamic attitude to disasters, for Hajiya says:

it is painful and hard when you have no man or child to hug, but I stayed [in the late husband's house]. I was married to him. It was where Allah wanted me to be. I stayed Li, not for a year or two but for thirty years.³⁶

Fortunately, before the man dies he shows appreciation for Hajiya's faithfulness with the gift of the house in which Li and Habu Adams live as tenants. The aim is that the rents accruing would enable Hajiya to procure the basic necessities for herself. Hajiya's confession illustrates another subtle way of "shaking the veil" of Islam through what the critic, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, has characterized as the tactics of "sit down and look on, but not idly."³⁷ Thus Hajiya's patience in living in the house with her sick, understanding husband, in addition to the unsympathetic fellow women is a planned patience and not patience induced by weakness. In effect, that planned patience magnifies an aspect of Zaynab Alkali's creativity which Ogunyemi also perceives as

³⁵ Alkali, *The Stillborn*, 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 284.

part of the focus in the novels of younger Nigerian female writers who

reiterate that they will parley with their men, even play games, to ensure that they forge ahead together without too much acrimony. They will not repeat men's mistake of using aggression to exclude or exile those different.³⁸

Thus Zaynab Alkali's female characters make efforts to parley with their men and ensure that they forge ahead socially and economically, especially in the procurement of the essential necessities of life.

The tribulations of the younger women, Li and Faku, do not only originate from the scarcities of the wherewithal to procure the basic necessities of life because their husbands are distanced from the moral consciousness of the Islamic tradition they profess and the moral consciousness of the women. The result is that as they absorb influences of modernism, they also absorb several vices, to the extent that the tenuous hold of Islam on them can not obliterate those vices. Thus the marriages of Li and Faku fail because the positive features of the Islamic tradition, or even the cultural tradition cannot influence their husbands. But Li strives to make a success of her life even within that constraining tradition unlike Faku who succumbs, out of frustration, to the vice of prostitution. Li's decision to acquire education is part of the author's way of underscoring both the value of education, and the possibility of securing fulfillment of the self in a modern Islamic society, despite unpleasant gender relationships.

Significantly, the modern Islamic society must also contend with new forms of deviances generated by material consciousness. At the Advanced Teacher's College where Li is studying after taking the decision to fulfill herself as a modern urbanized Muslim woman through education, and contrary to the subservience of the village Islamic tradition; she knows that "the security man had a reputation for making money through calling up girls for the rich Alhajis in town."³⁹ The prurient urges of the Alhajis, who under normal circumstances epitomize the zenith of moral responsibility, reveal a degeneration in

³⁸Ibid., 291.

³⁹Alkali, *The Stillborn*, p. 96.

which a warped sense of financial power creates excessive immorality. Zaynab Alkali portrays that in the traditional society, but more especially in the modern society, gender relationships are subjected to the selfish and opportunistic activities contrary to the tenets of social and cultural organizations. The brave statement of Li after all she has undergone at the hands of the unfortunate Habu Adams, whose legs are broken in a motor accident signify part of the vision of the new female in Alkali's novel as a strong reliable and purposeful figure in the society she envisages. Li informs her sister that she will "just hand [Habu Adams] the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk,"⁴⁰ which is a statement of that partnership based on equality that Zaynab Alkali signifies in this novel.

This same moral perspective is also present in Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*, which is a novel detailing the journey of three girls known as Nana Ai, Laila and Hajjo to the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Secondary School. The issue of gender relationships also predominates because it is ever present in the minds of the three girls, and the author contrasts its effects through the perspectives of the older girls, Nana Ai and Laila. Nana Ai behaves virtuously while Laila is unrestrained, and the two girls clearly reflect the influence of their respective families. The father of Laila is pompous while the grandfather of Nana Ai, who is also her guardian because her parents are dead is convinced that tradition does not require selfishly motivated acts. For instance, the old grandfather does not "believe in choosing spouses for his children. He let[s] them make their own choice[s], discreetly guiding with his subtle encouragement or discouragement."⁴¹ That discreet involvement is obviously the author's way of indicating the relevance of freedom of choice that women need even within an Islamic tradition.

Unfortunately, this attitude is not shared by the other members of the society who are untroubled by moral considerations as their hypocritical behaviors indicate. This hypocrisy is underscored by the slogans on the bodies of the lorries. The slogan written on the lorry which Nana Ai, Laila and Hajjo board for their journey to the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴¹ Zaynab Alkali, *The Virtuous Woman* (Ikeja, Lagos: Longman, 1987), p. 19.

secondary school reads *Hakuri*-- patience-- and the author narrates that

it was normal practice to label vehicles with all kinds of slogans. Two other Lorries were in the process of loading, when *Hakuri* pulled out of the motor park. One was labelled '*Allah Sarki*,' God is King, and the other '*Allah Kiyaye*,' God Protects.⁴²

Such slogans indicate a conviction of the omnipresence of Allah which the Islamic tradition emphasizes, although the drivers of those two lorries merely regard them as labels devoid of religious and moral implications. The irony in the lorry slogans becomes clear when the two lorries are stuck in the mud and a female passenger explains:

the [drivers] are mad. Ever since we left the town behind us, they have been chasing each other like bush rats. What I don't understand is the encouraging shouts from the passengers. Three times our Lorry skidded and almost toppled in the rain-- now look at what they have done. The Lorries are arm-deep in the soft soil. Now no matter how hurried they are, they will have to spend the night here.⁴³

The progress of this journey also casts insight on the fictive manipulations of characters; the social vision and gender relationships in the novel. Nana Ai and her two companions are given a male "protector" who ends up being protected by the girls in a role reversal that subverts the common perceptions of male-female associations in the society. This old and sick man symbolizes the old and sick patriarchy, while the young and healthy girls portray the evolving and vibrant ascendance of matriarchy. But interestingly, Zaynab Alkali does not make the feminine principle of that matriarchy overbearing, for it ascends to the level of the existing patriarchy and stabilizes. This stabilization is epitomized by the mutual appreciation of Bello and Nana

⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 40.

Ai. In addition, this journey also subverts an aspect of the socio-religious restrictions on women. Theresa Njoku rightly states that "mobility ensures the loosening of the Muslim woman's confinement"⁴⁴ and that this movement "symbolizes protest against a culture that cripples women, movement signifies liberation."⁴⁵ The liberation which this journey reiterates is the liberation from a stifling socio-religious attitude that envelopes the female members of the society. The stories narrated and the incidents that take place during the night that the travellers spend in the open-air make such views concerning the liberation of the female palpable and illuminating.

In the course of that night, Nana Ai learns the story of Mallard Dogo, the entertainer, whose unreasonable behaviour because his wife gives birth to only one son and many daughters leads him to marry another wife which culminates in tragedy. The second wife fails to fulfill his objectives, his first son dies in a motor accident, and the shock transforms him into a clown. The tragedy of Dogo becomes a metaphor which illuminates the erroneous beliefs concerning male and female offspring which Zaynab Alkali portrays through the communal interactions of the stranded people that night. The adventures of the night, however, are pleasant in comparison to the tragic accident of the following day involving the lorries, *Allah Sarki* and *Allah Kiyaye*. This accident occurs when

Allah Sarki [overtakes] *Allah Kiyaye* around a sharp bend and inevitably [crashes] into the obscured on-coming trailer which [is] carrying plastic goods. *Allah Kiyaye* which [is] following closely at the other's heels [has] no time to stop, so [crashes] fully into the other's rear.⁴⁶

The irony that the respective drivers of the vehicles fail to perform their duties under the guidance of Allah negates the religious belief that the

⁴⁴Theresa Njoku, "Personal Identity and the Growth of the Nigerian Woman in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Women*," in Helen Chukwuma, ed., *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism* (Enugu: New Generation Books, 1994), p. 178.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Alkali, *The Virtuous Woman*, p. 62.

words written on their vehicles signify. In effect, Zaynab Alkali is reiterating the tendency in human nature to obstruct the positive effects of Allah's guidance and protection.

More importantly, *The Virtuous Woman*, through the portrayal of Nana Ai, illuminates the moral consciousness in the Islamic tradition of appreciating virtue. The famous verse of the Queen Elizabeth School recited by the imaginary voice of the Principal in Nana Ai's daydream towards the end of the novel, as she and Bello, who survive the motor accident, are romantically drawn to each other, codify the value of that virtue, especially as Laila has not been exercising control over her emotions. That verse says:

Who can find the virtuous woman
For her price is far above rubies
The heart of her husband cloth
Safely trust in her
So that he shall have no need for spoil
She will do him good and not evil
All the days of her life---
Strength and honour are her clothing
And she shall rejoice in time to come.⁴⁷

These virtues stressed in the verse are reflected in the character of Nana Ai, although she has a physical disability. Through her, Zaynab Alkali stresses that in as much as these are virtues appreciated by Muslims, they are at the same time necessary in all human affairs, especially in the normal activities of organizing life and daily existence in the societies. Despite those virtues, Nana Ai is not likely to become an ignorant submissive wife, as she is aware of, and sensitive to, the rewards of education which her virtues would enable her to achieve. Thus her perception of gender relationships is one that unites the man and the woman in a bond of mutual esteem.

It is clear that Zaynab Alkali's artistic responses to gender relationships are not overtly didactic which would have militated against the creative focus of her novels. The range of Islamic gender

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

and social projections in the novels emerge through the subtle portrayals of the attitudes and thoughts of the characters. In effect, the female writers Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali, in as much as they are aware that "Islam is a way of life, an all-encompassing system that pervades the social, economic and political structures of its believers,"⁴⁸ they are equally conscious that the veil must be shaken in order to catalyze and reconfigure gender relations and also that the existence of an Islamic tradition in a multi-religious and multi-cultural environment possesses other implications. One of these implications is that all citizens, no matter their religious affiliations, must co-exist amicably. This necessity encourages a socio-cultural tradition of non-violence. Although in real life this tension often degenerates into conflicts, the novelists subvert the bases for such altercations through the constructs of the events and characters in their novels.

The characters in Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali's novels are portrayed to reiterate the virtues of well-considered social traditions as well as to demonstrate the inner strength that women in that society must cultivate. The novelists synthesize and situate the characters within the basic gender issues in the bid to make an introspective and extrospective analysis of the self as well as an extrospective assessment of the events. In effect, they stress the elasticity of religious and social traditions as the society evolves and their female characters pass through its phases. Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali succeed in highlighting that a subtle interrogation of tradition is perhaps more effective than a confrontational criticism of its individually exhibited patriarchal excesses. Thus interwoven in these novels is a mediated and subversive use of even the Islamic tradition to reiterate the positivity of womanhood, the survival of moral values, and a critically resistant and discomforting challenge of that tradition by suggesting the gaps and discontinuities in it. The two novelists have "shaken the veil" and exposed the features of oppression personified in the guise of human beings.

⁴⁸ Ali Jamale Ahmed, "Of Poets and Sheikhs: Somali Literature," in Kenneth Harrow ed., *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, p. 80.