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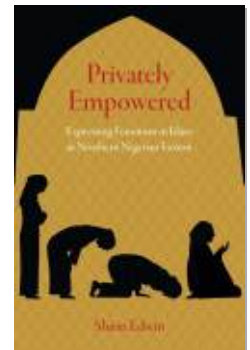
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Chapter 2



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.¹ 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.² 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*.³ Chief among the obstacles, or “mountains,” to again evoke Ogun-dipe-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.⁴

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."⁵ 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."⁶ 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:⁷

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. ⁸

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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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).¹² 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.¹³ 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”¹⁴—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*).¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

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."¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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."²² 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.²³ Omolale Ladele calls Li a young woman with "positive qualities."²⁴ Ogunyemi sees in her "a young, ambitious, fearless girl."²⁵ 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."²⁶

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."²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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."²⁹ 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."³⁰ Catherine Acholonu locates Li's feminism on a similar register, that of fierce radicalism, discontent, and "revolutionary" actions.³¹ 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.³²

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."³³ 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."³⁴ In similar fashion, Ogunyemi declares the novel as a piece of writing that boldly raises "socioeconomic questions and institutionalized injustice."³⁵ 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.³⁶ (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.³⁷

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.³⁸ "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."³⁹ (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.⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹

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.”⁴² 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.”⁴³ 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.’”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Ogunyemi finds the ending of the novel puzzling and inexplicable as Li “is made to wait for an irresponsible husband.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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).⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ C. U. Ogbuehi believes Awa to be complicit “in her own repression and urges Li to do the same.”⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ (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.⁶⁰

Thus, in pronouncing the *shahādah*, one is actually also saying that they "live out the truth that has been perceived."⁶¹ 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."⁶² 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.⁶³

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).⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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*.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.

