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## Privately Empowered

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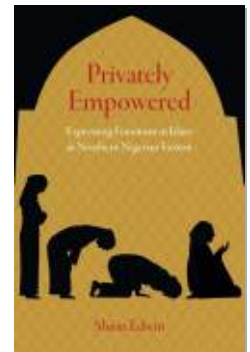
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## Chapter 4



# Spiritual Legacies and Worship

## Personal Spaces in *The Descendants*

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

—The Qur'an (13:28)

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

—John Renard

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Magira Milli may be a yesterday's woman but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society. Ramta was not too far away from major cities. She was a good listener who constantly tuned in to her small transistor radio. She was also a watcher of events. She knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. Education opens doors and gives an individual options in life. She may have missed those options but she wanted those options for her grandchildren. (*TD*, 13)

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

She realized belatedly that her late husband, the great Lawani Duna and herself had made a mistake. The Paramount Chief of Ramta had believed more in royalty than education. He had not allowed his sons to go to school and so they had not ventured out of their father's domain. One by one, they had perished in that land of ignorance and superstitions. A land of poverty and disease. Only Aji who had travelled out of Borno to pursue an education, has escaped. (*TD*, 14)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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