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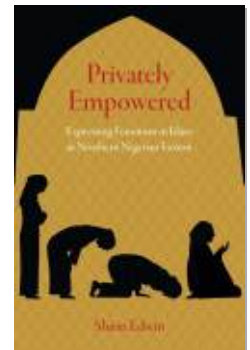
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Chapter 3



Historical Templates and Islamic Disposition

Personal Journeys in *The Virtuous Woman*

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

—Zaynab Alkali

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

—Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literary Levity: Children's Fiction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the use of sending a female child to school? If she turns out well, the man she marries gets the benefit of her education. If she gets spoiled in the school, I get the blame. It's my name that gets dragged into the mud. It's my house that becomes her refuge. Whichever way you look at it, the father of a female child is the loser. Let the girls stay at home and help their mother; when it is time for them to marry, let them marry. (TVW, 47)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

