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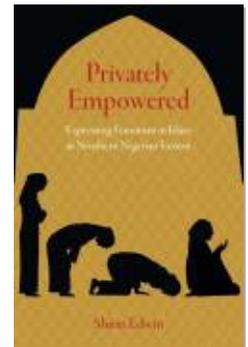
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Chapter 5



Frequent Functions and References

Personal Solutions in *Sacred Apples* and *Destiny*

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

—Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi

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

—Abubakar Gimba

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

—Nana Wilson Tagoe

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Critiquing Islam: A "Culture of Silence"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shareef then explains the value of knowledge in Islam by interpreting this exhortation to mean the pursuit of all kinds of knowledge and not just religious knowledge. He refers to the all-encompassing wisdom of the Qur'an, beyond just the exhortation to fulfill rituals: "do we just learn only how to perform ablution, how to pray, how to fast, or perform our rituals and then fold our arms? No . . . the Book exhorts us to do much more" (SA, 51). He goes on to quote the widely circulated *hadith* on going as far as China in search of knowledge³¹ and concludes, "taking a swipe at a cultural whim that had sadly acquired an aura of meritorious religious convention":

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

