ABOUT THE BOOK

Women, Islam and the Postcolonial Literary Imagination in West Africa: Gender, Faith and Female Agency in Senegalese and Nigerian Writing examine how West African writers engage with Islam, cultural traditions and social norms in their representations of women. While discussions of Islam and gender are often framed through assumptions of restriction and patriarchy, Senegalese and Nigerian literature reveal a more complex landscape in which women negotiate authority, ethical responsibility and social participation within religious and communal frameworks.

Focusing on key works by Ousmane Sembène, Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Ibrahim Tahir and Zaynab Alkali, this study explores how literary narratives interrogate the intersections of religion, gender, and power in postcolonial Senegal and Nigeria. Through close readings of texts such as *God's Bits of Wood*, White Genesis, *The Beggars' Strike*, *So Long a Letter*, *The Last Imam* and *The Stillborn* the book demonstrates how women emerge not simply as victims of patriarchal structures but as agents who shape moral discourse, influence communal life, and articulate new possibilities for female autonomy.

By situating these works within the broader contexts of Islamic ethics, social transformation, and feminist literary criticism, this book offers a nuanced understanding of how Senegalese literature reimagines the role of women in society. It contributes to ongoing debates in African literary studies, gender studies, and scholarship on Islam in Africa.

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Dedication

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Introduction

Islam, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in West African Novels

Contemporary West African fiction, particularly that of Senegal and Nigeria, constructs womanhood at the intersection of Islamic thought, indigenous cultural values, and the enduring legacies of colonial modernity. Across these literary traditions, writers deploy narrative form to interrogate reductive assumptions about Muslim women's lived experiences, their agency, and their moral and social authority. The works of Ousmane Sembène, Mariama Bâ, and Aminata Sow Fall foreground Senegalese women navigating contested ethical and social terrains, while the novels of Nigerian writers Ibrahim Tahir and Zaynab Alkali provide a complementary perspective in which Islam becomes both a cultural resource and a site of ideological negotiation. Together, these authors establish a comparative framework for understanding how Muslim women are imagined, constrained, and empowered across West African literary landscapes.

Islam, Gender, and Contexts in Senegal and Nigeria

While West African literary scholarship has traditionally emphasized Christianity and indigenous belief systems, the Islamic dimensions of fiction in Senegal and Nigeria have received comparatively little attention. Religion, Islamic, Christian, or indigenous, has long served as a vital symbolic and thematic resource in African literature, shaping narrative structures, ethical concerns and social commentary. This study foregrounds Islam not to fragment West African literary production along religious lines but to highlight Muslim experiences that have often been

marginalized in critical discourse. African literature has historically engaged Christianity through writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono, Ayi Kwei Armah, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and indigenous cosmologies through Yoruba authors such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and Akinwumi Isola. In contrast, in literary criticism, Islam has remained underexamined despite the religion's long-standing presence and profound influence on communal organization, political authority and gender norms. By situating the works of Sembène, Bâ and Sow Fall alongside those of Tahir and Alkali, this study addresses this critical gap, illuminating the religious imaginations that have shaped West African modernity and the ways these visions are articulated in fiction.

This study foregrounds writers from Senegal and Nigeria because their works reveal how Muslim women interpret, navigate, and challenge the moral, cultural, and religious frameworks that shape their lives. In Senegal, Islamic ethics and Sufi traditions, particularly those of the Murīdiyya, Tijāniyya, and Qādiriyya, shape social institutions, political life and gendered expectations. The Francophone novels of Sembène, Bâ and Sow Fall interrogate Islamic ethics, family law and entrenched social norms, thereby revealing possibilities for women's civic participation, ethical reasoning, and moral authority.

These writers occupy a foundational place in West African literature, both nationally and regionally. Sembène is celebrated for his politically engaged novels that address social inequality, postcolonial corruption and gendered dynamics, earning recognition as a key figure in Francophone African literary and cinematic traditions.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* remains a canonical text of African feminist literature, offering profound insights into polygamy, education, and women's agency within Islamic and customary frameworks. Aminata Sow Fall, through her socially realist narratives, illuminates urban life, ethical dilemmas and the negotiation of women's roles in postcolonial Senegal. Together, their works not only exemplify the rich literary output of Senegal but also provide critical perspectives on how Islamic, cultural, and historical forces shape gendered identities. Their contributions are therefore indispensable to understanding how religion, tradition, and modernity intersect in contemporary West African fiction.

In 19th-century northern Nigeria, the rise of Islamic reformist movements and the consolidation of the emirate systems reorganized governance and gender relations, creating spaces, albeit contested, for women's participation in education, scholarship, and communal leadership. Islam flourished through Qur'anic schooling, producing a literate, intellectually active, and socially engaged populace in which women cultivated distinctive scholarly and literary voices, exemplified by Nana Asma'u whose poetry and pedagogical writings combined Islamic instruction with ethical reflection and social critique. These historical processes form a crucial backdrop for northern Nigerian fiction, shaping how authors interrogate women's negotiations of agency, morality and social belonging. Anglophone Nigerian novels build directly on this terrain. *The Last Imam* by Ibrahim Tahir explores the entanglements of piety, political power, and female subjectivity, while *The Stillborn* by Zaynab Alkali depicts women navigating the

intersecting pressures of patriarchal authority, economic aspiration, and religious expectation.

In both the Senegalese and Nigerian contexts, Muslim women in fiction appear not as fixed symbols of tradition or resistance, but as dynamic agents whose identities are continually negotiated and redefined. Through close readings of the novels of Sembène, Sow Fall, Bâ, Tahir and Alkali, this study traces the tensions and intersections between religious belief, customary practices, and modern aspirations. These narratives portray women as interpreters of scripture, negotiators of familial and communal responsibilities, and as agents of ethical fashioning. They demonstrate how women's actions articulate agency, enact forms of resistance, and illuminate the multiple ways in which religious and cultural norms are interpreted, contested, and reimagined in the rhythms of everyday life.

The focus of this discussion is on how contemporary West African fiction engages the intertwined influences of Islam and indigenous traditions in shaping women's lives and identities. By examining selected novels from Senegal and Nigeria—two nations in which Islam continues to shape social, political and intellectual life—this study considers how writers probe the boundaries of faith, gender, and cultural authority through narrative strategies. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, universalized assumptions about Muslim womanhood are challenged and culturally specific forms of moral, social, and intellectual authority that emerge across West African fiction are highlighted.

Critical Frameworks for Interpreting Muslim Womanhood in West African Fiction

Anchored in postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism, and African literary theory, the analyses in this study are grounded in the specific historical and cultural contexts of Senegal and Nigeria. The interpretive framework adopted here is therefore tripartite. Postcolonial feminism challenges homogenizing narratives that cast Muslim women as uniformly oppressed or culturally static, instead emphasizing the complex negotiations through which they navigate power, belief and social expectation. Islamic feminism brings to light the plurality of interpretive traditions within Islam, revealing how women assert moral, intellectual, and theological authority from within the faith itself. African literary theory, with its attentiveness to oral aesthetics, indigenous epistemologies and local narrative forms, illuminates culturally specific narrative strategies through which gender is represented in African expressive traditions. Together, these approaches offer a grounded and culturally situated vocabulary for analyzing gender in West African fiction, enabling a nuanced understanding of how female characters inhabit, negotiate, and reinterpret their social and spiritual worlds.

Complementing these perspectives, a body of foundational scholarship situates the analysis within broader debates on gender, Islam, and postcolonial thought. Edward Said's *Orientalism* exposes how Western discourses have historically constructed the "Orient" as a space of cultural and religious otherness, providing a framework for understanding how African Muslim women are often read from external perspectives. Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* interrogates the sociopolitical deployment of Islamic

discourse in sustaining gender hierarchies while highlighting emancipatory possibilities within Islamic interpretive traditions. Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* demonstrates the interdependence of patriarchal culture and state power in shaping women's lives across the Islamic world. Fatna A. Sabbah's *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* offers a psychoanalytic reading of symbolic and theological representations of women in classical Islamic thought.

Additional perspectives further inform the study. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* challenges liberal paradigms of agency by showing how religious practice can function as a form of ethical self-formation. Amina Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad* introduces a theological dimension, advocating gender-egalitarian Qur'anic hermeneutics. Margot Badran's *Feminism in Islam* conceptualizes Islamic feminism as a reformist discourse grounded in Qur'anic ethics. Ousseina Alidou's *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya* broadens the scope by examining how Muslim women negotiate modernity, religious authority, and cultural obligation**.** The study also engages the Qur'an and the Hadith not as static repositories of law but as interpretive traditions that African authors mobilize to reimagine Muslim womanhood.

A transnational lens is added through Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* which critiques homogenizing Western feminist discourses that portray Third World women as monolithic victims. This resonates with African feminist thinkers such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Ifi Amadiume and Obioma Nnaemeka whose culturally grounded frameworks emphasize negotiation, relationality, and the historical specificities that shape

women's lives. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of how women in West African fiction inhabit, negotiate, and reinterpret their social and spiritual worlds.

Through an interdisciplinary approach that bridges Islamic studies, gender theory, and African literary criticism, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges monolithic portrayals of Muslim women and foregrounds culturally grounded representations of negotiation, reflexivity, resilience, and context-specific empowerment. In the novels selected for analysis, Muslim women emerge as dynamic agents whose ethical deliberation, intellectual engagement, and social negotiation illuminate the complex intersections of faith, culture, and modernity.

These perspectives form the conceptual backbone of the study. They demonstrate how fiction serves as a site in which Islamic values are reflected, interrogated, and reinterpreted. The texts examined depict women not as passive or static symbols but as active participants whose choices and embodied practices articulate the multifaceted ways Muslim womanhood is imagined across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. By situating these literary representations within broader historical, cultural, and intellectual frameworks, the study argues that Senegalese and Nigerian writers make sophisticated contributions to ongoing debates on Islam, gender, and literary representation. In highlighting the interplay of ethical reasoning, communal belonging and lived experience, it shows how fiction offers a powerful medium through which Islamic values are not only mirrored but also questioned, negotiated, and transformed.

Emerging from a web of cultural and religious influences, the women in the novels occupy a central place in debates over authenticity, morality and modernity. Their choices, comportment, and social positioning function as signifiers of communal values and cultural continuity, yet the texts consistently resist reducing them to fixed embodiments of social expectation. Rather, they emerge as speaking subjects who negotiate, question, and at times resist the roles assigned to them within patriarchal interpretations of Islamic ethics and indigenous norms. The authors examined interrogate the sociocultural application of Islam without repudiating the faith itself, thereby illuminating the interpretive flexibility of religious texts and the moral agency available to women in West African contexts.

The chapters that follow build on these historical, cultural, and theoretical foundations to examine how West African literary writers represent Muslim women negotiating faith, culture, and social norms. The first chapter situates the study within the historical and cultural contexts of Senegal and northern Nigeria, tracing how Islam, indigenous traditions, and colonial legacies have shaped gendered social structures. It establishes the interpretive framework through which concepts such as agency, authority, and subjectivity are understood as locally grounded and historically produced, rather than filtered through universalized Western paradigms.

Subsequent chapters turn to literary analysis, beginning with Ousmane Sembène whose novels depict women navigating the intersections of religion, civic responsibility, and postcolonial nation-building. Through his portrayals, the chapter highlights how female characters operate within competing moral and ideological expectations,

mobilizing Islamic and cultural discourses to negotiate both authority and resistance. Aminata Sow Fall's fiction is examined next, emphasizing the ethical, communal and moral dimensions of women's lives. Her narratives reveal how characters grapple with Islamic ethical codes, social obligation and communal responsibility, challenging binary models of oppression and liberation and presenting agency as relational, strategic, and deeply embedded in Senegalese Muslim moral economies.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is analyzed for its epistolary form which becomes a vehicle for introspection and relational self-representation. The novel illuminates the reflective moral self as it negotiates Islamic family law, widowhood and social expectation, showing how narrative form itself can articulate female subjectivity. The focus then shifts to northern Nigeria where Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* interrogates the dynamics of piety, spiritual authority and female subjectivity within closely ordered religious environments. This chapter highlights subtle forms of resistance, influence and self-fashioning that emerge as women negotiate moral regulation within structured religious hierarchies. Finally, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* explores the interplay of destiny, aspiration, Islamic values, and generational expectation in shaping northern Nigerian womanhood. Through her protagonist, the text demonstrates how education, marriage, and personal ambition become arenas for persistence, negotiation and nuanced empowerment.

Together, these chapters trace the multifaceted ways in which Senegalese and Nigerian authors employ narrative strategies, characterization, and intertextual references to Islamic and indigenous traditions to explore women's

agency, resistance and ethical deliberation. They illuminate the complex intersections of faith, culture and modernity that define Muslim female subjectivity in West African literature.

The conclusion brings these strands together to show how Sembène, Sow Fall, Bâ, Tahir and Alkali collectively complicate prevailing narratives about Muslim women in West African literary and cultural discourse. Across their novels, women emerge not as passive subjects confined by religious or cultural authority but as strategic actors whose moral reasoning, emotional depth and negotiated forms of agency reveal the complexities of Muslim female subjectivity. By situating these literary representations within broader Islamic, historical and intellectual contexts, the book argues that Senegalese and Nigerian writers offer sophisticated and often overlooked contributions to global debates on Islam, gender, and literary representation.

Chapter One

Islam, Society and Gender in West African Cultural Contexts

Scholars offer differing accounts of how Islam first arrived in West Africa. Lamin Sanneh emphasizes a military route, linking its introduction to the seventh-century campaigns of the Arab general ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ and later Almoravid incursions into the Western Sahara. Others, including Mervyn Hiskett and Nehemia Levtzion, argue that Islam reached the Western Sudan centuries earlier through peaceful commercial exchange brought by North African merchants along the trans-Saharan trade routes. These traders, drawn by gold, salt and other goods, often served as religious instructors, establishing early Islamic networks. By the eleventh century, the kingdom of Takrur in the Senegambia region became the first fully Muslim polity in West Africa as its ruler War-Dyabe adopted Islam and enforced its laws. Islamic influence also spread among neighboring Wolof elites, with marabouts (religious leaders) active at court by the sixteenth century. Over time, Muslim scholars, clerics and merchants became deeply integrated into political and cultural life mediating between religious law and local customs.

Islam and Social Transformation

From the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, the Mali Empire brought Islam to even greater prominence. Its founder, Sunjata Keita, was only nominally Muslim, yet under Mansa Musa (r. 1312–1337) Mali experienced a "Golden Age." Musa's celebrated pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 strengthened West Africa's connections with the

broader Muslim world and fostered intellectual and cultural exchange. Accounts of Ibn Battuta's visit in 1352 describe a prosperous and literate society in which Qurʾanic education, mosque attendance and Islamic dress codes were widespread, even as local customs particularly those affecting women remained resilient. This early history demonstrates that Islam in West Africa was not simply transplanted from abroad, rather, it was adapted to local social structures and, in turn, reshaped them, producing diverse expressions of Muslim identity across the region.

The spread of Islam from the eleventh century onward through trade, scholarly networks and reformist movements profoundly reshaped gender relations and public life. In regions such as Senegal and northern Nigeria, Islamic law and institutions offered women new opportunities for education, participation in commerce, and engagement in religious scholarship, while also introducing legal and social prescriptions that could restrict their mobility and autonomy. The encounter between Islamic norms and pre-existing indigenous traditions produced a hybrid gender order: in some contexts, Islam curtailed certain pre-Islamic freedoms for women; in others, it provided a moral and legal framework for contesting local patriarchal practices.

The interaction of African Islam with patriarchy was thus complex and historically contingent. Islamic jurisprudence became intertwined with customary law, creating layered systems of gender regulation. Religious discourses concerning women drawn from Qurʾanic injunctions, prophetic traditions, or the pronouncements of local scholars oscillated between empowering and restrictive interpretations. This ambivalence, in turn, generated a

vibrant tradition of literary and cultural responses as writers and intellectuals engaged with, reinterpreted or contested the gendered dimensions of religious authority.

Within this broader ambivalence, Islam functions in many contemporary West African societies not merely as a private faith but as a pervasive social institution that shapes worldviews, ethical frameworks, gender relations, and communal organization. Its influence extends across everyday life, informing education, legal systems, dress codes and interpersonal interactions while intersecting in complex ways with indigenous traditions and postcolonial legacies. As both a spiritual and sociopolitical force, Islam plays a formative role in the cultural and ideological configuration of the region. To overlook its presence in literary analysis is therefore to neglect a central axis of identity and meaning-making in African societies.

Literary and Feminist Interventions in Senegalese and Nigerian Contexts

The early history of Islam in West Africa reveals not only the spread of religious institutions but also the ways in which Islamic norms shaped social life, gender relations, and cultural practices, dynamics those early West African writers frequently explored. Literature from the region reflects these intersections, offering insights into how women navigated religious and social expectations. In Senegal, Abdoulaye Sadji's novels *Nini, Mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1934) and *Maïmouna* (1938) depict female protagonists negotiating education, moral guidance, and family obligations within religious frameworks, highlighting the interplay between Islamic ethics and local customs. Léopold Sédar Senghor's mid-century poetry, while blending Catholic imagery with African humanist

themes, also gestures toward Islamic cultural norms, portraying women in domestic, communal, and ceremonial spaces shaped by intersecting religious and social expectations. In Mali, Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *L'étrange destin de Wangrin* (1973) presents Muslim clerics, traders and women who engage in religious learning, manage households according to Islamic ethics, and navigate patriarchal authority illustrating the hybridization of Islamic and indigenous social structures. Together, these texts reveal how early West African literature not only reflects but also interprets the ways Islam shaped women's roles, agency, and social identities, offering a crucial bridge between historical realities and literary representation.

Across both historical and contemporary narratives, Nigerian writers similarly depict women navigating the obligations of piety, domestic responsibility, and communal honour alongside aspirations for education, economic participation and personal autonomy. In northern Nigerian fiction, particularly within the *littattafan soyayya* tradition female protagonists often inhabit social worlds shaped by Qur'anic schooling, expectations of modesty and the moral codes of extended kinship networks. Rather than framing agency solely in terms of resistance, these texts illuminate how women mobilise culturally embedded strategies such as moral persuasion, strategic silence, emotional intelligence and religious knowledge to negotiate marriage, inheritance, mobility and authority. Authors such as Zaynab Alkali, Fatima Umar and Hajara Ibrahim explore how Islamic ethical principles intersect with ethnic identity, generational expectations, and shifting socio-economic realities to shape women's everyday decisions.

At the same time, Nigerian literature foregrounds regional distinctions within Muslim communities. Works set in the Hausa-speaking north often engage debates around Sharīʿa implementation, seclusion (*kulle* or *purdah*), and girls' access to education, revealing how women interpret religious norms through the lens of their lived conditions. In contrast, texts from Yoruba Muslim contexts tend to emphasise pluralism and religious hybridity, highlighting how women navigate Islamic commitments alongside indigenous cosmologies and modern urban life. Across these varied settings, Nigerian fiction demonstrates that Muslim women's experiences cannot be reduced to singular narratives of oppression or liberation, rather, they reflect ongoing negotiations shaped by local histories, religious scholarship, legal reforms, and the emotional and intellectual labour women undertake to reconcile faith with the changing demands of contemporary society.

Drawing upon these literary glimpses into women's lived experiences, this analysis of West African fiction is enriched by theoretical frameworks that account for gender, religion, and postcolonial complexity. These included African as well as Islamic feminism and postcolonial critiques. They provide the tools to interrogate how women's subjectivities are constructed, represented and contested within literary narratives ensuring that their agency is recognized within the intersecting forces of culture, religion and history. The Senegalese and Nigerian novels examined in this study foreground the intersections of power, identity and voice across both local and transnational discursive terrains. In these texts, religious, cultural, and historical narratives converge and are reimagined to reveal the layered complexities of postcolonial societies in which Islam,

alongside Christianity and indigenous African religions has left enduring imprints on social structures, moral codes and cultural imaginaries. As Kenneth Harrow (1991) observes in *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Islam increasingly occupies vital spaces in the lives of African peoples, "governing first the territory of the mind, at times motivated by economic or other self-interested concerns, and then larger, external spaces of an increasingly political and social nature."

Accounting for Islamic epistemologies alongside indigenous belief systems and colonial legacies allows for a more nuanced understanding of how West African fiction negotiates questions of cultural authority, constructs gendered identities and envisions possibilities for social transformation. Religion is not treated here as a static or monolithic backdrop, but as an active and evolving force within the literary imagination, central to representations of women and the broader politics of identity. Islam, in this context, is a dynamic cultural and spiritual force, shaped by ongoing contestation and reinterpretation, one that writers here engage with through nuanced portrayals of gender, power and cultural continuity. This approach proceeds from the conviction that literature provides a vital space through which African writers interrogate and reimagine the legacies of religious and cultural authority. By centering representations of Muslim women in fiction produced within Islamic cultural contexts, the ethical, creative and intellectual negotiations through which gendered identities are constructed, not in opposition to religion or tradition, but from within their dynamic and evolving frameworks are illuminated.

Representations of women from Islamic backgrounds cannot be fully analyzed without reference to feminism, since gender is inextricably entangled with religious, cultural, and social identity. Building on Simone de Beauvoir's influential assertion in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," feminist theory foregrounds how gender is socially constructed, performed and regulated within specific socio-cultural contexts. Many feminist scholars conceptualize gender as a system encoding power hierarchies, subordinating women through control over sexuality, reproduction and social mobility. Therefore, given that the Muslim women portrayed in West African novels live within patriarchal social structures, feminist theory offers a critical lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of power, agency, and representation.

However, most Western feminist scholarship on Muslim women remains reductive, often portraying Islamic societies as monolithically oppressive, and in so doing, overlook the diversity and specificity of women's lived experiences. Juliette Minces, for example, refers to an "almost identical vision of women in Islamic societies" rooted in patriarchal family structures. Yet such a perspective neglects the distinct cultural, historical and regional contexts that mediate gender relations. As Deniz Kandiyoti argues, there is no universal patriarchy, just as there are no singular or fixed interpretations of Islam. Different systems of male dominance inflected by class, ethnicity and region shape how Islam is practiced and how gender is constructed.

Western feminist scholarship frequently portrays Muslim women as passive victims of their religion and culture. This

reductive view critically is examined by scholars such as Marnia Lazreg who contends that within this discourse, Islam is often cast as the principal source of gender inequality paralleling its attribution as a barrier to economic development in modernization theory. Such frameworks, she argues, reproduce the very patriarchal logic they purport to critique by denying Muslim women historical agency and subjective voice. In reducing women to symbols of religious and cultural oppression, such discourse erases their experiences and complexities, reflecting instead the same essentialist assumptions embedded in patriarchal theology.

This mode of representation aligns closely with broader orientalist constructions of Muslim societies as articulated by Edward Said in his seminal *Orientalism* (1978). Said asserts that Western depictions of the East have historically operated within a discourse of domination, framing the "Orient" as culturally stagnant, irrational and inherently oppressive especially toward women. Within this schema, Muslim women are routinely depicted not as active subjects but as markers of cultural decadence and subservience: eroticized, veiled, and voiceless. Such portrayals reinforce a civilizational binary between Western modernity and Eastern backwardness, legitimizing imperialist intervention under the guise of liberation. Said further argues that Western knowledge production about the East function as a mechanism of imperial power wherein representations of the "Orient" sustained colonial authority. In this logic, the figure of the Muslim woman becomes a synecdoche for the supposed inferiority of the Orient, an object of fascination and pity simultaneously sensualized and subjugated. This kind of narrative has profoundly shaped Western feminist

engagements with Muslim societies, often positioning Muslim women as silent victims in need of rescue through Western liberal values. Consequently, the relationship between Muslim women and feminism is fraught with tensions arising at the intersection of religion, colonial history, and global feminist discourse.

Some Muslim feminists note that the figure of the Muslim woman is persistently devalued in Western cultural production, often more so than the Muslim male. Malika Mehdid, in *The Invention of Arab Womanhood* and Fatima Mernissi, in *Scheherazade Goes West* trace early European conceptions of Muslim women to portrayals of them as sexually enslaved figures confined to the harem. Their primary purpose was the provision of erotic service to their male master. This image was immortalized in by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres in his painting *La Grande Odalisque* and revisited by artists like Pablo Picasso who produced numerous harem-themed works. In cinema, the fantasy endures in films such as *Aladdin and His Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Kismet*. In contemporary Western imagination, the orientalist fantasy remains largely unchallenged and the Muslim woman continues to be represented as sequestered, voiceless, and tradition-bound. Her presumed lack of agency now signified not by the harem but by layers of clothing that signal otherness and reinforce a narrative of invisibility.

The persistence of simplistic stereotypes of Muslim women is reinforced by modern Western media which frequently reduces them to symbols of oppression. One of the most commonly cited markers of this perceived subjugation is the veil which is often interpreted as a mechanism of gender segregation and symbolic silencing. It is viewed as a

visible signifier of women's confinement within patriarchal structures. In Western feminist and media narratives, the veil is frequently invoked as a visual emblem of disempowerment, its presence presented as evidence of Islam's incompatibility with gender equality. Yet such interpretations overlook the multiplicity of meanings the veil assumes across different cultural and historical contexts.

A number of scholars have emerged to contribute to reframing stereotypical images of Muslim women. Leila Ahmed, for example, argues that for some women, the veil functions as a conscious expression of autonomy and identity thus articulating feminist values rooted in culturally resonant forms of agency rather than Western liberal paradigms. Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod cautions against what she terms "cultural reductionism," in which the veil is isolated from its complex social, political, and spiritual dimensions and treated as a singular symbol of oppression. In many contemporary Muslim societies, veiling can signify moral agency, political resistance, aesthetic choice, adherence to Islamic epistemologies, or the assertion of cultural authenticity in the face of globalization and Western dominance. Such perspectives challenge reductive interpretations and call for contextually informed understandings of gender, religion and self-representation.

Fatima Mernissi further emphasizes that Islam, like other major religions, is historically shaped by patriarchal social structures and should not be viewed as inherently repressive. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she interrogates patriarchal readings of Islamic texts, demonstrating that early Islam recognized women's rights and authority. According to her, the oppression of Muslim women arises

not from Islam itself but from political and historical distortions of its principles. While her early work aligns with secular liberal feminist concerns but her later scholarship engages deeply with Islamic history and theology to illustrate that demands for dignity, democracy and rights are in fact embedded within Islam's ethical tradition. Mernissi's work exemplifies Islamic feminism which seeks reform from within religious frameworks by reinterpreting foundational texts, the Quran and the Hadith.

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi critiques both indigenous patriarchies and global systems of domination. In works such as *The Hidden Face of Eve*, she exposes socio-political mechanisms, from female genital mutilation to institutionalized misogyny that perpetuate women's subjugation. Though situated in a largely secular framework, her feminism is grounded in the lived realities of Arab and Muslim women, rejecting both Western paternalism and religious absolutism. In similar vein, Malika Mehdid, through ethnographic research in North African societies, emphasizes the everyday negotiations through which Muslim women contest and reshape gender norms, highlighting the fluid and context-specific nature of women's agency.

For her part, Fatna Sabbah in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, employs psychoanalytic and philosophical frameworks to examine how traditional Islamic thought has marginalized women, defining them as "other" within epistemological and theological structures. Like Sabbah, Mernissi, in her essay "Femininity as Subversion," contends that Muslim women have long challenged reductive and passive constructions of femininity imposed by patriarchal

interpretations of Islamic tradition. She argues that beneath surface-level prescriptions of modesty and obedience lies a persistent cultural anxiety about women's capacity to disrupt established social and religious orders. This anxiety, she suggests, informs the regulatory mechanisms—legal, moral and symbolic—through which Islamic societies have sought to contain women's agency, precisely because that agency is understood as inherently capable of generating subversion, contestation, and transformation. Collectively, these scholars underscore the inadequacy of universalist feminist frameworks and advocate recognition of multiple feminisms Islamic, postcolonial, and indigenous each grounded in specific cultural, religious and historical contexts. What unites these approaches is a commitment to challenge both internal patriarchal structures and external forces of epistemic domination.

These perspectives align with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's call for "feminist solidarity through difference" which rejects essentialist definitions of womanhood while fostering cross-cultural alliances rooted in contextual understanding. Mohanty warns against the tendency to universalize the category of "Third World women" as a homogeneous group, emphasizing that ace, class, ethnicity, age, and geopolitical location intersect with gender in complex ways that shape women's lived experiences differently across contexts. This critique is particularly salient in the African context where Muslim women are portrayed in Western feminist discourse as uniformly oppressed and voiceless, stripped of historical agency and reduced to abstract symbols of victimhood.

Paradoxically, such dichotomous framings of West versus non-West within feminist theory reproduce the very

hierarchies they aim to dismantle. Drawing on Edward Said's critique of Orientalist representation, Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes* interrogates how Western feminists frequently "colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of other women," subsuming their lived realities into abstract theoretical claims. Like other postcolonial feminist scholars, she critiques the construction of a homogenized image of women from the Global South as culturally bound, inherently oppressed and devoid of agency. Aihwa Ong similarly observes that Western feminists often assert authority by "speaking for" non-Western women, portraying them as static and voiceless rather than as active agents. This epistemological asymmetry has prompted considerable skepticism among African scholars many of whom view Western feminism as a new form of epistemic imperialism.

Complementing postcolonial critiques are a number of African feminist thinkers whose analyses develop gender frameworks that confront patriarchal structures within African societies while resisting the universalist assumptions embedded in dominant Western feminist paradigms. Their interventions emerge from specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, foregrounding how gender, race, class, religion, and colonial legacies intersect in shaping women's lives. Within this broader intellectual landscape, Senegal has produced influential feminist scholars and writers who articulate contextually grounded approaches to gender justice. Fatou Sow emphasizes reclaiming the feminist label from both cultural resistance and Western appropriation, arguing for a feminism rooted in Africa's legal, historical, and religious specificities.

In *La Parole aux négresses* (1978), Awa Thiam exposes practices such as female genital mutilation as instruments of patriarchal authority while insisting on African women's capacity to theorize their own experiences. Sociologists such as Marie Angélique Savané and Codou Bop extend these critiques by examining how Islamic family law, customary norms, and state institutions structure gendered power relations in Senegal's predominantly Muslim society. Senegalese literary voices further reinforce and expand these feminist perspectives. Writers including Ken Bugul, Fatou Diome, Mariama Ndoye and Sokhna Benga explore women's autonomy through narratives that address sexuality, migration, spiritual belonging, polygamy, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Their works illuminate how Senegalese women negotiate intersecting social, religious, and cultural expectations while asserting forms of agency grounded in everyday experience.

In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí critiques the gendered assumptions embedded within Africanist scholarship and calls for a re-examination of social categories through indigenous epistemologies rather than externally imposed frameworks. Her intervention is particularly significant for discussions of Muslim societies in West Africa, where colonial and postcolonial scholarship often reproduced Eurocentric assumptions about women. Similarly, the work of Amina Mama highlights how dominant narratives within both global feminism and African studies have frequently overlooked Muslim women's experiences. Mama argues that their marginalization results not from an absence of agency but from analytical frameworks ill-equipped to recognize forms

of agency articulated through religious and cultural traditions.

An important dimension of this reassessment involves recovering earlier traditions of female intellectual participation that colonial scholarship either sidelined or insufficiently documented. Central here is the work of Nana Asma'u, the nineteenth-century daughter of the Islamic reformer, Usman dan Fodio. An accomplished scholar, poet, and educator, she expanded women's access to Islamic learning in the Sokoto Caliphate. Writing in Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa, she produced didactic poems and historical works addressing religious ethics, social responsibility and communal memory. Equally significant was her establishment of the *'yan-taru* ("those who gather together"), a network of female teachers who travelled across rural communities to instruct women in Islamic knowledge, thereby institutionalising women's participation in religious scholarship and creating a durable model of female intellectual leadership within West African Islamic traditions.

In the Nigerian context, parallel debates unfold within a similarly complex matrix of Islam, gender and cultural tradition, especially in regions shaped by the legacies of the Sokoto Caliphate and the Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scholars such as Ayesha Imam and Hauwa Ibrahim interrogate how Islamic family law, customary practices, and postcolonial state policies structure gendered power relations in northern Nigeria. Their work challenge Western assumptions about Muslim women by demonstrating how local histories, Qur'anic hermeneutics, ethnic identities and colonial legacies intersect to shape women have lived realities.

Nigerian feminist thinkers such as Molara Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka resist imported Western paradigms and instead develop frameworks grounded in African socio-cultural realities. Ogundipe articulates Stiwanism, while Nnaemeka proposes nego-feminism both emphasizing relational forms of agency, negotiation, and communal ethics that resonate with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and broader West African social systems. Ogundipe-Leslie observes that one of the "mountains" burdening African women is constructed from structures and attitudes inherited from indigenous history and sociological realities, a view that aligns with the anthropologist Margaret Mead's observations on human societies.

Mead notes that societies are originally structured around biological differences between men and women, with symbolic associations of qualities such as strength and tenderness, good and evil, built upon these distinctions. While some societies assign women inferior roles, others valorize them for their symbolic connection to the supernatural as givers of life. Across traditional societies, labour was often divided according to gender, with female work frequently devalued. Even in matrilineal African societies, where inheritance passes through the female line, men often maintain dominant positions, reflecting persistent hierarchies. The physical control of women's bodies, reinforced in part by patriarchal interpretations of Christianity and Islam can be traced to traditional notions in which women and the products of their bodies were considered the property of male kin. These structures continue to influence the status of female children within their parental homes and adult women within marital households.

However, Ifi Amadiume offers a counterpoint in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, arguing that rigid gender demarcations characteristic of European societies were not present in traditional African contexts. Using the Igbo of eastern Nigeria as an example, she shows that gender mobility was possible due to the overlap of domestic and public domains, enabling men and women to share roles and status. Certain traditional institutions facilitated such flexibility, allowing women to participate in social hierarchies. The phenomenon of the "female husband" illustrates that women could assume roles typically associated with men, actively shaping familial and social arrangements. Similarly, the "male daughter" could inherit leadership of a household in the absence of a capable male, acquiring the respect and authority that position entailed, an example echoed in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*.

Historically, African women could enhance their social positions because their power had an economic base. Through farming, trade, or other forms of wealth accumulation, women could convert material prosperity into political influence and prestigious titles. This economic autonomy often granted women a right of veto in matters of communal importance, making them what Chinua Achebe describes as the "court of last resort." Reflecting this tradition, Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* portrays women strategically employing customary methods to contest the rigid restrictions imposed by the imam, demonstrating continuity between historical practices of female agency and their literary representation.

Nigerian literary production reinforces and nuances these debates. Thus, writers such as Zaynab Alkali, Fatima Umar and Hajara Ibrahim, depict Muslim women navigating the

intersecting pressures of piety, patriarchy, education, marriage and modernity. Their narratives examine themes such as polygamy, seclusion, domestic negotiation, Islamic schooling and the tension between communal duty and personal aspiration. These trajectories resonate with Senegalese texts while revealing distinct cultural inflections, especially regarding the politics of Sharīʿa, educational reform and Islamic scholarship.

Bringing Senegalese and Nigerian viewpoints into conversation highlights the diversity and dynamism of Muslim women's representations in West African fiction. While Senegalese writers often foreground debates around Sufi authority, communal ethics and the moral obligations of citizenship, Nigerian texts tend to emphasise domestic negotiation, Qur'anic education, marriage practices and the socio-legal frameworks governing women's lives in predominantly Muslim northern states. Together, they reveal the plurality of West African Muslim womanhood and challenge monolithic frameworks that treat Islam or gender as uniform across cultural contexts. This comparative approach strengthens the central argument of the study: literature from both Senegal and Nigeria offers textured locally grounded visions of Muslim female agency shaped by specific historical trajectories, interpretive traditions and social imaginaries.

Collectively, these scholarly and literary interventions challenge both internal patriarchal structures and external feminist frameworks that universalize African women's realities, advocating instead for gender analyses attentive to local histories, epistemologies, and social logics. By rejecting the homogenization of "Third World women" and advocating for feminist solidarities rooted in historical

specificity, cultural awareness and recognition of diverse epistemologies, African feminists offer nuanced and culturally embedded alternatives to orientalist and universalist paradigms. Their work affirms the importance of centering African women's voices, knowledge systems, and lived experiences in both feminist theory and literary analysis, enabling more sophisticated interpretations of Muslim women's subjectivities in West African fiction.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter outlines the historical, cultural, and intellectual frameworks necessary for understanding literary representations of Muslim womanhood in West Africa. By tracing the intersections of Islam, gender, and indigenous social structures and by drawing on African feminist and postcolonial critiques, this chapter has established the conceptual foundations for reading the region's literature through a lens attentive to both religious meaning and gendered experience. What emerges is the need for an interpretive approach that recognises the complexity of Qur'anic hermeneutics, the influence of customary norms, and the varied strategies through which women negotiate social expectations.

The chapters that follow build on this foundation through close readings of selected novels by major Senegalese and Nigerian writers. Although their works draw on Islamic beliefs, ethical systems, and social practices, they also engage secular ideas and local cultural traditions. A unifying concern across these texts is the social condition of Muslim women particularly the pressures generated by marriage, polygamy, authority, and the negotiation of personal autonomy. Yet the perspectives offered by male and female authors diverge in significant ways. Male

writers such as Ousmane Sembène often locate the sources of women's oppression in authoritarian structures whether political, customary or religious and deploy satire, critique and moral indictment to expose inequities. Female writers, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall and Zaynab Alkali**,** adopt a more interior and experiential mode as they foreground women's intellectual agency, ethical reflection, and strategic forms of negotiation within Islamic and cultural frameworks. Their narratives enact what postcolonial theorists have described as "subversive manoeuvres" subtle but powerful challenges to patriarchal norms that imagine alternative possibilities for female autonomy and social transformation. Together, these divergent but complementary perspectives illuminate the richness and variability of Muslim women's experiences in West African fiction. They also reveal the extent to which literary texts serve as critical sites where gendered identities, moral responsibilities, and religious principles are debated, reinterpreted, and reimagined.

Chapter Two
Ousmane Sembène and the Gendered Nation

This chapter examines the work **o**f Ousmane Sembène, one of Africa's most influential writers and a foundational voice in Senegalese cultural production. Across his long career, Sembène offered incisive portrayals of Senegalese society, tracing its political, religious, and social transformations from the colonial period into what Achille Mbembe refers to as the postcolony. While he is often celebrated for his socialist commitments, his engagement with Islam and its intersections with social hierarchy, gender relations and political authority is equally central to his work. From the early 1960s onward, Sembène consistently explored the structural forces shaping the lives of Senegalese women, producing some of the earliest sustained critiques by any African writer of the gendered implications of religious and customary power.

Building on the argument from the preceding chapter that literary representations of Muslim women in West Africa emerge at the intersection of religious ethics, social structures, and gendered power relations, this chapter focuses on two of Sembène's novels, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) and *White Genesis* (1962) as sites for exploring these themes. Together, they reveal the evolution of Sembène's vision of women's agency from the intimate and psychological struggles of rural and family life to the collective, revolutionary potential of women in public spaces. Through his characteristic fusion of satire, political engagement and social realism**,** Sembène exposes women's

subordination not as an inherent feature of Islam or tradition but as the consequence of the strategic manipulation of religious and customary norms by patriarchal elites.

These novels provide an entry point into the literary negotiation of gender, power, and religious discourse in Senegal establishing a framework for understanding how women's lives are shaped by intersecting social, political and religious forces. They also set the stage for subsequent chapters where female authors revisit and reconfigure these themes from within women's own experiential and interpretive worlds. However, before moving into close readings, it is important to consider how Sembène's life experiences and political formation informed the concerns that permeate his fiction.

Born in 1923 in Ziguinchor, Sembène grew up in a household where Islamic scholarship and religious devotion were part of daily life. His maternal uncle, an Islamic schoolteacher and writer, played a formative role in his intellectual development. Sembène's early exposure to Quranic learning and religious mysticism later enabled his nuanced literary engagement with Islam. He did not pursue higher education instead after a confrontation with his school principal, he left formal schooling and undertook various forms of manual labour in Dakar, work that immersed him in the struggles of the urban poor.

At fifteen, he enlisted in the French army and served in Europe during the Second World War. On returning to Dakar after the war, he participated in the Dakar–Niger railway strike, an experience that later inspired his landmark novel *God's Bits of Wood* (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu)*. In 1948, Sembène relocated to Marseille where he worked

as a dockworker, became a union organiser and joined the Communist Party. These experiences of military service, labour struggles and political activism shaped the socialist orientation that runs through much of his writing.

Sembène's literary output over the following decades was substantial. His early novels, including *Le docker noir* and *Ô pays, mon beau peuple!*, foreground the hardships of African workers and the political awakening of rural communities. Subsequent works, such as *Le Mandat* and *Xala*, probe the contradictions of newly independent Senegal and expose the tension between religious authority, modern state structures and entrenched social customs. His depictions of polygamy, generational conflict, and the erosion of communal values reveal his concern with the ways patriarchal power is consolidated and justified through appeals to both tradition and Islam. Later works, including *Le dernier de l'empire* and the novellas *Niwam* and *Taaw*, continue this sustained interrogation of Senegalese social life, particularly the pressures of modernisation and the shifting place of women within it.

Sembène's commitment to social transformation extended beyond literature to his pioneering work in African cinema. He viewed film as a necessary medium for communicating with audiences who could not access written French, and he approached it as a tool for political education. Over the course of several decades, he produced a body of films that mirrored the concerns of his fiction. Works such as *Borom Sarret*, *Mandabi*, *Emitai*, *Xala*, *Ceddo*, and *Camp de Thiaroye* engage issues of class, religious authority, colonial violence and gendered resistance. Notably, *Emitai* and *Ceddo* foreground women's collective action and challenge dominant narratives about the role of Islam in Senegal's

past. In questioning established patriarchal and religious histories, these films parallel the critical lens of his novels and underscore his sustained interest in women's agency.

Women in Sembène: Centrality and Agency

A defining feature of Ousmane Sembène's work is the centrality of women to social transformation. Unlike many African writers of his generation, he consistently brings women out of the margins, portraying them as active participants in both domestic and public spheres. His female characters are dynamic agents who navigate and contest the pressures of tradition, Islamic authority, and, at times, Western modernity, exploring questions of autonomy, dignity, and resistance. A consistent thread throughout Sembène's career is his preoccupation with the lives of ordinary people and the social forces that constrain them. While he shares with many African writers a commitment to exposing injustice, his work is distinctive for the prominence it gives women within broader struggles for social change. Long before feminist discourse gained traction in African literary criticism, Sembène represented women not as marginal figures but as central participants in Senegal's social and political life.

This chapter focuses on two of Sembène's most influential novels, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) and *White Genesis* (1962), which together illuminate the breadth and depth of women's experiences and Sembène's evolving vision of female agency. *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembène's seminal narrative of anti-colonial resistance, foregrounds women as central agents in the 1947–48 railway strike. Through its depiction of women's mass mobilisation, the novel reveals how the emergent postcolonial order is negotiated in the public sphere, highlighting the ways in which ordinary

women contest the coercive practices of both colonial, indigenous and religious patriarchal authorities. In contrast, *White Genesis* turns to the intimate domain of family and lineage, exposing how the logic of domination that characterizes what Mbembe terms the postcolony also permeates private life. The novel reveals the persistence of authoritarian, secretive and often violent masculinities that reproduce colonial modes of power within the household where patriarchal privilege remains insulated from scrutiny. In both texts, Sembène demonstrates that the postcolony is not solely a political structure but a lived condition in which power operates through multiple, overlapping registers.

By portraying women's actions, whether through collective protest in the streets or through resistance to silence within the home, as vital interventions, these works underscore how gender becomes a key site for negotiating and unsettling the postcolonial state's claims to authority. Through a blend of satire, political consciousness, and social realism**,** Sembène frames women's marginalisation not as an inevitable outcome of Islam, but as the consequence of patriarchal actors distorting religious and customary norms. His fiction thus provides an essential foundation for tracing how gender, power, and religious discourse are negotiated in Senegalese literature. Moreover, these works establish a framework against which later women writers articulate alternative visions, reconfiguring similar themes from within women's own experiential and interpretive worlds. It is against this background of a writer deeply invested in interrogating both religious authority and social inequality, that the following analysis examines

Sembène's representation of women, Islam, and the negotiation of power in these two seminal novels.

Women and Social Transformation in *God's Bits of Wood*

Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) offers a powerful fictionalisation of the Dakar–Niger railway strike of 1947–48, a seminal moment in West Africa's anti-colonial labour struggle. African railway workers mobilised to demand equitable wages, pensions, adequate housing, and family allowances, rights already accorded to European employees. Through his vivid reconstruction of life in Thies, Dakar, Bamako, and the settlements along the railway line, Sembène foregrounds the thousands of men and women whose economic survival and social identities were shaped by the colonial railway system.

While *White Genesis* remains comparatively understudied, *God's Bits of Wood* continues to attract sustained critical attention. Recent scholarship, for example, Ayo A. Coly's work on African women's revolutionary imaginaries, Samba Gadjigo's biographical analyses of Sembène, and Akin Adesokan's reflections on African political aesthetics emphasises the novel's redefinition of revolutionary subjectivity beyond earlier Marxist readings. Scholars such as Moradewun Adejunmobi and Florent Couao-Zotti underline Sembène's distinctive synthesis of materialist critique with African moral and communal traditions arguing that the text resists being read solely as a "classic" Marxist proletarian novel.

Earlier Marxist critics, including Emmanuel Ngara, argued that the workers' experiences of systemic injustice cultivate a political consciousness consistent with the materialist thesis that social existence shapes consciousness.

Contemporary theorists, however, note that Sembène's narrative complicates Marxism by situating the strike within a West African Muslim cultural landscape, highlighting the importance of religious ethics, gendered social norms, and communal forms of solidarity. Feminist and gender-focused readings such as those by Pius Adesanmi, Penda Mbow, and Aisha Fofana Ibrahim demonstrate that any account of political transformation in the novel must foreground women whose actions reconfigure both domestic and public spheres of authority.

Although *God's Bits of Wood* contains many hallmarks of the proletarian Marxist tradition, labour disputes, colonial repression and the triumph of collective action, a strictly Marxist lens risks obscuring the novel's deeper meditation on gender, community and spiritual ethics. In the West African Muslim societies Sembène depicts where female conduct is historically the subject of close scrutiny, women's participation in the strike emerges as both culturally subversive and deeply grounded in communal and Islamic ethical principles, including the *ummah*'s ethos of collective responsibility. The novel situates the strike as a moment of profound transformation. As the narrative observes:"When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the Savanna, they realised that an age had ended … Now the machine ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence(32)."

This passage underscores the dual recognition fostered by collective action: the workers become aware of their capacity to halt the colonial system, yet also confront their interdependence within a broader technological and social

order. Contemporary critics such **as** Achilles Mbembe and Felwine Sarr have argued that such tensions are emblematic of the emergent postcolonial condition, what Mbembe terms the postcolony where domination, dependency and resistance coexist in shifting, entangled forms. Within this evolving social consciousness, Sembène foregrounds women as indispensable agents of transformation. Their organisational labour, moral authority and strategic interventions reveal that revolutionary potential lies not only in male militancy but also in the ethical, communal, and spiritual practices women mobilise. As scholars like Ayo Coly and Aisha Fofana Ibrahim observe, Sembène's portrayal of women challenges both colonial oppression and patriarchal authority, revealing how gender becomes a crucial site for remaking social relations.

Read through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly Mbembe's analysis of power in the postcolony, the novel reveals that domination is neither limited to colonial institutions nor confined to the public sphere; it permeates communal, religious, and domestic structures. Women's actions, whether in organising the march, asserting moral leadership, or challenging patriarchal norms, open alternative possibilities for authority and social organisation beyond the coercive logics of both colonial rule and indigenous patriarchy. In sum, *God's Bits of Wood* exemplifies Sembène's ability to integrate historical realism, African Muslim cultural ethics and a critical political vision that places women at the heart of social transformation. Their central role establishes the foundation for examining Sembène's subsequent exploration of gendered power and private trauma in *White Genesis* where the intimate dynamics of patriarchy become the focus.

Certainly, one of the most striking aspects of *God's Bits of Wood* is Sembène's treatment of traditional values not as static norms, but as dynamic frameworks that both shape and are reshaped by social action. Unlike many African novels in which traditions are presented as fixed, Sembène depicts a process of "elicitation", where communal customs and moral principles actively guide and inform the strike while also adapting to new historical circumstances. This approach lends the novel enduring relevance, allowing it to resonate across multiple phases of societal development. At the same time, statements such as, "The kind of man we were is dead, and our only hope for a new life lies in the machine, which knows neither a language nor a race" (76), appear to adopt a tradition-hostile perspective, privileging technological and material progress. Yet this does not imply a rejection of tradition: the social transformation depicted in the novel is inseparable from the pre-existing coherence and moral integrity of the communities themselves which form the foundation upon which collective action is built.

Gerald Moore famously identifies an "insistence on the primacy of change" in Sembène's work, noting that his fiction charts transformations in economic, political, and interpersonal realms while locating the consciousness of this change within the people themselves. Recent critics extend this insight: Samba Gadjigo argues that Sembène's narratives consistently situate revolutionary energy within ordinary Africans rather than elite actors, while Kenneth Harrow and Lucy Jarosz emphasize his attentiveness to gendered labour and the political capacities of women in communal life. In *God's Bits of Wood*, this commitment emerges through Sembène's portrayal of characters not as isolated individuals but as a collective body forged by

shared experience, common destiny, and mutual dependence. Both public spaces, markets, union halls, streets, and domestic spheres, extended households, communal courtyards, intergenerational networks become sites where solidarity is cultivated and enacted.

The strike reveals the community's profound interdependence and resilience as the French authorities employ increasingly brutal tactics: cutting water supplies, using fire hoses against marchers and deploying armed force. It is in the crucible of this coercion that Sembène foregrounds women's extraordinary resourcefulness, endurance and leadership. While many male characters struggle to mount a coherent challenge to colonial power, it is the women who sustain the community materially and morally ensuring survival in the face of starvation and deprivation. The scene in which Mariame Sonko and Dieynaba prepare to eat a captured vulture, for instance, underscores the ingenuity and courage required to protect collective life.

As Ramatoulaye and Houdia M'Baye poignantly reflect, "the real misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty, it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty" (101). Hunger thus becomes not only a physical condition but also a politicised strategy of domination, one that sharpens the community's moral clarity. Under these pressures, individuals are drawn into a collective subjectivity. Sembène writes that it is "as if some giant eraser had rubbed out their individual traits; they had taken on a common mask" (41). This transformation is not merely rhetorical: it signals the emergence of a collective political consciousness characteristic of the postcolony where solidarity becomes a

mode of resistance against the intersecting violences of colonial rule and indigenous patriarchy.

The novel's dialectical structure juxtaposes loyalty and betrayal, illuminating the moral demands of collective struggle. Figures such as Doudou exemplify steadfast commitment, refusing personal gain in favour of communal welfare, while characters like Diara and Sankoré experience ostracism for self-serving behaviour. Such contrasts underscore Sembène's larger argument taht collective action is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity in contexts marked by systemic dispossession.

Crucially, Sembène situates these dynamics within a predominantly Senegalese Islamic milieu. The ethical sensibilities of the characters draw simultaneously from African communal traditions and the Islamic conception of the *ummah*, both of which valorise mutual responsibility and interdependence. As Frederick Case has noted, African Islamic societies often harmonise Qur'anic principles with pre-Islamic communal ethics, producing a shared moral vocabulary of care, justice and reciprocity. Yet Sembène also exposes the contradictions within this framework: religious and traditional leaders such as the Imam and El Hadji Mabigue align themselves with colonial authority, revealing the gap between institutional authority and popular legitimacy. Their position demonstrates how religion, like other ideological instruments in the postcolony, can be mobilised to consolidate power rather than serve communal welfare.

Against this backdrop, Sembène foregrounds women as central agents of social transformation. Moore's earlier observation that Sembène regarded African women as "the most powerful force which can shift the whole society into

the future" is reinforced by more recent feminist scholarship. Scholars such as Obioma Nnaemeka, Ayo A. Coly, and Florence Stratton have emphasised Sembène's radical recognition of women's political labour often overlooked in nationalist historiography. In *God's Bits of Wood*, women do not simply support the strike; they propel it forward. They organise supply chains, sustain families, orchestrate collective strategies, and engage in direct acts of subversion. This evolution is encapsulated in Mame Sofi's assertion: "You'll see—the men will consult us before they go out on another strike… before this they thought they owned the earth… but now it is the women who are feeding them" (7). Through such moments, Sembène illustrates how women acquire political consciousness and authority through praxis rather than ideology.

The novel's dedication "to the men and women who took part in the struggle for a better way of life [who] owe nothing to anyone: neither to any 'civilising mission' nor to any parliament or parliamentarian" reaffirms Sembene's commitment to depicting ordinary people, and especially women, as historical agents. Chapters named after female characters, Maimouna, Penda, Houdia M'Baye, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, Adjibidji further consolidate women's narrative centrality, mapping a continuum of actions from quiet endurance to open defiance, culminating in the women's march to Dakar. In Sembène's vision, women are not symbolic markers of national identity nor adjuncts to male heroism; they constitute the moral, organisational, and revolutionary backbone of the community. Their agency is central to the formation of political subjectivity in the postcolony, illustrating that any

meaningful social transformation must be fundamentally gendered.

Women, Tradition, and Intergenerational Agency in God's Bits of Wood

From the outset of *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembène deliberately shifts the narrative focus from the male perspective of the strike to the preoccupations and responses of women, highlighting their centrality to social and political life. The opening scene exemplifies his cinematic attention to detail, the towering minarets of the mosque signify the moral and religious authority of Islam, while the governor's residence, "poised like a sugar castle on the heights" embodies French colonial dominance (1). In contrast, the mud-walled homes of the railway workers appear modest, yet it is within these domestic spaces that much of the novel's action unfolds. Here, the wives, mothers and daughters of the strikers gather, representing three generations of women, each negotiating the demands of tradition, faith, and social change.

Sembène's depiction underscores how Senegalese women's lives are shaped as much by Islamic precepts as by customary practices, with neither influence being absolute. Scholars such as Edris Makward note that Sembène does not oppose tradition outright, rather, he foregrounds those elements of cultural practice that support social cohesion and communal resilience. Characters such as Fa Keita and Old Niakoro exemplify these positive aspects of tradition. While Fa Keita demonstrates deep religious faith, Old Niakoro embodies an enduring commitment to indigenous values, preserving the stability and order of the past amid the turbulence of colonial rule. Her exasperation with her granddaughter Adjibidji's casual use of French words

reflects anxieties about cultural erosion:"What use is the white man's language to a woman? To be a good mother you have no need of that… But you rootless people think only of learning his, while our language dies" *(4).*

Yet Old Niakoro's attachment to tradition is not static or conservative in a limiting sense. Her own history of resistance, having previously lost a husband and a son during a strike, signals that the courage to challenge oppression is embedded in African cultural memory transmitted across generations. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o similarly illustrates in *Petals of Blood* (1977), older female figures can embody the historical and moral continuity of popular struggles**,** linking past and present resistance. The novel foregrounds the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, values, and activism**,** illustrating how political consciousness and ethical responsibility circulate through familial and communal networks. Old Niakoro, whose previous experience with strikes informs her resilience and moral authority, embodies the historical depth of women's activism. The interactions between Niakoro, her son Bakoyoko, the union leader, and her granddaughter Adjibidji exemplify how ancestral wisdom and experience inform emerging forms of agency, linking continuity with social and political transformation across generations.

Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* foregrounds the collective and individual agency of women during the railway strike, portraying them as central actors in the political, social, and moral life of their communities. The novel demonstrates that women's contributions are neither auxiliary nor incidental; rather, they are essential to the organization, survival, and ethical coherence of society under colonial oppression. The intergenerational transmission of

knowledge, values, and activism is a key mechanism through which this agency is expressed. Old Niakoro, whose prior experience with strikes informs her resilience and moral authority, represents the historical depth of women's activism, while her granddaughter Adjibidji embodies the postcolonial vision of the "new African woman": socially conscious, politically engaged, and capable of navigating male-dominated public spaces. Interactions between Niakoro, Bakoyoko, the union leader, and Adjibidji illustrate how ancestral wisdom informs emerging forms of agency, linking continuity with social and political transformation.

While some critics, such as Makward (1991), suggest that N'Deye Touti represents the future of African womanhood, it is Adjibidji who exemplifies Sembène's model of a socially and politically empowered generation. Unlike Niakoro, whose influence largely resides within the domestic sphere, Adjibidji actively engages in public life, accompanying Fa Keita to the union hall and assuming the role of the strikers' moral compass. Her growth is marked by ethical reasoning and reflective engagement, culminating in the epiphany that "it is the purity of the spirit alone" that can perform remarkable feats (76). Through her, Sembène envisions a postcolonial Africa in which women shape public life, influence political decision-making, and assert moral authority without constraint.

Sembène also presents complex individual female characters whose moral and political choices extend beyond material necessity. Penda, in particular, departs from traditional literary tropes of the prostitute as a symbol of socio-economic exploitation. While she shares socialist concerns with authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, her

decisions are driven by ethical agency, personal independence, and resistance to patriarchal authority. Described as having "developed a hatred for men and had turned away everyone who had wanted to marry her" (37), Penda protects Maimouna, the blind beggar, and her twins, ensuring justice and survival. By presenting women as self-determining actors rather than objects of pity, Sembène situates female autonomy at the heart of communal resilience.

In line with Kenneth Little's notion of the "free woman", Penda rejects domestic and reproductive expectations, taking leadership in public and traditionally masculine spheres. During the strike, she organizes apprentice boys and orchestrates raids on Syrian shops and French chicken coops, demonstrating tactical intelligence and moral courage. Her assertion of authority provokes opposition from male figures such as Balia, who remarks, "It's normal that they should support us, a wife should support her husband but from that to a march on Dakar… No, I vote against it" (185), highlighting the persistence of patriarchal norms even within collective struggle.

The novel situates women's agency within Islamic and African ethical frameworks, illustrating how religious and communal principles can support rather than constrain female participation. The collective solidarity displayed during the strike reflects the intersection of Islamic communal ethics (*ummah*) and African notions of interdependence, demonstrating that cultural and religious values can be mobilized to challenge entrenched hierarchies. Women confront the structural alignment of patriarchy and colonial power, asserting authority in both domestic and public spheres. Their courage, initiative, and

leadership are not only practical, organizing food, negotiating survival strategies, and resisting colonial enforcement, but also symbolic, forming the moral foundation for social transformation.

Sembène's dedication to "the men and women who took part in the struggle for a better way of life [who] owe nothing to anyone" further affirms the pivotal role of women, particularly those without formal organizational training or literacy-based authority. Through characters like Adjibidji and Penda, Sembène demonstrates that postcolonial transformation is inseparable from the emergence of gendered agency, showing that women's ethical, political, and social participation is central to the formation of collective consciousness, community solidarity, and societal renewal. In doing so, he articulates a vision of Africa in which women actively shape public life, challenge entrenched norms, and drive social and political change.

As Florence Stratton observes, Sembène disrupts the prevailing literary tendency to confine women to secondary roles situating them at the heart of historical and social transformation. Chapters named after prominent women, *Maimouna, Penda, Houdia M'Baye, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi,* and *Adjibidji* further reinforce this centrality, tracing their evolution from domestic actors to key participants in resisting exploitation and shaping society.Through these interwoven portrayals, *God's Bits of Wood* demonstrates that women's agency is inseparable from both cultural continuity and political activism. They embody the moral, organizational, and revolutionary backbone of Sembène's Senegal, illustrating that social transformation is not a purely male-led enterprise but a collective achievement

rooted in shared history, communal values, and intergenerational knowledge.

The novel demonstrates how women's engagement is both political and culturally grounded**.** Critics such as Olalere Oladitan (2017) suggest that the women act with such determination because the strike threatens the one sphere over which they exercise authority: the feeding and survival of their families. While this aligns with broader assumptions about conservative Muslim women, Sembène challenges the notion that women's activism is merely moral or domestic. As Fatima Mernissi observes, women's political demands are often interpreted as extensions of familial duty rather than genuine political agency. In contrast, *God's Bits of Wood* presents women whose actions are fundamentally political as they confront colonial authorities, challenge patriarchal assumptions, and assert autonomy over their lives and communities. This is illustrated when the French supervisor dismisses the death of Senegalese children during the strike, remarking derisively, "After all, one or two children more or less won't make much difference to them… The women don't wait to have one before they're pregnant with another" (103). Such remarks, combining colonial prejudice with gendered assumptions, provoke the women to assert their intellectual, moral, and physical agency, demonstrating that African women possess autonomy over mind, body, and spirit.

Sembène also uses symbolism to link women's agency with tradition and communal identity**.** The "motherhouse of Ramatoulaye… a big shed-like structure painted the colour of the earth standing on a foundation of bricks" (50) signifies both historical rootedness and the foundational

role of women in maintaining social cohesion. Ramatoulaye herself is portrayed as a "walking encyclopaedia of every family in the district" (40), embodying cultural memory and the transmission of communal knowledge. When she slays El Hadji Mabigue's goat to feed the starving families, her actions catalyse collective resistance, sparking confrontations with the colonial police and inspiring solidarity among the women. Her explanation "When you know that the life and spirit of others depend on your life and spirit, you have no right to be afraid… we must find our own strength" (69) illustrates Sembène's conviction that women are central to social and moral resilience.

Importantly, Sembène differentiates the collective role of women from the more abstract, ideological representation of male characters. While union leaders such as Bakayoko embody the ideals of proletarian *struggle* "It isn't those who are taken by force… who are the real slaves; it is those who will accept it morally and physically" (20), they are largely archetypal, lacking the nuanced emotional depth that animates female characters. In contrast, women like Ramatoulaye, Adjibidji, and Mame Sofi are depicted as fully realized agents whose personal growth is intertwined with communal liberation. Their strategic interventions during the strike, managing scarce resources, confronting oppressive authorities, and assuming public leadership underscore the transformative potential of women within both domestic and societal spheres.

Finally, the novel situates women's agency within Islamic and African traditional frameworks, demonstrating how ethical and communal principles can support, rather than suppress, female participation. Patriarchal figures such as El Hadji Mabigue invoke divine sanction to justify female

subordination, asserting that "He had assigned a rank, a place and a certain role to every man and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design" (182). Similarly, French colonial officers dismiss women's voices as "just shouting and yelling…. they're just making noise because they like to make noise" (179). In both cases, women are subjected to intersecting forms of oppression, constrained by religious dogma, patriarchal authority, and colonial subjugation.

Yet Sembène's narrative continually demonstrates that women are neither passive spectators nor marginal actors. Their participation in the strike reflects the confluence of Islamic communal ethics **(***ummah***)** and African notions of interdependence**,** showing how cultural and religious values can be mobilised to challenge entrenched hierarchies. Women's first attendance at the union meeting met with astonishment and patronizing attitudes underscores the novelty of female agency in a society where gender norms, tradition, and religion intersect to circumscribe women's roles. In practical terms, it is women who organize food, negotiate survival strategies, and take direct action against colonial enforcement. Through these interventions, Sembène foregrounds their leadership, resourcefulness, and ethical authority, illustrating that social transformation depends on the active engagement of women.

As Frederick Ivor Case notes, *God's Bits of Wood* is not only a work of social critique but also an exploration of changes in positions initially perceived as immutable, including gender roles. In tandem with the railway workers' challenge to French colonial authority, women confront and transcend patriarchal expectations, participating fully in decision-making and strategy. The novel's dedication to

"the men and women who took part in the struggle for a better way of life (who) owe nothing to anyone" symbolically recognises women's pivotal role, particularly given their lack of formal organisational structures or literacy-based leadership, affirming that ethical, communal, and religious principles can underpin rather than limit women's transformative action. In the novel, Sembène presents women as central agents of social transformation, illustrating how collective action, ethical reasoning, and intergenerational knowledge sustain communities under the twin pressures of colonial domination and patriarchal authority.

While *God's Bits of Wood* foregrounds women in public, collective spaces, Sembène's *White Genesis* shifts attention to the intimate, private, and psychological dimensions of female experience. In this text, women navigate the constraints of family, secrecy, and interpersonal violence, particularly in patriarchal rural communities to reveal how male authority and social norms shape individual lives. The focus moves from communal solidarity and strike leadership to the personal costs of patriarchal control, demonstrating that women's agency must contend not only with structural oppression but also with the ethical and relational dynamics of everyday life. This progression highlights Sembène's evolving conception of female empowerment from collective, public forms of agency in the struggle against colonial and social domination to interiorized, ethical, and relational forms of resistance within domestic and familial spaces. Examining *White Genesis* alongside *God's Bits of Wood* provides a fuller understanding of Sembène's nuanced portrayal of women in the postcolonial context, showing them **as** moral,

political, and transformative actors, whether mobilizing communities to challenge authority or negotiating justice and survival within the most intimate spheres of life.

Women, Intimacy, and Patriarchal Constraints in *White Genesis*

Building on the collective and intergenerational agency highlighted in *God's Bits of Wood*, *White Genesis* shifts its narrative gaze to the private and intimate spheres of women's lives. More accurately described as a novella, it situates female struggle not within the arena of public political mobilisation but within the ethical, emotional, and relational demands of patriarchal and socially conservative rural communities. Here, women navigate secrecy, male authority and familial violence, revealing how power is enacted through subtle, every day practices that shape identity, autonomy, and moral judgment.

Where *God's Bits of Wood* centers collective solidarity and ethical action within the public sphere, *White Genesis* turns inward to examine the psychological and moral textures of oppression, illustrating how women's agency is negotiated through domestic, kinship and intimate social networks. Through key female figures such as Ngone War Thiadum, her daughter Khar Madiagua Diop, and Gnagna Guisse, Sembène probes the ways women assert resistance, exercise moral discernment, and pursue self-determination despite the structural, patriarchal, and religious constraints that circumscribe their lives. In this shift, he extends his vision of female empowerment from public, collective struggle to the personal, ethical and relational dynamics of the private sphere, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of women's agency in postcolonial Senegal.

White Genesis thus occupies a critical place in understanding Ousmane Sembène's artistic project, not only for the emancipatory possibilities it imagines for women but also for the narrative strategies through which it interrogates social structures and their embedded contradictions. The novella's significance further lies in its fusion of traditional African storytelling forms with modern literary experimentation, revealing Sembène's dual commitment to cultural continuity and incisive social critique. This narrative orientation naturally extends into the novella's grounding in oral tradition where its formal choices become inseparable from its thematic concerns.

The story is deeply anchored in the figure of the Senegalese *griot*, the traditional storyteller who functions as historian, cultural archivist and moral commentator. In adopting this griot stance, the text positions itself as a witness to the lived experiences of the community, documenting struggles, complexities and silences with authoritative clarity. In *White Genesis*, this role is embodied by Dethye Law whose voice mediates between communal memory and ethical reflection. Through him, the story constructs a mode of storytelling that critiques social conventions while preserving the moral and cultural consciousness of the society it depicts.

The novella is distinctive within African literature for its frank engagement with the taboo subject of incest, a theme seldom explored not for sensational effect but as a lens through which broader social abuses and inequalities are exposed. Sembene's narrative revolves around Ngone War Thiandum whose daughter becomes pregnant by her husband. Ngone, constrained by patriarchal authority and religious expectations, is denied meaningful agency and

ultimately takes her own life, an act that starkly symbolizes the oppressive social and moral structures governing women's lives. The incestuous father is later killed by their psychologically tormented son, while the daughter is cast out of the village, underscoring the harsh communal consequences that follow transgressions of both familial and societal norms.

Significantly, the story is set in a remote Wolof village where Islamic practice and local tradition coexist, often uneasily. Villagers navigate ethical dilemmas by appealing alternately to religious law and customary norms, demonstrating how both systems can be mobilised to reinforce hierarchical structures, particularly those governing gender and social status. This interplay enables the text to critique the instrumental use of religion and tradition in sustaining inequality, while simultaneously acknowledging the complexity of social life and the fluidity with which cultural codes are interpreted and negotiated.

A defining feature of Sembène's approach is its sustained attention to social particularity. Santhiu-Niaye is rendered with striking clarity: its temporal rhythms, spatial organisation, and ritual life are firmly rooted in Wolof cultural practice. Scholars such as Samba Gadjigo and David Murphy observe that the fiction draws deeply on the textures of daily existence, seasonal cycles, kinship structures, communal labour and religious observance allowing the narrative to unfold within a fully realised social world. This careful grounding reflects a broader commitment to a people-centred historiography in which storytelling functions as an extension of communal memory.

Within this precisely articulated environment, women's experiences emerge not as abstracted conditions but as outcomes shaped by intersecting structures of gender, tradition, and religion. Françoise Pfaff's work on the author's representation of women emphasizes how these forces operate together to define the moral, cultural, and material constraints that structure their lives. By allowing female characters to inhabit this dense web of social relations, the narrative exposes both the limits imposed upon them and the subtle forms of negotiation through which they navigate village life.

Through *White Genesis*, Sembène offers a profound social critique. He exposes the consequences of rigid hierarchies, the exploitation of women, and the ways in which communal and religious authority can be used to justify oppression. At the same time, he demonstrates that cultural knowledge and moral reflection are sources of resistance. The griot figure, the careful depiction of Wolof traditions and the tragic arcs of the central characters all contribute to a narrative that is at once socially engaged and ethically compelling. Ultimately, the novel is a call for awareness, accountability and change. By confronting taboo subjects and portraying the full spectrum of human behavior, from heroism to moral failure, Sembene asserts the writer's responsibility to bear witness and to provoke reflection on the society from which the narrative emerges. *White Genesis* thus exemplifies the power of literature to illuminate social realities, challenge entrenched norms, and advocate for a more just and equitable world.

From the outset, the reality of life in Santhiu-Niaye is made clear, as the narrative emphasises both the village's geographic isolation and the cultural and religious

homogeneity of its inhabitants. They are described as "true believers, wearing away the skins on their foreheads and knees in prayer five times a day," highlighting Islam as a constant presence in daily life (p. 9). Yet the narrator also notes that in moments of difficulty, the villagers turn to the *adda*, their customary traditions, for guidance (10). This dual orientation reflects a cultural synthesis long observed in West African societies. Scholars such as Rudolph T. Ware and Fallou Ngom argue that when African communities adopt Islam, they do not discard established social structures; rather, extended family systems, authority hierarchies, gendered norms, and customary rules of interaction continue to shape religious life. Islamic principles are frequently interpreted in ways that accommodate or even reinforce indigenous practices, producing a hybrid moral world in which religious and cultural codes remain deeply intertwined.

Throughout *White Genesis*, this interplay of Islam and tradition shapes how the villagers negotiate ethical and social dilemmas. When faced with the crime of incest committed by Guibril Guedj Diob, the village elders vacillate between enforcing Quranic law which demands death for such an offense and adhering to the *adda* which prescribes either death or expulsion (42). The novel presents these systems as distinct yet overlapping, leaving the community to debate whether the transgression offends Islam or tradition most. As both the narrative and comparative works such as Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, suggest, tradition often prevails when conflicts arise between the two frameworks.

Historical accounts, such as those recorded by Ibn Battuta during his travels across the Mali Empire, indicate that

West African communities once harnessed the transformative potential of Islam to foster learning, trade, and social innovation. Education, scholarship and civic engagement were integrated into religious life, allowing Islam to serve as a vehicle for both moral and social vitality. In contrast, the villagers of Santhiu-Niaye appear constrained by a more rigid, locally circumscribed interpretation of the faith in which Islamic practice is tightly interwoven with traditional hierarchies and customary codes. This juxtaposition underscores the historical variability of Islam in West Africa and highlights how its social and ethical possibilities have been mediated differently across time, space and local contexts.

The villagers devotion is described as grounded in the "hypothetical promise of one of the best places in paradise," a fixation that erodes confidence in the future: "Burying themselves in the old saying: 'Life is nothing', they had reached a state where they no longer felt desire" (10). Criticism of this mindset is implicit, yet as Edris Makward cautions that such passages should not be read as a sweeping condemnation of either Islam or tradition. Rather, they articulate a firm opposition to the way some members of society exploit religious and cultural frameworks to preserve privilege and justify the oppression of others. While both systems are repeatedly invoked to maintain the status quo, the crises portrayed in the novel underscore the necessity and desirability of change.

More than any other character in White Genesis, Ngone War Thiandum embodies the central tensions of her society. Directly affected by the incestuous relationship between her husband, Guibril Diob, and their daughter, Khar Madiagua Diob, she is compelled to question and re-evaluate the

foundations of her life. Sembène initiates this psychological and ethical interrogation by situating her identity firmly within the framework of her upbringing as a Muslim woman:

"Like all women of these parts, Ngone War Thiandum had her place in society, a society sustained by maxims, wise sayings and recommendations of passive docility; woman this, woman that, fidelity, unlimited devotion and total submission of body and soul to the husband who was her master after Yallah, so that he might intercede in her favour for a place in paradise" (14).

Her upbringing and religious beliefs are depicted as integral to her mentality, shaping her responses to the traumatic events she faces. The narrative voice frequently intervenes at critical junctures, directing the reader's attention to these formative influences. Yet an even more intimate and revealing device is Ngone's extended internal monologue which exposes the workings of her conscience and moral reasoning:

"Yallah have pity on me, a simple woman! Drive from me dark, stubborn thoughts of vengeance. My Yallah, I have always obeyed your commandments, and interpreted what I have heard. You have been my guide and my witness, your malaika, your angels, have been my close companion.... I was submissive to my lord, my master after you, Yallah my guide in this world, my advocate in the next, according to your teaching I only rested when my lord rested. My voice never rose above his. In his presence, I always kept my eyes on the ground" (13).

Through *White Genesis*, Sembène illustrates how socialisation, religious instruction, and patriarchal norms

converge to shape a distinct female subjectivity. Ngone War Thiandum's upbringing, marked by rigorous training in obedience, devotion, and submission, mirrors what Nawal El-Saadawi describes in her analysis of female socialisation in Arab Muslim societies in *The Hidden Face of Eve*:

"The child is trained to suppress her own desires, to empty herself of authentic, original wants and wishes linked to her own self, and to fill the vacuum that results with the desires of others. The education of female children is therefore transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind" (31).

By juxtaposing Ngone's interior life with these broader theoretical reflections, the novella foregrounds how patriarchal and religious structures shape women's moral consciousness, self-perception, and capacity for agency. Sembène combines narrative commentary with extended interior monologue, allowing readers to witness Ngone's ethical and psychological struggle as she oscillates between prayerful submission and a growing awareness of her grievances.

This inner conflict captures Ngone's state of mind. What Martin Bestman dismisses as her "outdated" ideas reflects not personal limitation but the enduring influence of traditional norms and Islamic ideology, which continue to inform the self-perception and moral reasoning of many West African women. Even the comparatively more educated and ostensibly "enlightened" Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* affirms:"My heart concurs with the demand of religion. Reared since childhood in their strict precepts I expect not to fail" (32).

A similar pattern appears in God's Bits of Wood, where Assitan internalises patriarchal expectations so fully that "she lived on the margin of her husband's existence, a life of work, silence and patience" (33). Unlike Assitan, however, Ngone's consciousness is marked by tension and reflection; her thoughts vacillate between compliance and subtle questioning, highlighting the ethical and existential complexity of negotiating inherited norms.

Ngone's frustrations also raise ontological questions at both the individual and societal levels. As Frederick Case notes, culture and religion are interdependent aspects of being, and in a society that is simultaneously overtly Islamic and deeply rooted in traditional African norms, expressions of existence are shaped by both religious and indigenous forces. These forces operate not only externally, through communal expectations, but also internally, through the internalisation of social and ethical norms. Ngone's perception of permissible action reveals how deeply she has absorbed and in certain ways perpetuated the oppressive traditions of her society. Even when her worst fear is confirmed, she remains incapable of confronting her husband about his incestuous act, for in this society questioning male authority, particularly by a woman, is regarded as "a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a crime against the established order" (p. 10). Morally defeated, she continues to receive her husband into her bed, a depiction intended to underscore the magnitude of the moral and ethical initiative she later demonstrates.

Throughout the novella, Sembène maintains an atmosphere of intense tension by focusing on Ngone's bewilderment in the face of the collapse of values she has been taught to hold dear. The community's apparent indifference to incest

starkly contradicts their usual strict adherence to both religious law and traditional codes of honour which leaves her deeply affronted. Her refusal to collude with a corrupt system alienates her from others in the village. Her only confidant is the griot woman, Gnagna Guisse. While Sembène celebrates the cooperative spirit and solidarity between women as a first step toward resistance against male dominance and exploitation, this relationship is complicated by issues of caste, rank, and mutual caution in what each shares.This is because the complexity of Ngone's struggle is structured around interlocking themes of religion and tradition, gender and caste, morality and justice, honour and nobility—all of which intersect in her internal negotiations. Though she frequently feels powerless as a woman, her noble lineage instills a profound sense of pride that enables her to embrace her family motto:"Rather die a thousand deaths in a thousand ways each more terrible than the other than endure an insult for a single day" (23).

Her lived experience, however, has exposed her to countless indignities, confirming Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's observation that "the most important challenge to the African woman is her own self-perceptions since it is she who has to define her own freedom" (35). For Ngone, it is her commitment to protecting the honour of her family and caste that strengthens her resolve, even as she discovers "her own capacity to assess events from her own woman's point of view" (15).

Sembène deliberately aligns this awakening with a partial disavowal of the religious beliefs that have constrained her. While the novel does not question the truth of Islam itself, it portrays religious orthodoxy as fostering passivity and

inertia in the people of Santhiu-Niaye. Ngone's moral and ethical awakening occurs when she realises that the door to paradise promised through her husband has been closed by his incest and that her own agency is essential. Her subsequent actions constitute a deliberate break with restrictive traditions and beliefs unlocking her own potential and that of her daughter. With the guidance and support of Gnagna Guisse, she arranges the future: in a significant departure from both tradition and Islamic custom which normally requires a child to take the father's name, she bequeaths all her worldly possessions and the noble Thiandum name to her daughter's child. Her eventual suicide functions as a moral and social catharsis that compels the community to confront its complicity and indifference. Through these interwoven threads, Sembène depicts a woman who, though constrained by social and religious structures, achieves moral self-realisation and agency, simultaneously challenging both personal and communal complacency while redefining the possibilities for women within her society.

Sembène suggests that when men abdicate responsibility, it falls to women to take action and drive social change. This radical treatment of female agency has led scholars such as Edris Makward to argue that the novel lends itself to feminist readings. The text articulates the pain and suffering of women in patriarchal society, particularly through the ramifications of incest. Unlike Bessie Head's *The Cardinals*, which treats father-daughter incest as a form of love story, Sembène focuses on the incest taboo as a social structure. Anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Margaret Mead, observe that the prohibition of incest is nearly universal, serving not merely to protect the sexually

immature but to enforce exogamy and ensure social continuity. As Lévi-Strauss notes, daughters are often treated as objects of exchange which neglects women's agency as subjects. Incest, in this framework, highlights the systemic subordination of women and the exploitation inherent in patriarchal norms.

In *White Genesis*, incest functions as a marker of profound social malaise, particularly when the community ignores Ngone's suffering. The griot Dethye Law's admonition to the village leaders "A girl the same age as your daughter…if you marry her, you are marrying your daughter" highlights how communal silence preserves abuse, revealing the mechanisms by which the society sustains this blindness. The novel emphasizes the trauma and exploitation inherent in father-daughter incest, drawing attention to the asymmetrical power exercised by the father. While some interpretations suggest that both father and daughter might be equally culpable, such a view ignores the authority wielded by the father and perpetuates the systemic silencing of girls. This dynamic resonates with sociological cases cited by Nawal El-Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), where women endure abuse within ostensibly pious families while perpetrators remain unaccountable.

Sembène situates this abuse within broader gendered norms. In Santhiu-Niaye, a girl's virtue is measured by obedience to her father, and men exchange daughters to acquire additional wives, making equality between fathers and daughters unattainable. Through Khar Madiagua Diob's silence, the novel illustrates women's loss of voice and agency, echoing Mary Harmer's observation that incest cannot be separated from the social order that sustains it.

Family secrecy, cultural pride, and societal taboos reinforce the concealment of abuse, while Sembène exposes how gender, caste, religion, and custom shape both perpetration and response.

By linking sexual abuse to structural inequities, the novel reframes incest as a lens for understanding wider societal failings. Sembène foregrounds the silenced voices of victims and the mechanisms that perpetuate their suffering, demonstrating the interplay between personal trauma and communal complicity. His unflinching depiction transforms fiction into a space for moral reflection, witnessing hidden abuses, and interrogating the intersection of gender, authority, and tradition, offering a powerful critique of a society that conceals and normalizes violence against girls.

Instead, Sembène underscores the pervasive secrecy surrounding incest: neither Khar nor her father can speak of the act, reflecting how taboo silences both victim and perpetrator. The novel highlights the consequences of this enforced silence. Khar's lack of voice mirrors women's loss of power and agency, while Ngone's long interior monologues reveal her reflections, never fully voiced aloud. In contrast, men's rhetoric is paralytic; they talk yet fail to act. This separation of the sexes, further emphasized in the novella's film adaptation *Niaye*, reflects traditional social norms and Islamic prescriptions of gender segregation. Women whisper behind bamboo screens, while men occupy the public square and mosque, discussing the village's welfare only reluctantly.

While Western feminists often argue that African Muslim women confined to domestic spaces and lack influence, in his novella, Sembène demonstrates that female agency operates through collaborative and strategic action. Ngone

and Gnagna Guisse, though constrained by secrecy and domesticity, shape the resolution of the incest crisis. Khar's eventual decision to keep her child despite being expelled from the village symbolizes her transition from vulnerability to self-assertion. This act restores moral balance and signals the potential of women's agency to effect social change even in contexts where patriarchal authority dominates public life.

Sembène's belief in the transformative potential of women is consistently affirmed in *White Genesis*. Unlike some contemporaries, who initially depict strong female figures but later recede from this vision, Sembène repeatedly positions women and girls as agents of social renewal. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Bakayoko's adopted daughter is imagined as the natural heir to the workers' struggle, while in *White Genesis*, Khar's child born of difficult circumstances and while female is presented as a symbol of hope for the future. This optimism resonates throughout Ngone War Thiandum's reflections and is reinforced at the novel's close when Khar and her daughter depart Santhiu-Niaye. The narrator emphasizes this possibility for self-determination: "This story had no other ending, it was a page in their life. A new one starts, which depends on them" (73).

Central to Sembène's vision is the concept of *le refus,* that is, the refusal of oppression and humiliation which entails assuming moral responsibility for oneself and, by extension, one's community. In *White Genesis*, this principle is enacted by Ngone, her daughter, and most articulately by the griot Dethye Law whose critique of incest, caste, and religious manipulation exposes systemic abuses of power. Law's advocacy, coupled with Ngone and Gnagna Guisse's covert but decisive actions demonstrates how moral agency

can challenge patriarchal authority and hierarchical privilege. Through these intertwined narratives of personal courage, ethical reflection and social critique, Sembène affirms that women's agency is both a moral imperative and a practical force for transformation. By linking the trauma of incest to broader questions of honour, justice and societal integrity, he constructs a vision of Senegalese society not only as it is, but as it ought to be, foregrounding the potential of women and the oppressed to shape their own destinies.

Long before other African writers foregrounded women's roles in shaping a dynamic society, Sembène brought them from the margins to the center of social life. His narratives place women in the midst tensions and crises generated by conflicting views on justice and social responsibility to represent their legitimate struggles, aspirations and moral agency. As Karen Smyley Wallace observes, his writing presents finely chiselled portraits of women as "real, palpable individuals." Brenda Berrain similarly notes that, rather than confining female characters to secondary roles that merely complement men, Sembène allows them to express their feelings, joys and pains, and to respond thoughtfully to pressing situations. Wallace further emphasizes that by creating women who do not simply echo male voices or exist as shadows of men, Sembène captures the complexities of a changing Africa. In these texts, female characters emerge as dynamic agents, navigating and redefining their sense of self amidst cultural ambivalences between tradition and Islam, and, in some cases, the influences of Western norms.

By foregrounding interior and relational dynamics, *White Genesis* extends Sembène's vision of female empowerment

beyond the collective, public sphere exemplified in *God's Bits of Wood*. The novella demonstrates that in postcolonial Senegal, women's agency and moral reasoning operate equally within intimate, domestic, and social arenas to reveal a complex and multifaceted understanding of resistance, subjectivity and ethical selfhood. Through Ngone War Thiandum's moral courage, Khar's growth and Dethye Law's principled witness, the text affirms that women and the oppressed possess the capacity to challenge injustice, restore social equilibrium and envision a future shaped by truth and responsibility.

In conclusion, Sembène's works underscore the moral and social significance of agency, especially female agencyas a catalyst for societal transformation. In *God's Bits of Wood*, women emerge as active participants in the collective struggle for justice, shaping the course of public life and challenging entrenched hierarchies. In *White Genesis*, this focus shifts to the intimate and domestic spheres, where women negotiate ethical, relational and moral responsibilities under the constraints of patriarchal and religious norms. Across both texts, Sembène renders women as fully realized subjects and agents within the intertwined realms of family, community and society constructing a vision of postcolonial Senegal that is simultaneously critical, hopeful and profoundly human. Together, these works affirm his enduring commitment to justice, the reclamation of silenced voices, and the transformative potential of courage, responsibility and ethical self-determination as foundations for social change.

Chapter Three

Religion, Community, and Moral Authority in Aminata Sow Fall

Aminata Sow Fall occupies a central position in post-independence Francophone African literature as one of the first Senegalese women to gain international recognition as a novelist. Emerging in the 1970s, her writing engages deeply with the ideological, social and moral tensions of postcolonial Senegal, a period characterized by the expansion of state institutions, rapid urbanization, and widening gaps between political elites and ordinary citizens. Across her oeuvre, Sow Fall consistently interrogates these societal transformations, using narrative to expose systemic injustice, bureaucratic indifference, and the erosion of communal ethics. She has published five novels: *Le Revenant* (1976), *La Grève des Battu* (1979), *L'Appel des Arènes* (1982), *L'Expert de la Nation* (1993), and *Le Jujubier du Patriarche* (1993). This chapter focuses on her second novel, *La Grève des Battu*, translated into English as *The Beggars' Strike*, which was awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire in 1981 and exemplifies her engagement with social ethics, communal responsibility, and the moral challenges of modern Senegalese society.

The Beggars' Strike (*La Grève des Battu)* underscores Sow Fall's narrative commitment of foregrounding those relegated to the margins of society. By centering the experiences of beggars whose presence threatens the government's public image, she illuminates the moral contradictions embedded within state power. This focus on vulnerable bodies, often treated as obstacles to

administrative efficiency, allows Sow Fall to critique modernization projects that privilege appearances over genuine social responsibility. Throughout her body of work, she blends satire with ethical reflection, revealing how dignity and humanity persist even in hostile urban environments..

A defining feature of her writing is the complex interplay between traditional communal values, Islamic moral frameworks, and the rationalized authority of the modern state. Rather than portray these as mutually exclusive systems, Sow Fall uses fiction to explore their frictions and convergences. Her characters navigate these overlapping ethical terrains as they make choices that reflect both inherited moral obligations and the demands of contemporary life. This layered ethical landscape gives her writing a distinctive philosophical texture and situates her among African authors who approach fiction as a medium of civic and moral pedagogy.

Women in Sow Fall's fiction are portrayed with remarkable nuance. Rejecting reductive depictions of African Muslim women as either victims or cultural symbols, she presents them as purposeful moral actors who intervene in familial, economic and civic spheres. Her representations challenge patriarchal constraints while also departing from universalizing Western feminist narratives. It offers instead, a model of agency grounded in local cultural logics and Islamic-inflected ethics. In this way, her work contributes significantly to African feminist thought and aligns closely with other women writers. Her work forms part of a broader West African literary tradition concerned with gender, social justice and moral responsibility. It intersects meaningfully with the writings of her countrywoman

Mariama Bâ whose *So Long a Letter* highlights the emotional, religious and cultural negotiations of Senegalese Muslim women. While Bâ situates female agency within introspective and domestic spaces, Sow Fall extends this agency into civic and ethical domains, depicting women who intervene in public morality and challenge institutional failures. Together, their works articulate a continuum of Muslim women's experiences and demonstrate that agency emerges not through rejecting cultural frameworks but through strategically engaging and reinterpreting them.

Sow Fall's work also resonates with the Nigerian woman writer Zaynab Alkali whose fiction similarly centres on women negotiating patriarchal structures within African Muslim communities. Alkali's novels, particularly *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, portray female protagonists whose agency emerge through education, economic participation and moral steadfastness. Like Sow Fall, Alkali rejects reductive portrayals of Muslim women as uniformly oppressed instead she presents them as actors who reshape their circumstances from within culturally grounded frameworks. Both writers therefore contribute to an indigenous African feminist discourse, one that is attentive to religion, community and ethical responsibility rather than detached universalist models. Taken together, these writers reveal the diversity and intellectual depth of African women's narrative agency. Sow Fall stands at the intersection of these traditions: ethically rigorous, gender-conscious and committed to culturally situated portrayals of Muslim women.

slamic moral philosophy constitutes a foundational structure in Senegalese communal life, shaping ethical conduct, social norms and public responsibility through principles derived from the Qurʾān, the Sunnah, and centuries of West African practice. This moral framework emphasizes justice, charity, communal solidarity and humility, embedding ethical imperatives not merely in individual devotion but in social, economic and civic life. Scholars such as Lamin Sanneh and Kenneth Harrow have observed that Islamic ethics in Senegal operate both as spiritual guidance and as a practical framework for fostering communal cohesion and moral accountability.

A central embodiment of Islamic moral authority in Senegal is the marabout, a spiritual leader whose moral credibility and religious knowledge confer significant social influence. Marabouts provide guidance on ethical conduct, mediate disputes and often act as intermediaries between communities and local authorities, shaping civic and moral expectations. It has been noted that marabouts play a particularly important role in rural and semi-urban areas where their authority helps maintain social stability and ethical coherence. Complementing this role are Senegal's Sufi brotherhoods, most prominently the Murīdiyya, Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya, which structure communal life through spiritual networks, ritual practice and ethical guidance. Scholars, including Lucy Sène, have observed that these brotherhoods foster solidarity, regulate moral behavior, and link piety with social and economic engagement thereby extending ethical norms from private devotion into public life. Together, marabouts and Sufi brotherhoods demonstrate that Islamic moral philosophy in

Senegal is not limited to personal piety but is expressed through institutional and communal mechanisms that shape everyday interactions, public morality and civic responsibility. Understanding Senegalese society and literature that engages with it requires recognition of this moral and ethical architecture which informs social interactions, gender roles and collective accountability.

In *The Beggars' Strike*, Aminata Sow Fall's commitment to portraying ethical responsibility, communal interdependence and the realities of postcolonial Senegal are rendered with greatest thematic precision. If her broader oeuvre demonstrates a sustained interest in the moral contradictions of modern statecraft, this particular novel provides the most incisive narrative forum for examining how religious obligation, community welfare and political ambition collide within the Senegalese social order. In it, Sow Fall crystallizes her critique of the widening gap between Islamic ethical principles and their compromised enactment in contemporary urban life.

The focus on *The Beggars' Strike* here is justified by the novel's exceptional clarity in foregrounding Islam as a lived ethical framework. Sow Fall uses the narrative to underscore the importance of zakat, one of the central pillars of Islam and a foundational practice for maintaining social harmony. In Islam, Zakat occupies a position of equal significance to the *shahada* (declaration of faith), the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is not merely an act of charity but a structural obligation designed to redistribute wealth, strengthen community bonds and reaffirm the moral interdependence of the faithful. In presenting zakat as both a spiritual duty and a mechanism of social cohesion, Sow Fall positions it as

a lens through which to critique modern governance in Senegal.

To examine the divergence between the doctrinal principle of zakat and its compromised application in contemporary urban Senegal, Sow Fall constructs the figure of Mour N'Diaye, the ambitious Director of Public Health charged with sanitizing Dakar's streets in order to cultivate a more appealing environment for Western tourists. This task is framed as progress and modernization. In carrying out this directive, Mour directly contravenes a core tenet of Islamic social organization, the obligation to assist the needy. His actions reveal how state policies influenced by external pressures, particularly Western expectations of urban order and aesthetics can undermine indigenous moral systems that prioritize communal responsibility.

The beggars, forcibly displaced from the city centre counter this violation of religious and communal ethics by adopting an unfamiliar tactic: a strike, a distinctly Western form of resistance. Their collective withdrawal exposes the fragility of Mour's political aspirations. Deprived of those who would traditionally receive alms Mour finds that he is unable to distribute the sacrificial meat prescribed by the marabout Kifi Bokoul who has assured him that such an act would secure his elevation to the newly created post of Vice President. The absence of recipients for his charity not only derails his political ambitions but also lays bare the hollow show of a religious observance that is divorced from sincere ethical intent. Through this narrative structure, Sow Fall illuminates the tension between outward displays of piety and the substantive moral obligations that underpin Islamic communal life. *The Beggars' Strike* thus becomes an incisive exploration of how political authority when removed from

genuine moral responsibility, disrupts the delicate balance that sustains community. By centering the beggars, figures that are often overlooked or dismissed, Sow Fall reclaims them as moral agents whose presence sustains social equilibrium. Their withdrawal is not merely a political act but a revelation of the indispensable role of the marginalized in maintaining the ethical scaffolding of society.

By depicting the ethical and communal structures that underpin Senegalese society, *The Beggars' Strike* dramatizes the tensions between moral responsibility and institutional neglect. Sow Fall's narrative foregrounds characters who inhabit the margins, the beggars whose very presence exposes the failures of civic authority thereby reflecting the stakes of communal ethics in everyday life. The novel resonates with the moral frameworks reinforced by Sufi networks and the guiding influence of marabouts, illustrating how spiritual and ethical authority shape social expectations even amid the pressures of modern governance. Furthermore, in depicting women and marginalized individuals asserting agency within these moral and civic terrains, Sow Fall interrogates the gap between Islamic ethical ideals and the realities of state power. In so doing, she demonstrates both the resilience of communal values and the consequences of their erosion. The novel enacts a literary exploration of Senegalese moral philosophy, revealing how social cohesion, spiritual guidance, and civic accountability are continuously negotiated in postcolonial urban life.

Marginal Lives as Moral Centres

At its core, *The Beggars' Strike* explores the interdependence of all members of society and the ethical dynamics of giving

and receiving. The begging bowl depicted on the novel's cover functions as a central symbol. As **Susan Stringer** observes, it is "an expression of an ever recurring ritual or cycle," highlighting how charity is often given with the expectation of some personal gain. When the beggars go on strike and refuse alms, they disrupt the social equilibrium and force the city to confront the moral assumptions that underpin relationships between the powerful and the marginalized. The novel contrasts attitudes toward beggars to illuminate these ethical tensions.

A character in the novel, Mour's assistant, Keba, is vehemently opposed to their presence, but his objections are personal: "He was shocked to see human beings, however poor they might be, diminishing their own dignity by sponging on others in such a disgraceful shameful fashion" (p2). Physically repulsed by those who "expose their infirmities for profit," he pursues a campaign to rid the city of beggars without acknowledging the social and structural pressures that drive people to beg. Through Keba, Sow Fall emphasizes the novel's central ethical point: the able-bodied, educated, and influential members of society owe a duty to the weak and disadvantaged. Yet almsgiving is rarely motivated by pure altruism as one beggar notes:

> "It's not because of our rags, nor our physical disabilities, nor for the pleasure of performing a disinterested good deed that people deign to throw us the money we get as donations. First of all they have whispered their dearest and most secret desires to the alms they tender.... And when they are kind enough to invite you to share their steaming, odorous calabashes of

> millet porridge and curdled milk, do you imagine it's because they thought you might be hungry? No my friends, that is the least of their worries! Our hunger doesn't worry them. They need to give in order to survive, and if we don't exist, whom would they give to? How could they ensure their own peace of mind? They don't give for our sake; they give for their own sake" (38).

This observation illustrates what Trinh Minh-ha describes as the mutuality inherent in giving. Even acts of charity are rarely devoid of expectation whether material, spiritual or psychological. The novel contrasts this transactional approach with the moral authority of the marabouts who embody the authentic ethical principles of Zakat. Serigne Birama, a devout marabout, warns Mour when he attempts to justify the removal of beggars for public hygiene and tourism: "The city is dehumanising you, hardening people's hearts so that they no longer pity the weak. Take care, Mour, God said, 'Let the poor come unto me" (17).

Birama reminds both Mour and the reader that wealth is a divine loan and that believers are morally obliged to support the disadvantaged. In contrast, the marabout Kifi Bokoul, "a shrivelled wisp of a man, wrapped in a dark voluminous boubou, with eyes like bottomless apertures," embodies fear and manipulation. While Mour initially relies on Bokoul's supernatural advice to advance his political ambitions, Sow Fall presents Birama as the genuine spiritual authority who neither shirks his duty to the less fortunate nor abandons his client. Through these contrasting figures, Sow Fall interrogates the tension between spiritual authenticity and worldly ambition. As

Mour's personal ambitions collapse, he gains moral and spiritual insight, awakening to his responsibilities both as a public official and as a Muslim. The novel thus dramatizes the interplay of civic, ethical and religious obligations to show how personal growth, social conscience and spiritual understanding are inseparable in a society where human dignity, communal responsibility and moral accountability are constantly tested.

While *The Beggars' Strike* initially examines the dynamics between beggars and the wealthy, Sow Fall extends the novel's ethical inquiry to include the relationships between men and women, highlighting how dependence and power operate across multiple axes of society. Although she states that her primary concern are general social issues rather than the female condition, women occupy a crucial space in her narrative and illustrate how patriarchy intersects with broader social hierarchies. A number of scholars have observed that the marginalization of beggars in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* mirrors the subordination of women in patriarchal Senegalese society, thereby revealing a broader critique of structural dependence and entrenched hierarchies. For instance, Trinh T. Minh-ha argues that societies often construct dependency as a feminized condition, associating vulnerability with those who occupy the lowest rungs of social visibility. Similarly, Louise Stringer highlights how public discourses surrounding poverty reproduce the same mechanisms of exclusion that regulate women's access to authority and mobility. Yet according to Ifi Amadiume further contends that African social systems frequently naturalize gendered hierarchies by embedding them in everyday economic and moral practices.

Within this theoretical frame, Sow Fall's representation of beggars does more than expose urban neglect; it dramatizes how social value is unevenly distributed across lines of gender, class and moral legitimacy. The beggars' regulated invisibility parallels the ways women's voices are constrained, both groups rendered dependent on structures that simultaneously need and disavow them. In linking these forms of marginalization, the novel engages a wider critique of social inequality to reveal how systems of privilege shape who may speak, who may be seen, and who may participate meaningfully in public life.

This parallel emerges vividly in the character of Lolli whose reluctant acceptance of her husband's decision to take a second wife mirrors the initial hesitation of the beggars to strike. Lolli explains to her daughter, "There are things that you cannot understand. If I left this household today, my father and mother would curse me, as would all the members of my family… Without work, all alone, what would I do with you if I took you with me?" Yet after a brief protest, "her zeal to regain her master's favour redoubled" (48). Similarly, when the beggars first contemplate their strike, one observes: "What will we do? Must we be entirely impoverished? Nguirane, what you talk about is not feasible… by refusing we'll harm no one but ourselves" (51). In both cases, dependence shapes behavior: while the beggars ultimately assert collective agency, Lolli embodies the social and psychological constraints that limit women's ability to challenge their oppression.

Mour's assertion, "Isn't it me who feeds and supports? And tell me what contract binds me and prevents me from taking a second wife if I want one?" (44), underscores the

unequal distribution of rights and responsibilities within patriarchal structures. Trinh Minh-ha notes that men often manipulate ambiguity in giving and duty to serve their interests, adjusting their behavior according to circumstance, a pattern mirrored in Mour's treatment of Lolli and the beggars. African and Muslim feminist scholarship similarly emphasizes the tension between male authority and women's autonomy. Ifi Amadiume, for instance, documents historical examples of West African women organizing collective resistance, demonstrating that women's leadership often emerges from solidarity and strategic social networks. Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi similarly highlight how Islamic and social norms have historically constrained women's public roles while simultaneously creating spaces for negotiation, agency, and moral authority.

Salla, a beggar woman who organizes the strike, embodies the intersection of leadership, resistance, and ethical agency within the novel's critique of social hierarchies. Her establishment of a cooperative system in which each beggar saves part of their earnings and takes turns collecting their share asserts both practical organisation and moral authority, crystallised in her declaration that "We (the beggars) are useful to them as the air they breathe" (54). Through Salla, and through assertive women such as Sine who operate in different but complementary modes, Sow Fall illuminates how solidarity, strategic action, and ethical awareness enable marginalised individuals to claim social and moral space thereby exposing the hypocrisy of male authority that simultaneously relies on and demeans those it renders dependent. In this way, the novel links the oppression of women and the poor, situating Salla's

assertiveness within a broader historical and contemporary pattern in which West African women mobilise for economic, social, and political causes. Through these intersecting narratives, by illustrating how patriarchal and social hierarchies oppress both women and the poor, Sow Fall critiques the manipulation of dependence and the selective exercise of duty. Yet, by portraying figures such as Salla and, to a lesser extent, women like Sine she affirms the potential for collective agency and ethical resistance.

In *The Beggars' Strike*, Sow Fall repeatedly interrogates the multiple faces of the 'gift' and its intimate connection to oppression, dissecting and reassembling this theme throughout the novel. Beyond this thematic focus, the novel demonstrates unusual narrative strategies that challenge conventional novelistic forms, transforming reading into an act of attentive listening. Her stylistic use of anticipatory, descriptive and evaluative phrases foregrounds characters and events with a rhythmic, almost oral quality: "This morning the newspaper again spoke about the human congestion caused by these beggars, these talibes, these lepers, these cripples, these derelicts" (5); "There is something distinguished about him, this Nguirane San, maybe because he always holds his head up very high and slightly inclined to the left" (15); "A true businesswoman, this Salla Niang, who had formerly worked as a 'maid of all tasks' [bonne à tout faire]" (16); "She promises to become a strong-minded one, this Raabi" (p. 48); "Mour rose quickly to catch him. He's become pitiful, this Mour!" (97).

At first, this narrative voice may strike the reader as intrusive but through repetition it becomes familiar, functioning as a "pointing finger" that guides readers to engage morally and socially with the text. By blurring the

boundaries between the authorial voice and the consciousness of characters such as Mour, Lolli, Keba, and Salla, Sow Fall reflects the fluidity of West African oral storytelling in which narrators often move seamlessly between observer, commentator, and participant—a technique noted by Ifi Amadiume in her studies of African gender and social structures. For instance, when Lolli reacts to Mour's announcement that he intends to take a second wife, the narrative voice seems to inhabit her consciousness, leaving readers uncertain whether the perspective they witness belongs to the character, the author, or a fusion of both.

This narrative approach also resonates with Islamic ethical discourse, particularly the principles surrounding Zakat, charity and communal responsibility. The ethical stakes in Sow Fall's narrative, the beggars' strike, the parallel subordination of women, and the manipulation of social obligations by those in power reflect the complex interplay of dependence, obligation, and moral accountability. As Minh-ha observes, acts of giving, rarely straightforward, often reveal interdependence. Similarly, Ahmed notes that Islamic ethical frameworks emphasize both communal obligation and personal accountability, highlighting the moral significance of actions that affect the wider society.

Through the interplay of these narrative techniques, West African oral storytelling conventions, and Islamic ethical discourse, *The Beggars' Strike* enacts a participatory moral dialogue. Readers are invited not merely to observe but to listen, reflect, and recognize the ways in which communal cohesion, spiritual guidance and social responsibility are intertwined in Senegalese society. By integrating these literary, social and ethical dimensions, Sow Fall's novel

demonstrates that narrative form and moral reflection are inseparable, producing a text that is simultaneously literary, social, and pedagogical.

By portraying beggars and women as moral centres, Sow Fall challenges conventional hierarchies of power and ethics. The novel suggests that true moral authority does not reside solely with the educated, wealthy, or socially dominant, but emerges from those whose lives are shaped by vulnerability, interdependence and ethical reflection. In both the strike of the beggars and the moral negotiation of women like Salla and Sine, the narrative foregrounds the ethical agency of marginalized figures, showing that their decisions, struggles and strategies articulate a coherent moral vision for society. In this sense, Sow Fall's novel elevates the margins by demonstrating that dignity, ethical insight and social responsibility are not the exclusive province of those in power, but are often most clearly revealed in the lives of those whom society seeks to overlook.

Conclusion

Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* presents a profound exploration of social ethics, moral responsibility, and the dynamics of power in postcolonial Senegalese society. Through her portrayal of beggars and women, figures that traditionally marginalized both socially and economically, she amplifies the ways in which those at the peripheries of society often embody the deepest moral insight and ethical agency. The beggars, through their strike, assert a form of social and ethical authority that challenges the self-interest, hypocrisy and moral blindness of the powerful, while women such as Lolli, Sine and Salla negotiate agency and resistance within patriarchal structures revealing the ethical

potential inherent in solidarity, strategic action, and moral reflection.

Sow Fall's innovative narrative techniques, including her blending of authorial and character perspectives as well as her evocation of the rhythms of West African oral storytelling serve not only to engage readers aesthetically but also to immerse them ethically. By inserting the reader into the thoughts, frustrations and moral struggles of her characters, she transforms reading into listening, inviting reflection on societal inequities, moral contradictions and the obligations that bind members of society. Her novel challenges conventional hierarchies of authority and demonstrates that dignity, justice and ethical insight are often most visible among those whom society seeks to overlook. Their solidarity, strategic action and ethical deliberation illuminate the moral and social responsibilities of the entire community. In the end, *The Beggars' Strike* offers a compelling lesson from the margins that through vulnerability, courage, and reflection, society's deepest truths and its capacity for justice are revealed. Through this fusion of literary innovation, moral inquiry and cultural insight, Sow Fall affirms the enduring power of literature to illuminate both the ethical and social dimensions of human life.

Chapter Four

Negotiating Female Agency in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

Mariama Bâ's 1979 novel *Une si longue lettre*, translated into English as *So Long a Letter*, received the first Norna Award for Publishing in Africa in 1981. According to the selection panel, the work "offers a testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth." Early commentators such as Dorothy Blair described it as "the first truly feminist African novel," while Christine Guyoneau suggested that it inaugurated a new era for African women writers. Similarly, Aminata Kaiga Ka emphasizes Bâ's role as a torchbearer, providing an authentic platform for women to articulate their perspectives in a literary space long dominated by male authors.

More critics have continued to reassess Bâ's contribution, situating her work within broader debates on African feminism and the negotiation of gender within Islamic and postcolonial contexts. Scholars such as Obioma Nnaemeka have read *So Long a Letter* through the lens of "nego-feminism," emphasizing the text's portrayal of women's agency as a process of negotiation rather than open confrontation with patriarchal structures. Likewise, Florence Stratton and Kenneth Harrow highlight Bâ's nuanced representation of women's experiences within polygamous marriage, noting that the novel critiques patriarchal privilege while remaining attentive to the cultural and religious frameworks within which its characters operate. Scholars including such as Penda Mbow

have also drawn attention to the ways in which Bâ's narrative situates women's struggles within the moral and social landscape of Senegalese Muslim society, thereby complicating Western feminist readings that overlook the ethical and communal dimensions of the text. Collectively, these interpretations underscore the continuing relevance of Bâ's work, not merely as an early feminist intervention but as a sophisticated literary exploration of how women negotiate authority, faith and social expectation in postcolonial West Africa.

So Long a Letter occupies a central place in discussions of African women's writing and remains a key text for understanding Muslim women's negotiation of Islamic ethics, modernity and female agency in postcolonial West Africa. Through the epistolary reflections of its main protagonist, Ramatoulaye, Mariama Bâ examines the tensions between personal conviction, religious values and the social expectations placed upon women within a predominantly Muslim society. The novel's enduring significance lies in the way it articulates female agency not through overt rebellion but through ethical reflection, negotiation and moral resilience within established cultural and religious frameworks. In doing so, Bâ demonstrates how Muslim women navigate the complexities of tradition, faith and modernity while asserting their intellectual and emotional autonomy.

Much of the novel's acclaim reflects its ability to combine literary form and ethical insight. It provides readers with access to a perspective that had long been mediated by male Senegalese authors such as Camara Laye, Abdoulaye Sadji, and Ousmane Sembène. In Bâ's narrative, the West African Muslim woman speaks for herself, articulating both

personal and social concerns with clarity and nuance. The epistolary form structured as a long letter from Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou also creates a reflective narrative space in which questions of marriage, motherhood, religion and social responsibility can be examined from within the lived experience of a Muslim woman negotiating the pressures of postcolonial society.

The enduring significance of *So Long a Letter* lies in the way it intertwines the personal and the social. Critics such as Florence Stratton, Peter S. Hawkins, and Aduke Adebayo have noted thematic affinities between Bâ's novel and Sembene's *Xala*. Yet whereas Ousmane Sembène satirizes the corruption of the postcolonial elite through the figure of El Hadji whose impotence symbolizes moral failure, Bâ shifts attention to the domestic sphere, revealing how these broader social contradictions shape women's experiences within marriage and family life. Accordingly, while Sembène deploys polygamy primarily as a symbolic device in his critique of the bourgeoisie, Bâ treats it as a lived ethical and social reality.

This chapter examines *So Long a Letter* as a text in which Islamic ethical norms, cultural tradition, and female agency intersect. The focus is on how Ramatoulaye and other women negotiate personal autonomy, desire, and social obligation within frameworks shaped by marriage, polygamy and communal expectations. By situating the narrative at the intersection of the personal, the ethical and the social, the interplay between individual conscience, communal responsibilities and the moral imperatives of Islam in postcolonial Senegal is illuminated. The novel demonstrates that agency and moral authority are not the exclusive preserve of men or the socially powerful, rather,

they emerge through reflection, moral responsibility and strategic negotiation within the parameters of both Islamic and traditional social norms, revealing the nuanced ways women assert autonomy and solidarity in society.

Religion, Gender, and Social Change in Postcolonial Senegal

Through the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, *So Long a Letter* examines the emotional, religious and legal dimensions of polygamous marriage, interrogating its effects on women's dignity, autonomy and sense of justice. In doing so, Bâ reframes questions of moral conduct through women's lived experiences thus situating ethical deliberation at the heart of domestic and social life. The parallels between El Hadji in Sembene's *Xala* and Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye's husband, a former trade union activist who abandons his ideals and takes a much younger wife, further underscore this critique. Following Modou's death, Ramatoulaye must confront the social and emotional consequences of his actions, reflecting on marriage, faith and responsibility in a rapidly changing society. In this sense, the novel can be read as a subtle interrogation of *Xala,* however, it relocates debates about morality and social justice within a distinctly female perspective. Similarly, Bâ's concerns resonate with those explored by Aminata Sow Fall but whereas Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* examines the ethical obligations of the state toward marginalized citizens, *So Long a Letter* turns inward to the domestic sphere, highlighting how tensions between tradition, religion, and modernity shape women's lives within the family.

Significantly, the novel situates women's experiences within broader transformations brought about by

education, urbanization, and post-independence reforms in Senegal. Marriage and polygamy are presented as socio-religious institutions in flux, reflecting societal shifts in which women's roles and expectations are being renegotiated. The text engages with debates around women's labour, family responsibilities, the moral and social dimensions of polygamy to illustrate how cultural, religious, and social norms intersect with emerging modern practices. Scholars such as Obioma Nnaemeka, Amina Mama, Ifi Amadiume, and E. J. Boyd note that these transformations offer women new avenues for agency that enable them to assert autonomy and negotiate obligations within domestic and public spheres. Education and urbanization, in particular, are depicted as sites where women acquire knowledge, social capital and a capacity for reflection, allowing them to challenge patriarchal authority while remaining embedded within Islamic and West African cultural frameworks.

Ramatoulaye's reflections on marriage, widowhood and polygamy are framed within Islamic moral codes, highlight the ways in which women negotiate agency while respecting tradition. In *So Long a Letter*, *mirasse*—the Islamic custom requiring a widow to observe four months and ten days of mourning—functions on both a social and symbolic level. As a religious obligation, it imposes seclusion, confining Ramatoulaye to her home and restricting her participation in public life. Yet this enforced withdrawal simultaneously creates a contemplative space that the novel transforms into a site of introspection, self-disclosure, and narrative reconstruction. Within the stillness of *mirasse*, Ramatoulaye is compelled to confront the emotional and ethical complexities of her marriage, her husband's

betrayals, and the gendered expectations that shaped her life. The ritual becomes a structuring device through which the text stages her internal transformation: the solitude enables her to reassess social norms surrounding polygamy, motherhood, and female respectability, while also allowing her to articulate a quiet but firm critique of the traditions that circumscribe women's autonomy. In this way, *mirasse* serves not merely as a culturally mandated period of mourning but as the narrative engine of the novel, generating the reflective voice that exposes Ramatoulaye's pain, resilience, and evolving consciousness.

A number of scholars have observed that *So Long a Letter* articulates a mode of female ethical agency that does not rest on rebellion for its own sake but emerges from a thoughtful engagement with communal, religious, and moral expectations. Filomina Chioma Steady argues that African women's subjectivities must be understood within a relational ethical framework in which agency is inseparable from responsibility to kin, community, and spiritual life. In this context, Ramatoulaye's choices, particularly her observance of *mirasse* and her measured critique of polygamy reflect a moral reasoning shaped by social embeddedness rather than a desire to renounce her cultural world. Obioma Nnaemeka's theorization of "nego-feminism" further illuminates this orientation: she contends that African women often enact empowerment through negotiation, compromise, and strategic patience. Ramatoulaye's narrative exemplifies this dynamic, revealing a form of resistance that is cumulative and dialogic, grounded in ethical self-scrutiny rather than confrontational rupture. Her refusal to marry Daouda Dieng, for example, is framed not as a rejection of marriage

as an institution but as a decision rooted in moral integrity and fidelity to her own principles.

Senegalese philosopher Aminata Diaw also provides an important lens through which to view Ramatoulaye's ethical practice. Diaw's work on women, Islam, and civic identity in Senegal emphasizes how women's agency is exercised within Islamic moral traditions, which they reinterpret rather than discard. This perspective aligns closely with the novel's portrayal of a protagonist who is committed to the ethical tenets of her faith even as she critiques the social distortions of religious doctrine, particularly the patriarchal manipulations of polygamy and inheritance. Similarly, critics such as Florence Stratton and Ayo Kehinde underscore Bâ's portrayal of women as interpreters of cultural and religious norms. They argue that the novel resists Western feminist paradigms that define agency solely through acts of open defiance; instead, it presents a more nuanced model in which women assert moral authority through reflection, interpretive engagement, and an insistence on justice that draws strength from cultural continuity rather than from its rejection.

Together, these readings demonstrate that Bâ imagines women's empowerment as a process grounded in ethical deliberation, emotional resilience, and culturally situated critique. Ramatoulaye embodies a form of agency that is neither submissive nor iconoclastic but rooted in an evolving moral consciousness. Her reflections during *mirasse* illuminate how Senegalese Muslim women negotiate personal autonomy and social responsibility, revealing the ethical complexities of living within and thoughtfully reinterpreting the religious and communal

traditions that shape their lives. This understanding positions the novel as a significant contribution to African feminist thought, one that foregrounds the moral labour, subtle negotiations, and ethical insight through which women pursue self-definition within postcolonial Islamic societies.

The friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou exemplifies a sustained form of female solidarity that functions as resistance within the constraints of a patriarchal environment. Their relationship embodies what Filomina Chioma Steady identifies as relational feminism in which women's agency emerges through collective support, shared moral reflection, and the forging of alternative networks of care that counterbalance male-centred authority structures. In the novel, the correspondence between the two women becomes a space of moral negotiation, one in which they articulate grief, betrayal and disillusionment but also reaffirm integrity, dignity and mutual responsibility. Rather than rebelling through rupture or exile alone, their solidarity carves out what Obioma Nnaemeka describes as a field of negotiated resistance, where empowerment unfolds through the exchange of counsel, the reinterpretation of social norms, and the reaffirmation of personal worth in the face of gendered constraints.

Aissatou's departure from her marriage to Mawdo Ba after he takes a second wife and her decision to rebuild her life elsewhere signify one form of ethical refusal, grounded in her conviction that dignity cannot exist where inequality persists. Ramatoulaye, by contrast, embodies a different mode of moral endurance, choosing to remain within the social environment to which she feels tied, yet using her

reflective voice to critique its contradictions. Their friendship holds these differences without hierarchy, demonstrating what Florence Stratton describes as the plurality of African women's resistance strategies. The mutual respect and admiration that define their bond enable each woman to enact her own ethical stance, Aissatou through refusal, Ramatoulaye through introspection and perseverance while ensuring that neither is isolated within patriarchal judgment. This relational network of support also reflects what Aminata Diaw describes as women's moral citizenship within Senegalese Islamic society, that is, a capacity to engage critically with social and religious norms from a position grounded in relational solidarity rather than individualist defiance. The epistolary form reinforces this ethos, transforming the act of writing into a shared engagement with life. Through their letters, the two women create a counter-space that allows them to reinterpret tradition, reassess personal suffering, and articulate visions of justice and mutual care that exceed the narrow prescriptions of their social world. Their friendship thus constitutes a micro-community of moral reflection that challenges patriarchal norms not through open confrontation but through an ongoing, dialogic reimagining of dignity, selfhood and female agency.

In this sense, female solidarity in *So Long a Letter* becomes not simply emotional support but a politically and ethically charged practice. It enables Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to negotiate their positions within marriage, motherhood, religion and nationhood while maintaining moral autonomy. As scholars such as Steady, Nnaemeka, and Stratton have shown, such relational forms of solidarity function as a distinctly African feminist mode of resistance,

one that transforms interpersonal bonds into sources of ethical strength, social insight, and subtle yet profound critique of patriarchal power.

Narrative Technique and Voice

The epistolary form of *So Long a Letter* is central to both the novel's narrative strategy and its ethical, feminist dimensions. By structuring the text as a sustained letter from Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou, Mariama Bâ creates a storytelling mode that is simultaneously intimate, reflective, and socially engaged. The letter functions as a private yet performative space, allowing Ramatoulaye to articulate grief, anger, frustration and hope while situating these emotions within broader reflections on Senegalese social norms, Islamic moral codes and postcolonial gendered expectations. In this way, the epistolary form blurs the boundary between the personal and the political, transforming an ostensibly private practice into a vehicle for ethical inquiry and social critique.

Scholars have long observed that female writers frequently adopt the epistolary form because it provides a socially sanctioned avenue for self-expression in contexts where women's public speech is constrained. Florence Stratton notes that the letter allows women to narrate interiority with moral authority, creating a textual space in which personal experience gains epistemic significance. Similarly, Stephanie Newell argues that the epistolary mode serves as a strategy for negotiating power: it permits female narrators to address an interlocutor of their choosing a peer, friend, or confidante thereby fostering networks of solidarity, guidance, and ethical deliberation outside patriarchal oversight. In Bâ's novel, this is evident in the way Ramatoulaye addresses Aissatou not merely as a recipient

but as an ethical mirror, a collaborator in reflective moral reasoning. In this sense, the epistolary form is not merely stylistic but strategically feminist: it cultivates solidarity, circumvents social limitations on women's speech, and produces a narrative in which emotional depth and moral reasoning reinforce one another.

The letter structure also enables a temporal and emotional layering that other narrative forms might obscure. Through it, Ramatoulaye recounts past events, evaluates their ethical and emotional significance, and articulates hopes for the future, all while maintaining a cohesive narrative voice. The form privileges subjectivity without diminishing social critique, allowing Ramatoulaye to interrogate polygamy, gendered expectations, and the intersections of tradition and religion from a position of reflective authority rather than confrontation. Recent postcolonial scholarship emphasizes that this epistolary voice functions as a site of political and ethical reflection rather than merely a representational device. In this reading, the letter becomes a discursive strategy through which gendered power relations, religion, and cultural continuity are negotiated and contested, enabling the narrative to articulate a distinctly African worldview that engages with, rather than replicates, colonial and patriarchal legacies.

The novel's epistolary mode also illuminates the fusion of affective and cognitive knowing, a concept Minna Salami describes as "sensuous knowledge," in which emotional intuition and intellectual reflection are inseparable. Applied to *So Long a Letter*, this framework highlights how Ramatoulaye's grief, contemplation and ethical discernment operate simultaneously as emotional disclosures and interpretive acts. Her reflections on marital

betrayal, Islamic moral obligations, and gendered societal expectations are both lived experiences and epistemic resources, demonstrating how personal emotion can generate insight into broader social and moral structures. Stratton similarly observes that African women's writing frequently mobilizes interiority and affect as vehicles for social critique, using narrative strategies that invest personal reflection with political and ethical significance.

Through this sensuous and reflective mode of narration, Bâ transforms Ramatoulaye's subjective experiences into a medium of moral and cultural insight. The epistolary form bridges memory and ethical inquiry. As Ramatoulaye recounts past episodes, the letter becomes a reflective archive of both personal loss and social critique, showing how ethical agency emerges through deliberation rather than dramatic rebellion. By centering West African Muslim women's voices and linking interiority with socially meaningful reflection, Bâ demonstrates how literary form itself can enact an ethical stance, one in which voice, memory, and moral responsibility are inseparably intertwined.

Marriage, Polygamy and Ethical Responsibility

So Long a Letter is a seminal text in its interrogation of Islamic social codes and their implications for women's lives in contemporary Senegalese society. In adopting the epistolary form Bâ allows readers intimate access to Ramatoulaye's reflections, making her experiences almost akin to diary entries addressed to her friend Aissatou. Although the letter is never sent, it functions as a cathartic medium that enables Ramatoulaye to process grief, moral reflections and social critique. The narrative opens with the death of her husband, Modou Fall and details her reactions,

mourning rituals, and the ethical and religious framework within which she interprets these events. Through references to Quranic exhortations, Ramatoulaye highlights the spiritual and moral dimensions of widowhood, demonstrating how Islamic precepts shape her sense of duty and conduct:

"Comforting words from the Koran fill the air; divine words, divine exhortations to virtue, warnings against evil, exaltation of humility, of faith. Shivers run through me. My tears flow and my voice joins weakly in the fervent 'Amen,' which inspires the crowd's ardour at the end of each verse" (5).

Through these passages, the novel foregrounds the tension between ritual observance and social practice as Ramatoulaye observes the ceremonial behaviors surrounding death in Senegal that often reveal self-interest or formal display rather than genuine religious devotion. By contrasting these communal practices with her own devout adherence, particularly her observance of the *idda*, the prescribed period of seclusion for widows, Bâ situates marriage, fidelity, and polygamy within both ethical and spiritual registers.

Mbye Cham emphasizes that the Islamic custom of *mirasse,* the disclosure and division of a deceased person's estate is pivotal for understanding the novel's exploration of marital relations and polygamy. He notes that *mirasse* is both a religious and juridical principle that reveal hidden aspects of the deceased's life and allows for critical reflection on marital fidelity and responsibility. Complementing this, Uzo Esonwanne observes that *mirasse*, combined with the epistolary form, enables Bâ to redefine African women's relationship to secular and sacred authority, linking as it

does Islamic ritual, personal disclosure and the literary tradition of the letter. Through this framework, Ramatoulaye exposes Modou's moral failures, particularly his abandonment of his first family and his decision to take a much younger second wife:

"The mirasse commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed. These exposures crudely explain a man's life. With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family...was the outcome of the choice of a new life" (9).

The acquisition of a second wife constitutes the novel's central ethical crisis, providing a lens for examining polygamy from the perspective of the affected spouse, rather than the husband or society at large. Ramatoulaye does not conform to the stereotypical submissive Muslim wife as she negotiates her ethical and emotional responses while maintaining fidelity to her own moral principles. Her stance reflects both Islamic teachings and the emerging ethical consciousness of modern, educated Senegalese women who balance personal dignity, social expectation and religious norms.

Ramatoulaye's reflections also frame marriage as a site of ethical and social responsibility. She views the harmony of the marital couple as foundational to family stability and, by extension, the success of society and the nation. For her, marital fidelity, mutual respect, and moral reflection are not merely private matters but contribute to the ethical health of the wider community. This conception resonates with African feminist scholarship and emphasizes women's moral and social agency within patriarchal and religious

structures. Obioma Nnaemeka, Ifi Amadiume, and Amina Mama have argued that African women writers often depict marriage and family as spaces where women negotiate authority, social expectation, and ethical responsibility, rather than spaces of passive subordination. Likewise, Muslim scholars such as Noorhaidi Hasan have also noted that Bâ's treatment of Islamic practice highlights interpretive flexibility, showing how women can exercise agency and moral judgment while remaining faithful to religious principles.

In this way, *So Long a Letter* situates marriage and polygamy at the intersection of personal, social, and religious ethics, revealing the complex negotiation required of women within postcolonial Senegalese society. Through the interplay of the epistolary form, *mirasse*, and ethical reflection, Bâ articulates the moral and emotional labor women perform to uphold family, faith, and social integrity, even in the face of betrayal and institutionalized inequality.

Negotiating Female Agency

Ramatoulaye's pursuit of agency in *So Long a Letter* exemplifies the negotiation of personal autonomy within Islamic and West African cultural frameworks. Rather than conforming to the archetype of the submissive Muslim wife, she asserts a principled and critical stance toward her husband while adhering to the moral codes of her religion and society. In her youth, she and Modou considered themselves part of a new generation of educated, modern Africans, embracing romantic love even eloping to get married. Yet, despite Modou's betrayal through polygamy, Ramatoulaye remains committed to the ideal that marriage should be based on mutual choice and attraction, linking

the ethical harmony of the marital couple to the broader success of the family and, by extension, the nation.

Education is central to this ethical negotiation. For Ramatoulaye, Western education represents emancipation: "To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition, and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilisations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities" (16). Ramatoulaye's measured engagement with the opportunities afforded by education is contrasted to Aissatou's radical assertion of autonomy. When confronted with her husband's polygamy, Aissatou decisively rejects the marriage, asserting,"I cannot accept what you are offering me in the place of the happiness that we once had…Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (31).

In traditional Islamic jurisprudence, Aissatou's refusal might be seen as *nashiz*, a form of rebellion against spousal authority, or even *bida'a*, innovation which challenges established religious and social norms (Ghazali, trans. 2004; Mernissi 1991). By refusing to comply with the polygamous order, Aissatou asserts her moral and emotional agency and demonstrates that women can exercise critical judgment even within the constraints of Islamic law. Her departure provides a model of radical self-assertion and thus highlights the spectrum of female agency in Senegalese society.

Ramatoulaye, in contrast, negotiates her position with careful ethical and emotional deliberation. Her reluctance to divorce stems partly from enduring tenderness for Modou and partly from the social realities facing divorced women of her generation many of whom face social

marginalization or diminished prospects for remarriage. Yet her agency is evident in her selective exercise of autonomy: she rejects subsequent suitors, retains her moral authority and draws emotional support from her friendship with Aissatou, "Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed whereas obstacles kill love…It has heights unknown to love" (54).

The bond between the two women exemplifies female solidarity as a moral and emotional resource that enables women navigate betrayal, polygamy and social constraints. While Ramatoulaye occasionally betrays this friendship, by not warning Aissatou of Modou's intentions, she increasingly relies on trusted advisors, such as her griot, as she transitions from wife to mother. Over time, Islamic moral imperatives guide her reflection and acceptance, but as her children's needs and social responsibilities take precedence, religion becomes less a prescriptive force and more a framework within which she articulates her ethical reasoning and vision for the future. By juxtaposing Ramatoulaye's reflective negotiation of agency with Aissatou's assertive refusal, Bâ demonstrates the complex interplay between cultural, religious, and personal factors in the construction of female agency. While Ramatoulaye embodies a form of ethical and strategic negotiation within Islamic and social norms, Aissatou models a more radical assertion of self-determination that rejects polygamy outright. Together, they illustrate that female agency is neither monolithic nor limited to overt rebellion. Instead, it is exercised through choices that reflect moral reasoning, relational negotiation, and engagement with social and religious expectations.

Some critics have also highlighted the political significance of the epistolary form in articulating female relational bonds as counter-discourses to patriarchal authority. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye's correspondence with Aissatou not only recounts individual suffering but also models female friendship as a space of solidarity, support and ethical negotiation that transcends familial and marital constraints. This dialogic quality captures the emotional and moral complexity of women's lives in a way that male narratives historically struggled to achieve when they represent women indirectly or symbolically. In comparison, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* similarly uses letters to foreground women's voices and interiority as it emphasizes resistance to oppression and self-fashioning within African American contexts. Both novels demonstrate how epistolary forms allow women to reclaim narrative authority, intertwining personal reflection with ethical and social critique.

Scholars Obioma Nnaemeka, Ifi Amadiume, Amina Mama and Fatima Mernissi emphasize that African women negotiate autonomy both within and against patriarchal structures, balancing ethical responsibility, social obligation, and personal desire. Islamic feminist scholars extend this analysis by highlighting the ways Muslim women reinterpret religious texts and ethical frameworks to assert agency. For example, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas argue that women can exercise moral and social authority without rejecting Islam by critically engaging with Quranic principles and distinguishing between patriarchal interpretations and the ethical spirit of the faith. In this light, Ramatoulaye's adherence to Islamic practice while simultaneously negotiating her moral and emotional

autonomy exemplifies the Islamic feminist notion of embedded agency where women work within religious frameworks to claim dignity, ethical authority and personal choice.

Bâ's depiction of female solidarity, particularly the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou further demonstrates that agency is not only enacted individually but also collectively. Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed underscore that networks of female support enable women to reinterpret social and religious norms, creating spaces for ethical reflection, resistance, and moral negotiation**.** In this way, the novel situates women's agency at the intersection of personal ethics, friendship, education and religious engagement showing that the negotiation of autonomy in postcolonial Senegal is both relational and culturally embedded.

Conclusion

So Long a Letter presents a nuanced spectrum of strategies through which women navigate marriage, polygamy and ethical responsibility, highlighting friendship, education, and moral reflection as essential resources for negotiating life in postcolonial Senegal. Through the contrasting experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Bâ demonstrates that female agency is neither monolithic nor purely oppositional but that it emerges through careful moral reasoning, emotional resilience and strategic negotiation within socially and religiously mediated frameworks. Ramatoulaye's reflective engagement with Islamic principles, alongside Aissatou's assertive independence, exemplifies the diverse ways in which women claim dignity, ethical authority and personal choice, showing that

agency can operate both within and against patriarchal and religious structures.

The novel's epistolary form, its exploration of marriage and polygamy and its emphasis on female friendship collectively constitute a foundational intervention in Senegalese literary and ethical discourse. By giving West African Muslim women a direct voice, Bâ challenges male-centered narratives, foregrounds the ethical deliberations of daily life, and situates personal experience within broader debates about social transformation. In this way, *So Long a Letter* remains an enduring text for understanding the intersections of gender, Islam, and modernity, offering a model of literary engagement that honors both the moral and emotional labor involved in negotiating female agency in a changing society.

Chapter Six

The Politics of Piety and Female Subjectivity in *The Last Imam*

Since the publication of Chiekh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, no other West African novel has engaged the presence of Islam with the same single-minded intensity as Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*. Published in 1984, Tahir's novel is set in a region of Nigeria rarely explored in Anglophone fiction, yet it has generated remarkably little sustained scholarly attention. The silence surrounding its initial reception began to shift only when Kenneth Harrow mentioned it briefly in his introduction to *Faces of Islam in African Literature*. There, Harrow observes that Muslim characters in African fiction "testify to a growing desire of writers to focus entirely upon comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos" and among the examples he cites Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Interpreters*, *Season of Anomy* and Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* but none pursues this same concern as explicitly as Tahir's *The Last Imam*.

Although the novel received some commentary after Harrow's remarks, Ahmed Sheikh Bangura's 1996 essay, "The Quest for Orthodoxy in *The Last Imam*" marked its first substantial critical engagement. More recently, renewed scholarly attention has emerged. Abubakar Mohammed Sani's comparative study of Tahir's novel and Achebe's *Arrow of God* underscores *The Last Imam*'s contribution to debates on leadership, moral order, and social responsibility. Similarly, recent postgraduate work on "ideological paradigms" in Tahir's fiction has begun to

explore the novel's complex negotiations of Islamic authority, while emerging studies examining religious ideology, patriarchy and gender dynamics in northern Nigerian literature have helped reposition *The Last Imam* within current academic conversations about Islam and society.

Tahir's narrative may be understood alongside the literary efforts of West African writers who seek to define their cultural environments. As Achebe in his novel *Arrow of God* constructs the religious life of an Igbo community on the brink of colonial intrusion, Tahir situates his narrative in Hausaland after the Fulani Jihad, crafting a moral universe in which Islam functions as the dominant ideological frame. Whereas Achebe embarks on the task of recovering indigenous cosmology, Tahir's text admits virtually no history or worldview beyond Islam as lived in Bauchi. This orientation resonates with Rupert East's late-1930s observation that for the Northern Nigerian Muslim writer, the art of writing is closely linked to religion and therefore not easily separated from spiritual or ethical purpose:

> The influence of Islam, superimposed on the Hamitic strain in the blood of the Northern Nigerian, produces an extremely serious-minded type of person. The art of writing, moreover, being intimately connected in his mind with his religion, is not to be treated lightly.... To these people, therefore, the idea of writing a book which was frankly intended neither for edification of the mind, nor the good of the soul, a 'story' book which, however, followed none of the prescribed forms of storytelling,

> seemed very strange... In short, it was necessary to explain to a very conservative audience a conception which was entirely new, and of doubtful value if not morality.

East was instrumental in not only establishing the first Hausa-language newspaper *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo* in Northern Nigeria and also encouraged Hausa intellectuals to write prose fiction on the western model. His commentary, while laden with colonial assumptions, nonetheless reveals something of the sensibilities that shaped Tahir's literary consciousness for whom the Western novelistic form becomes a vehicle for articulating the moral anxieties and religious commitments of a deeply Islamic society.

The Last Imam is thus a novel saturated with Islamic consciousness, one in which religion operates both as a subjective experience and as an objective social force. Quotations from the Qur'an and Hadith appear with such frequency that, as Bangura notes, their removal would considerably shorten the text. These allusions, always reverential, signal the sacred texts as the definitive measure against which all actions and moral claims are judged. The central tension of the narrative emerges from the struggle between a rigid commitment to Islamic orthodoxy and the community's inclination towards more flexible, accommodating practices. Although the people of the fictionalized Bauchi embrace Islam as their natural religion, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices persist within their everyday lives. While such syncretic patterns recur across many of West African novels examined, they are intolerable to the protagonist, the imam Alhaji Usman who devotes his life to enforcing strict adherence to Islamic doctrine. His efforts to implement a rigorous interpretation

of Islam within his household and across the old Bauchi emirate constitute the novel's central dramatic concern.

This chapter situates *The Last Imam* within contemporary debates on patriarchy, piety, and female agency in West African Muslim societies. By bringing the novel into conversation with recent scholarship on Islamic authority and northern Nigerian gender dynamics including studies that enable a reassessment of the novel's ideological, religious and socio-political interventions, this chapter examines how religious authority embodied in the figure of the imam intersects with gendered expectations and women's lived experiences. It explores how women negotiate, navigate or resist the moral structures that shape their lives in a society governed by religious law and patriarchal social norms.

Islam, Authority, and the Gendered Moral Order in *The Last Imam*

The aim in this chapter is to account for the exceptional emphasis on religion in *The Last Imam* and to examine the forms of conflict that arise between those who champion a fundamentalist, uncompromising vision of Islamic practice and those who allow inherited customs and social pressures to shape its meaning. Central to this tension is the way the novel frames patriarchy not merely as a private system of male authority within the household, but as a religiously sanctioned and socio-political structure that governs communal life, spiritual legitimacy, and gendered power. This inevitably raises critical questions that guide the present analysis: How does religious authority operate and consolidate itself in the figure of the imam? In what ways is piety mobilized to regulate, discipline or elevate particular forms of gendered behavior? And how do women in the

novel negotiate such authority, assert agency within or against its constraints?

These questions acquire particular urgency because the narrative itself dramatizes a striking gendered polarity. On one side stands Alhaji Usman, the zealous champion of doctrinal purity and on the other stands Aisha, his first wife and the most prominent woman in the novel. The prominence of women at pivotal moments in the novel's moral and spiritual trajectory raises a further question that this chapter explores: is it coincidence that women serve as catalysts in the struggle between religion and tradition or does the text deliberately invest them with a distinctive moral or spiritual capacity that complicates patriarchal authority?

Before pursuing these questions, it is useful to recount the story of the protagonist around whom the novel revolves, especially because *The Last Imam* remains unfamiliar to many readers of African literature. Through the character of the imam, Alhaji Usman, Tahir explores the devout Muslim man's relationship to his faith and the extent to which this shapes his social interactions. Usman's presence dominates the narrative, throughout the text he aligns himself visibly and unambiguously with divine authority. Even his physical appearance reinforces the gravity of his religious vocation. Tahir describes him as "very tall, with his long and white robe hanging so majestically around him, he looked like a Hausa or Fulani idea of Moses in all his dignity" (13). In many ways, he functions as a self-consciously prophetic figure marked from childhood by a dream that foretold his succession to the imamate of the old Bauchi kingdom.

Determined to be worthy of this destiny, Usman excels in religious learning and ascetic discipline. He acquires deep respect in a society where mastery of Islamic knowledge confers immense moral authority. But beneath this veneer of piety lies a more complex and troubling moral psychology. Although he intends in youth to lead a life of celibacy and worship, he is dissuaded on the grounds that such self-denial contradicts the Prophet's example. He is therefore persuaded into an alms marriage with Aisha which he desecrates through the brutal rape of his young wife. This moment marks the beginning of a lifelong struggle between his spiritual aspirations and his inability to reconcile them with the demands of human desire, emotional vulnerability, and social responsibility.

After subsequently marrying three additional wives in rapid succession, Usman travels to Mecca with his father. Upon his father's death in the holy land, he returns to Bauchi to be turbaned as the new Imam. During the journey across the desert, however, he is enthralled by a young slave girl, Hasana, whom he takes as a concubine under the Qur'anic allowance for "what your right hand possesses" (34). For thirteen years, he devotes himself entirely to Hasana and their son Kasim, neglecting all of his other wives. When Hasana dies suddenly, he is overwhelmed by grief and a profound sense of divine abandonment. His spiritual crisis drives him to demand a sign from God and it is Aisha, the young wife he wronged so grievously at the beginning of his married life who guides him back from the brink of apostasy. Her emotional labor and steadfast support elevate her status within the household and she soon leverages this position to exert authority over the domestic sphere.

To honor her loyalty, Usman instructs the childless Aisha to adopt Kasim as her own son but this decision reignites longstanding tensions between them. As both struggle to maintain their closeness to Usman, their rivalry takes the form of subtle domestic contestations. Matters reach a crisis when Aisha accuses Kasim of theft and disrespect toward his "mothers." Conscious of Qur'anic injunctions commanding deference to parents, Usman loses his temper and beats Kasim severely, thereby breaking the promise he made to Hasana on her deathbed. Stricken with guilt after Kasim flees to the protection of a wandering teacher, Usman resumes visiting Hasana's grave to seek forgiveness. For the sake of domestic peace, he eventually agrees that Kasim be raised by the less learned Malam Shuaibu.

In the meantime, while Usman struggles to contain the crisis in his household, the month of Ramadan arrives, offering further opportunity for asserting his religious authority. Using his position as Imam, he compels the Emir to ban the Hausa custom of *gwauro*, a tradition requiring public humiliation of any married man whose wife leaves him during the holy month. Yet the timing of this decree coincides with the rebellion of his wives, prompting suspicion and anger within the community. The people begin to question not only his judgment but also his much-vaunted piety.

The crisis deepens when it is revealed that Malam Shuaibu is in fact Usman's half-brother, born of a slave girl his late father had raped in his youth. The discovery unleashes a storm of incredulity and moral outrage. Usman struggles to reconcile his reverence for his father with the reprehensible act and he is further troubled by the recognition that his

own conduct mirrors the very injustices he condemns. By failing to respect the Qur'anic principle of equitable treatment among his wives, he realizes he is guilty of the same moral failings he attributes to his father: "A child conceived in a stolen embrace was as much a bastard as if he had been conceived out of wedlock" (177). Confronted with his complicity, Usman temporarily loses his sense of superiority and seeks forgiveness from his wives.

Determined to restore strict adherence to Islamic marital law, he delivers a sermon on nuptial ethics and bastardy. Unsurprisingly, the sermon proves unpopular, given its implications for the community. Despite their professed belief in Islam, the people of Bauchi remain committed to traditional practices, including *gwauro* and belief in omens. When thunder and lightning strike for seven consecutive days without rain, causing deaths and destruction, no Qur'anic reasoning convinces the people that these events are natural rather than divine punishment. Many interpret Usman's ill treatment of the motherless Kasim as the moral catalyst of their suffering. Some even flee their ancestral homes in panic. The Emir intervenes, urging Usman to return Kasim to appease the community but the Imam refuses because he believes that any concession to human tradition would compromise divine will. His uncompromising stance alienates him from the people, and the pragmatic Emir unturbans him and appoints Malam Shuaibu as the new Imam: "an agreeable Imam much better suited to the ways of some of us" (241). Tahir hints that future appointments will prioritize social adaptability over rigid doctrinal rigor.

The question then arises: how is the reader meant to view Alhaji Usman? He is central to the novel, yet Tahir's

characterization sets him apart from the stereotypical, unscrupulous religious figure. His devotion is genuine, and his authority is both historically and socially grounded in his lineage of Fulani scholars recruited during the jihad movement. Bangura observes that understanding Usman's efforts to reform Islamic practice requires attention to his personal relationships with his father, Hasana, Aisha, Kasim and the wider dynamics of his polygamous household all of which shape his moral and religious reasoning. While he sometimes exhibits excess and appears intoxicated by his power, the reader never doubts the depth of his faith.

Through his introspection, Usman measures the social, familial and spiritual forces shaping his fate thus revealing the tensions of a society organized around Islamic norms of faith, worship, and ethical conduct. Crucially, his reflections highlight the central role of women, their influence over his personal fortunes and moral judgments which extend indirectly to the broader community. In this way, Tahir foregrounds the complex interplay of patriarchal authority, religious piety, and female agency, illustrating that even within constrained societal structures women could exert significant power in both domestic and public spheres.

Religious Power and the Regulation of Women's Lives

The profound impact women have on the Imam's psychology is immediately apparent in the novel when his crisis of faith is linked to the anguish caused by the loss of Hasana, "the one and only woman he had ever loved" (2). Feeling a wound to his own sense of worthiness, he longs for direct communication with the divine: "He wished Allah would tear the sky with his voice or send the

archangel to him in the way he had sent him to Muhammed" (2). When this does not occur, reverence gives way to anger and he comes to view Islam itself as a "colossal confidence trick that Islam had permitted no other prophet after Muhammed" (2). This moment brings him perilously close to heresy until the revelation he seeks arrives in the form of "a cold realisation that his sadness had led him into the blasphemous hands of Sheidan and unless he repented there and then he was a sinner and an apostate!" (3).

The depth of feeling Hasana inspires in the Imam is immediately contrasted with his rage toward his first wife Aisha who dares to challenge his authority. Introduced through the narrative lens of the disruptive influence they exert on him, both women are initially framed as sources of disorder, embodiments of chaos whose presence tests not only the Imam's piety but the social order itself. Tahir thus contributes to a literary exploration of women as agents of *fitna* (chaos), a theme that resonates beyond the private sphere to encompass society at large. In considering this, it is useful to engage with the perspectives of Islamic scholar Ahmad Ghazali whose extensive writings on male–female relations have significantly shaped Muslim thought on the role and influence of women.

Alhaji Usman is portrayed in multiple social roles: as a son, a husband, and a father. Yet it is his public position as Imam that is most significant as his decisions carry immense representational weight and shapes perceptions of both morality and religious authority in his community. His relationships with Aisha and Hasana thus become crucial explorations of sexual love and spiritual life within an Islamic framework. Tahir enhances the narrative's

complexity by incorporating issues of class, power, tradition and expanding the discussion of women's influence beyond the purely personal. Early in the novel, the Imam reflects that what he "took in Aisha had given him doubts, but that in Hasana he had found Allah and his work" (25). In this contrast, women are depicted either as sources of temptation and disorder (*Sheidan*) or as custodians of the Imam's spiritual well-being.

Of the two women, Aisha's presence is most vividly felt. She embodies a spectrum of female experiences of forced marriage, sexual violation, childlessness and marginalization within her own household. Her character defies the model of ideal femininity promoted by orthodox religion. That is the obedient, modest, and submissive woman whose conduct ensures favor with God and male authority figures such as fathers, husbands and Imams that Fatima Mernissi describes in *Beyond the Veil*. Unlike Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* who reconciles personal desire with religious duty, or Ngone War Thiandum in *White Genesis* who fears questioning divine will, Aisha refuses passive acceptance of her circumstances. Her pragmatic approach mirrors Li in Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* who navigates life through strategy rather than unquestioning faith. She recognizes Alhaji Usman's need for her during his grief, leverages her support of co-wives in domestic negotiations, sets aside jealousy for familial stability and remains attuned to public opinion thereby demonstrating a nuanced exercise of agency.

Aisha is granted narrative voice, especially in Chapter Three in the novel which aligns her reflections with the Imam's earlier contemplations. While Alhaji Usman's self-examination revolves around spiritual and political

concerns, Aisha focuses on the manipulations and constraints imposed on her by patriarchal authority. By alternating perspectives, Tahir depicts both the societal ideals of female subservience and the woman's lived experience of resistance. In so doing Aisha's insights are situated as central to the novel's critique of patriarchal structures.

Her marriage which was arranged by her father as an "alms marriage" denies her knowledge of her husband's identity until the wedding leaving her "to care little for all the pious talk about the blessings Allah reserved for girls given away to Muhammed" (48). Despite being considered a prize bride in Bauchi society, she feels humiliated, "given away like a goat" (48). For her, the marriage fails to guarantee the love and respect promised by tradition. As her frustration deepens, she observes the contrast between prophetic precedent and her own lived reality, "She had come into Alhaji's hands as the bride of the Prophet Muhammed, and when she felt she needed Allah and Muhammed most, they had rebuffed her" (173).

Yet, her initial compliance with the marriage reflects an internalization of societal expectations. She believes that piety invests men like Alhaji Usman, learned, from respected lineages with exceptional character that would make them *Mutumin Kirki* (a good man) endowed with saintly qualities of compassion and respect. Tragically, for thirteen years, the Imam neglects these duties, favoring instead his concubine Hasana and her son Kasim, contravening basic Islamic principles on polygamy. Like Agbadi in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* who wields authoritarian control over his family, Alhaji occupies a "position not so different from that of a god," sitting "like

a god reading his books" (50), asserting dominance while marginalizing those who rely on his moral and spiritual leadership.

In the Muslim mind, religious belief and the conduct of male–female relationships are deeply interconnected as embodied in the Prophet Muhammad's instruction that "whoever marries safeguards half his faith, let him fear God for the second half" (*Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*). This directive underscores not only the spiritual value placed on marriage but also the ethical responsibility men have toward their spouses. In *The Last Imam*, the distortion of this relationship is shown to corrode both personal ethics and religious credibility. Aisha reads Alhaji Usman's marked favour toward Hasana as confirmation that he is no longer the principled spiritual authority she once esteemed because he replaced integrity with partiality and self-interest: "When he took Hasana for a favourite he demonstrated to her that he was not so upright after all, he could be reached, managed and moulded" (32). Aisha's vocal resistance to her marginalization, including her mobilization of co-wives, reflects her sense that she must struggle for agency, "either fight or we fall."

Aisha's assertion of agency is informed by her recognition that within her social context, a woman's public identity and social legitimacy are largely circumscribed by her marital status. Were she to seek divorce, "no man in Bauchi would have dared to marry the ex-wife of one as revered as the Imam" (52). Her frustration reflects a broader social dynamic in which women's lives are regulated in the name of religion but often mediated through patriarchal interpretations that subordinate women. Noting the discrepancies between religious theory and the reality of

everyday practice during the course of her own marriage, Aisha begins to challenge male interpretations of a number of religious precepts. Her schemes and manipulations as well as her refusal to be silenced marks her out as different from 'the ideal Fulani wives who never complained' (179).

Throughout *The Last Imam*, the ideological rationale behind the Imam's private and public decisions is consistently highlighted whereas Aisha is depicted in a largely arbitrary fashion as intent on obstructing her husband's efforts to instill strict adherence to Islam among the people. Her actions and responses are framed as stemming solely from a self-interested, rebellious nature, traits that Imam Ghazali, in his classical work *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*, considers inherently feminine. Ghazali contends that civilisation must continually struggle to contain women's potentially destructive influence, a view reinforced by a statement attributed to Prophet Muhammed: "After my disappearance, there will be no greater source of chaos and disorder for my nation than women." Following this perspective, some Islamic scholars conclude that the Muslim social order is vulnerable to two principal threats: the external infidel and the internal influence of women. Ghazali insists that women must be controlled to prevent men from being diverted from their social and religious responsibilities.

This perceived destructive power of women is inscribed into Aisha's character. While her husband labours to reinforce a rigorous interpretation of Islam in Bauchi society, Aisha is shown to threaten him with domestic disorder by making allegations of thievery against his favourite son Kasim, inciting his other wives against him, and compelling him into politically dangerous decisions by

issuing ultimatums. Tahir's portrayal is so entrenched that later, tentative efforts to present her in a more sympathetic light such as when she comforts the Imam after Hasana's death or warns him of the possibility of impeachment fail to appear convincing. Loud, rebellious, unkind to the orphan, and attached to certain traditional practices, she appears to embody the stereotypical image of the undesirable woman in Islam.

Similarly, in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, Fatna A. Sabbah argues that historical Muslim discourse has often constructed women's roles in dualistic and limiting ways which portray them as either passive or subordinate disruptive forces in need of control. This framing, she suggests, reflects entrenched conceptual hierarchies in Muslim cultural thought that place women in a secondary position relative to men thereby limiting their access to both spiritual and social autonomy. Sabbah's work reveals how medieval juristic and exegetical traditions often justified female subordination by linking desire and rationality to gendered hierarchies that favor male authority, effectively seeing women's agency as a threat to social and religious order.

Hence, while Tahir constructs the character of the main protagonist with the help of favourable comparisons drawn between him and the Islamic ideal, the same reference to this Islamic model is not deemed necessary or appropriate for Aisha. There seems to be a conscious intent behind his authorial interruption of Aisha's mental excursion into the past when he asserts that 'like most Hausa girls and youth of her background she was a Muslim without getting involved with that side of her faith which demanded the

total submission of her person' (p.48). Or, when he highlights the frivolous turn of her mind:

> She preferred instead of the pious talk to think of the person she would marry as someone she herself had chosen, someone who had spoken tenderly into her ear, someone of whom she could sing unashamedly in the market place, (48)

Aisha's desires mirror those of many young women in African fiction who see the freedom to choose a spouse as essential to marital happiness. Yet in the Islamic context of *The Last Imam*, such aspirations appear secondary, almost trivial, beside Alhaji Usman's explanation for his reluctance to marry her: "I have told you I am married to Allah's work and will marry nobody. That is real enough for me...." (19). Obedience to the tenets of his faith, rather than personal preference or filial duty, alone justifies his eventual acceptance of Aisha as wife. This response is consistent with the model of pious Muslim conduct that he embodies. His stance is effectively constrained as objections couched in personal terms are rendered powerless against the weight of religious duty: "Will you tell the people that alms marriages are legal but that you, their Imam, disapprove?" (20).

Aisha's refusal to be silenced, her critique of appeals to "patience" that have historically justified women's endurance of mistreatment ''Patience, patience you say! … That is how we took years of degradation'" must be read in light of this discursive tradition. Rather than simply be seen as an emotional outburst, her rebellion can be seen as pointing to the tension between lived female experience and the selective application of religious norms. Her contention that she cannot tolerate indignity lays bare the

dissociation between patriarchal readings of religious virtue and women's demands for dignity and respect.

While Tahir's narrative appears to distance Aisha's actions from "religion proper," this distancing itself mirrors historical tendencies whereby male interpreters deem women's assertiveness as incompatible with religious piety, a critique found in the work of scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El-Saadawi, and Ghada Soliman all of whom argue that patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts have often been used to justify women's subordination. These scholars contend that such readings are not intrinsic to Islam but rather reflect historical and sociopolitical power relations that diminish women's roles in matters of faith and authority.

By contrast, writers such as Nuruddin Farah position women at the center of spiritual and social life, imagining them as agents who "determine the pace at which life is lived." In his fiction, female agency functions as a corrective to entrenched gender hierarchies. Tahir, however, reinforces conventional structures: the Imam embodies religious and moral ideal, while Aisha's spirituality and rebellion are portrayed as existing outside the bounds of normative piety. He underscores this hierarchy explicitly in his commentary on her character: "like most Hausa girls and youth of her background she was a Muslim without getting involved with that side of her faith which demanded the total submission of her person" (48). Through the juxtaposition of Aisha's desire for autonomy with expectations of obedience, Tahir illuminates the tension between the lived realities of Muslim women and the patriarchal frameworks through which religious norms are interpreted and enforced. Aisha's rebellion is therefore

not merely a matter of personal defiance instead it resonates with broader feminist critiques of gendered social structures in Muslim contexts.

Women's Piety and the Negotiation of Agency

Tahir employs the strategy of "paired women," a technique Florence Stratton observes in the works of Nwapa, Emecheta, and Bâ, to highlight contrasts in women's roles. Juxtaposed against Aisha, the character of Hasana, despite her limited presence, is sharply defined. Alhaji Usman reflects that she should have entered his life before Aisha and the other wives (25). Fatna Sabbah's inquiries in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* "How does a man love a woman?" "Why does one type of woman excite desire and win love while another provokes anxiety and mistrust?" underscore the ways women's subtle rebellion can challenge patriarchal authority while simultaneously negotiating space for agency within male-dominated societies.

The relationship between Alhaji Usman and Hasana demonstrates the integration of spiritual and carnal desire, aligning with Ghazali's argument that sexual desire serves God's plan by sustaining the Muslim community and encouraging striving for Paradise. Hasana's beauty is depicted in elaborate Islamically resonant imagery": "Eyes as beautiful as the eyes of the Sahara gazelle, their whites like the milk moon in the blue Sahara sky. Her limbs long, lissom, chocolate brown. The mirage in the desert simmering, and throwing at him the shimmering glory of her long black hair, smooth, shiny, like the wet feathers of a blue duck in the sun" (31). This idealization parallels Ghazali's description of the perfect Muslim wife, beautiful, non-temperamental, with long hair and large eyes, echoes

Quranic depictions of houris. Significantly, Alhaji Usman's passion for Hasana coincides with his pilgrimage to Mecca, linking desire with spiritual renewal, "The heat of the sun set his heart on fire for her and made her and his rediscovered passion inseparable" (31). Their eventual union produces Kasim, whose piety reassures Alhaji Usman of the future of Islam in Bauchi society.

Yet Hasana's agency remains extremely limited. She functions primarily as an object of the Imam's desire and her death is necessary to restore his spiritual equilibrium. This agrees with the notion that women are a source of *fitna* (chaos) for the male psyche. Tahir also emphasizes structural inequalities: while Aisha, a freeborn woman, enters into formal marriage, Hasana, a former slave, can be taken as a concubine (34). Both, however, must defer to male authority, illustrating Ghazali's assertion that marriage places women in a position of obedience. Prophet Muhammad's definition of the "best woman" one who rejoices at her husband's gaze, obeys his commands, and guards his possessions, reinforces expectations of total submission.

The novel further depicts how coercive sexual practices assert patriarchal authority. Aisha's early marital experiences reveal the tension between cultural and religious expectations and her personal agency. On the first night, Alhaji Usman's sexual assertion is publicly acknowledged as affirming masculine authority and social perception of potency "The taking away of the wife's chastity on the first nuptial night had been ritualized and had become part of the customs of the lower orders of society" (23). Tahir presents this act not as personal moral

failing but as an expression of male social expectations in spite of profound consequences for Aisha.

Tahir's depiction of women's sexuality only insofar as it affirms male virility parallels with Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) which highlights the systemic subordination of women across Islamic and postcolonial contexts. In Salih's novel, Hosna bint Mahmoud, like Aisha, suffers coercion and sexual violence justified in the name of social and religious order. While scholars such as Sonia Ghattas-Soliman argue that Islam itself does not condone such acts, communal interpretations often blame women for social disruption. Both novels demonstrate women's vulnerability under patriarchal, religious, and cultural imperatives, while also showing the strategies they employ to negotiate power and assert agency within these constraints.

Aisha's resistance, strategic manipulation, and occasional subversion exemplify the negotiation of agency within Islamic and societal frameworks. Fatna Sabbah's analysis of female rebellion illuminates this dynamic: defiance, whether through domestic maneuvers, assertion of sexual preference, or manipulation of social networks, function both as a critique of male authority and as an assertion of autonomy. In Tahir's narrative, the tension between women's piety and their capacity for agency is articulated through Aisha's complex role as a domestic insurgent, highlighting the intertwined realities of constraint, negotiation, and subversion in the Muslim female experience.

Contesting Authority: Leadership, Morality, and Gendered Power

If Islam in *The Last Imam* is read as a dominant patriarchal force that has firmly established itself in Bauchi society, it also becomes evident how women and pre-Islamic traditions are aligned intentionally or inadvertently against the Imam and his quest for religious orthodoxy. The inhabitants of the novel, much like the people of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Diollobe country, appear to have been purified by the "waters of Islam," with the religion becoming "their real nature" (122). Yet this apparent total embrace of Islamic orthodoxy is complicated by historical memory:

"Yet only three hundred years ago, and maybe less, the Word of God Himself had not existed for the people who inhabited the land. For Bauchi then was no more than a rocky trough in the mountainous country of the wild Savannah—a no-prophet land of pagan tribes, each with its shrine sheltering behind a rocky grove" (121).

This evocation of Bauchi's pre-Islamic past underscores a central tension. the struggle between Islamic orthodoxy, which seeks to assert the Imam's moral and spiritual authority and enduring indigenous traditions which simultaneously challenge his leadership and provide women with subtle yet significant social leverage. Just as the people of Santhui-Niaye in Sembène's *White Genesis* turn to the *adda* (tradition) in moments of uncertainty, the people of Bauchi fall back on ancient beliefs to explain misfortune and calamity. Trimmingham and Mbiti note that in many African societies, illness, misfortune, and death are often attributed to supernatural forces or individuals endowed with special powers. In Tahir's

Bauchi, these beliefs are activated when the cry of a hyena signals impending death which the populace interprets as the Imam's sacrilege. By leaving Kasim with Malam Shuaibu, a teacher of dubious reputation, thereby breaking a promise made to Kasim's mother on her deathbed, Alhaji Usman is thought to have invoked a powerful ancestral curse. Despite his Quranic explanations, these traditional beliefs persist: the people "needed diversion like the gwauro ceremony and other rituals whose roots lay deeply buried in the long-forgotten history" (123).

This conciliatory stance is rigorously challenged when the Imam confronts the *gwauro* custom performed during Ramadan described as the month "every discontented wife's favourite" (90). In this ritual, husbands are publicly chastised for failing to meet domestic and marital expectations, adorned with household implements, paraded through town and jeered at by the community. While some men flee in fear, the ritual's purpose is clear, it holds husbands accountable, warning against negligence and adultery. Tahir allows for a rare display of female agency as Aisha mobilizes her co-wives to confront the Imam, "There is nothing more to be said, Alhaji. You have rejected us and your other children. At dawn we shall all leave the house for you and your Kasim" (89).

For the first time, power shifts, unsettling the Imam whose internal despair is revealed, "he was doing his best to hide his emotions, it was clear that he was crying inside, dripping with despair" (90). To avert public humiliation, he listens to the women's grievances, asks for forgiveness and consents to Kasim being raised by Malam Shuaibu. This episode demonstrates that even in a male-dominated society, women can exert power through social and ritual

channels. Yet Tahir simultaneously undermines the perceived legitimacy of female agency when the *gwauro* ritual is framed negatively, associated with debauchery, idolatry and disorder. Men are mocked, while women appear as ritualized figures: "a grim circle of women sitting there like ritual carvings in a juju shrine" (59). In this portrayal, women's power and pre-Islamic customs are metaphorically linked to social chaos, reinforcing the need for male and religious authority.

Insights from Mernissi (1991) elucidate this tension. In *Beyond the Veil*, she argues that social order is secured when men occupy positions of authority, limiting women's capacity for unmediated action. Similarly, Ghazali in *The Revivification of Religious Sciences* depicts women as potential sources of *fitna* who require careful management to prevent distraction and disruption of male spiritual and social duties. Fatna Sabbah expands this argument by showing that women's rebellion and assertiveness, often read as dangerous or transgressive, can function as strategic negotiations with patriarchal constraints. Aisha's mobilization of her co-wives exemplifies such negotiation, reflecting Sabbah's reading of female rebellion as both moral and social commentary.

The *gwauro* episode functions on multiple levels: it constitutes a temporary reversal of patriarchal control, an assertion of female agency, and a site where Islam and pre-Islamic tradition intersect ambiguously. Despite the Imam's authority, the women compel him to account for his actions thus illustrating that leadership and moral authority in Bauchi are contested rather than absolute. Similarly, Florence Stratton has observed that male writers frequently link women with "petrified" cultural traditions, casting

men as reclaimers of societal order. Tahir's narrative echoes this even as he it demonstrates that women and tradition cannot be entirely silenced.

Ultimately, Tahir shows that even within a rigidly patriarchal and Islamic society, women shape leadership and social outcomes. Their strategic use of pre-Islamic rituals, combined with negotiation of marital and communal authority underscores that gendered power is not unidirectional. Women, though structurally subordinated, remain pivotal agents in contesting authority and influencing the moral and social landscape of Bauchi. The Imam's eventual deposition, following his inability to reconcile spiritual authority with social realities, exemplifies the limits of male-dominated leadership when women and tradition intervene,

Conclusion

In *The Last Imam*, Ibrahim Tahir presents a nuanced interrogation of the intersections between patriarchy and piety to reveal how religious authority in Bauchi society is both a personal and public mechanism of control. Through the figure of Alhaji Usman, the novel demonstrates how male spiritual and political power is inseparable from gendered expectations, with women positioned simultaneously as potential sources of moral disorder (fitna) as well as indispensable agents in sustaining social and religious life. The juxtaposition of Aisha and Hasana illuminates the complexities of female agency within Islamic moral worlds. Aisha's resilience, pragmatism and occasional subversion of patriarchal norms contrast sharply with Hasana's idealized spiritual and physical presence, underscoring how women's influence can both affirm and unsettle male authority.

Tahir's exploration of these dynamics contributes to broader West African literary debates on gendered interpretations of Islam, the ethical responsibilities of moral leadership, and the tensions inherent in community governance. By embedding disputes over tradition, orthodoxy, and syncretism within a richly textured narrative, the novel centers the ways in which women navigate, and at times contest, the constraints imposed by patriarchal and religious structures. Practices such as *gwauro*, alongside the Imam's personal failings, reveal both the potential and the limits of female intervention in shaping social and moral outcomes thus highlighting the interdependence of gender, faith, and governance.

The Last Imam is not merely a portrait of a religious leader, but a study of the moral and social negotiations through which women assert their agency in Islamic contexts. In so doing, it resonates with the overarching argument here that in Senegalese and Nigerian literature, representations of Muslim women illuminate the ongoing negotiation between Islam, tradition, and female agency. Tahir's work offers a critical lens for understanding how literary texts can expose the ethical, social, and gendered dimensions of religious life, while also positioning women as active interlocutors in debates over faith, morality and authority.

Chapter Seven

Dreams, Destiny, and Selfhood in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*

Published in 1984 the same year as Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam,* Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* occupies a landmark position in Nigerian literature as the first novel in English written by a female author from an Islamic background. Alkali would later publish *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) intended as a moral guide for young readers, and a short story collection *Cobwebs and Other Short Stories* (1997). Although Alkali remarked in an interview with Adeola James that she felt "no special responsibility towards [her] own culture," the critical acclaim accorded to *The Stillborn* by the Association of Nigerian Authors suggests otherwise. The novel's recognition reflects its significant engagement with the experiences of Muslim women, a community that, at the time, was largely marginal within Nigerian literary representation. Beyond any claim to 'authenticity,' the novel provides a nuanced account of the intersecting social, cultural and religious factors that shape Muslim women's lives, capturing the complexity of their thoughts, feelings and ethical decisions.

Northern Nigerian Women and Literary Representation

The critical relevance of *The Stillborn* becomes clearer when situated within the broader landscape of literary and scholarly representations of African women. As the writer and critic Maryse Condé famously observes, "the inner personality and inner reality of African women have been hidden under a heap of myths, so-called ethnological theories, rapid generalisations and patent untruths." Her

remark continues to resonate strongly in discussions of Northern Nigeria, where the lived experiences of Muslim women have historically attracted comparatively limited academic and literary attention. Their voices have frequently been dismissed as passive or marginal, overshadowed by the more substantial body of scholarship devoted to women in other Nigerian societies, particularly among Igbo and Yoruba communities which have long been the focus of anthropological, historical and literary studies.

This imbalance is rooted partly in the legacy of colonial knowledge production. Early European researchers and administrators tended to prioritise societies whose "traditional" practices could be documented as evidence of what they perceived as the transformative reach of European civilising projects. In this process, Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria whose intellectual, religious, and political histories extend back to the eleventh century and were shaped by the reforms associated with the nineteenth-century jihad of Usman dan Fodio were often inadequately represented in colonial archives. Consequently, the historical experiences and intellectual traditions of Northern Nigerian women have remained largely marginal within early academic discourse.

Recent scholarship has increasingly drawn attention to the enduring consequences of this historical neglect. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí critiques the gendered assumptions embedded within Africanist scholarship and calls for a re-examination of social categories through indigenous epistemologies rather than externally imposed frameworks. Her intervention is particularly significant for discussions of Muslim societies

in West Africa where colonial and postcolonial scholarship often reproduced Eurocentric assumptions about gender hierarchy without sufficiently attending to the complexity of local social arrangements.

Similarly, Amina Mama highlights how dominant narratives within both global feminism and African studies have frequently overlooked Muslim women's experiences. Mama argues that Muslim women are often rendered invisible within postcolonial gender studies, not because they lack agency, but because prevailing analytical frameworks are ill-equipped to recognise forms of agency articulated through religious and cultural traditions. In a comparable vein, the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow has emphasised the importance of centring Muslim women's voices within African feminist scholarship in order to challenge persistent stereotypes that depict them primarily through the lens of restriction or silence.

Contemporary developments in both scholarship and public discourse further underscore the urgency of such reassessments. In recent decades, driven by a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds women's historical and contemporary roles within Islamic societies, debates surrounding Muslim women's education, public participation, and intellectual contributions in Northern Nigeria have gained renewed visibility. These developments have encouraged a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's lives as they highlight the diversity of their social roles, especially the ways in which faith, education and cultural practices intersect in shaping their negotiations of identity, authority and community responsibility.

A particularly important dimension of this reassessment is the recovery of earlier traditions of female intellectual participation that colonial scholarship either overlooked or did not sufficiently document. Central to this historical recovery is the work of Nana Asma'u, the nineteenth-century daughter of Usman dan Fodio. An accomplished scholar, poet and educator, she played a significant role in expanding access to Islamic learning among women in the Sokoto Caliphate. Writing in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa, she composed numerous didactic poems and historical works that addressed religious ethics, social responsibility, and communal memory. Equally significant was her establishment of a network of female teachers known as the *'yan-taru* ("those who gather together"), who travelled across rural communities to instruct women in Islamic knowledge. Through this innovative educational system, Nana Asma'u institutionalized women's participation in religious scholarship and created a durable model of female intellectual leadership within West African Islamic traditions.

The recognition of such historical precedents complicates earlier scholarly assumptions that Muslim women in Northern Nigeria were largely excluded from intellectual or literary production. Indeed, women have long participated in diverse forms of cultural and literary expression within the region. One important example is their involvement in popular Hausa narrative traditions, including the genre commonly known as *soyaya* literature. These are romantic narratives and songs that circulate through oral performance and more recently, through popular print culture. It constitutes a vibrant cultural space in which themes of courtship, marriage, emotional attachment, and

moral responsibility are explored. Women have participated in this tradition both as performers and as audiences whose interpretive engagement helps shape its narrative concerns. Through *soyaya* storytelling and song, questions surrounding love, marital obligation and social respectability are negotiated in ways that prioritise women's perspectives and experiences.

Such traditions demonstrate that women in Northern Nigerian Muslim societies have historically contributed to literary culture not only through formal scholarship but also through oral performance, poetic composition and popular narrative forms. Recognising these contributions is an important task for contemporary scholars who seek to broaden the scope of African literary history. Within literary studies, this shift has also prompted renewed attention to the contributions of Northern Nigerian women writers whose works articulate perspectives long marginalised within the Nigerian literary canon.

Against this backdrop, *The Stillborn* by Zaynab Alkali provides an invaluable corrective perspective. The novel centres women whose lives are shaped by the intersection of religion, culture and gendered social expectation. In doing so, it resists reductive portrayals and broadens the parameters of Nigerian literary representation. By articulating the inner worlds, aspirations, and moral struggles of its female protagonist, Alkali's narrative disrupts longstanding silences and enriches a literary tradition that has too often overlooked Muslim women's voices. Her work therefore contributes to a broader intellectual effort to reclaim the complexity of women's experiences in Northern Nigerian societies.

The Stillborn is particularly notable for its exploration of dreams, symbolic imagery, and Islamic-cultural values as narrative devices through which the protagonist's inner conflicts and personal transformation are expressed. Alkali interweaves traditional, Islamic and feminist discourses in order to illustrate how a young woman negotiates her aspirations, moral commitments and social responsibilities within a complex postcolonial and religious framework. Thus the novel reflects broader contemporary debates within African feminist thought about the relationship between faith, culture, and gendered agency.

The narrative traces the protagonist's gradual movement toward selfhood, demonstrating that personal agency does not necessarily emerge through a rejection of tradition or religious belief. Rather, it suggests that agency can be cultivated through a careful and reflective engagement with these forces. In foregrounding dreams and symbolic experiences, the novel dramatizes the tension between individual desire and communal expectation while offering readers insight into the psychological and ethical dimensions of womanhood in Northern Nigeria.

Negotiating Female Agency in *The Stillborn*

The Stillborn, set in postcolonial Northern Nigeria, follows the life of Li whose efforts to shape a life on her own terms place her in recurring tension with the structures of authority that govern her community. The narrative unfolds largely through her perspective enabling readers to witness her gradual development from childhood through adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, if Li's final dream sequence is taken into account, the novel traces a broad arc of personal growth that symbolically extends even into old age.

From the outset, Li is characterised by a spirited independence that sets her apart from the expectations placed upon young girls in her community. When as a child she returns home from boarding school, she already exhibits an instinctive resistance to male authority, particularly that embodied by her father who functions as the principal custodian of religious and traditional values within the household. Her acts of defiance often directed at the rigid expectations surrounding female obedience signal an early awareness of the limitations imposed on women's autonomy.

At the age of fifteen, Li marries the charismatic Habu, a union that initially appears to offer an escape from the restrictive environment of her parental home. Within the village community, Li's spirited personality is frequently interpreted as evidence that she was "badly trained," and marriage therefore promises a new beginning. During the period of courtship and the prolonged interval before she joins Habu in the city, Li sustains herself with dreams of a prosperous future built upon shared ambition and mutual support. In her imagination, Habu will become a doctor while she herself will achieve professional success as a Grade I teacher. The city represents the setting in which these aspirations might be realized, a place associated with opportunity, modernity and social mobility. Li envisions a life of comfort and prestige, imagining herself in "a big European house full of servants, the smooth body, the long silk hair… There was no end to the luxuries the city could offer (55)." At this stage, her aspirations reflect the allure of middle-class respectability and the attraction of urban modernity in postcolonial Nigeria. The city appears to promise a social environment in which traditional

restrictions might be loosened, allowing men and women to cultivate more balanced and fulfilling relationships.

These hopes, however, gradually unravel as Li confronts the realities of married life. Rather than becoming the supportive partner she had imagined, Habu proves unwilling or unable to collaborate in the pursuit of their shared dreams. Li encounters not only material difficulties but also the emotional and psychological strain produced by her husband's indifference. Her experience reveals the fragility of the idealised vision that had sustained her during her youth. Throughout the narrative, her growing awareness is shaped not only by her own disappointments but also by the experiences of other women in her life. The struggles of Awa, her sister, and her close friend Faku provide parallel narratives that illuminate the broader conditions affecting women within their society. Observing the challenges faced by these women reinforces Li's understanding of the precariousness of female dependence and underscores the importance of self-reliance. Their stories function as cautionary examples that deepen Li's insight into the structural constraints imposed by gendered expectations.

Importantly, Alkali does not portray this social environment as uniformly restrictive. Rather, she depicts a society in which women negotiate constraint and possibility simultaneously, operating within a moral landscape that requires a constant balancing between faith, communal expectations and personal aspiration. In this sense, the novel resonates with recent scholarship on African Muslim women which emphasises that agency is often expressed through negotiation rather than outright defiance. Alkali's narrative aligns with this perspective by portraying women

as moral agents who navigate competing values with resilience, prudence and ingenuity.

By situating the protagonist within a historically layered, culturally hybrid, and religiously informed environment, Alkali lays the groundwork for a narrative in which dreams, destiny and selfhood emerge as central mechanisms for exploring womanhood. This multidimensional context shaped by Islam, indigenous tradition and evolving postcolonial social norms provides the terrain upon which the protagonist learns to question inherited expectations, reconcile internal conflicts and imagine alternative futures. It is within this textured socio-religious setting that Alkali charts Li's gradual movement toward self-definition and negotiated agency.

The narrative directs attention to the female presence within a traditional–Islamic milieu, portraying the strengths, vulnerabilities and resourcefulness of women in a social order where men's interests often assume priority. It examines the complexities and contradictions that shape women's lives, particularly the position of daughters within the parental household, the importance of stable and mutually respectful marital relationships, and the transformative role of education in shaping women's aspirations and self-understanding. Alkali's fiction demonstrates a careful awareness of the cultural, religious and social frameworks that define women's experiences and therefore offers an important counterpoint to feminist critiques that rely exclusively on Western paradigms to interpret African realities.

The constant tension between men and women within the narrative initially appear to align Alkali with broader struggles for gender equality articulated within strands of

African feminist thought but this interpretation has been questioned by some critics. Echoing this concern, Helen Chukwuma observes that certain feminist narratives collapse the complexity of social relations into a rigid male–female divide, presenting empowerment as if it necessarily required the diminishment of men. For these critics, such portrayals risk misrepresenting African social realities and privileging conflict over the forms of negotiation that historically characterise gender relations within many African societies.

Similarly, Anthonia Ekpa argues that some African women writers risk reproducing Western gender binaries premised on an oppositional struggle between male dominance and female resistance. Ekpa illustrates this concern through her reading of Amaka in *One Is Enough* by Flora Nwapa where marriage is portrayed as fundamentally restrictive and female sexuality becomes a domain of exploration independent of male partners. However, Alkali's fiction represents a notable departure from such oppositional frameworks. Her perspective aligns more closely with the position articulated by Catherine Acholonu who cautions that it is "impossible, almost suicidal" for African women to adopt Western feminist paradigms without taking into account the historical, cultural, and ideological conditions that shape African womanhood.

While Alkali employs Western narrative conventions, the novel form and the English language, her fiction remains deeply rooted in local realities. Her female characters do not repudiate their cultural environment, rather, they navigate its moral and communal frameworks in order to address the challenges they face. Marriage, for instance, remains central to the social ethos represented in *The*

Stillborn and the narrative accords it the seriousness it commands within the cultural context. The novel therefore portrays marriage not simply as a site of oppression but as a social institution whose success depends on mutual respect and ethical conduct.

Alkali's vision resonates with an indigenous intellectual tradition that predates both colonial modernity and contemporary feminist discourse. A significant point of reference is the reformist movement associated with Usman dan Fodio, the eighteenth-century Islamic scholar and social reformer who criticised the treatment of women within certain Hausa societies of his time. Dan Fodio condemned the "oppressive customs" of husbands who neglected, abused, or undermined their wives, arguing that such behaviour reflected ignorance rather than religious authority. His writings emphasised women's rights to education, moral dignity, and proper treatment within marriage. In many respects, these concerns anticipate the ethical questions that Alkali threads throughout her narrative.

Through Li's evolving consciousness and her gradual reassessment of the ideals that shaped her early expectations, *The Stillborn* ultimately presents female agency not as a dramatic rupture with tradition but as a process of negotiation within it. The novel's conclusion, marked by Li's return to her father's household with renewed confidence and recognition, signals not defeat but transformation. Through resilience, self-awareness and careful engagement with the moral frameworks of her society, Li achieves a measure of autonomy and respect. In this way, Alkali's narrative contributes to a broader literary

conversation about the possibilities of women's agency in Northern Nigerian Muslim societies.

Cultural and Religious Coexistence in *The Stillborn*

According to Stewart Brown, *The Stillborn* emerges from a finely observed recreation of a culturally and religiously "mixed village" that reflects Alkali's own experiences of life in northern Nigeria. Rather than perpetuate the assumption that the region is entirely Islamic, the novel presents a nuanced portrayal of coexistence among Muslims, Christians, and adherents of ancestral religions. This careful depiction accounts for the diversity of attitudes and practices evident in the narrative, particularly regarding women's mobility, visibility and autonomy. Traditional religion, embodied in the figure of Li's grandfather Kaka, continues to influence social life, offering continuity between past and present, celebrating major life events and cultivating tolerance among villagers. Kaka's compassion and his special bond with Li whom he admires for her spirit and resilience, illustrate the ethical and relational resources that traditional belief systems provide, particularly in their accommodation of women who "understand the language of the gods" (37).

Alkali's artistic skill lies in her ability to weave Islam into this setting without overt didacticism. While fewer explicit Islamic phrases appear in the text than in some other novels, Islam nonetheless exerts a strong presence through the attitudes and actions of key characters. The religion is occasionally referenced by name through "Allah" or in contrasts drawn by characters such as Baba, Li's father, who labels non-adherents "heathens" or "unbelievers." in this way, the novel emphasizes the tension between Islamic orthodoxy and local practice. The villagers' long-standing

customs and rituals persist alongside Islamic precepts, creating a complex terrain in which women navigate multiple moral and social expectations.

This tension is evident from the outset of the narrative as the village prepares for the end-of-year festival, traditionally a celebration for "the healthy, the strong, the men and women of hot blood," while pregnant women, infants, the infirm and the eccentric remain at home (48). Li recognizes that her household falls into the latter category but the temporary absence of Baba suspends his authority. Alkali highlights the constraints imposed on women, showing that their subordination cannot always be ascribed solely to Islam. Rather, the enforcement of gendered norms is mediated by factors such as class, education, history and tradition.

As the principal custodian of Islam in the novel, Baba embodies a rigid, patriarchal mode of religious authority. His refusal to permit his daughters to participate in communal gatherings, events that traditionally reinforce social cohesion, demonstrates how individual interpretations of religious law can unsettle customary patterns of communal life. Relations between Baba and the women in his household, including his stepmother, are openly strained: "they shared a hatred for each other though this was thinly disguised under a veneer of polite tolerance" (8). With his wife, even this pretence collapses, as he castigates her for the perceived moral and social failings of their children:

"A heathen woman can only have heathen children. Why I married you is what I can never understand. There were many believing women in my village, but I had to end up

marrying from a heathen village. And even I, after I have civilised you, you still behave like heathens" (13).

Baba's speech reveals not only a profound disrespect for women but also his conviction of Islam's supremacy over traditional belief systems. His words reflect a cosmology in which the man mediates between God and woman, determining the legitimacy of her religious and social existence. Within this hierarchy, God occupies the apex, man becomes the enforcer of divine injunctions, and woman is relegated to a subordinate position, her purpose defined primarily in relation to male authority.

Fatna Sabbah, Fatima Mernissi, Camillia Fawz El-Solh, and Judy Mabro have variously argued that women often bear the principal responsibility for maintaining Islam's cultural distinctiveness. In *Women in the Muslim Unconscious*, Sabbah links this responsibility to the Islamic concept of surrender. She explains that women's obedience to their husbands is not incidental but central to the functioning of the system:

> The believer is fashioned in the image of woman, deprived of speech and will and committed to obedience to another (God). The female condition and the male condition are not different in the end to which they are directed, but in the pole around which they orbit. The lives of beings of the male sex revolve around the divine will. The lives of beings of the female sex revolve around the will of believers of the male sex (118).

In *The Stillborn*, this dynamic manifests in Baba's paradoxical dependence on women to sustain the Islamic identity of his household. While he positions himself as the

head of the family who is charged with molding it in accordance with Islamic principles, it is ultimately the women who bear the burden of translating those principles into everyday life. Through the regulation of women's behavior, particularly the segregation of the sexes, women serve as the living markers of the presence and difference of the Islamic religion. Consequently, Baba's satisfaction and the household's perceived adherence to Islam hinge on the comportment of its female members.

In *The Stillborn*, Baba is the character through which the narrative interrogates entrenched attitudes toward women in a patriarchal order shaped by both tradition and religious interpretation. As head of the household, he exercises strict control over his wife and daughters, exemplifying how patriarchal norms merge with religious ideals to circumscribe women's behaviour and mobility. The narrative offers two possible explanations for his severity. One, articulated by Kaka, attributes it to personal disposition, describing Baba as a man consumed by a "mad obsession with discipline." The other frames his actions as those of a devout believer determined to uphold what he interprets as Islam's moral demands. Ultimately, his character demonstrates how personal temperament and religious conviction can converge to reinforce gendered hierarchies within the domestic and communal spheres.Through these intersecting layers of tradition, Islam, and patriarchal authority, Alkali illustrates the intricate negotiations women undertake to assert agency within restrictive social and religious frameworks. The narrative shows that female autonomy is never fixed or absolute, rather, it is continually shaped and reshaped in

relation to family obligations, communal expectations and prevailing belief systems.

The strict social boundaries sometimes associated with Islamic societies can come into tension with indigenous African practices that have historically granted women greater visibility and influence within both domestic and public spheres. According to Mernissi, the figure of the "unfettered" woman has often been perceived as potentially disruptive. She is seen as embodying a form of social disorder that must be contained through regulation and surveillance. Within the fictional world of *The Stillborn*, Baba's actions could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to maintain moral order by restricting his daughters' movements and limiting their interaction with the outside world. He forbids them from leaving the family compound except to perform necessary errands. From his perspective, such measures represent the responsible conduct expected of a conscientious Muslim father determined to protect his daughters' reputations.Yet, Baba's rigid attitudes and his frequent tirades against people of other faiths portray him as a figure whose interpretation of religion reinforces prejudice and intolerance. His authoritarian behaviour is sharply observed by Grandma, who remarks that he is "never tired of playing God with his children." Such comments highlight the tension between Baba's assertion of moral authority and the discomfort it creates for the women in his household.

The oppressive atmosphere produced by this rigid authority is especially evident in Li's experience of life within the family compound. The control Baba exercises over his daughters' movements makes Li feel trapped within the household environment. After only a few weeks

at home, she finds the compound "suffocating," longing instead for the freedom she had enjoyed at boarding school where life had been comparatively carefree and unconstrained. This sense of claustrophobia reflects the psychological impact of a system in which female mobility and independence are severely restricted.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to attribute Baba's attitudes solely to Islam. As Deniz Kandiyoti cautions, just as there is no universal system of patriarchy, neither is there a single, uniform interpretation of Islam. Different systems of male dominance shaped by class, ethnicity and historical circumstance influence both the practice of religion and the ideological constructions of what may be considered properly Islamic. In other words, patriarchal practices are often derived as much from cultural traditions as from religious doctrine.

This insight is vividly illustrated in a significant episode in *The Stillborn* when in an act of rebellion, Li persuades her older sister Awa to accompany her to a moonlight dance in the village, an event where young men and women mingle freely. For Baba, such gatherings represent a "heathenish" practice incompatible with the moral discipline he seeks to enforce. When confronted with this accusation, Li defiantly declares to her sister that she would rather be a heathen if it meant enjoying the freedom to move about without constant surveillance. Baba initially responds with fury and prepares to punish the girls but his anger is checked when his son Sule admits that he too had attended the dance. At this moment Baba's thoughts reveal a deeper layer of patriarchal reasoning. While he feels justified in beating Awa for disobedience regardless of her age, he hesitates to

punish Sule, the firstborn male child. To beat a grown man for attending a dance, he reflects, would be outrageous.

This episode illustrates that Baba's behaviour is informed not only by religious considerations but also by deeply entrenched assumptions about gender hierarchy. As the critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie observes, the belief that men are naturally superior to women continues to permeate many social structures in contemporary Nigerian society. Such ideological assumptions sustain discriminatory practices that persist despite the egalitarian ethical principles emphasised within Islamic teachings. In everyday life, the privileges of autonomy, mobility, and personal choice frequently remain weighted in favour of men. In this sense, the privileged status accorded to the male child functions as a key mechanism through which patriarchal authority is reproduced within the family.

The responses of the women in *The Stillborn* to this system of authority vary considerably reflecting the extent to which they have internalized or resisted patriarchal assumptions. Their differing reactions highlight the complex psychological dimensions of gender subordination. Ogundipe-Leslie has argued that one of the greatest obstacles facing African women lies in the internalisation of negative self-perceptions. Women, she suggests, are often constrained not only by external structures but also by attitudes of fear, dependency, and the desire to appease male authority.

A comparison between Li and her sister Awa illustrates this contrast vividly. When confronted by their father's anger after the moonlight dance incident, Awa responds with conciliatory humility, attempting to placate Baba and avoid further conflict. Her behaviour mirrors that of their mother

who embodies a pattern of quiet submission inherited across generations. Li, by contrast, gradually recovers from her initial fear and begins to challenge her father's authority more boldly. Observing Baba's hesitation once Sule becomes involved, she recognises the unequal logic underpinning his judgment. Her confidence grows as she realises that her brother's intervention is motivated less by solidarity than by his own interests as she had earlier caught him smoking and could expose him if necessary. As a result, Li refuses to accept punishment passively, refusing to "take any beating alone." Her awareness of the injustice embedded in her father's reaction forces Baba to reconsider his position.

Destiny, Marriage, and the Dreaming Self: Education and Female Selfhood

A feminist–Islamic hermeneutical reading of *The Stillborn* is sharpened when approached through the interpretive framework of Amina Wadud, whose work distinguishes between patriarchal cultural practices and the ethical egalitarianism embedded in the Qur'an. Interpreted through this lens, the contrasting stances of Li and Awa reveal two divergent responses to gendered power, one rooted in inherited custom, the other in the search for self-understanding that resists conflating cultural norms with divine mandate. Their contrasting attitudes reflect broader generational patterns in the text, particularly the divide between Grandma and Mama. Awa reproduces her mother's submissive dispositions, while Li's insistence on self-definition gestures toward alternative possibilities for Muslim womanhood, possibilities grounded not in rebellion but in reinterpretation.

Though motherhood has historically been associated with social value in many African societies, the novel unsettles this assumption. Mama, despite her reproductive labour and unceasing service, remains structurally vulnerable. Her near-mechanical movements evoke a life emptied of agency, an embodiment of what feminist theorists describe as the internalisation of patriarchal norms. Her silence, while culturally legible, becomes an interpretive site through which the text exposes how gendered expectations diminish women's emotional and intellectual autonomy.

Yet Mama's narrative marginality produces a paradox: in a novel committed to examining women's conditions, she appears only faintly. This limited representation echoes the very pattern that Alkali previously criticised of women appearing merely as background figures. However, when read through a feminist hermeneutic lens, Mama's muted presence becomes a critique of the systems that render certain women narratively invisible. Her subjectivity, though underdeveloped, functions as an indictment of the patriarchal order that produces such erasure.

The generational dynamic becomes more pronounced in Awa, whose fear of male authority is so deeply internalised that it shapes her entire ethical framework. Her behaviour during courtship, marked by ritualised restraint, illustrates how women are socialised into performing emotional invisibility as a marker of virtue. While such restraint appears to grant temporary leverage, momentary inversions of power, it ultimately reinforces the gendered hierarchy that governs romantic and marital relations. Islamic hermeneutics sharpens this critique. Awa's unquestioning adherence to social convention obscures the moral rights and protections Islam potentially affords

women. From a feminist-Islamic interpretive standpoint, her submission is not "piety" but a culturally inherited distortion of religious principles, what scholars would call a conflation of custom with divine injunction. Her failure to distinguish between the two allows patriarchal norms to masquerade as religious law.

At first Awa's marriage to Dan Faima initially appears to confirm the rewards of conformity, yet the union reveals the fragility of gender roles rooted in economic and social stability. When shifting postcolonial realities destabilise Dan Faima's authority, his descent into alcoholism exposes the precarity of masculinities tethered solely to provision. Awa responds with stoic endurance, reproducing the same logic that governed Mama's life: that women must bear hardship silently while men struggle and fall. Her acceptance reinforces a double standard that Islamic feminist scholars have long sought to interrogate. As economic and cultural change reshapes village life, neither tradition nor religion remains static. The encroachment of urban modernity forces a renegotiation of older hierarchies. It is within this shifting landscape that the text's feminist and hermeneutical force becomes clearest: women who refuse complete submission reveal the possibility of alternative readings of both gender and faith.

As urban modernity reshapes village life altering social rhythms and exposing the instability of inherited hierarchies, the limits of patriarchal interpretations become increasingly visible.This is where the figure of Grandma becomes crucial. Unlike Mama and Awa, Grandma embodies a form of interpretive agency aligned with Wadud's call for women to read their lives, traditions, and faith through lenses of moral equality. Grandma's authority

does not derive from submission but from lived wisdom, self-possession, and a reflexive relationship to tradition. She represents an indigenous feminist hermeneutic: one that draws selectively from cultural resources while refusing the erasures that define Mama's and Awa's lives. Through her, the narrative articulates an indigenous model of female agency grounded in wisdom and an ability to read the world on one's own terms. In this way, the novel invites a feminist-Islamic hermeneutic that distinguishes between culture and revelation, between inherited patriarchy and ethical possibility. Through Li and Grandma, it posits that women's selfhood emerges not from abandoning tradition but from reinterpreting it, in asserting meaning within the spaces patriarchal authority has long circumscribed. Seen through this interpretive framework, Li's journey towards selfhood becomes the novel's most compelling hermeneutical statement. Her refusal to collapse personal aspiration into cultural expectation signals the possibility of reimagining Muslim womanhood, not through rejection of tradition but through the interpretive autonomy that scholars like Wadud champion.

Li's estrangement from Habu and her experiences of marital neglect highlight the rigidity of social expectations and double standards governing women's lives. While her loyalty initially earns her sympathy, it gradually becomes the subject of ridicule, especially in contrast to her sister Awa's displayed fecundity. Habu's absence during critical moments, the birth of their daughter Shuwa and Baba's death, marks the ultimate insult, signaling both personal disregard and the broader patriarchal devaluation of women. Li's decision to return to the village, reclaim her independence, and later pursue teaching reflects a

reclaiming of selfhood, She interprets her circumstances not as defeat but as an opportunity to reimagine her life and pursue her ambitions.

Alkali positions Li's experiences alongside those of Faku whose early vulnerability as a fatherless woman and subsequent unhappy marriage to Garba illustrate how social and marital norms constrain female agency. The dream imagery of barren land and futile tilling crystallizes the harsh lessons of dependency: women who invest in husbands alone risk exhaustion and spiritual desolation. These dreams act as both metaphor and moral counsel, guiding Li toward self-reliance while cautioning against romantic illusions. This narrative strategy resonates with Amina Wadud's argument for reinterpretation of religious and cultural norms to empower women within Islam.

Through education, economic autonomy and reflective insight, Li and Faku rise from the limitations imposed by patriarchal custom. Li's eventual return to the village as a teacher positions her as a model of practical empowerment. It enables her to command respect, exercise agency and serve as a source of guidance for other women. Her story illustrates that female selfhood emerges not from the abandonment of tradition or faith but from their reimagining, reinterpreting the ethical and spiritual frameworks of Islam in ways that affirm dignity, autonomy and partnership.

Alkali's concluding dream sequence in which Li advises her great-granddaughter on the nature of dreams—"like babies, dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn"—underscores the novel's core feminist message. Dreams, like female ambition must be nurtured but critically evaluated. Women

are called to discern the illusions imposed by social and patriarchal structures and to cultivate lives shaped by their own initiative and vision. In this way, the novel affirms the possibilities of education, self-discovery and ethical reimagining, positioning women as active agents of their own destinies while remaining within the moral bounds of Islam.

Conclusion

In *The Stillborn*, Alkali redefines womanhood by portraying characters who navigate the constraints of marriage, tradition, and social expectation through self-reflection, resilience and moral growth. Li and Faku demonstrate that female agency emerges not from the rejection of culture or faith, but from the reimagining of one's role within them through education, ethical discernment and the pursuit of personal aspirations. By tracing the interior lives of women, the novel reclaims the emotional, intellectua, and spiritual worlds of Muslim women, showing how they negotiate authority, family and religious norms to assert their selfhood.

This narrative reframing situates women as active participants in shaping their destinies, challenging patriarchal prescriptions while remaining attentive to moral and religious frameworks. In doing so, Alkali contributes to broader West African literary debates about the intersection of Islam, tradition and gender highlighting the complex ways in which women claim autonomy within socially and religiously regulated spaces. The novel ultimately affirms that the negotiation of female agency is ongoing, dynamic, and intimately tied to both cultural context and personal imagination.

Conclusion

Islam, Literature, and the Reimagining of Female Agency

Literary engagement with Islam provides a particularly productive lens for understanding how postcolonial West African writers negotiate the intertwined forces of religion, gender and cultural tradition. Positioning Islam as a central axis of analysis expands the interpretive vocabulary for reading both Senegalese and Nigerian fiction. It shows that Muslim women are not static symbols of oppression or tradition but complex actors negotiating faith, social expectation and personal autonomy. Foundational theoretical frameworks by Edward Said's critique of Orientalist constructions of the "Orient," Fatima Mernissi's interrogation of Islamic discourses sustaining gender hierarchies and Nawal El-Saadawi's exploration of the interplay between cultural tradition and state power provide critical tools for examining how literature both reflects and interrogates social and religious norms. Fatna A. Sabbah's psychoanalytic critique of symbolic and theological representations of women in Islam further underscores the value of literary and intellectual approaches for understanding the cultural formation of gendered subjectivity. Together, these works illuminate the complex interplay between religious, cultural and political forces that shape Muslim women's lived realities, particularly in relation to marriage, sexuality, and polygamy.

Contemporary scholarship further deepens this analysis by moving beyond simplistic binaries of oppression and

liberation, emphasizing the nuanced ways women exercise agency, navigate ethical obligations, and negotiate social expectations. The politics of piety demonstrates that religious practice can function as a form of ethical self-cultivation rather than mere coercion. Amina Wadud's gender-egalitarian Qur'anic hermeneutics articulate the possibility of challenging patriarchal authority from within Islam, while Margot Badran situates Islamic feminism as a principled reformist discourse grounded in ethical commitments. Ousseina Alidou extends these concerns to African contexts, examining how Muslim women in postcolonial societies navigate intersecting pressures of modernity, religion, and cultural expectation. These perspectives, alongside transnational critiques such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* and African feminist frameworks articulated by Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Ifi Amadiume and Obioma Nnaemeka, underscore the need for analyses that foreground cultural specificity, historical context, and relational understandings of agency. They collectively provide a conceptual foundation for reading literature that situates women's experiences at the intersection of faith, ethics and societal transformation.

Senegalese literature offers rich examples of how women negotiate agency in faith-informed contexts. Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* positions women as active participants in collective struggles that shape public life while challenging entrenched hierarchies. In *White Genesis*, the focus shifts to the domestic and intimate spheres, revealing how women negotiate ethical and moral responsibilities under patriarchal and religious constraints. Across both texts, Sembène presents women as fully

realized agents whose decisions and courage shape the moral and social fabric of postcolonial Senegalese society. Similarly, Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* foregrounds the ethical and social responsibilities of marginalized women, showing how moral insight often resides in those whom society seeks to overlook. Her blending of narrative perspective and West African oral storytelling traditions transforms reading into an ethical engagement with characters' moral deliberations, highlighting solidarity, reflection and strategic action as essential to women's agency.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* exemplifies the interiority and reflexivity through which Muslim women articulate agency. The epistolary form grants readers access to Ramatoulaye's moral reasoning, ethical deliberations, and self-reflective engagement with marriage, polygamy and religion, while her friend Aissatou demonstrates radical independence. Through these parallel trajectories, Bâ illustrates that female agency is neither singular nor oppositional but negotiated through ethical reasoning, relational solidarity and emotional resilience. Education, friendship, and moral reflection emerge as crucial resources for navigating marital and social challenges in postcolonial Senegal. They represent culturally grounded forms of agency emphasized by scholars such as Nnaemeka, Amadiume, Mama, and Mernissi. By giving West African Muslim women direct narrative voice, Bâ reframes discussions of morality, family, and religion through lived experience demonstrating how the literary form itself can amplify agency..

These dynamics extend to Nigerian literature where Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Tahir's *The Last Imam*

explore similar negotiations of faith, social expectation, and female selfhood. In *The Stillborn*, Li's journey illustrates the interplay between education, moral reflection and agency in the context of patriarchal and religious norms. Her estrangement from Habu, her pursuit of a teaching career and eventual return to her village as an independent woman reframe the expectations of marriage and female subordination. Through her, Alkali's narrative emphasizes the relational and generational dimensions of female agency. Li's assertiveness contrasts with her sister Awa's submissiveness therby revealing both continuity and change in women's responses to societal norms. Dreams and symbolic imagination, particularly Li's visions of barren or fertile land, serve as literary metaphors for women's capacity to critically reimagine their destiny and in so doing highlight the psychological dimensions of autonomy.

Tahir's *The Last Imam* similarly interrogates the ethical and social dimensions of Muslim life in Northern Nigeria. In it female characters navigate patriarchal structures and religious authority with varying degrees of agency. The novel foregrounds the constraints imposed by tradition while simultaneously illuminating the possibilities that emerge through moral reflection, education and individual resolve. It portrays Muslim women as intellectually and ethically engaged actors whose decisions shape not only their domestic circumstances but also the wider communal order. Tahir and Alkali together illustrate that Nigerian literature, like its Senegalese counterpart, reframes Muslim women's experiences in ways that challenge reductive narratives of subordination and illuminate the negotiation of agency within Islamic and cultural frameworks.

Across these texts, a central theme emerges: female agency is relational, contextually grounded, and ethically informed. Male authors often emphasize structural sources of oppression, while female authors highlight reflection, solidarity, and strategic action as pathways to autonomy. Both approaches illuminate the social significance of women's choices and reveal how Islam, far from being a monolithic constraint can serve as a framework for ethical engagement and moral reasoning. This literary interrogation challenges simplistic portrayals of Muslim women as passive and underscores the importance of faith as both a lived experience and a site of negotiation.

Ultimately, these narratives collectively depict literature's capacity to reimagine female subjectivity. Muslim women in Senegalese and Nigerian contexts assert moral authority, exercise judgment and navigate autonomy within evolving cultural, social, and religious landscapes. By highlighting both internal deliberation and engagement with broader societal structures, the texts studied challenge reductive narratives of Muslim womanhood, affirming that agency emerges from negotiation between faith, tradition and personal choice. The interplay of education, reflection and courage, whether in Bâ's letters, Sow Fall's moral vision, Alkali's dreams or Tahir's depictions of Northern Nigerian women, demonstrates that literature provides a medium for reimagining female destiny.

In conclusion, the engagement with Islam in West African literature is not merely representational but actively interrogates and mobilizes religious discourse to expand understandings of female agency. Senegalese and Nigerian writers alike demonstrate that ethical reflection, relational solidarity, intellectual and moral courage are key resources

through which women navigate patriarchal, religious and social constraints. By foregrounding Muslim women's interior lives and moral deliberations, these texts affirm that postcolonial literature serves as a transformative site for exploring the intersections of gender, faith, and modernity, offering both critique and vision for the possibilities of female selfhood in West Africa.

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