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WOMEN, ISLAM AND TRADITION IN THE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Kent, at Canterbury.

November 2003

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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ABSTRACT

There is a body of literature from West Africa that is of Islamic inspiration and that deals in a substantial way with Islamic beliefs and practices. To a considerable extent, Islam has influenced the way some important African writers define themselves and their art. Their novels are distinguished by a rich profusion of Islamic beliefs and practices even as they remain mindful of traditional cultural practices that continue to flourish in their various societies. Prominent in the novels selected for in depth study here, are the conflicts as well as the collusion that occurs between Islam and tradition particularly as they affect the lives of women.

This thesis undertakes a close reading of six novels in order to examine in depth literary representations of the West African Muslim woman. Chapter one serves as an introduction as well as an exposition of the theory that informs the rest of the thesis. Drawing on the ideas of Edward Said, Fatima Mernissi and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, I attempt to place this discussion within the body of critical discourse about "other" women. Chapter two goes on to trace the history of Islam in West Africa and the impact it has had on the religious beliefs and socio-political life of the inhabitants. I pay special attention to how the condition of women is affected by it before examining how creative writing is seen and approached by writers from an Islamic background. Since a number of West African novels speak of the Islamic experience, choices have to be made in the selection of texts for discussion in Chapters two to five. I have therefore chosen to focus on specific novels from two West African countries namely, Senegal and Nigeria. In the chapters which examine the works of Ousmane Sembene, Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Ba as well as those of Ibrahim Tahir and Zaynab Alkali, I take into account available literary criticism on the novels. I also lean heavily on the Holy Quran and on the Hadith (the sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammed) including the exegeses of knowledgeable commentators.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with the novels of contempory Senegalese and Nigerian writers who dwell on the profound effect Islam has had and continues to have on sub-Saharan Africa. The novels of Ousmane Sembene, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow-Fall, and those of their Nigerian counterparts, Zaynab Alikali and Ibrahim Tahir construct a distinctively Islamic edifice with their words at the same time as they acknowledge the primacy of traditional cultures. Certainly, similar institutional patterns, fictional identities, and responses to situations developed in their novels with reference to the most important texts in Islam, the Quran and the Hadith, point to the existence of not only a West African Islamic culture but also a modern literature steeped in a world view different from that of the Euro-Christian tradition inherited from the colonial era.

Interestingly, more than anything else Muslim women have come to symbolise the "otherness" of Islam and of Islamic societies. Where this particular religion is concerned no other subject has attracted more curiosity, proven more susceptible to stereotyping and therefore in need of demystification than the Muslim woman.[1] In this thesis, I will focus on representations of women and in particular on how their situation on the domestic front as well as in public life is affected by Islam and by indigenous traditions which have remained a part of African life. My intention is to extricate from a close reading of the novels I examine what women mean in/to Islam in West Africa, the roles they play and their responses to the situations they find themselves. I will search out particular areas in which religion and tradition collude in prescribing women's place and the points at which they diverge. To do this, I will

concentrate on a select number of novels by the aforementioned male and female writers who themselves come from Muslim backgrounds and are therefore able to depict Islam as it is lived and experienced today in their part of the world.

However, the emphasis I place on the religious backgrounds of the writers and novels I deal with here is not intended to polarise African literature into opposing camps, Islamic and Christian, or otherwise, but rather an attempt to include in the multiplicity of literary voices emerging from West Africa those that speak of the Muslim experience. Numerous literary attempts at conveying the African character acknowledge the central role of religion in society when they draw upon particular religious icons and idioms in order to enhance meaning. For example, Wole Soyinka's celebrated list of works concentrate on the exposition of traditional African religious concepts. And, because of its active contribution to colonialism, Christianity too has remained a well frequented subject matter in African literature. The divisive impact of Christianity in West Africa is well documented in the novels of Chinua Achebe in a conscious attempt to remedy that injustice he mentions in the article 'The Novelist as Teacher', that is to show Africans that contrary to Euro-Christian propaganda, their 'past – with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them'.[2] Hence When African novelists write about Islam, it should also be seen as part of their efforts of coming to terms with another significant force that has influenced and shaped the character of their societies. As Kenneth Harrow rightly asserts in the seminal text *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991), the Islamic religion has come to:

> Occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people – psychological spaces, 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.[3]

Certainly in the light of recent world events, we know that Islam as a religious doctrine has not lost any of its potency in the imagination of those who profess it. Unfortunately, although Islam has played an important part in West Africa, one that predates Christianity and accompanies Colonialism, the tendency has been to sideline its impact on society and on literature. In this thesis, I will attempt to remedy

this state of affairs and bring into focus a body of literature that deals in a substantial way with Islamic beliefs, practices and social patterns, works which challenge the frequently perpetuated notion that African literature is wholly an amalgam of Western literary and traditional African cultures.

This present chapter which serves as an introduction is also an exposition of the theory which informs the rest of this thesis. Here, I go on to include an overview of dominant ideas that have influenced the perceptions and approaches that have been brought to both the study of Islam and of women in this part of the world. I shall not attempt to fashion a definitive theoretical framework for my analysis of women, religion, and tradition in the novels I examine but will take into account Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism (1978)*, Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil (1975)* and Nawal El-Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve (1980)*, all of which have made concerted and important contributions to the study of contemporary Islamic societies.[4] While Said concentrates immense effort on the treatment Islam and those who profess the religion receive in the West, the latter two have done much to open up the discourse on Muslim women. Both Mernissi and El-Saadawi restore humanity to the popular image of the veiled silent Muslim woman by delving deep into hitherto unexplored areas of her life. In this thesis therefore, I frequently take into account their insights into the dynamics of male-female relations and the politics of religion, matters which are undoubtedly of great relevance where the Muslim woman is concerned.

Similarly, I find Fatna Sabbah's *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious (1984,)* a psychoanalytic portrayal of how the Muslim mind thinks of women useful for its ideas about sexuality and the female body.[5] The points Sabbah raises help to elucidate further Islamic views on marriage, sexual relations, and the issue of polygamy as found in Muslim societies, subjects which feature frequently in the novels under discussion in this thesis. The conclusions Mernissi, El-Saadawi, and Sabbah reach are of particularly pertinence because they take into close consideration what the sacred texts of Islam, the Quran and Hadith say about women as well as the theories propounded by respected Muslim scholars such as Imam Ahmad Ghazzali. In addition, because they remain significant even in todays West Africa even today, I also refer to the views put forward by the Nigerian Islamic reformer Usman Dan Fodio. Finally, in this introduction, to aid my particular focus in this thesis, I will take

a brief look at feminist discourses on the treatment African women receive as subjects and as writers of fiction. Sociological arguments concerning the situation of West African women by analysts such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in the *Recreating Ourselves (1994)*, and Ifi Amadiumine's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands (1987)* and *Reinventing Africa (1997)* will also form a vital part of my analysis.

Edward Said's model of orientalist discourse and its projection of the Orient indirectly supplies the basis for my entry into literary representations of West African Muslim women. As a critical discourse, it is useful in that it provides a way of looking at contemporary Western attitudes towards Arab/Muslim men and women and in locating such responses in a reinterpretation of history.[6] Since the crusades, the Orient and Islam, two almost synonymous terms, have stood for the 'ultimate alienation from and opposition to Europe, the European tradition of Christian litany as well as its cultural community'.[7] In his powerful critique of orientalism, Said draws attention to the dynamics of power by which the Arab/Muslim or "oriental" person is appropriated by inherently authoritative modes of writing – what Said terms 'technologies of power', by which he means Western ownership of the production, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas that make the projection of a certain picture of the oriental possible.

Said claims that the West sees the oriental as an essentially backward primitive human being who is in need of civilising control. This view is furthered by the special language of orientalist discourse which often slips into what Roland Barthes describes as a 'kindly of reductionism and disapproval'.[8] According to Said it seems that the orient like the peasant in Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*, cannot represent itself, and so is represented by others, but only to suit preconceived notions about the object of study. In the process, argues Said, that the Arab/Muslim/Oriental is rendered not only Europe's silent "other" but is dehumanised and dispossessed of history.[9] As well as its decided view of Islam as a timeless monolithic phenomenon, sweeping characterisations of the religion found in Western discourse also transform various groups of people who participate in it into a homogenous body of Muslims. S.P. Mohanty rightly blames this trend on discussions of "otherness" which often tend to imply that others are undifferentiated even when the focus is on difference whether of race, class, gender or cultural otherness.[10] In its most extreme form, the orientalist view goes as far as to deny the

authenticity of Islam in a region like West Africa by insisting that all genuine forms of the religion be tied to Arab culture and language regardless of the fact that 85 percent of Muslims actually live outside the Arab world.

Everywhere one looks, more than images of the male person, those which devalue the Arab/Muslim female are more evident to the interested scholar. According to Malika Mehdid in 'The Invention of Arab Womanhood' [11] and Fatima Mernissi in *Scheherazade Goes West (2001)* [12], the earliest western/European conception of the Muslim woman is that of a sexually enslaved person living in the harems of the East. Her primary role is seen as that of giving unstinting service to her lord and master. She is represented as an erotic nude in paintings such as Jean Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *La Grande Odalique* and Pablo Picasso is also known to have painted no less than fourteen pictures in the same vein. In film, she has passed into Hollywood fantasy as a scantily clad belly-dancing exotic creature in Twentieth Century Fox screen versions of *Aladdin and His Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, and *Kismet*, to mention a few. According to Camillia El-Solh and Judy Mabro, this image has in fact undergone very little change in recent times. For the most part, In the western mind the Muslim woman remains imprisoned in seclusion, tradition-bound and victimised, and if now she is tantalisingly hidden by layers of clothing, she still is considered as having little substance or character.[13] Herbert Bodmin lays a large portion of the blame for such popular beliefs about Muslim women on the prevalence of newspaper accounts, television broadcasts and film documentaries which exploit pejorative images of Islam as backward and unchanging.[14] Although earlier I mentioned how useful Edward Said's *Orientalism* is for looking at aspects of this manipulative cultural system even his analysis is limited because it is articulated mainly around a male gendered approach. In order to develop a more nuanced picture of Muslim women, there is need to look elsewhere, specifically at feminist discourse for a more in depth clearer understanding of the condition of their lives.

MUSLIM WOMEN AND FEMINISM

The situation of women from Islamic backgrounds cannot be examined properly in this thesis without including an analysis of feminism as it pertains to them because

the notion of gender is deeply implicated in their religious identity. The concept of gender and how it is constructed has influenced, defined, and orientated much feminist discourse since Simone de Beavoir wrote in *The Second Sex (1949)* that one is not born a woman but becomes one.[15] The idea of gender comes to feminist theory and criticism from a number of different angles. For some feminists, gender is seen as a system of meanings within cultures which is used to categorise male and female sexuality in hierarchical terms. They argue that men and patriarchal ideologies control women's sexual and reproductive capacities. Others bring to the forefront the importance of mothering and early identification with gender; they work on the assumption that the family is the primary site of gender struggle. Both Mariama Bâ's and Zaynab Alkali's respective novels *So Long letter* and *The Stillborn* provide literary examples of this latter perspective. Still others rewrite woman's body and reconceptualise the feminine[70] but whatever the theorists' particular area of interest is gender is unanimously seen as a play of power relations between men and women.

Hence, since without exception, the Muslim women in the novels I examine in this thesis live and interact in deeply patriarchal societies, a feminist approach provides an appropriate platform from which to launch an examination into their lives. Certainly in her article 'Femininity as Subversion', Fatima Mernissi considers it a legitimate position from which to examine male/female relations in Islamic societies.[17] The most important of her arguments is that Muslim women have always struggled against passive models of femininity and in addition, she makes the startling observation that Muslim communities live in constant fear of women's rebellion. Several of her findings are corroborated in the novels under discussion in this thesis.

More often than not, in many studies by western scholars Muslim societies are simply tarred with strident allegations of male oppression and female subordination regardless of whatever the facts on the ground may be. For instance, when Juliette Minces speaks of an almost 'identical vision of women in Islamic societies' and cites as the basis of this the patriarchal family system favoured by Islam, she neglects to mention specific cultural practices which constitute women as daughters, wives or mothers in the society she studies.[18] Instead such considerations are instead elided under a universal description of an Islamic community. But as Deniz Kandiyoti

rightly points out, there is need to keep in mind that just as there are no universal interpretations of Islam, there is also no universal system of patriarchy because:

> Different systems of male dominance and their internal variations according to class and ethnicity exercise an influence that inflects and modifies the actual practice of Islam as well as the ideological constructions of what may be regarded as properly Islamic.[19]

Sharing a similar view, Fatima Mernissi in *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry (1991)* is also quick to stress the fact that Islam is spawned by the same patriarchal social structures as Judaism and Christianity and should therefore not be considered as any more repressive.[20]

One particular aspect of Islamic culture that is frequently seized upon to illustrate the subjugation of Muslim women is the dress code commonly referred to as the veil which is meant to shield its female wearer from the gaze of non-kin males. The tendency in the West has been to associate this symbolic segregation of the sexes with the subordination of women, and also because of the implied restriction of their movement in the public sphere, with powerlessness. Yet the veil is not mandatory practice in all Muslim societies.[21] Indeed, some Muslim women choose to discard it in protest against their social and political marginalisation. According to Leila Ahmed, some take it up as an expression of a feminist position 'supportive of female autonomy and equality articulated in terms totally different from the language of the west'.[22] Thus to assume that Muslim women are forced in to wear the veil is to disregard the various reasons behind their decisions and to deny them agency. Addressing the reductionism inherent in a lot of Western scholarship on women in the Middle East and North Africa, Marnia Lazreg believes that:

> A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the cause of gender inequality just as it is made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernisation theory. In an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa mirrors that of theologian's own interpretations of women in Islam.... The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being.[23]

In the discursive homogenisation and systematisation of the oppression of "other" women, power is evidently exercised by western feminists. While this may not be entirely unexpected one of the dangers of treating Islamic culture as if it is frozen in time and place is that it obscures the process by which gender is historically, socially and politically constructed. This is why in this particular study, I find the works of contemporary Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El-Saadawi and Leila Ahmed particularly useful. In comparison they appear to be more in tune with the variables that influence the condition of Muslim women's lives. Before their involvement, most feminist discussions on Muslim women pitted a secular and mainly western-inspired discourse against a religious Islamic one. In fact in her earlier writings, Mernmissi too adopted a gladiatorial stance on gender inequality similar to what is found in many western feminist texts. In them she focused on 'the Muslim social order (which) views the female as a potent aggressive individual whose power can if not tamed and curbed, corrode the social order'.[24] But in general while she examines Islam from the perspective of a western ethos, she at the same time attempts to reinterprets its fundamental teachings in such a way that it provides a sanctioning forum for the introduction of new ideas. Increasingly, she feels compelled to launch an historical and theological enquiry in order to prove that:

> We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imparted values but is a true part of the Muslim tradition.[25]

Above, I have attempted to establish a connection between the orientalist and feminist approaches brought to the study of Muslim women. However, most of the scholarship I have so far mentioned is based on women from the Middle East and North Africa. While much of what has been said applies to them as well, surely as West Africans, the situation of Muslim women from Senegal and Nigeria that I concentrate on in later chapters must necessarily have peculiarities specific to them. As Chandra Mohanty asserts, other relations of age, race, class, ethnicity as well as the politics of spaces, locations, margins and identities interlock and come into play with the issue of gender.[26] Her warning is especially pertinent because Western feminists' interpretations of research data about Muslim women often fail to take into

consideration other factors beside religion that make them what they are. It is interesting to observe that in much the same way that Muslim women are viewed in some western feminist texts, African women are also generally produced as a singular monolithic subject. Together as third-world women, they are constructed as an homogenous "powerless" group often located as implicit victims of their particular socio-cultural systems. Variations from one class, generation or region to another are ignored as researchers insist upon their preconceptions.

From available evidence, it seems that like orientalist discourse on Muslims/Arabs, Western feminist studies on African women are based on a binary opposition or a simple inversion of Self and Other, of Us and Them, or as Civilised versus Backward. Chandra Mohanty's belief that Western feminist writings tend to 'colonise the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of other women', [27] is borne out by the habit Western women have of employing Africans as examples in their analysis. The prevailing situation seems to be one where 'Europe is theory' and Africa is 'native informant'. In this power relation, a singular composite image of African women as ignorant and speechless is constructed to exemplify women who are most exploited and oppressed. Aihwa Ong elucidates this point further when she argues that:

> Western feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish their authority on the backs of non-western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives. If from the feminist perspective there can be no shared experience with the persons who stand for the other, the claim to a common kinship with non-western women is at best tenuous, at worst non-existent.[28]

Implicitly, European critical analyse of 'third-world women' present feminism as a Western phenomenon. This not surprisingly has caused great alarm among some African writers and critics who in turn see it as a 'form of imperialism with a woman's face'. In her essay 'Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist', Madhu Kishwar notes that:

> The general flow of ideas and of labels is one way – from West to East, in the overall context of a highly imbalanced power relation, feminism as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural

> imperialism. The definitions, the terminologies, the assumptions, even the issues – the forms of struggle and institutions are exported from West to East, and too often we are expected to be the echo of what are assumed to be more advanced women's movements in the West.[29]

As an example, Kishwar mentions how interested Western feminists are in the question of whether or not India has battered women's homes. The underlying assumption being that not to have such homes is to be at a lower stage of development in the struggle against violence on women. In the same way, those interested in African culture seem to be more committed to narratives of victimhood about African women in spite of the women's own different value systems. Aware of this, literary writers such as Miriam Thali, Bessie Head and Aminata Sow-Fall to mention a few, refuse to identify with the term "feminist". The Nigerian novelist, Buchi Emecheta who explodes popular myths surrounding motherhood in *Joys of Motherhood (1979)* has this say on the subject:

> I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f'.[30]

On another occasion, she declares:

> I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that.... I don't like to be defined by them.... It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land and I say 'okay I can't build on it; I have no money so I give it to some women to start planting'. That is my brand of feminism.[31]

Whether it is called "womanism" or "feminism" there is no doubt that as far as female solidarity and concern for the welfare of their own sex go, African women and even some men are involved with what may be branded feminist activities. But as

Emecheta points out, there are important points of differences between herself and Western feminists. Water, education and other needs for daily survival are often uppermost in the minds of most African women like herself, issues which are not part of the concerns of most Western feminists. Reiterating a similar view Catherine Achonolu affirms that:

> It is impossible, almost suicidal for African women to adopt Western feminist ideologies without regard for the basic fundamental historical, cultural and ideological differences in the experiences, world-view and raison d'être of both cultures.[32]

Hence in this examination of the lives of African women have to deal with, I find it necessary to take into account what Molara Ogundipe-Leslie describes as the "six mountains" weighing down their backs to a lesser or greater degree each of these influence the perceptions and efforts of various women. [33] Undoubtedly the African woman lives in a continent that has experienced assault and mastery of various kinds. Ogundipe-Leslie traces some of the oppression she has encountered can be traced to foreign intrusions into her indigenous way of life. The introduction of first Islam and eventually of Christianity into West Africa disrupted traditional societies and created what to Ogundipe-Leslie describes as 'new oppressed and subjugated stati and roles for women'. Focusing especially on European colonialism, she claims that it brought to the fore traditional ideologies of patriarchy she conceeds may have already existed in Africa. Not only did African women have to contend with the imperialistic activities of the colonialists but they also suffered from Victorian ideas of female helplessness and dependency that the white men brought with them. The result being that some of the equality and authority African women previously enjoyed was weakened. Where once they played important roles in agricultural activities, they became marginalised. What more, not included in the modern educational institutions set up towards the latter part of the colonial era, women continued to loose a great deal of their economic power.

However, while this is a reasonable assessment of the impact colonialism has had on West Africa, I would like to posit that Ogundipe-Leslie's privileging of Western intervention into African society again conforms with the orientalist attitude of ignoring or underestimating how deeply Islam has influenced societies with which it

comes into contact. Indeed in all the texts I examine here, with exception of Sembene *God's Bits of Wood* which at first glance appears more concerned with the effects of capitalism on the African society and individuals, we find characters who are to a large extent preoccupied with how they live according to the Islamic religion they profess.[34] In Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, as the heroine Ramatoulaye braces herself for widowhood, uppermost in her mind is concern with how well she interprets Islam in her life. Her first allegiance is unequivocally to Islam:

> I hope to carry out my duties. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail.[35]

Despite moments of doubt, self-examination and sometimes outright rebellion against perceived injustice, most of the women we will encounter during the course of my investigation are bound to the religion which more than anything else appears to govern their lives.

According to Ogundipe- Leslie he second mountain that sits on the African woman's back is 'built from structures and attitudes inherited from indigenous history and sociological realities'.[36] This view agrees with the observations of the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Writing about the history of the organisation of human society, Mead maintains that every known society was originally structured around the biological differences between men and women and that it is upon this contrast in bodily form and function that men have built analogies between the sun and the moon, strength and tenderness, good and evil that have survived to this day. Different societies assign different qualities to one sex or to the other. In some women are assigned an inferior role because of their sex, while in others, because of their symbolic relationship with the supernatural world as the givers of life, they are highly regarded. In traditional societies, as men and women were identified with one or the other attribute, labour too was divided on the same basis with female work often being regarded as having lesser value. Surprisingly the idea that men have superior claim to advantage and privilege while women are assigned an inferior role can also be found in so-called matrilineal African societies. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, even in such societies, gender hierarchy or in other words male supremacy, is taken for granted. In them, inheritance and authority may pass through women to

the male of the line but men nevertheless still occupy dominant posistions. The notion of the physical control of woman's body, which as we shall see in the texts examined later on is to some extent reinforced by Islam, seems to emanate from the traditional past when a woman and the products of her body were considered the property of her male kin. This attitude has had serious ramifications for the position and status of both the female child in her parental home and of the adult woman in the marital one.

Ifi Amadaiume offers a contrary view In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* when she argues that the rigid gender demarcation found in European societies does not exist in traditional Africa.[38] Citing Igbo society in eastern Nigeria as an example, she insists that gender mobility occurred because of the considerable overlap between the domestic and public domains. And as a result, men and women could cross gender boundaries and share roles and status. Moreover, certain traditional institutions and titles made the manipulation of the gender system possible and allowed African women to share in the power hierarchy. Amadaiume provides as an example what she terms the phenomenon of 'female husbands'. Thus contrary to the victimhood western feminists attribute to African women in polygamous marriages, this indicates that there are times when they play a proactive role in making the arrangements. Similarly, the African phenomenon of the "male daughter" who takes over the leadership of the household in the absence of a capable male and is therefore accorded the respect and dignity that goes with the position is illustrated by the social elevation of the heroine in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*.

African women were able to develop these possibilities of enhancing their position in society because suggests Amadiume, their traditional power had an economic base.[39] Since women could traditionally accumulate wealth through farming or trade, they were able to transform their material prosperity into prestigious titles and political power. This also meant that women had the right to veto in matters of societal importance in their communities, they were in fact what the writer Chinua Achebe calls the 'court of last resort'. Hence it is hardly surprising to find as we do in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* women expediently adopting traditional strategies in their protest against the rigid patriarchal system imposed by Islam.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie goes on to enumerate include their "backwardness" during which their educational development took a back seat to that of their male counterparts and consequently led to their present poverty and ignorance. She is at a disadvantage by her race because the international economic order is divided along racial and class lines, and the black woman is unfortunately placed at the bottom of the ladder. The fifth mountain the African woman has to struggle with is man. Her struggles with this particular obstacle appears to cause her the most pain because he is usually her nearest kin, her father, brother or husband to whom she is bound by ties of love and duty. In addition the opposite sex 'steeped in centuries old attitudes of patriarchy' does not wish to abandon the dominant position that has been advantageous to him and therefore is likely to oppose any idea or person who poses a threat to him. And finally, perhaps the most difficult mountain the African woman has to contend with is herself. As Ogundipe-Leslie explains, 'women are shackled by their own negative self image'. Having from an early age interiorised the demands of tradition and attitudes which relegate their desires to a secondary position, they frequently grow into adults who are incapable of asserting themselves.

I have described Ogundipe-Leslie's various mountains at some length because considered alongside the ideas of Edward Said and Fatima Mernissi, we are brought closer to some kind of framework within which to explore the representations of Muslim women found in West African novels. Taken together, all the above enable us to form a coherent assessment of the condition of West African women. However, while there is comparatively more interaction between the various elements which make up their situation, some produce more deeply felt and longer lasting impression on women.

It is interesting that while much of research has been done on the impact western colonialism has had on Africa, little has been carried out on the combined effects of tradition and Islam on the condition of women in West Africa. In *White Genesis* (1972) Ousmane Sembene writes of the people of Santhui–Niaye that 'they sought comfort in the adda, the tradition'. Observing the same, the importance of tradition on the mentality of Africans is summed up ably by the playwright James Ene Henshaw in the following:

> Tradition is sacred. Custom is above all. To question tradition is sacrilege. If men do not respect tradition how can society stand? How can we be proud of our forefathers and pass our pride to our children? What would happen if you or I were allowed to change our ancient practices as we like? For us, tradition is not a passing thing, it is the earth on which we live and the air which we breath.[40]

In Song of Lawino Okot p'Bitek's narrator advocates the same point of view in *Song of Lawino*:

> The ways of our ancestors are good,
> Their customs solid
> And not hollow
> They are not thin, easily breakable
> They cannot be blown away by the winds
> Because their roots reach deep in the soil.[41]

These passionate endorsements of tradition do not overstate the matter where African societies are concerned. Tradition is the bulwark which society falls back on particularly when its social structure is under threat. It is what protects against the inroads made by foreign ideas into the psyche of Africans. One could argue that people are more likely to let go of traditions than of a religion they have accepted as their own, but from the evidence we shall find in the novels, this is not always what happens. Instead when traditions privilege a section of society they simply seek to legitimise them by linking them firmly to religiously inspired law. One example that immediately comes to mind is the practice of polygamy. Already an institution in Africa, the Islamic law which allows men more than one wife is merely seen as putting a seal of approval on it. Some critics have said that such example of collusion is why Islam has been able to find a home in West Africa. However, a curious situation exists whereby African women are placed in a double bind. They are regarded as the natural custodians of tradition and are expected to act as mediators between the past and the present. Yet on some occasions, when they revert to the same tradition, they are then seen as ignorant and backward. On the other hand, their attempts at finding other ways of coping with new situations are also regarded as a problem. According to Christina Obbo the myth of the good

traditional woman found in numerous texts and the demonisation of the unconventional one have been constructed simply to justify male structures of domination because when men see themselves as the mediators between the present and the future, they in effect allocate to themselves the control of the historical development of society.[42]

Tradition plays a vital role in reinforcing communal ethics and literary writers frequently depict characters defying it at their own risk. But while it remains a recurrent theme in African literature, we will find in the novels examined here that treatment of this subject is somewhat tempered by the strong presence of Islam. In subsequent chapters, I posit that the Islamic religion is an integral part of West African life offering transcendental values that people hold dear. Orientalist approaches to the study of Islam have occluded a better understanding of Islamic realities that have emerged in West Africa, but as George Lang rightly points out, 'Africa is but one of the five cultural spheres in which Islam has found a home and the Arab heartland is but another'.[43] How Islam has developed in West Africa is essential to our understanding of the impact it has had on society and as well as on the consciousness of creative writers. Therefore, in Chapter Two of this thesis I attempt to trace the course Islam has taken in the region, the ways in which it has influenced the people, and conversely, the way Africans mould it to suit their particular needs. To do this, I rely on a number of modern historical accounts as well as the chronicles of Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun and the essays of the 19th century Islamic reformer, Usman dan Fodio and his daughter Nana Asmau. The several research works of John Spencer Trimmingham are particularly useful because not only does he note in them the ways in which West Africans have assimilated Islam, but also the degree to which it fulfils their religious aspirations, but also where these do not find expression in Islam, he investigates by what means and in what directions they are fulfilled. In the same chapter under the subheading 'Muslim Women in West Africa', I pay particular attention to how women have negotiated their place and roles in Islamic societies. After this under the subheading 'Islam and Literature', I undertake a brief examination of how Islam approaches fictional literature as well as the reception and treatment Islam as a subject has encountered at the hands of literary critics. Hopefully, information gathered here will enable a better appreciation of the novels examined in this thesis.

Ogundipe-Leslie is right to recognise the great potential there is in the use of imaginative literature as a 'data source' for the study of women in society.[44] Literature can provide a reliable representation of hard social facts, one has only to read the and the novels I investigate here certainly 'reflect society in the sense of embodying and revealing what pleases that society'. Hence we can look upon them as transmitters of African norms and values and read from them who is considered the virtuous or exemplary woman, what behaviour from both Islamic and traditional perspectives is approved or disapproved of, as well as what are considered viable models of family, society, and women's role in both.

In the next four chapters, I examine in depth a selected number of novels by both male and female West African writers. Their works are strongly marked by a profusion of beliefs and practices that are Islamic in origin but they also draw upon diverse secular ideas and customs. The unifying theme in the novels I examine is the social condition of Muslim women. In my investigation into literary representations of them, I think it appropriate to undertake textual analyses that are sensitive to Quranic hermeneutics in the hope that it will aid a more accurate explanation of how Muslim women are depicted in the various novels. In Chapters Two and Four respectively, the male novelists Ousmane Sembene, a prolific and well received writer in critical circles, and another, Ibrahim Tahir, lesser known and with just one novel *The Last Imam* to his name, describe similar relationships and conditions that the female writers in Chapters Three and Five dwell on. In varying degrees all five writers display concern with the condition of life of women, with the institution of marriage and the practice of polygamy. And significantly, engage with Islamic principles of faith and conduct.

However, as will become evident during the course of this dissertation there are a number of important differences between male and female orientations towards the same material. For example, while Sembene and Tahir are more inclined to condemn authority and launch attacks on apparent sources of social oppression whether disguised as tradition or religion, the women novelists Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow-Fall and Zaynab Alkali concern themselves with the intellectual implications of women's various escapes from victimisation. These women writers appear to be engaged in what Ashcroft and his colleagues in *The Empire Writes Back* appropriately term "subversive manoeuvres". They appear to use their writing to

express a desire for change in their social status as well as in the society around them through positive and enabling interpretations of Islamic instructions concerning their sex. Although each novelist chooses a different area of life to convey the potential inherent in women on the whole their allegiance to Islam is rarely in doubt. Bâ and Alkali concentrate on personal relationships with husbands, fathers and fellow women, while Sow-Fall by espousing the Islamic principle of Zakat (alms giving) which insists on the equitable distribution of society's wealth, paints a more public role for Muslim women. All the novels under discussion here capture the essence of their peculiar cultural matrix and make immense contribution to our knowledge of West African Muslim women.

NOTES

1. Yvonne Hadda, ed., *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pxi, notes how interest in Muslim women is increasingly being reflected in high profile events like the United Nations Population and Development Conference held in Cairo 1994 and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. On both occasions Muslim women had the rare opportunity of speaking for themselves on issues of education and economic welfare instead of the usual "exotic" subjects of female circumcision, infibulation etc. that normally preoccupy the minds of Western women when they turn their attention to other women. See also, *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, ed. by Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Fried, L. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997) which was based in part on the proceedings of the latter conference.

2. Chinua Achebe, 'The Novelist as at Teacher', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* Essays (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975).

3. Kenneth Harrow, ed., *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1991) p 7.

4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); Fatima Mernissi *Beyond the Veil, Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (London: Asqai Books, 1985); Nawal El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (London: Zed Press, 1980). All subsequent references to these texts will be from these editions.

5. Fatna Sabbah, *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984).

6. In Edward Said's formulation of this view in *Orientalism*, Michel Foucault's theory on the relation between power and forms of knowledge looms large although Said also argues that Foucauldian "images of power" are too closely tied to the interests and approaches of those with power to be helpful for elucidating the case of those without it.

7. Edward Said, *The World, The Text and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 292.

8. Roland Barthes: *Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 29.

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 21.

10. S.P. Mohanty, 'Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism', Yale Journal of Criticism 2, 2:1,1987, p. 31.

11. Malika Mehdid, 'The Invention of Arab Womanhood: The "Oriental Female"', in *Women in Muslim Societies*, ed. by Herbert Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

12. Fatima Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001). According to Mernissi the word "harem" derives from the Arabic word "haram" which literally refers to sin, that dangerous frontier where sacred law and pleasure conflict. Haram is what religious law forbids, while the opposite "halal" is that which is permitted. Interestingly, when "haram" crossed to the west it lost some of its connotations.

13. Camillia Fawzi E-Solh and Judy Mabro, eds., *Muslim Women's Choices* (Providence/Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp. 4-5.

14. Herbert Bodman, ed, *Women in Muslim Societies* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 2. Recently, one of the most provocative images used to obtain support for the American led war on Afghanistan is that of Muslim women clad in chadors, their concealed forms were used to symbolise the barbarity of the Taliban regime. But at the same time, this sustained image of women who walked like shadows upon their own land offered very little information about what the women themselves thought about their situation or what strategies of survival they brought to bear upon it.

15. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans.by H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974). See also *The Social Construction of Gender,* ed. by Judith Lorber and Susan Farrel (Newsbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

16. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (London: Virago Press, 1982) and Zaynab Alkali, *The Stillborn* (Essex: Longman 1989). All quotes are from these editions.

17. Fatima Mernissi, "Femininity as Subversion", in *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. by Diana, L. Eck and Devak Jain (London: The Women's Press, 1986), pp. 88-100.

18. Juliette Minces, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society* (London: Zed Press,1982), p. 23. In assuming that 'women in the third world' is a legitimate and separate subject of study, the Zed Press series to which the

above belongs has made some unique and important contributions. However, while numerous titles have appeared under the Zed name, a number of which are excellent expositions on women's struggles, texts such as that of Minces exemplify the kind of western feminist writing which unfortunately dispense with the ethics of responsibility, when writing about 'different' women.

19. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy", in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. by N.R. Keddie and B. Baron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 24.

20. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. vii.

21. In his recent travels in the Sahara for the BBC which was televised in September 2002, Michael Palin made surprising discovery Among the Muslim Taureg tribes that roam the desert, it is men rather than women who cover their faces. Here it is those higher up in the social hierarchy that screen themselves from the profane gaze of those considered lesser than themselves.

22. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 226.

23. Marnia Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', in *Feminist Issues* 14:1 1988, p. 87.

24. Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (see pp. 31-33) received much critical acclaim when it first came into western knowledge precisely because its fearless, analysis of women's situation in an Islamic society was unheard of before then.

25. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* p. vii.

26. Mohanty's view that this is part and parcel of the appropriation of knowledge by the west echoes what Edward Said writes about at length in *Orientalism*.

27. Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in *Feminist Review*, No. 30 (Autumn 1988), pp. 62-63. The term 'colonisation' is usually employed to describe economic and political hierarchies, but Mohanty's definition of the word, which I find useful here is predominantly a discursive one.

28. Aihwa Ong, 'Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Representations of Women in Non-Western Societies' in *Inscriptions* 3/4 (1988) p. 80. Theories advanced as being universally applicable to women as a group on closer examination are frequently limited by the middle class origins of their proponents. For example Nancy Chodrow's work on sex role socialisation in 'Family Structure and Feminine Personality' in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 43-66. See also Chodrow's *The Reproduction*

of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press,1983). Carol Gilligan's, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). While these classics make key contributions to feminist theory they simultaneously promote the notion of a generic woman who is white and middle class.

29. Manushi 61 (Nov-Dec 1990) p. 3. See also Maivan Clech Lam, 'Feeling Foreign in Feminism' in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19.4 (Summer 1994), pp. 865-93; Sara Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Post Colonial Condition', in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992), pp. 756-69.

30. Buchi Emecheta, 'Feminism with a small f' in *Criticism and Ideology*, ed. by Kirsten Petersen (Stockholm: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), p. 175.

31. Quoted in *Gender in African Women's Writing* by Juliana Makuchi Ngah-Abbenig (Bloomington and Indiana Polis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 7.

32. Catherine Achonolu, *Motherism: The Afro-centric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa Publications, 1995), p. 103.

33. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton: African World Press, 1994), pp. 27-36.

34. Ousmane Sembene, *Gods Bits of Wood,* trans. by Francis Price (London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1985). *Xala* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1976).

35. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 8.

36. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves,* p. 33.

37. Margaret Mead, *A Study of the Sexes in a Challenging World* (London: Victor Golanez Ltd. 1950), p. 7.

38. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed Books), p. 163.

39. Ibid. See also Catherine Coquery – Vidrovitch, *African Women: A Modem History* (Oxford: West View Press, 1997).

40. James Ene Henshaw, *Children of the Goddess and Other Plays* (University of London Press, 1964), p. 19.

41. Okot p.Britek, *Songs of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House,1968).

42. Christina Obbo, *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence* (London: Zed Press, 1980), p. 143.

43. George Lang, 'Through a Prism Darkly: "Orientalism in European Language African Writing"', in *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1991), p. 305.

44. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves*, p. 43.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When the historian Peter Clarke states in the introduction to his book that 'Islam in West Africa is not peripheral to or a mere appendage of the Muslim world', he echoes an earlier statement made by John Spencer Trimmingham who pioneered research on the subject of Islam in Africa.[1] In his seminal work *Islam in West Africa* (1959), Trimmingham writes that 'Islam has become an African religion... As it spread among Africans Islam was conditioned by their outlook and customs, but Islam in turn changed their outlook and customs'. He goes on to add that because of this reciprocal influence, 'every Muslim society varies in its understanding and practice of Islam'.[2] This statement sums up correctly Islam's long contact with West Africa during which the religion has occupied different positions and taken up different attitudes towards the host society. The impact of Islam has long been deeply felt. This is why before embarking on an analysis of selected novels I find it pertinent to first outline in summary the region's earliest contact with Islam. I deliberately select events and phenomena which convey what I believe are the salient features of that historical encounter particularly with regard to religious beliefs, women's lives, the colonial era, and the implications it has had on modern West African literature.

In both Nigeria and Senegal, the two countries I focus on especially in this thesis, an overwhelming majority of inhabitants are Muslims, about eighty percent in the case of Senegal and more than half the population of Nigeria's 150 million people. My intention in this chapter is to trace the "making" of this huge Muslim community by embarking on an assessment of the historical impact Islam has had on the area. This is a necessary task because the themes, subject matters, even methods we find in the novels examined in subsequent chapters arise out of the writers' sense of themselves as Muslims. The images represented in their novels as well as the various positions adopted by individual writers on social and political issues have in many cases their correspondence in history. Furthermore undertaking this exploration of the past, ancient and recent, will go some way towards elucidating the main preoccupations of the novels.

WEST AFRICA'S FIRST CONTACT WITH ISLAM

It is interesting to note that opinion is divided as to how West Africa was first introduced to Islam, whether it happened through conquest and therefore by the sword, or whether it was through trade between Muslim North African traders and their counterparts south of the Sahara desert. The historian Lamin Sanneh insists that Islam arrived in West Africa through military conquest. According to him, in the 7th century, an Arab conqueror by the name of Uqba ibn Nafi, led his forces from their base in Kairouan near Egypt into Southern Morocco, and thence into Western Sahara.[3] After Ibn Nafi's conquest of the nomadic Sanhaja Berbers who roamed the Sahara came one Abd Allah ibn Yasin who sought to teach the restless Berbers about Islam. As a teacher who had studied and trained in the holy city of Medina, he took this task seriously and subjected his pupils to a severe discipline of reform. However, he was also an able and inspiring military leader and under him, his followers who came to be known as the Almoravids, conducted campaigns farther afield and took control of the caravan cities of Sijilmasa and Awdaghust. Eventually, their military campaigns moved south into the land of the non-Muslim Negro people of West Africa.

Mervyn Hiskett and Nehemia Levtzion in their respective histories of Islam in West Africa hold a contrary view to that of Lamin Sannah as to when Islam was first introduced into this area. According to them it cannot be claimed that the Almoravids introduced Islam into West Africa since two hundred years earlier it had already penetrated into Western Sudan.[4] Hiskett and Levtzion are both convinced that Islam's first contact with West Africa occurred through the agency of merchants who for centuries plied the trans-Saharan trade routes. These North African merchants arrived in Kanem-Bornu area in present day Nigeria and travelled through to Ghana in search of foodstuff, slaves, and gold. This theory that Islam was first introduced into the region by merchants, who in some cases were also missionaries, seems more likely. Gold especially was the medium of exchange in the Muslim world, therefore it is reasonable to conclude that Muslim merchants were attracted to plentiful supplies of the product coming out from south of the desert.

Nevertheless, in spite of early contact with North African Muslims, by 1076AD the majority of Ghanaians remained steadfast in their allegiance to their ancestral religion. During the period 965-1040 A.D., the state of Takrur located in the Senegambia area rose to prominence to became what was effectively the first Muslim state in West Africa. Here again it was probably the salt mines of Awil close to River Senegal which attracted Muslim merchants into the area. The scholar Al-Bakri records in his *Book of Journeys and Kingdoms* (1068) that salt was valued so highly during that time that it could be exchanged in some places for its equivalent weight in gold [5]. He goes on to give an account of how the ruler of Takrur War-Dyabe was won over to Islam. Writing of his ruler's conversion and the creation of an Islamic state which came about as a result of it, Al-Bakri notes that the people of Takrur were mainly adherents of the indigenous religion who worshipped such idols as Dukur until War-Dyabe 'established among them the laws of Islam, forcing them to obey these laws after his own eyes had been opened to the truth (Islam)'.[6] A Portuguese account cited in *France and West Africa* (1969) also provides information about the state of Islam among the neighbouring Wolof people who inhabited the provinces of Walo, Cayor, Sine and Saloum which made up the Jolof Kingdom in the 15th century. They were known to have highly stratified societies, some ten castes being distinguished below the monarchy. This account states that by 1507:

> The king and all the lords and nobles of Gyloff (Jolof, heartland of the empire) are Muslims and have bischerys (marabouts) who are priests and preachers of Mohammed and can read and write. These marabouts come from far in the interior, for example from the kingdom of Fez and of Morocco and they come to convert these Negroes to their faith by their preachers. These marabouts make amulets written in Arabic and put them on the neck of the Negroes and also on their horses.[7]

From the above it seems that Muslim religious teachers were working among the Wolof in the Senegambia area by the 16th century. Their activities were not however confined to the mosques or making amulets in Arabic for the people. They also played an important part in the life of the royal court such as presiding over ceremonies like the sacred bathing ritual conducted on newly enthroned rulers.

Over the centuries as kingdoms emerged in West Africa, they exerted great political and economic influence over large land areas. Between the 13th and 14th centuries it was the turn of Mali to rise to prominence and at the height of its power, the empire stretched from Senegal in the northwest to Air in the northeast and south almost to the forest zone. According to historians, Mali was founded by Sunjata Kaita (or Sundiata) who is described by Mervyn Hiskett as a 'nominal' Muslim.[8] Sunjata eventually became the great hero of Mandinka tradition and is still remembered today by griots, the traditional chroniclers, for his strength and magical feats.[9] But it was under Mansa Musa who reigned from 1312-1337 that the empire enjoyed what can be termed its 'Golden Age'. His reign is particularly noteworthy because it was his legendary pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 that brought the empire renown in the Middle East and as far as Europe. Tales abound of how the gifts of gold he distributed on that journey were so generous he single-handedly brought down the price of gold in the Mediterranean. Pilgrimage to Mecca, the fifth pillar of the Islamic faith is above all a religious duty, a profound spiritual experience which helps to reinforce the feeling of oneness or unity among Muslims. It is of historical significance because it brought West Africans closer acquaintance with the religion as it is practised in Mecca and North Africa [10] and in so doing increased West Africa's contact with intellectual influences and ideas prevalent in the rest of the Muslim world. [11] Just how much those affected life in West Africa will became apparent later on in this chapter.

To return to Mali's place in the development of Islam in West Africa, Mende speaking traders from the upper Niger region of the empire extended their trading network far and wide and establishing pockets of Islam wherever they set up trading posts. From their performance of Islamic prayers and other religious practices, they must have given the people they encounter some idea of the Muslim way of life. However, Peter Clarke cautions that while these traders frequently acted as missionaries, it would be wrong to give the impression that they went about actively propagating Islam among non-Muslim people. [12] Indeed some cases they were known to have lived in isolation from the indigenous people among whom they settled and even went as far as to maintain that it was not part of their duty to convert non-Muslims to Islam. [13] Their opinion was that members of other faiths, including traditional

religionists, who lived good and upright lives may be saved without becoming Muslims.

We owe much of the earliest description of Malian Muslim life to Ibn Battuta's written account of this period of history. In 1352 Ibn Battuta travelled to the main cities of Mali and was highly impressed by the way Muslims there meticulously observed the five daily prayers and attendance at congregational prayers on Friday. 'On Fridays' he wrote, 'if a man does not go early to the mosque he cannot find space to pray because of the large number of people there'. The people apparently also demonstrated great concern with cleanliness which appears to be a direct result of their Islamic faith. They would 'put on good white clothes on Friday and if a person had only a tattered shirt he washed it and wore it for the Friday service in the mosques'. [14] So great was the importance attached to the learning of the Quran by heart that parents made sure that their children applied themselves seriously to the task and punished them severely for laziness or indifference. What emerges from Ibn Battuta's account is a picture of a prosperous, literate society which owed much of its development to the influence of Arabic Islamic culture. However, despite obvious ethnocentric tendencies, he was forced to acknowledge that Islam did not arrive into a socio-cultural vacuum in Mali. He notes with some amazement traditions and practices regarding women, marriage, and inheritance that were distinct from what obtained in other Islamic societies in other parts of the world:

> Their women were of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever, no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brothers. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorising the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves though they are assiduous in attending the prayers. [15]

It seems that while there was strict adherence to many Islamic precepts, this West African society retained its own concept of the status of women and the rights that accrue to them through a matrilineal system of inheritance in spite of having adopted a religion that is firmly rooted in a patriarchal heritage. Furthermore, these customs were approved of by Muslim rulers including other practices such as prostrating before the King, a particularly African phenomenon which remains to this day even though orthodox Muslims believe one should only prostrate only as a sign of submission to God. [16] Divination was also widespread and almost all traditional titles given to court and government officials continued to be used. It seems that when Islam was adopted, West African societies did not immediately change their social structures but remained entities distinguished by their own patterns of custom. In time Islam became closely intertwined with traditional communal life, but it did so without disrupting existing basic structures. While new features were superimposed, traditional customs, the composition of the extended family, the status of women, the authority of the ruler and so on were little affected.

The fashioning of the somewhat unique character of West African Islam took place over a long period of time. Indeed, until around 1600 A.D. the spread of Islam in West Africa was in fact slow. Initially, it seemed to have made little impact on the way of life or the beliefs of the rural majority whose daily life remained harmony with the rhythm of traditional religion, its fertility rites, ancestor worship, and the supplication of the deities. This traditional African way of life needs further elaboration as it plays a major part in the representations of the societies found in the novels I examine in later chapters.

As was mentioned earlier, J.S. Trimmingham provides invaluable reference material in his detailed analysis of traditional African cosmology. In *Islam in West Africa* he asserts that although Africans have always believed in the idea of a Supreme Being (e.g. 'Soko' among the Nupe and 'Olorun' among the Yoruba) who is regarded as the Creator of the universe, as in Islam this deity in contrast to their traditional belief and the world of spirits is considered, an impersonal and unknowable entity. The Creator is viewed as the generator of the spirit force which after animating various forms of creation such as the ancestors, men, animals and things then returns to the Creator. Through this dynamic relationship the whole world is pervaded by the same power or life force and harmony is preserved when men maintain a state of equilibrium. In

traditional society this is achieved through ritual action whereby ancestral spirits and the forces of nature are appeased by specialists who possess both the knowledge and the power to deal with them through rites and divinatory practices. It is believed that death results from the disruption of the harmony between these forces. However since the dead remain an integral part of earthly existence, they can be applied to for help through the head of the living family that is the father figure who in the words of Trimmingham, is 'the harmoniser.... earthly steward of the family estates....the trustee to the ancestors for the welfare of the family and its heritage'. [17] Beside the spirits of the ancestors, society also has to contend with the spirits of the natural world, hence presence the rituals surrounding fecundity and the cyclic resurrection of vegetation.

According to the Kano Chronicles, Islam met with considerable opposition from the adherents of traditional religion. [18] In some areas of northern Nigeria which today is predominantly Islamic, there was great reluctance on the part of local inhabitants to support or to recognise the authority of Muslim rulers. For example, Sarki Kanejeji of the city state of Kano was forced to revive the cult of Tsumburburai, the spirit of Dalla hill and the adjacent grove of Jakara. Indeed, during the first few centuries, as far as most of the ordinary people who converted to Islam were concerned, the new religion appears to have been more of 'a supplement, an addition to their traditional religion', rather than something that replaced their old belief system. They remain attached to the conviction that their strength, welfare, and survival as a community was linked to a close and continual observance of their traditional beliefs and practices. Most converts therefore, as Lamin Sanneh points out, 'kept one foot in the old traditions and simply drew on their new faith in terms congruent with earlier custom and usage'. [19]

Some scholars believe that compared to Christianity, Islam found easy acceptance in West Africa only because it began 'in continuity with the old, demanding little radical change as a consequence'. [20] An often cited example of this is the institution of marriage. While for Christianity, the traditional marriage system, particularly the key institutions of polygamy and bride-price (dowry) proved to be serious obstacles to overcome, Islamic demands on the other hand appeared to conform with customary practice. It is arranged that this type of adaptation to the African situation gave Islam added advantage in securing followers, and in some cases, even won it

some genuine adherents. However, other historians such as Lamin Sanneh are not convinced of Islam's tolerance. He insists that it was not so much the flexibility of Islam that enabled it to find a home in West Africa, but rather the capacity of African religions 'for subtle response and adaptability'. [21]

This argument is dealt with in more detail in Trimmingham's study of Yoruba and Nupe societies in Nigeria. [22] According to him, these two societies have assimilated Islamic elements into existing frameworks. He asserts for example that the esteem in which Islamic learning is held among the Nupe people derives directly from traditional understanding of the function of the masters of religious craft who are deeply venerated this society. Islam may have broadened the Nupe conception of what constitutes knowledge to include not only those who possess knowledge of political and dynastic affairs, but also those with competence in reading the Quran and the making of charms. In common practice, religion and magic are always not clearly separated. This is probably because in their endeavour to dissuade people from offering sacrifices to the spirits, Muslim clerics offer protection through what might be described as an Islamic magical method. Clients are given amulets and charms which contain verses from the Quran, the names of angels and jinns, mysterious formulas, and sometimes taboos which must be observed to ensure the efficacy of the prayer. To the wearer, the amulet is magical in operation but also religious because it draws upon the name of God and His angels. Consequently both the traditional priest and the Islamic cleric are invariably seen by the Nupe as practitioners of *boche* (medicine). Similarly, Islamic funeral rites and the idda, which is the period of mourning observed by Muslim women, have been assimilated into pre-existing tradition and reinterpreted as the means of eliminating the contamination of death, releasing the soul and rendering it harmless to the living. In the same way Islamic taboos regarding social relationships, for example incest, spoke to what the people already understood. Crearly, the early period of the Islamisation process in West Africa was marked by accommodation and syncretism. The new harvest festival as well as the notion of eating one's fill on the day to symbolise hope for plenty in the time to come has also become fused with 10th Muharram, the beginning of the Islamic calendar. This in many instances Islam has brought about little or no change in psychological attitudes towards traditional beliefs and practices. While at firs glance the adoption of Islam may imply a transference of the values upon which the unity and continuity of the society depended, in reality, indigenous ideas and

institutions continue to be retained in the communal memory, particularly that strong sense of community which even under conditions of great change has remained a vital part of African society. Indeed through the sharing of common religious practices such as congregational prayers, fasting and so on, Islam has in fact reaffirmed that traditional notion of community.

In his studies, Trimmingham identifies as three overlapping stages spanning the "animist" stage when the encounter with Islam was little removed from traditional practice and Islam did not appear to demand a violent break with the past. He describes the second stage as when rather than just individuals, whole villages and towns adopted the new religion. The final stage occurs when it becomes firmly entrenched as the society's main religion. It is during this stage that the greatest changes in social and religious life occur as influential groups of Muslims begin to demand that society give up entirely inherited safeguards and to base life completely around a rigorous form of Islam. Allah becomes recognised, perhaps because of some communal calamity, as a stern but righteous power who will not tolerate other gods besides himself. Belief in the efficacy of Islam's religious sanctions increased and mosques become the nerve centres of society. Children are sent to Quran schools and their revered teachers become the new figures of authority. During this last stage, the revolutionary force of Islam became more evident as it seeks to eliminate forms of old worship and to enforce a more orthodox practice of Islam. [23]

WIDENING HORIZONS

The above does not pretend to be an exhaustive account of the earliest stages of contact between West Africa and Islam, but it provides a rough outline of the prevailing situation which eventually led to the next phase of growth. This is the period during which the spread of Islam gained impetus and the religion became more entrenched in the consciousness of the people. Until around the 17th century, Islam was mainly the religion of the ruling elite, the merchant class, and of town dwellers, but later, particularly between the 18th and 19th centuries, its spread gained momentum among various people in different kinds of environments, from the nomadic Fulani people who roamed around the Savannah area of west Africa with their cattle to more sedentary people like the Hausa, Nupe, and the Yoruba in the forest zone.

According to Trimmingham, during the early stages of establishing itself, the Islamic religion needed a strong urban base in order to thrive and this was duly provided by towns in where commerce, industry, and learning was concentrated.[24] These urban centres provided West African Muslims with opportunities of encountering other influences such as the teachings and writings of foreign scholars such as the Egyptian Al-Suyuti and the Andalucian Al-Maghili who sojourned among them.[25] In particular, the writings of Al-Maghili were to have far reaching consequences for the political and religious history of West Africa. In a document titled *'The Crown of Religion Concerning the Obligations of Princes'* written on the request of Mohammad Rumfa (1463-1499), the ruler of Kano in what is modern day Nigeria, he stressed that the ambition to dominate and rule others is not one of the characteristics of a good Muslim ruler: 'It is an obligation for every sane person to be sure to avoid the Emirship unless it is unavoidable for him'. He adds that, 'let your ambition, all of it, be for the sake of God, for God did not appoint you over them to be their Lord and Master. Rather, you were appointed to improve their faith and welfare'.[26] In chapter two of the same treatise, he goes on to advise Muslim rulers against lying to their subjects 'If you speak, speak the truth. And if you make a promise, keep it'.[27] The main point Al-Maghili makes made is that 'the condition of the ruler and the condition of the subjects are two scales of a balance, so dispose wisely by increasing or decreasing until the scales balance'.[28] Almost every chapter of the document ends with this warning to Muslim rulers, 'the height of Affliction is the isolation of the ruler from the subjects', an admonition which from what we shall find in the various novels of Sembene , Tahir, and Sow-Fall remains as valid in today's West Africa as when Al-Maghili wrote it several centuries ago.

For a long while in West Africa, different perceptions of Islam and how it is meant to be practiced existed side by side with each other. There were for instance, those who could be described as the 'accommodationists' who believed that various cultures and belief systems could co-exist. An example of such a person is recreated in the fictional character of Kaka, the grandfather, in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. But what mainly concerned Al-Maghili and students who studied his work was the corruption brought about by immorality, the taking of bribes, false religious beliefs, and the adulteration of Islam by Muslim rulers who mixed their Islamic faith with traditional beliefs and practices. Trimmingham concedes that Islam flourished because it possessed certain assets. Perhaps the most important of all was its

certainty of being the true faith. It was this that probably impressed most rather than the idea of one God. Further more Islam also offered a recognisable heaven of material and sensual bliss and the confident assurance Muslims displayed of attaining this Paradise may have exercised an attraction for others. The problems of life are solved because Islam appears to have answers to both those of this world and of the hereafter. However it is important point to note is that while the Islamic moral consciousness is undeniable to all intents and purposes communal, and though its laws extend to all who acknowledge it, in contrast to tradition, its doctrine of reward and punishment is in fact much more personal because it places ultimate responsibility on the individual. Such an attitude as we shall find below not surprisingly, would have implications for the historical progress of Islam in West Africa and indeed on how the religion is perceived and practiced by different people at different times.

To fully comprehend how Islam came to consolidate its position in West Africa, we need to take into account a major phenomenon, that is, the Islamic reform movements otherwise known as the Jihads. The word 'Jihad' has come to mean different things to different people, but for Muslims, the word generally means 'striving in the path of Allah'. This effort or striving can be performed in a number of ways. There is the jihad of the heart whereby the Muslim strives to purify the soul of evil thoughts and desires. Then there is the jihad of the tongue which consists of warning people of wrongdoing. And finally, there is the jihad of the hand, which literally consists of lifting the hand to administer Islamic disciplinary measures. This sometimes means open warfare either to defend or to reform Islam and it is meant to be the last resort after the first two kinds of jihads have been exhausted. Several jihad al-sayf (of the sword) have taken place in West Africa. The earliest recorded is the one led by Nasr al-Din in 1673-1677 which established a precedent for others to follow, for example, the jihads of Usman dan Fodio 1804-1812, of Seku Ahmadu in 1810, and that of Hajj Umar in 1850. Most of these movements covered large areas of land and incorporated a variety of language groups. The historian Mervyn Hiskett notes, that these holy wars were similar in certain religious and political characteristics the most important point of difference being that while some occurred before the colonial era, others took place after the European colonial campaigns began. [29]

Here, I shall focus on the jihad of Usman dan Fodio not only because its impact resonates to this day in Northern Nigeria, the area where he established the seat of his Caliphate, but also because it has had the greatest repercussion across the West African region. Several other prominent jihadists such as Ahmad ibn Muhammad are known to have sought and received banners and blessings from dan Fodio when they embarked on their campaigns of reform. Through their combined efforts, these jihadists successfully extended the frontiers of what can be termed Dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam). But what factors contributed to this outcome? And why did a particular language group, the Fulani or Fulbe, to which Fodio and the others belong, appear to monopolise these movements?

It is important to remember that prior to colonialism, the boundaries which exist today in West Africa were more fluid and that therefore people moved about more easily. The Fulani in particular being of nomadic stock roamed the grasslands from the Senegambia area to the bend of River Niger in Nigeria. [30] In the process they established a network of contacts with people who spoke the same language as well as with the Tauregs who lived on the fringes of the Sahara desert. Although traditionally a wandering people, over time they settled among other people such as the Wolof, Hausa, Nupe and others or established their own settled communities. It seems that the solitude of their earlier lifestyle had encouraged learning and soon from their ranks came people well versed in the Quran, Hadith, Islamic law and theology. As Hiskett notes, there has certainly been a long tradition of Islamic literacy among the Fulani a number of which chose to teach and preach, and either joined or established Islamic communities where they carried out missionary activities. Some went into service in the courts of the rulers as scribes and advisers. And Altogether they They formed a class of people who had studied and been influenced by the writings of respected Islamic scholars such as Al-Suyuti, Al-Maghili, and Al-Ghazali. Through their activities increasing emphasis was placed on written sources as the guide for to the way Muslims should behave and on the way society ought to be governed and this led eventually to a change in the character of Islam in West Africa. Islam became a set of clearly defined laws that had to be preserved from contamination and many scholars who felt that they were living in societies where Islam was in grave danger of losing its true identity took the decision to step back to the Quran and Hadith to revive the teachings contained in them.

From available historical evidence, it seems that Usman dan Fodio's jihad was initially not targeted at non-Muslim populations, but rather was an attempt to purify the practice of those who already profess the Islamic faith. Thus he launched verbal attacks on 'venal mallams' Muslim teachers who preached and taught Islam although they themselves were inadequately or poorly trained. He accused them of presenting people with misleading interpretations of Islamic doctrine and in one of his written texts titled the "Lamp of the Brethren", he cites al-Maghili's criticism of such practice: 'One of their characteristics is that they are not Arabic-speaking; they understand no Arabic except a little of the speech of the Arabs of the town in an incorrect and corrupted fashion so that they do not understand the intentions of the scholars'. [31] This matter of the incompetence of some Muslim clerics which often rears its head in West African literature has always been a thorny issue. Sometimes in fiction they are ridiculed as Mabigue is in Senbene's *God's Bits of Wood* or as Mallam Shuaibu is in Tahir's *The Last Imam.* At other times they are seen as dangerous for both the physical and spiritual welfare of their people. In Fodio's view as it was in al-Maghili's, it was vital for Muslim clerics to understand the writings of respected orthodox Muslim scholars. The end product of this emphasis on literacy however, is that it created a sentiment of universalism, 'a feeling that the whole Islamic world was one and therefore any divergence from the central pattern laid down in the Sunna, the "Tradition" of the Prophet was intolerable'. [32]

The desire to create an ideal Muslim society inevitably projected Usman dan Fodio headlong into conflict with the rulers of Hausaland whom he accused of supporting un-Islamic practices. In retaliation, and in order to curtail the growing influence of Fodio and his followers, the reigning ruler of Gobir by the name of Nafata issued a proclamation in 1797-8 forbidding a son from adopting a religion different from that of his father. The wearing of the turban and veil, garments by which Muslims identified themselves were also proscribed. Inevitably tension mounted as Muslims saw these various instructions as infringements of their rights. Hence, following the example of Prophet Mohammed who made hijra (a planned withdrawal from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D) when his community was threatened, Fodio too withdrew to a place called Gudu on the outskirts of Sokoto in 1804. This served to increase his popularity and many people, Fulani, Hausa, and Taureg, flocked to join him recognising in him the Mahdi, the deliverer or saviour which popular Muslim tradition believe would restore order, peace, justice and the true religion to a morally degenerate world. Soon after,

Fodio was elected imam and, as the Amir-al-Muminin (the commander of the faithful). According to the Kano Chronicles, after his community was attacked by a punitive expedition from Gobir in the early months of 1804, the Muslims prepared to defend themselves and thus the jihad of the sword was launched in Hausa land. In time this culminated in the military conquest of a vast area of land which eventually came to be known as the Sokoto Caliphate. [33]

Several historians, Levtzion, Hiskett, and Clarke to mention a few, caution against seeing Usman dan Fodio as an extremist or an intolerant man. Indicating the volume of writing he produced, they believe that in order to put his views across he was more inclined to preaching, teaching, and discussion rather than the use of force. For instance, when one Jibril ibn Umar argued that a Muslim reverted to the status of unbeliever if he commits certain wrong doings, such as marrying in excess of the recommended four wives, Fodio quoted the Egyptian scholar al-Suyuti in reply saying that 'in truth wrong doing does not cause faith to lapse, nor does innovation'. Doctrinal justification for his jihad is given in a letter known as 'Wathiqat ahl-al-Sudan' the purpose of which was to make clear to Muslims what was lawful and what was unlawful. It states what an individual Muslim or community was obliged to do where Islamic principles were not being observed particularly in those states which profess to be Islamic. The central theme of his teaching which after his death was carried on by his brother Abdullah, his son Muhammad Bello, daughter Nana Asmau and indeed all later reformers in West Africa was that the 'Muslim has a duty to command what is right and forbid what is evil', a theme the various writers I examine in later chapters appear to also incorporate into their novels. By the latter end of the 19th century, the large land area under the Sokoto caliphate became part of dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam), at least in terms of the consciousness of its numerous inhabitants. So well did Usman dan Fodio succeed in creating a viable Islamic state, the British colonial government which eventually established authority over it was loath to interfere with the structures put in place. And thus by preserving the cultural and political autonomy of northern Nigeria, this powerful western power in effect conferred a stamp of legitimacy on Muslim leadership, slamic governance and culture.

MUSLIM WOMEN IN WEST AFRICA

When Ayesha Imam writes that 'it has not been the case that discourses sympathetic to women sympathetic have been entirely lacking in the history of Islam after all, but that they have not been able to attain authority' she correctly sums up the relegation of women's histories of any kind. [34] Without going into a detailed discussion of the reasons why this is so, suffice to say that as with many discourses, the male perspective dominates historical accounts of Islam in West Africa and little is revealed to us about the lives of women. Indeed, the following investigation of women's encounter with Islam in which I argue that women did not necessarily experience the process of Islamisation in the same way as men relies mainly on sociological rather than historical sources. [35] Below, I show that women also have a history, albeit a hidden one, of interpreting, negotiating, and acting as men do when confronted with new ideas and ways of doing things. As members of society, they live in social and political contexts where they play certain roles therefore, here I shall attempt to explore how historical factors of tradition, colonial rule, and post-independence political and economic patterns shape these contexts while simultaneously paying particular attention to how Islamic ideology and law set the tone of their involvement.

Ibn Battuta's description of a 14th century West African Islamic society mentioned earlier in this chapter, paints a revealing picture of women who observed many Islamic precepts and yet who nonetheless maintained a mode of behaviour that is inherited from pre-Islamic times. Freedom of movement and of interaction with the opposite sex is implied in ibn Battuta's statement that 'their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves though they are assiduous in attending the prayer'. It seems that in spite of having adopted the Islamic religion, this particular community retained an indigenous concept of women's place in society. However, over the several centuries of Islam's presence in West Africa, female manners and behaviour have undergone some transformation and this is vividly illustrated in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's description of a latter day Muslim woman in his novel *Ambiguous Adventure*:

> They called her the Most Royal Lady... the little white gauze veil clung to the oval of a face of full contours.... It was like a living page from the history of the Diallobe country. Everything that the country treasured of

> epic tradition could be read there.... An extraordinarily luminous gaze bestowed a kind of imperious lustre upon this face.... Islam restricted the formidable turbulence of those features in the same way that the little veil hemmed them in. [36]

This passage conveys eloquently how centuries of Islamic influence have affected the demeanour of one West African woman. A deep-seated pride in her traditional heritage and a apparently consciousness of her duty as the custodian of the ancient ways and values of her people is apparently constrained by a strict observance of Islamic practice. Between the time Ibn Battuta wrote his account of their social status and the colonial period during which Kane situates the character he calls the Most Royal Lady, what happened to West African women? What socio-religious changes did they experience to arrive at their present identity as Muslim women? These are questions that need to be answered if we are to fully appreciate the choices and struggles of the women characters we will later encounter in the novels that this study focuses on.

In their various researches into the subject, Janice Boddy, Pamela Constanades and Sandra Hale claim that evidence that women once played central roles in the religious life of their societies can be found in the traditional cults of spirit possession such as found among a number of Arab communities in north Africa, the Sudan, and the bori cults of the Hausa people of northern Nigeria. [37] Spirit possession manifests itself in the form of hysteria and people who suffer attacks of it turn to the bori priestess for remedy. Treatments vary, but the most important method employed is the control of spirits (iskoki) by initiation in a ceremony that lasts several days and involves the participation of all initiates male and female attached to the particular cult. [38] As Trimmingham points out the introduction of Islam could have spelt the end of bori cults but instead, while Islam was accepted as the religion of the aristocratic class, the cults continued to flourish as the 'religion of the lower social strata', particularly of women and slaves. [39] Many of the practices associated with this form of religion that were once undertaken by the whole community then evolved to become intimately linked to women who make up a larger percentage of the cults' practitioners.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the old West African kingdoms including those of the Hausa speaking people of northern Nigeria were the locus of an extremely tolerant form of Islam, one which drew simultaneously upon the spiritual forces of traditional religion as well as upon the strengths of monotheistic Islam. Barbara Cooper notes that the two were easily reconciled primarily because much of the Islamic world already appears to recognise the existence of spirits and jinns. [40] Consequently in time, the pantheon of local powers the Hausa people associated with natural features such as rocks, hills, trees or lakes were generally reinterpreted into spirits that were far less earth bound as is found in Islam.

However, this process of integration was rarely complete, so even as the old spirits acquired new names which reflected the culture's historical experience of Islam, religious life for the most part continued to rest on a double foundation, the traditional animist under layer and the Islamic super structure. To support her theory, Cooper cites the example of a Hausa woman, Baba of Karo, who once explained to the anthropologist Mary Smith how the Hausa spirit cult has functions parallel to that of Islam: 'The work of malams (Islamic clerics) is one thing, the work of bori experts is another, each has his own kind of work and they must not be mixed up. There is the work of malams, of bori, of magicians, of witches, they are all different but at heart everyone loves the spirits'. [41] Thus it seems that society did not totally disengage from the old ways. In addition, it seems that whereas under Islam men dominated religious institutions as they did governmental positions, the old religion appeared to provide women with more opportunities of exercising influence in their societies. For instance, traditionally, the bori cult was overseen by a titled woman (the Magajiya) who was usually the sister or aunt of the king. This confirms Ifi Amaduime's assertion in her research that titled positions for women were a common practice in Africa. Certainly through bori cults and the formal recognition accorded to them, Hausa women gained visible religious and political power. In some places, the head of the bori cult could even demand tribute from the male ruler, lead troops to war, or as Barbara Cooper reports from personal observation, hold important judicial responsibilities by acting as a kind of *joji* (western judge) or *alkali* (Muslim judge) for fellow cult members. One Hajiya Jeka that Cooper interviewed had this to say:

> That is right. Each would come to greet her, and kneel in respect, just as they would before the king. Now the king only has power over men,

> he gathers the men, and if a man does something wrong he would be brought before the king, and if it was a matter for Sharia law, then he would be brought to the Imam, he's the one who does Sharia. Now the inna (or iya) does her own judging. For her bori adepts. [42]

Men it seems go to the king to resolve their differences or if the conflict required the attention of a Muslim scholar, they are referred to the Imam while women brought their problems to the inna or iya who heads the bori cult. It would appear that if humans are governed by Islamic Sharia law, spirits are subject to a different but analogous law. Hence overseeing the spiritual wellbeing of the community was ultimately seen as the responsibility of the women who headed the local bori cults, and men, particularly those of the aristocratic class, had no part in it. As Hajiya Jeka remarked to Barbara Cooper; 'it is women's work. It's none of the king's business'. However a significant reversal in women's autonomy occurred when by the end of the third decade of the 20th century, official recognition of female spiritual roles was denied and the dancing associated with sprite cult became the province of prostitutes or women who were independent of male control. Eventually as Islam became more entrenched in Hausa society the title 'Magijiya' became the designation once given to the woman who headed local prostitutes rather than that once given to aristocratic female leaders. Yet in spite of the negative connotations associated with it and even though later the British colonial administration endeavoured to uphold the version of Islam favoured by the Muslim Fulani people who controlled most of the religious and political structures in northern Nigeria, they were not very successful in completely eradicating bori practices. Trimmingham believes that the steady influence Islam exerted on Hausa/Fulani society for centuries did eventually lead to the removal of bori ceremonies from public areas and that it was at this stage when bori was confined to the domestic space that induced possession first made its appearance. [43]

It is often observed that Islam has transformed West African societies like those of the Hausa into more rigidly gendered worlds where the sexes are spatially segregated with men dominating institutionalised forms of the religion and positions of authority. Today in Hausa society, women experience varying degrees of seclusion (or purdah) depending on the form of marriage, wealth, education, and environment whether rural or urban in which they find themselves. Where seclusion

is practised, the married Muslim woman lives within the female quarter and only ventures outside the home with the expressed permission of her husband.[44]

According to Renee Dittin in her study, multiple marriages and the alternatives to successive marriages available in Karuwanci (prostitution) are the only options open to the Hausa women.[45] But while in general women's social activities appear to be severely circumscribed and limited to the domestic home, it can be argued that through the practice of bori they have been able to make that separation into an arena for spiritual expression. For the married Hausa Muslim woman, bori at once a strategy for expressing her individual persona as well as an occasion for celebration, music, and dance, albeit within the confines of her home. Roberta Dunbar, Sondra Hale, and several others suggests that women who participate in bori are probably engaged in some kind of psychological catharsis made necessary by their relatively low status and that they may find spirit possession a useful buffer against patriarchal hegemony in the broader society.[46] Certainly the social support of other women and the material gifts given by her husband to the one possessed could help a woman overcome her sense of social isolation and also permit her to negotiate for more favourable attention and reward for her domestic situation. This is why in her recent work on bori, Susan O'Brien insists that far from being marginal to Hausa society, bori cults have been and are central to the fashioning of a dynamic equilibrium in society as a whole. Coupled with the official positions once held by women associated with bori, as well as the economic exchanges involved, bori is then revealed to have a large public role. [47]

The consolidation of Islam as the main religion of a large area of West Africa compelled women to find other outlets for spiritual expression that fitted in with their new circumstances. However this not always noted by those who have studied and written about Islam in West Africa. As Christian Coulon argues, that just because the methods women employed are not always immediately apparent does not mean that they did not adopt a number of strategies to cope with the new conditions delineated for them. Writing in 'Women, Islam and Baraka', Coulon asserts that:

> Women participate in their own way in Islam, manipulating it and accommodating it to their needs. They are informal, hidden, parallel, or heterodox; hence it is wrong to relegate the female universe to this

twilight zone where it only appears to belong because of our inability to study it. [48]

Certainly specific historical configurations of gender and religion emerge simultaneously when we look closely at West African Muslim society. The jihads clearly contributed to how women experienced Islam because we find that their roles and position were profoundly altered in a variety of ways by the transformation of social structures which occurred during that period. In spite of the appearance of male dominance in Islamic institutions, women did manage to find a niche for themselves in the cult of saints which emerged out of the prevailing Sufi concept of piety. The three main Sufi orders (tariqa), the Qadriyya, Tijaniyya, and Mouridiyya which feature prominently in 19th century West Africa are known to have placed great emphasis on mysticism and the charismatic leadership of certain saintly figures. Levtzion and Pouwells note that these shaykhs (teachers) were revered as 'friends of God' and attracted a huge number of pilgrims to their seats of learning. [49] The relationship between the shaykhs and their followers was direct and deeply personal. Leaders of jihad such as Usman dan Fodio, and especially Hajj Umar, were among the few believed to possess the same qualities given to those described as the 'rightly guided ones'. While this practice has been a matter of contention among some orthodox Muslims, Coulon argues that 'Islam of the brotherhoods (tariqa) and marabouts has become primarily the religion of women.... Because by its rational and explanatory nature it is linked more than reformist or fundamentalist Islam, to the traditional values transmitted by women'.[50] Other scholars such as Trimmingham have also noticed significant similarities between this veneration of saints and aspects of bori spirit possession. Belief in spirits springs from people's connection with nature, while that in saints arise from belief in the 'baraka' of a person whom God has given the ability to confer blessings, heal sickness, and work miracles. Although the supernatural element in the cult of saints that is manifested in trances, vows and oaths is sometimes viewed as 'un-Islamic', they are nonetheless the powerful means by which women negotiate their positions in their relationships with men. In Senegal, the participation of wives in sainthood instils fear in their men folk because it is believed that through it they can exercise power over male virility.

In Senegal, a few highly esteemed women have acquired the title 'sokhna' which is equivalent to the title 'serigne' conferred on holy men. Through their leadership in

ritual duties and religious celebrations, they make publicly visible their participation in Islamic activities. The presence of women in this aspect of Islam is probably due to the fact that female relatives of tariqa leaders have assumed roles similar to the ones they held in pre-Islamic times. Although they may have a considerable number of male disciples, some sokhnas choose to concentrate on overseeing the spiritual activities of members of their own sex. For example, sokhna Magat Diop is said to have inherited her baraka from her father serigne Abdoulaye Niakhep. Basing her stance on a number verses in the Holy Quran, she created a subsection in her order that was concerned with justifying the equality of the sexes in religious life. [51] Sokhna Muslimatou, an older sister of the reigning caliph of the Mouride order was also well known in Senegal in the 1960s. Like Diop, her spiritual leadership was recognised and large numbers of disciples paid respect to her. Like their male counterparts, the sokhnas also enjoyed the great wealth acquired from the work of disciples who believed that giving service to them as well as their marabouts would assist their admission into paradise when they die.

Much has been written about maraboutism which is essentially a kind of subjection to a religious personality and the cult which surrounds him. Occupying a slightly lower position in comparison with Serignes or Sokhnas, we find frequent references to them in Senegalese novels such as those of Ousmane Sembene and Aminata Sow-Fall. Historically, they have proved to be a powerful force in Senegalese economic and political life as they have been in religious matters. Marabouts, particularly of the Mouridiyya order who insisted on the active contribution of their disciples in large scale agricultural endeavours became allies of the French colonial government which took advantage of the clout they wielded in Senegal. Significantly, due to the crucial position marabouts occupy as a buffer between the state and society they contributed to a large extent in establishing Senegal as one of the most politically stable democracies in West Africa. But while they have been able to co-exist with a secular state, with none of the tensions that marks post-independence Nigeria, their ability to confer and withdraw baraka at will has also led to accusations of oppression and exploitation being flung at them by those who condemn their capitalist activities.

In contrast to the Senegalese situation, where Nigerian Muslim women were concerned, indirect opposition to the patriarchal hegemony of the elite as well as

greater assimilation into the larger world of universal Islam came mainly through education. In some ways, the more recent and more literal interpretation of Islam advocated by the Fulani jihadists had some positive implications for women because not only did it allow them to take on the role of teachers, but later after independence women were again able to use it to justify their attendance in western style schools. Importantly, in *Nur ah'Alhab* Usman dan Fodio strongly championed the cause of women's education condemning as an 'impious practice', the situation where most of the Ulama (Muslim scholars) left their wives and daughters uneducated. While his primary concern was the religious instruction of women, in the same text as well as in other writings, he similarly also spoke of the need to educate women in commercial subjects; 'It is binding upon her to endeavour to know those as it is to know about other matters pertaining to her religion like ablutions, fasting and praying'. [52]

The historical role women have played in the dissemination of Islamic ideas in Nigeria is highlighted in Jean Boyd's well researched biography titled *The Caliph's Sister* (1989).[53] Nana Asmau, daughter of Usman dan Fodio and sister to Muhammed Bello who succeeded their father as head of the sokoto Caliphate. Nana Asmau ensured that women were active participants in the spread of Islam by founding a movement known as the *Yan Taru.* [54] Vast numbers of non-Muslim women in rural areas were brought into the fold of Islam through the activities Nana Asmau's group of teachers. Although the jihadist's emphasis on seclusion and veiling restricted women's movement, one important activity opened to them was training in Islamic scholarship. Nana Asmau and her Yan Taru (associates) devised an educational system that allowed women of about 14 to 44 to stay at home and look after domestic affairs while those younger and older were urged to acquire as much learning as possible. It is interesting that the Fulani word 'modibo' which means scholar has no particular gender association. Indicating a society which recognised that the intellectual pursuits of pious men and women could legitimately converge and equal status be accorded to all scholars regardless of their sex. And because in the same society such women scholars could travel alone far and wide without fear of molestation they were able to make significant contributions to the intellectual development of Islam in West Africa. Perhaps in some cases the jihadist's message to women was contradictory but what is clear is that the women quickly took advantage of the opportunities open to them. Nana Asmau herself is

known to have written a considerable amount of verse for her students who then passed them on to others. One piece of such writing which encapsulates her main concerns is entitled *Godaben Gaskiya (The Path of Truth)*:

> Listen to my song, let us repent and leave sin, let us do good works that perchance we may be joined with Ahmad (the Prophet Muhammed). Let us perform prayer properly for you know that if prayer is right, the whole of religion is right. Let us seek knowledge for it is with knowledge that God and the Prophet are followed. The Sufi litany, prayers and meritorious effort lead us to the Prophet, likewise also patience in troubles, worship, patience in poverty, and wishing for a Muslim everything you wish for yourself. The Day of Resurrection is a day of terror and fear to everyone except the most Excellent of Mankind, Muhammed; people are exposed together with the sins they have committed. The stench of adulterer is worse than the stench of a dead decaying animal. The tongues of the ostentatious, even if he is zealous in his worship, will be discarded. The proud and those who practice tyranny will not meet Ahmad nor will he who embezzles and takes bribes, nor he who despises his parents and is a backbiter. [55]

Verses like the above were meant to be committed to memory and it is a testimony of their power that they are still taught in Quran schools in Nigeria today.

It is necessary to note that when Islam first brought its influence to bear on ancient Arabia and reformed to a large extent the status of women by outlawing female infanticide, granting women inheritance rights, control over their property and emphasised women's right to contract marriage for themselves, it did not entirely replace the Arab concept of women as creatures whose identities are dependent on their connection with male relatives.[56] Andrew Rippen observes that Islam appears to have 'instituted a social system upon the presumption of an extended family group within a patriarchal system'. [57] It seems that in spite of Islam's attempt at reforms, a reaffirmation of male dominance occurred which inevitably perpetuated the inequality of women. This is most apparent in matters of marriage where traditional practice frequently reasserts itself in the arranging of marital unions as well as in the composition and structure of the domestic home. In no other aspect of life have

women been more affected by Islam than in their family affairs. Regarded by eminent Muslim scholars such as Imam Ghazali as the foundation upon which the Islamic social order is built, the centrality of family life is reflected in the Islamic legal system within which family law is considered particularly sacrosanct.

Prior to Islam, West African men had unfettered rights to as many wives as they pleased and discrimination between wives was sanctioned and in some places even encouraged. Writing about this, Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali notes that in traditional African society, there was 'a clear hierarchy of wives based on seniority and age... a pattern not unrelated to the division of labour in the household whereby junior wives performed more menial duties'. [58] The Islamic reformer Usman dan Fodio wrote a vehement criticism of what he called the 'oppressive customs' of married Muslim men which he enumerates in the following:

> They fail to dress, house and feed their wives adequately, they show favouritism between one wife and another and make unwise and hasty marriages without due thought.... They revile their wives.... And beat them excessively... they do not educate them and if they divorce them they spread malicious tales about them ruining their chances of remarriage.... Others refuse to divorce unhappy wives.... My goodness! All these things are evidence of ignorance. [59]

Compliance with the above rights and duties men owe to women was meant to improve women's lot. Unfortunately, as we shall find in the novels, discrepancies between Islamic prescriptions and the realities of women's condition are a constant source of conflict between the sexes.

Under the British colonial regime the status of Muslim women suffered a decline. Imbued with Victorian notions of women's physical and mental inferiority, the colonial administration excluded African women from the institutions of learning and other public fora. This state of affaires continued even after political independence from the British. By the 1960s some of the Nigerian male leadership supported women's education but not the vote. But others, guided by the influential teacher and politician Aminu Kano, embraced alternative interpretations of religious texts which emphasised women's rights, education, and political emancipation. Women

eventually gained franchise in 1976 and in recent time Nigerian military rulers have done surprisingly much to encourage women's participation in national assemblies and in other civil service posts.

However, even if only indirectly, an Islamic social framework made it possible for Muslim women to enter into the politics of modern Nigeria, in the case of Senegal, women fared somewhat differently. Although women there enjoyed relatively more prominent roles in religious activities and as leaders in the brotherhoods, it did not carry over into modern politics. The reason for this relegation lies in the kind of colonial policies pursued by the French and in the comparatively more secular nature of the Senegalese state they created, which I will discuss in more detail under the subheading Islam Under Colonial Rule. Furthermore according to Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey, although Muslim feminist groups have emerged in post colonial Senegal, they appear to focus their attention and strategies outside of or in opposition to religious associations. [60] Such behaviour would undoubtedly put them in conflict with other Islamic groups. However what is clear is that women have always been involved in changing their lives for the better and in most cases have attempted to do so from within Islam itself. For instance, taking inspiration from the life and example of Nana Asmau, the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) was founded in 1985. This organisation has led the politicising of Muslim women and has argued for the need for more women scholars to be involved in the interpretation of Islamic law and hadith. It calls for the establishment of sharia courts, and upholds women's rights in the workplace. In such ways as these, Muslim women have been able to assert their membership in community in order to further their own goals. But as with other parts of the Islamic world, when efforts to improve their status are closely identified with outsiders, an awareness of their Islamic identity becomes particularly acute. Therefore it is likely that as economic and political problems threaten the stability of their societies, West African women may continue to demonstrate a marked allegiance to Islam as a powerful source of cultural identity.

ISLAM UNDER COLONIAL RULE

There is need to consider however briefly, European occupation of West Africa, what the colonial policy was towards Islam and what the 'Islamic' response was in return to it, because what happened during that period has continued to affect political, economic and social structures in the area. European intervention into the affairs of West Africa dates back to the 15th century, but as far as most of the hinterlands were concerned, high European imperialism began around the 1880s. The Berlin Conference mentioned in historical texts did not initiate what came to be known as the 'scramble' for Africa, but it laid down the rules to be followed by participating European powers if their occupation were to be considered valid by the rest of Europe. African opinion on the other hand, played little part in the whole affair. Prior to the Berlin Conference in 1884-5, France, Britain, and Portugal had already laid claims to land possessions in West Africa. The French had a large colony in the area that is now Senegal as well as other settlements. The British were in possession of the island colony of Lagos, the southern states of the Gold Coast (Ghana) as well as Banjul on the mouth of the river Gambia. The Portuguese occupied Cacheu, modern day Guinea Bissau, and the islands of Sao Tome and Cape Verde. Benefiting from a relatively high level of industrialisation and supplied with the most advanced military equipment available, France and Britain between them came to own most of the West African region. Firms like the Royal Niger Company led the British occupation of West Africa, while in the French territories, plans were drawn up by the Governor Faidherbe, with a view to further expansion. His objective was to turn Senegal 'into a compact homogenous territory bound by its natural frontiers'. [61] This way, explained Faidherbe, 'all the sources from which the trade of these coasts is drawn would be in our hands'. [62] France ended up acquiring the largest amount of territory including modern day Mali, Upper Volta, Ivory Coast, Niger, and the Republic of Benin with the intention of administering them as a single unit and as an extension of France. This was known as the policy of Assimilation according to which West African territories were referred to in Paris as part of "overseas France". French colonial subjects were supposed to be given the same rights and treatment as "true" Frenchmen especially after they have been educated to a certain level. In practice however, things turned out differently and only a small minority of West Africans obtained French citizenships or rights. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the Policy of Assimilation was abandoned and replaced by one that was similar to what the British operated in their colonies.

Although France occupied almost three times the land area of West Africa as the British, the colonies of the latter including present day Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Gambia, contained a population twice the size of that of the whole French territory combined. The administration policy applied by the British throughout her colonies was that of 'indirect rule', a policy which in different areas took on different forms and meant different things both to the colonial administration and to the colonised. Often this policy gave traditional rulers a say, sometimes more than was permitted by indigenous constitutions and systems of governments. It led for example to the creation of powerful chiefs where they previously did not exist. Peter Clarke notes that prior to colonial rule, in many parts of West Africa kings or chiefs were ultimately responsible in some form or the other to those over whom they ruled, but with the advent of colonialism, they became accountable to only the British colonial administration. [63]

As well as the political, there was also a cultural dimension to colonialism which was produced by what was termed in Europe as "scientific" thinking which claimed to embrace laws governing intellectual, social, and cultural development. According to both Peter Clarke and Nehemia Levtzion, evidence points to a certain element of "positivism" in the thinking of French and British colonial officers as far as the development of human thought and civilisation were concerned. This line of thinking was influenced by the theories of Auguste Comte (1797-1857), the founding father of sociology, an academic discipline which considers the history of Europe to be synonymous with the history of the human race.[64] Comte believed that all communities would necessarily develop along the same lines as Western civilisations. In his 'Law of the Three Stages of Intellectual Developments' he maintained that human thought evolves gradually, passing from the lowest theological stage, to an intermediate stage that is, the metaphysical, to the most advanced stage, the scientific or positive stage. He discerned more stages of evolution within the religious phase which he identified as fetishism that is the worship of animals and inanimate objects which then develops through to a stage of polytheism until it reached the highest form in monotheism. When this way of thinking about human society is combined with the Darwinian theory of evolution, we will then begin to understand the European approach to Islam in West Africa. Below, I will attempt to outline what this is.

In his book *France and West Africa* (1969), O'Brien offers some insight into French thought regarding Islam in West Africa:

> The Muslim propaganda is a step toward civilisation in West Africa and it is universally recognised, that, with respect to social organisation, the Muslim peoples of these regions are superior to the populations that have remained fetishitic.
>
> We cannot claim to make it possible to climb in one sole generation, or even in five or six, the rungs of a ladder whose summit the old western world cannot yet see, even after hundreds of years. One should remember that nature does not make any leaps and that it is if not impossible at least dangerous for the black to pass abruptly from his semi-barbarous state to the highly advanced state of our social development. One should also remember that Islam bears an indisputable de-brutalising force and moral value. [65]

It seems that on the scale of civilisations, Islamic society was considered a midway point between African barbarism and progress. Probably because Islam had a written culture, it was credited by the French colonial administration as having a positive 'differential'. According to Jean-Louis Triaud; at the height of its empire, France in fact prided itself on being a 'major Muslim power'. But this expression was, to say the least, ambiguous because under the pretext of recognising its Muslim subjects, France's interest lay rather in competing with the British by symbolically vying for control over the territory of Islam. In spite of its policy of assimilation, the French colonial government even when it made use of the mediation services of the Islamic brotherhoods prevalent in its area, consistently refused to invest them with recognised legal power. As far as Jean Triaud is concerned, an anti-Islamic dimension was inherent and recurrent in French politics in West Africa because of an underlying current of suspicion and fear nourished by several centuries of holy war between Islam and Christianity. [66]

Triaud goes on to offer another interesting reason for French fear of Islam. He suggests that hostility to Islam in France can be traced to the French Revolution

when an unfettered struggle was waged against the Roman Catholic Church, and the masses denounced its feudal authoritarian ways. In West Africa, it seems the French sometimes believed that they were up against a similar adversary only this time it bore Islamic features. [67] Hence, concludes A. Gouilly in *L'Islam dans L'Afrique Occidental Francaise* (1962), French policy towards Islam was 'often hostile, sometimes favourable ... made up of contradictions... of sharp twists and turns'. [68] This inconsistency on the part of the French towards Muslims in their West African territories became more apparent after World War 1.

Throughout French West Africa, upon being duly solicited, prominent Muslims leaders lent their support to the colonial government and even encouraged their people to join the French army. But while at this time a malleable, pliable Islam served the purposes of the French it also resulted in French fear of Islam being dispelled. What followed then was a concerted attempt to reduce the significance of Islam in this area. As Triaud concludes, whenever Islam appeared too strong or a possible threat to French interests, steps were taken to undermine it. It is recorded that those colonial officials who once privileged Islam came under severe criticism as old priorities were reversed. Eventually the 'fetishist was seen as perfectible' but not the Muslim who remained frozen in a 'moral impasse'.[69]

In Senegal, colonialism, capitalism, and Maraboutism were seen as the three main enemies of Islam. Marabouts who had acquired formal training in Islamic sciences and who enjoyed a high reputation among their people were regarded with particular suspicion by the French. And yet, they also came under attack from fellow Muslims who sought to reform Islam as well as those who dedicated themselves to establishing socialism in the country. Indeed marabouts that were alleged to be exploiting the credulity of the masses by taking money in return for amulets and charms were regarded by many as the enemy within. In a number of Ousmane Sembene's novels, we will find literary expression of this resentment towards marabouts.

On the other hand, especially with the full implementation of their system of indirect rule the British appeared more consistent in their interaction with Muslims in West Africa. Their policy was to interfere as little as possible with the Islamic faith of the people even going as far as to allow indigenous Emirs the authority to decide

whether or not Christian missionaries operated in their areas. In this way they played a decisive role in the consolidating of Islamic presence in this area. In contrast, where the Yoruba people of western Nigeria and the Igbo of the eastern region were concerned, the British believed them to still be at the fetishistic stage and therefore in need of the civilising influence of Christianity. As I will point out in the next section, this was later to have direct bearing on the development of the western style literature which emerged from these parts of Nigeria.It is interesting to note that while the British policy in northern Nigeria could be regarded as having been very tolerant or even 'protectionist', it did not appear so to all Muslims. Some in fact saw it as a real defeat for Islam believing that its 'paternalistic' attitude was designed not to protect or preserve Islam, but rather to dominate and ultimately bring Muslims under the control of the non-Muslims who came to hold high office in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

However on the whole, Islamic responses to colonial rule in both British and French territories were no more coordinated nor systematic than was the colonial policy towards Islam. Some Muslims offered what Clarke terms 'introversionist oppositional response', refusing as far as was possible to have direct contact with it.[70] While they did not perform hijra or withdraw from the areas ruled by non-Muslims, they did withdraw mentally and culturally from contact with European culture. Throughout the colonial era and after, Muslims stoutly defended their Islamic identity and held onto the belief that the reform and the purification of Islam was a necessary first step towards overthrowing colonialism. Other responses consists not so much avoiding contact with the colonial regime and the Western values it represented, but in cooperating with the system with the aim of limiting some of its influence. To this end, there arose a generation of Muslim intellectuals who combined western education with studies in Islamic institutions in Arab countries in the hope of providing their people with the means of operating within the framework of colonialism which they hoped in time would be removed.

Similarly, the present post colonial situation in West Africa has been fraught with all kinds of problems. But here because of space constraints, I shall only elaborate a few political ones as they appear to impinge most on other areas of life. Comparatively speaking, Senegalese people have been able to establish a much more stable democracy than Nigerians who have experienced several military

regimes since independence. This is in spite of the fact that Muslims leaders such as the marabouts who once played important politically determining roles in Senegal were ousted from their positions by a new elite which had acquired French education. In fact it was through close collaboration with Muslim leadership that Leopold Senghor who was from a Christian background became Senegal's first president in a country of overwhelming Muslim majority.

However in Nigeria, religion has created and continues to create the most serious political cleavages which sometimes explode into violence between opposing groups. [71] The policy pursued by the British colonial administration preserved the cultural and political autonomy of northern Nigeria strengthening Islam there, but that same policy fermented distrust among non-Muslim southerners. Once colonial control was lifted, resentment and prejudices soon surfaced which eventually lead to a bitter civil war. Interestingly the Biafran War was fought on the basis of self determination for the Igbo people in eastern Nigeria and not for the preservation of Christianity, while national unity, not jihad was how the northern based federal government justified its part in the war. Nonetheless, the religious undertone which was muted during the war itself was later amplified to become the main reason for the conflict and this inevitably had consequences for relations between the two sides.

As the country prepared to return to civilian rule, another major dispute occurred from 1976-1978 over the creation of a Federal Sharia court of appeal. The Christian population immediately perceived this proposal as signalling the Islamisation of the entire country while Muslims on the other hand, regarded their opposition as sheer anti-Islamic prejudice when according to them, the country already operated a Christian biased system inherited from the colonial era. Twenty-two years later, President Olu-segun Obasanjo was to grant predominantly Muslim states in the federation permission to establish sharia law in their areas. [72]

Yet another cleavage which is less obvious occurs among Muslims themselves, Intra-Muslim tensions in the 20th century first found expression in the rivalry among Sufi brotherhoods. Some identified with established regimes, while others claimed to represent the original spirit of the jihad of Usman dan Fodio and therefore articulated more radical ideas. Among the largely Sunni Muslims of Nigeria, Sufi brotherhoods

are often severely criticised.[73] One Saad Zungur singled out the veneration of saints as a typically un-Islamic practice of Sufism. Following in his footsteps, the grand Kadi of the northern Abubaker Gumi founded the Yan Izala movement in the mid 1970s, and became the most outspoken advocate of this Sunni school of thought. Several violent confrontations took place between Sufi and Sunni Muslims in the latter part of the 1970s which had to be quelled by the then military regime. Islam in northern Nigeria continues to bear the burden of the heritage of the jihad of Usman dan Fodio who set out to purify the practice of Islam. Thus when successors of his revolution failed to sustain the standards of their forerunners, the gap between ideal and practice created recurring tensions which occasionally result in open confrontations between those who would accommodate the exigencies of modern life and government, and those who would adhere to strictly to the ideals of the jihad. As we shall find in the next section, this history has had immense implications for West African literature.

ISLAM AND LITERATURE

The general impression conveyed about West African literature especially in the field of literary criticism is one of a cultural activity that is largely a mixture of Christian and indigenous African traditions. In the *African Novel in English,* M. Keith Booker's asserts that 'most African languages did not have written forms before colonialism' and that the 'very act of writing is to a certain extent a European activity' thus linking the acquisition of writing skills by Africans to the era of European colonialism. [74] He acknowledges that Egyptian hieroglyphics existed long before the development of written cultures in Europe, but neglects to mention the presence of writing in Arabic script in areas outside of North Africa which predate colonialism by several centuries. However Booker is not alone in making this omission as numerous other discussions on literature from West Africa tend to begin with writing that emerged from the colonial experience and the Christian religion which accompanied it. This privileging of a particular period of West African history has had a deterrent effect on comprehensive study of writing from this part of Africa erasing as it does other valid influences that have contributed to literary production. It precludes not only the legitimate inclusion of certain writers into the fold of literature, but also discourages critical attention from being paid to writing that does not fit into the conventional mould. Undoubtedly, the combined influences of colonialism and Christianity have been more pervasive on the kind of literature I am concerned with in this thesis;

however, I suggest that Islam has had a decided impact on it as well. To emphasise this point which is crucial to my reading of the novels later on, there is need to recapitulate here the nature of Islam's propagation in West Africa and more importantly, characteristics of the religion as they pertain to literature.

Although it is not always acknowledged by Western scholars, literacy was introduced into West Africa in two distinct waves through the agency of people who alhtough hailed from different parts of the world nevertheless came with similar objectives - trade and the propagation of religions new to Africa. As I have to establish earlier, the first to arrive were the agents of Islam whose impact on the cultural life of West Africa was felt as far back as the 11th century. Since Islam first spread through the ranks of the ruling class, it follows that this religion was more a court affair than a popular movement. The development of literacy in Arabic was therefore initially quite elitist. Scholars were engaged in writing essays on theology, law, and on elucidating the finer points of Islam but they also produced as in the case of the Fulani jihadists some poetry for popular consumption. Being mainly religious scholars, they were not favourably inclined towards practitioners of folk art to whom they directed verses urging them to stop un-Islamic practices.

> Singer stop, do not waste your time
> I singing the praises of mortal men
> Sing the praises of the Prophet,
> That you may have comfort.
> It is midih
> That you should hold fast,
> That you may obtain your desire,
> And those who have eloquence,
> Let them come and explain it by commentary
> By speaking even to the Prophet's qualities. [75]

Verses such as this were frequently written in Hausa, Fulfulde, Wolof and so on in Arabic script to provide examples of the sort of art traditional artists were expected to cultivate. Hence, in one of the few researches undertaken into the subject, Graham Furniss argues that writing in indigenous West African languages cannot be separated from the history of Islam in that area. [76] Inevitably, Islamic influences are

evident in a range of literary genres that preceded colonial inspiration. Priscilla Starratt classifies those she finds among the Hausa speaking people of Northern Nigeria into tales (tatsuniyoyi), traditions (labarai) which include variations of dilemma tales or fables, and religious tales about prophets, angels and jinns. [77] The pietist strain in much of this literary tradition which sometimes incorporates material from written Arabic literature is a direct consequence of the society's allegiance to Islam. Therefore even when the main subject of a piece of writing is not religious, homage is frequently paid to the Prophet in formal invocations both at the start and at the end.

In his artical "Islam in Senegalese literature and Film", Mbye Cham notes correctly that the deep aura of reverence and solemnity that surrounds religious writing is often missing in those texts that are written for more popular consumption.[78] However, verses such as the following still demonstrate a capacity for irreverence even while urging believers to seek God's assistance:

> Whatever you would do, O man invoke the Lord's great name,
> If on the Lord you call for help, your work will not go wrong.
> And if you would go forth to rob, Ask help from our good Lord!
> And if you would run after girls, invoke the Lord's great name. [79]

Further, Beverley Mack's study of verses written by Muslim women from northern Nigeria similarly observes how oral traditions tend to poke fun especially at the religious figure for example the imam or marabout in an attempt at demystifying his authority and reducing him to the level of a mere mortal. [80] Parallels can be drawn here with African-American oral traditions which in spite of a deep belief in Christianity are nevertheless rich in satirical narratives about the peculiar habits and shortcomings of the preacher. Writing about West African Muslims, Mbye Cham also notes 'the surface irreverence of the oral traditions vis-à-vis the serigne-marabout is but a thin veil of their deep allegiance to Islam' because in the end, the legitimacy of his power is rarely questioned.[81]

Such oral treatments are precursors of what we find in modern West Africa in novels which in likewise manner mock or criticise religious personalities who fail to be good examples to the rest of society. Observing the same, Kenneth Harrow insists that

several contemporary novels such as Ousmane Sembene's *Xala and White Genesis*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* and Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* 'testify to a growing desire of writers to focus entirely upon comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos'. [82] But, it is important to note that while creative works whether oral or written willingly challenge people's behaviour, a line is drawn against the irreverent treatment of important Islamic figures and certain legal aspects of the religion. Prophet Muhammed, Islamic saints, as well as Islamic laws are generally considered sacrosanct subjects. It is in this separation between what is permissible for use as literary material, and what is not, lays the difference between Western and Islamic attitudes and approaches to the novel. What informs the Islamic view and how it affects some Muslim writers who adopt the form of the novel are pertinent questions that need to be addressed at this point before moving on to a discussion of individual texts in the next five chapters.

I will argue here that the status of the Holy Quran in Islamic society impinges directly on Muslim attitudes towards prose-fiction. Incidentally, it may also explain why there is a noticeable dearth of writers from Muslim backgrounds in Nigeria – a country that has been comparatively prolific in literary output. As a written document which Muslims believe contains the divine words of God passed on intact through Prophet Muhammed to human society, the Quran is considered completely authentic by Muslims the world over. The guidelines it contains regarding human behaviour, interpersonal relationships and indeed the very organisation of society are considered by Muslims to be the ideals to strive for. *In Beginning: Intention and Method* (1975), Edward Said provides a useful analytical discussion of the differences between hermeneutical traditions from which different notions of sacred texts arise in the West and in Islamic societies. According to him, whereas holy books of Judaism and Christianity are regarded as incomplete and requiring interpretation, and therefore sanction the authority of those who interpret them, Islam for its part regards the Quran as unique and complete, a belief which consequently renders 'all other texts impotent'. Thus any writing that deviates from what is already contained in the Quran is regarded as suspect. In short, real originality or creativity is seen as belonging entirely to God. Scrutinised from within such a world view, the Western writer's absorption with his own creativeness appears almost profane to Muslims. As Said puts it 'the desire to create an alternative world, to modify, or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the

act in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view'. He goes on to characterise this Islamic perspective as one which conceives the world as a 'plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification' with the result being that stories in Islam are regarded as merely 'ornamental variations of the world rather than completions of it or models for transforming it'. [84] Such a view is at odds with the Judeo-Christian perspective which informs the genre of the novel. Thus the African Muslim writer has to negotiate a cautious route between his desire to utilise a genre introduced to him by his historical experience of colonialism and the Islamic faith which deeply ingrained in his psyche has for centuries shaped his thinking and perspectives.

Most theorists of literature identify the novel genre as being European in origin. The Marxist critic Walter Benjamin associates the rise of the novel with specific material developments such as improvement in printing technologies and the spread of literacy and believes that these developments are closely linked to social and political changes in the West. Subscribing to a similar view, Ian Watt has pointed out that the novel rose to prominence in the West as part of the great historical process through which feudal societies were transformed, into modern capitalist ones. Indeed, it is now quite conventional to regard the novel as a quintessentially bourgeois genre through which the European bourgeoisie effectively portray their particular class consciousness. Said notes that coinciding with the development of this new social system, the western novel has enabled the writer to represent characters and societies that 'grow and move in the novel because they mirror a process of engenderment or beginning and growth possible or permissible for the mind to imagine'. [85] Novels are in effect 'aesthetic objects that fill in gaps in an incomplete world'.

Narrative prose fiction can therefore be seen as arising from the writers' need to modify reality. However, while the Muslim writer adopts the genre, his perspective on prose-fiction and what it implies of creativity or originality is determined by his approach to the Islamic faith he was raised in. That is, whether his attitude to his first text, the Quran is what Clifford Geertz appropriately terms 'scripturalist' meaning a literal and formalistic approach to Islam as found among most Sunni Muslims, or whether he leans towards a mystical Sufi understanding of the faith. [86] Martin Ling describes the Sufi as one who is 'conscious of being like other men, a prisoner of the world of forms, but unlike them, he is also conscious of being free, with a freedom

which immeasurably outweighs his imprisonment'. [87] This latter frame of mind may appear to challenge the basic premise of his faith, it yet exhibits an awareness of the infinite possibilities the Quran points to. The Sufi's hermeneutical credo is suggested by this evocative line in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*: 'Every verse of the Koran has an outside and an inside'.[88] These two approaches to the text, the literal, learned, esoteric one that discourages the interrogation of the Quran, which is espoused by orthodox Sunni Muslims, and the exoteric, popular approach of the Sufi that encourages elaborations of the same, can be discerned in the choices and treatments of issues found in the novels I look at. While both approaches share a basic acceptance of the ideals of Islam, I suggest that most, if not all the novelists here consciously or subconsciously adopt an investigative stance. Their writings search for hidden truths that will raise the individual and society to that higher level of morality and justice that the Quran instructs people to strive for.

Demonstrating a rare grasp of the intricacies of Islamic literature, the literary critic Kenneth Harrow rightly notes that when Islam is cast in novels in a positive light as an 'ethical faith', action takes the form of a dual jihad, a struggle against both external evil and against evil inclinations from within. In novels and short stories in particular, internal conflict is intended to lead to a process of self-overcoming. Islamic virtue is then portrayed as a matter of inner strength which brings about self-transformation or self-realisation. This view of Islam which is portrayed in the novels I examine in this thesis give the lie to John Spencer Trimmingham's observation that:

> Muslims place extreme emphasis on the externals of religion and make no important ethical demands. They have a unified and attainable religious social code of behaviour. They do not live as Christians do, in a state of tension, feeling that their lives fall short of their religious standard. Therefore no strain is put on them. Their religious life is wholly a matter of behaviour and conformity. [89]

A desire to define behaviour according to Islamic principles is certainly apparent in all the novels I look at, but there is also a constant awareness of the tension between essence and appearance, between ethics and externals. Thus in their work, writers comply with the requirements of their chosen genre and simultaneously with the

emphasis they implicitly place on obedience to a higher moral principle if not to a higher authority, they remain within the bounds of what is acceptable to Islam.

In studying novels from West Africa, one cannot help but note the difference in the amount of prose fiction produced by the two countries I focus on. Novels written in English from Nigeria enjoy a prestigious position on any list of African literature. When Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart* was first published by William Heinneman in 1958 and under the African writers series in 1962, it brought contemporary writing by Africans into the world's consciousness and elicited an interest which has since endured. Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet and essayist Wole Soyinka became the first black African to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, while Ben Okri from a younger generation of Nigerian writers has been awarded the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road* (1991). Yet in a list that includes many respected names such as Flora Nwapa, Isidore Okpenwho, T.M. Aluko, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi and Buchi Emecheta to mention a few, why do only two others, Zaynab Alkali and Ibrahim Tahir, write specifically about Islamic Nigerian societies? On the other hand, the factor of Islam is prominent in Senegalese literature. As noted by Mbye Cham, the bulk of novels and short stories from various Senegalese writers such as Chiekh Hamidou Kane, Ousmane Sembene, Ahmadou Kohrouma, Ousmane Soce, Abdoulaye Sadji, Nafissatou Dialb, Aminata Sow-Fall, and Mariama Bâ concentrate on Islam and the impact it has had on thought and action in Senegal. Granted a larger percentage of Senegalese people can claim Islamic heritage than in Nigeria, but what other reasons are there for such disparity in the quantity of Islamic related literary work produced in these two countries?

The answer to this question can be traced to significant historical peculiarities that have determined the aspirations of writers from the two countries. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, under the British colonial regime, Nigeria was governed as three separate regions, Eastern, Western, and Northern. However, the British colonial policy of indirect rule that was deemed appropriate for the mainly Muslim Hausa speaking northern part of Nigeria was not enforced rigidly in the other two regions. Thus following the lines of religious affiliation to either Islam or Christianity, which ran more or less along the same lines of demarcation drawn by the colonial government, Western style education made more progress in some areas than in others. Noting this fact of history, Bruce King argues that the Nigerian writers

mentioned above form a 'remarkably homogenous group' as most of that first generation which include Achebe, Amadi, Nwapa, Ekwensi come from the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, a few such as Soyinka and Amos Tutuola come from Yorubaland in the West. Altogether they are among an elite group who attended the first five government colleges run by missionaries. Some like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara and Vincent Ike went on to study at the University College in Ibadan.

What is indicated here is the fact that these writers emerged from a background in Western Christian education. Their tastes were therefore largely developed from the modernist movement pioneered by Joyce, Yeats, Pound and Eliot. Furthermore, since they started writing at a time when the question of identity was a major issue among educated Nigerians, there is also among them a strong sense of awareness of being members of an ethnic group. For instance, Achebe's purpose has been to write about and for his people in an attempt to restore their faith in themselves and to set the record of Nigerian history straight. Similarly, as a form of cultural assertion in response to the effects of colonialism, Wole Soyinka employs the myth and traditions of the Yoruba people in his writing. Following their examples most other Nigerian writers have dealt with the colonial encounter while drawing upon the traditions of their people for literary inspiration. Thus in their book *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1983), Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ikechukwu Madubuike claim that the African novel has always been a complex hybrid cultural phenomenon that combines Western and African cultural perspectives. But a novel such as Ibrahim Tahir's The *Last Iman* defies this description because rather than joining the cultural nationalism trend, it affirms specifically the values of Islam. It mourns not the traditional past, but the neglect of true Islamic principles. Unfortunately, such emphatic stress on the legitimacy of Islam in Nigerian society has proved problematic for many critics. Before the publication of this novel, Nigerian writers shared similar education, interests, assumptions, aesthetics and even politics, and not surprisingly promoted each other's work through literary criticism. However, it seems that where Tahir's novel is concerned, critical attention is withheld not because the work lacks literary merit but because it advocates a point of view not acceptable to those who seem to have a monopoly over West African literature. The neglect Tahir has suffered validates Edward Said's insistence that

literary criticism is itself bound up with social realities, human experiences, and institutions of authority and power.

Although Gillian Robinson was writing about the neglect of women's writing, her assertion that the fact of publication or even the feat of remaining in print are not indicators of a novel's acceptance is equally true of other marginalised novels such as *The Last Iman* or Aminata Snow-Fall's *The Beggar Strike*. Bernth Lindfors makes a similar point when he devised a test for measuring the stature of African writers:

> The unexamined literary career is not worth much in a noisy marketplace of ideas. To be famous, to be reputable, to be deemed worthy of serious and sustained consideration, an author needs as much criticism as possible, year after year. Only those who pass this test of time – the test of persistent interest in their art will stand a chance of earning literary immortality. [90]

It is no wonder then that after the critical silence that greeted the publication of Tahir's novel in 1984, no other writer of note has emerged from Nigerian Muslim society.

I am inclined to agree with Northrope Frye's theory that in spite of our assertions that we as readers/critics freely express independent views on any given text, 'what we are clearly not free to do is to alter what is really a part of our cultural genetic code'. [91] Hence those schooled in the Western tradition whether they are European or African are likely to bring institutionalised attitudes to bear on the subject of Islam in African novels. Sometimes, when critics encounter texts that have their basis in an 'alien' culture, the temptation has been to impose meanings rather than what is actually in the text, thus leading to partial or erroneous readings. George Lang cites a telling example of a colleague who remarked that Aminata Sow-Fall's *The Beggar Strike* 'tells of a beggar's strike after an official has tried to restrict downtown begging. This strike wreaks havoc with the almsgiving that is required by local custom'. [92] Almsgiving (zakat) is one of the principle pillars of Islam; hence alluding to it in this way is similar to describing the Christian practice of confession in for example, Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* as a quaint local tradition. Another instance of such reductive reading can be found in Abena Busia's article

'Rebellious Women' in which she argues that while the writings of Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Sadawi have much in common, 'the most striking parallel between them is not that they are both about Islamic African women.....' [93] Yet precisely what links these two women, one Senegalese, the other Egyptian together is the fact that they write about their Islamic experiences. To deny this is to deliberately ignore a common heritage which provides inspiration for their works.

Other critical responses to Islam in modern West African literature have been less subtle. In the 1970s the publication of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1988) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) turned the discussion on African novels away from the question of what language is appropriate for literary expression that is whether to write in African or European languages, to the issue of religion. Kane's point of view in his novel was shaped by a zealous embrace and advocacy of Islam as the most effective vehicle for the integration of the individual and society. In contrast, Armah and Ouologuem denounced Islam as a colonial imposition, and assumed a social vision which treasured the traditional African past and translated its inherent viable values into a contemporary or future outlook. These two mutually irreconcilable views had eminent critics joining in the debate. For instance a considerable part of Soyinka's critical text, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) is devoted to the question of how social vision is shaped by religious ideology. But even as Soyinka acknowledges the fertile role the Islamic vision has played in West African literary creations of the 19th and 20th centuries, he emphatically denies Kane's novel the merit of authenticity, apparently because he treats Islam as an essential part of his people's world-view. On the other hand, the depictions of a predatory Islam that we find in the novels of Armah and Ouloguem are praised for being more 'truthful' representations of the part Islam has played in Africa. But as Edris Makward rightly points out, both of these novels depict Islam from an 'uncertain historical standpoint and not as it is lived and experienced today in any given Muslim African community'. [94] It appears that those writers who maintained a positive view of Islam are merely dismissed as apologists without much consideration being given to the literary contributions they make, or the possibility that they may be tapping into a world-view they are more familiar with for radical alternatives to the post-colonial African situation.

However, Senegalese novels in French written from within an Islamic framework have generally fared better in literary criticism than the Nigerian ones I look at in this thesis. This is probably because like the majority of better known Nigerian novels, they dwell more on the shifts in the social situation and in the mental universe of the African after contact with the west. It is as Ulli Beier has written, one of the greatest ironies that although the French colonial administration through its policy assimilation did its best to destroy African traditions, and to create a more secular state, a more vigorous quest for the authentic African identity has emerged from this part of West Africa. Precisely because of the French policy, the literati from Senegal have been able to evolve a clearer position of dissent from what seems to them alien and omni-present philosophical and socio-political systems. Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* which I refer to frequently in this thesis, is one of the earliest West African novels in French to deal with the conflict between the Islamic faith and the way of life it demands, and the social and cultural consequences of western conquest. The novel's hero Samba Diallo is the archetypical figure of the burdened *assimilé* who is torn between two conflicting frames of moral and spiritual reference. Writing about this character, Abiola Irele observes that:

> Around this figure, Kane has gathered up and woven into a significant whole all the elements within the divided consciousness of the westernised African caught between his acquired image in a new world of thought and effects, and his sense of his original self and aspiration to an original identity. [95]

The intensity with which Samba Diallo grapples with this situation is ably represented by the meditative prose in which it is conveyed. In Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* we find a similarly reflective kind of narrative, but in this case the focus is on the struggle between tradition and Islam for the upper hand. Like Camara Laye in *The African Child* (1958), Kane makes competent use of the novel as a vehicle for expressing a vision of an African mode of existence rooted in the Islamic faith. He is aware that the familiar spiritual foundation is threatened by a new dispensation which may not provide a satisfactory alternative. With themes such as this Kane and Laye have much in common with the poets of Négritude.

The novels of Ousmane Sembene, Mariama Bâ, and Aminata Sow-Fall as well as Zaynab Alkali's and Ibrahim Tahir's that I examine in subsequent chapters in fact move away from this tradition. They prefer to elucidate a social consciousness that has less to do with cultural conflict between African and Western ways, and more to do with resolutely elaborating a vision that incorporates Islamic ideas of individual and communal responsibility. To better situate their narratives in the appropriate milieu is the reason why in this chapter I have gone to some length to provide a historical overview of Islam in West Africa and the implications it has had for literature. The surprisingly strong feminist undercurrent which runs through all the novels I look at provides an important focus for my investigation in this thesis. I reiterate that this radical element is a direct consequence of the Islamic reality they all attempt to portray. Because of Islam's emphasis on the family, the traditional realm of the female, women are necessarily given prominence in the novels. All five writers choose to concentrate on specific aspects of women's condition and bring to their narratives individual perspectives which go a long way towards filling noticeable gaps and absences in West African literature.

NOTES

1. Peter Clarke, *West Africa and Islam* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), pvii.

2. J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 40.

3. Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p.13.

4. Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (London: Longman Publishers, 1984) provides a comparatively more objective examination of Islam's first contact with West Africa than Sanneh does in his book. See also Nehemia Levtzion's 'Abd Allah b. Yasin and the Almoravid' in *Studies in West African Islamic History* Vol. I, ed. by J.R. Willis (London: Frank Lass, 1979).

5. See V. Monteil's translation of al-Bakhri's 'Book of Journeys and Kingdoms' (Kitab al-manalik wal-mamalik) in B.I.F.A.N. Ser B xxx (1968), p. 68.

6. Ibid.

7. From V. Fernandes, 'Description de la Cote Occidantale d'Afrique' cited in *France and West Africa* ed. by J.D. Hargreaves (London, 1969), pp. 15-18. Marabouts is the name given to Muslim religious leaders in French speaking West African countries. To refer to them as priests as in the quote is misleading because Islam has no hierarchically ordained priesthood in the same sense as Christianity. It is perhaps more accurate to describe them as religious guides, clerics or teachers.

8. Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam,* p. 28.

9. Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Sundiata* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1977). This epic tale is derived from the tales recounted by traditional griots. The narratives of griots are an invaluable source of African history. Through their work as historians and genealogists they have for centuries recorded information about royal

ancestry, conflicts, and social changes. Later, they became regarded as rivals by Muslim clerics who also took upon themselves the task of chronicling events, but most important of all is the function they served of bridging the gap between Islam and traditional values in their roles as mediators and critics. However, it is significant that through their oral narratives, Sundiata is better remembered by Malians today than the Muslim Mansa Musa.

10. West African Muslims appear to experience some difficulties in accepting Islamic laws particularly those to do with marriage and family. Al-Uman in Corpus 261, *Tarikh al-Sudan* text 7/translation 13, recounts an amusing tale about Mansa Musa who although was described as pious man who 'strictly observed the prayer, the recitation of the Koran, and the mention of Allah's name' fell short in his sexual behaviour. When Mansa Musa visited Cairo on his way to Mecca, he ordered that the beautiful daughters of his subjects be brought to his bed without marriage. These were free women not slave concubines. When told that Islam did not permit him this, he asked: 'Not even kings?' 'Not even to kings' was the reply. 'By Allah' he said, 'I did not know that. Now I will renounce it completely'. We will find further illustration of this kind of behaviour in *The Last Imam.*

11. Available evidence suggests that returning pilgrims from Hajj often became more orthodox in their practice of Islam. See Peter Clarke, pp. 226-227.

12. Peter Clarke, p. 54.

13. Their stance is validated by the short chapter Al-Kafirun (109) in the Quran which reads:

    Say o ye that reject, Faith
    I worship not that which you worship
    Nor will ye worship that which I worship...
    To you be your way
    And to me mine.

14. From S. Hamdum and N. King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa* (London, 1975), p. 478.

15. *Ibn Battuta – Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, translated and selected by H.A.R. Gibb (London: DARF Publishers, 1983), p. 321.

16. The idea that people should not prostrate to their elders as is approved of by tradition in West Africa resurfaced in the 1970s in Nigeria when the Yan Izala Movement led by the grand Kadir tried to put a stop to it. This caused Abubakar Gumi great uproar in northern Nigeria as many believed that the Quran also asked people to demonstrate respect to elders particularly parents and that prostration was merely another way of doing so.

17. J.S. Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa*, pp. 6-7. The implications of this world-view is that while it forms a complex social structure with restraints and disciplines, personal initiatives and responsibility is diminished while the communal is amplified.

18. See H.A.R. Palmer, 'Kano Chronicles' in *Sudanese Memoirs* Vol. 3, Lagos, 1928, pp. 107-8.

19. Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban*, p. 1.

20. Ibid.

21. Lamin Sanneh, p. 22.

22. According to Trimmingham, the Nupe are relevant examples of a people in transition from ethnic religion to Islam, he therefore devotes much space to discussing their beliefs and practices before and after Islam. See pp. 5, 56-57, 115, 118-9. See also S. F. Nadel's *Nupe Religion* (London: Cohen and West,1954).

23. David Robinson, 'An Approach to Islam' in *Faces of Islam in African Literature,* ed. by Kenneth Harrow (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 107. Robinson prefers to use the terms "quarantine" "court" and "reform" to describe the phases Islam went through in West Africa. However, while this

scheme is useful for marking out the broad outlines of the changes that occurred, it also tend to equate the development of Islam with state formation and as such does not tell the whole story of Islam in the area.

24. Trimmingham, p. 29.

25. Peter Clarke writes at length about the influence of these scholars. See pp. 56-8 for al-Sayuti, pp. 61-4 for al-Maghili. See also Nehemia Levtzion 'Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800' in *The History of Islam in Africa* ed. by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwells (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000).

26. Al-Maghili, 'The Crown of Religion Concerning the Obligation of Princes', trans. by K.J. Bedri and D.E. Starrat in *Kano Studies* (1974), pp. 15-28. Interestingly, al-Maghili's document was written not long before Niccolo Machiavelli wrote his influential treaties on government titled *The Prince* in 1513.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Hiskett, p. 56.

30. The majority of the Fulani people lived on the peripheries of existing states and frequently experienced the power of the state as exploitation (because of taxes imposed on their cattle and grazing rights) rather than as protection. Because many flocked to join the 19th century jihads of dan Fodio it became known as the "Fulani" jihad.

31 Cited in Mervyn Hiskett's *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of Shehu Usman dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 128.

32. Hiskett, p. 159.

33. More has been written about the Sokoto Caliphate than any other aspect of Islam in Nigeria. Apart from those already mentioned see also *The Life and Works of Uthman dan Fodio* (Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1979), ed. by Ismail Balogun. Ud. Fitt. El-Misri 'The Life of Shehu Usman dan Fodio before the Jihad' in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, No. 4. 1963.

34. Ayesha Imam 'Politics, Islam, and Women in Kano, Northern Nigeria' in *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Assertions and Feminism in International Perspectives* ed. by Valentine Moghadam (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), p.137.

35. See Christina Oppong, ed., *Female and Male in West Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983) and the WIN Document: Conditions of Women in Nigeria, Zaria 1985. However, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's *African Women: A Modem History* (Westview Press, 1997) is also a useful text.

36. Cheikh Hamidou Kane *Ambiguous Adventure* (Oxford: Heinemann, AWS, 1972), p. 21.

37. The following studies show that bori possession is not an isolated phenomenon but recurs in different guises all over Africa. Janice Boddy, 'Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance', *American Ethnologist* 15, 1988, pp. 4-27. Pamela Constantinades 'Women Heal Women: Spirit Possession and Sexual Segregation in a Muslim Society', in *Social Science and Medicine* 21, 1985, pp. 685-2.

38. Trimmingham, pp. 107-111.

39. Ibid, p. 110.

40. Barbara Cooper, 'Gender and Religion in Hausaland: Variations in Islamic Practice in Niger and Nigeria' in *Women in Muslim Societies* ed. by Herbert Bodmin and Naysereh Tohidi (Boulder: Lynne Renner, 1998), p. 25.

41. See Mary Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 223-224. This is one of the few histories available about an African woman who lived before and during colonial rule.

42. Barbara Cooper, p. 30. The title Hajiya indicates a Muslim woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. She prays regularly but does not regard the practice of bori incompatible with her Islamic belief.

43. Bori initiation involves ritualised dances of possession which are executed by mediums called 'horses'. Stimulated by music, the medium dances until the spirit takes over her body, she then enters into a trance-like state. After a while she begins to perform movements characteristic of the spirit. The spirit is eventually dismounted by sneezing. Thereafter the initiate is considered a member of the cult.

44. Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali, 'Islam and Gender: The Nigeria Case', in *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality* ed. by Camillia F. El-Solh and Judy Mabro (Providence, Oxford: Berg, 1994).

45. Renee Dittin, 'Houses of Women: A Focus on Alternative Lifestyles in Katsina City', in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed. by Christina Oppong (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983)

46. See Roberta Dunbar, 'Muslim Women in African History' in *The History of Islam in Africa* ed. by N. Levtzion and R. Pouwells pp. 397-413. See also Iris Berger, 'Rebels or Status-Seekers? Women as Spirit Mediums in East Africa' in *Women in Africa*, ed. by Nancy J. Hofkin and Edna Bay (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1976), pp. 157-8

47. Susan O'Brien, 'Spirit Possession as Historical Source: Gender, Islam and Healing in Hausa Bori', thesis cited in Roberta Dunbar's '*Muslim Women in African History*' (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976) , p. 399.

48. Christian Coulon, 'Women, Islam and Baraka in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* ed. by Donal Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 115.

49. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwells, ed., *The History of Islam in Africa*, 1976, pp. 6-7.

50. Christian Coulon, p. 117-118.

51. The Holy Quran, Surah 3:104, trans., Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Brentwood: Amana Corporation,1989).

52. See T. Hodgekin, ed., *Nigeria Perspectives* (Oxford: 1960), p. 245.

53. Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister,* Nana Asmau (London: Frank Lass, 1995).

54. The Yan Izala Movement founded by AbubaKar Gumi in 1970s in Nigeria was based on The Yan Taru principle of spreading the correct teachings of the Quran and Sunnah (way) of Prophet Muhammed.

55. Cited in Jean Boyd's *The Caliphs Sister,* p. 50.

56. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, 1991). Here Mernissi examines at length women's status in Arabia.

57. Andrew Rippen, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 116.

58. Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali

59. See Jean Boyd, p. 5.

60. Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey, *The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion and Politics in West Africa* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1994), pp. 170-172.

61. See J.D. Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa* (London: 1969), p. 147.

62. Ibid.

63. Peter Clarke, p. 187.

64. R. Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (Middlesex, England: 1977) *Vol. I, pp. 63-111.*

65. Alain Quellien, La Politique Musulmane dans L'Afrique Occidentale (Paris: Larose, 1910), pp. 128-29.

66. Jean Triaud 'Islam in Africa Under French Colonial Rule' in *The History of Islam in Africa,* ed. by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwells, p. 170

67. Ibid.

68. A. Gouilly, *L'Islam dans L'Afrique Occidental Francaise* (Paris: 1962), p. 261)

69. Jean Triaud, p. 175.

70. Peter Clarke, *West Africa and Islam,* p. 193.

71. Other longstanding bases of cleavage in Nigeria are economic (oil producing states versus revenue dependent ones); Political (military versus civilian elite); class based (traditional hierarchy versus meritocratic achievement); and geographic and ethnic (Hausa/Fulani in the north/Yoruba in the west/Igbo in the east).

72. For a detailed discussion on the controversy surrounding this issue see William Miles, 'Religious Pluralisms in Northern Nigeria', pp. 209-221 in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwells.

73. Ibid.

74. M. Keith Book, *The African Novel in English* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998), p.28

75. This example is provided by Mervyn Hiskett in *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1975).

76. Graham Furniss, *Writing in West Africa* (London: Kegan Paul, 1988), p.7

77. Priscilla Starratt, 'Islamic Influences on Oral Traditions in Hausa Literature', in T*he Marabout and the Muse,* ed. by Kenneth Harrow (London and Portsmouth: Heinemann/James Curry, 1996), pp. 159-175. See also Neil Skinner, An Anthology of Hausa Literature (Zaria: Northern Nigeria Publishing Co. 1980), pp. 5-6.

78. Mbye Cham, 'Islam in Senegalese Literature and Film', in *Faces in African Literature*, p. 172.

79. Oyekan Owomoyela, *African Literatures: An Introduction* (Massachusetts, Crossroads Press, 1979), p. 24.

80. Beverly Mack, Hausa Women Verses (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

81. Mbye Cham, p. 172.

82. Kenneth Harrow, *Faces of Islam*, p. 7.

83. Edward Said, *Beginning: Intention and Method*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 81.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid, p. 82.

86. Cited in Kenneth Harrow, 'Islamic Literature in Africa', in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwells, p. 532.

87. Martin Ling, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p.4.

88. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, p. 53.

89. John Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p. 107.

90. Cited in Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 143.

91. Northrope Frye, Creation and Creation (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 4.

92. George Lang, 'Through the Prism Darkly Orientalism in European Language African Writing', in *Faces of Islam*, p. 301.

93. Abena Busia, 'Rebellious Women: Fictional Biographies' in *Motherlands* ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1992), p. 89.

94. Edris Makward in *Faces of Islam*, p. 188.

95. Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington and Indioanapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 152.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FEMALE CONDITION AND SENEGALESE SOCIETY IN THE NOVELS OF OUSMANE SEMBENE

In this chapter, I turn my attention to the literary works of Ousmane Sembene, one of Africa's foremost writers whose incisive portrayals of Senegalese society at various points in history has won him much acclaim from both African and Western critics. Writing in the French language, Sembene has done more than any other writer to document and interpret the impact Islam has had on Senegalese social, political, and economic life. However, critics frequently ignore his focus on Islam in their efforts to elucidate the socialist ideology he is known to espouse. And while his interest in women and issues concerning them has been evident in his work since the early 1960s, it is only recently that he has been acknowledged by critics such as Victor Aire as one of 'Africa's first feminist writers', a title that is usually reserved for female writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, or Buchi Emecheta. [1] As indicated earlier, I intend to examine two of Sembene's novels for his treatment of women, religion and tradition, but before I do so it is interesting to note how closely his biography summarised below reflects the creative evolution and the ideological orientation we find in his work.

Born in January 1923 in Zinguinchor, Senegal, Ousmane Sembene's early life was influenced by Abdou Rahman Diop, his mother's older brother who was a school teacher and author of writings on Islam. His early youth was marked by religious mysticism as, following the example of his uncle, he devoutly pursued the Islamic faith. Thus when he later wrote about Islam in his novels, it was with the confidence of one who knew the impact it could have on the outlook of its believers. However unlike the majority of African writers, including the other four whose novels I examine in subsequent chapters, Sembene never acquired a university education. He in fact left school without obtaining his 'certificate d'etudes' as he was expelled after a confrontation with his school principal. After this incident, he went on to pursue various occupations, working as a fisherman, plumber, mechanic, and bricklayer in Dakar all of which gave him an insight into the lives of under-privileged working people. By the age of fifteen he had enlisted in the French army and he went to fight in Italy and Germany in World War II. When he was demobilised in 1946, he

returned to Dakar where he subsequently participated in the Dakar-Niger railroad workers' strike for better wages and improved working conditions. This experience eventually inspired what is generally considered to be his literary masterpiece, his novel *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960, *God's Bits of Wood*). For the next ten years from 1948, he worked as a docker in Marseilles during which time he became a trade union leader and also joined the Communist Party. Several of his novels reflect this interest in socialist ideology. For example, his first novel *Le docker noir* (1956, *The Black Docker*) is concerned with the experiences of African dock workers who led a wretched existence in Marseilles. His second novel, the lyrical *Oh pays, mon beau people* (1957, *Oh Country, My Beautiful People*) is about the return of a war veteran to his homeland and the mission he embarks on of organising the peasants to fight for their own liberation from exploitation. The publication of a collection of short stories; *Voltaique* (1962, *Tribal Scars*) was followed with a fourth novel *L'Harmattan* in 1964. Two more short novels, *Vehi-Ciosane Ou Blanche Genesis* (*White Genesis*) and *Le Mandat* (*Money Order*) were published together in 1965. In *Money Order*, by focusing attention on the degenerate state of African social customs and the conflict between traditional and modern ways of life, Sembene draws a disenchanted picture of contemporary Senegalese life. The same theme recurs in his next novel *Xala* (1976) which also draws on an earlier story '*Ses trois-jours* (*Her Three Days*)' found in *Voltaique* in which Sembene attacks polygamy by vividly depicting the plight of older wives whose husbands acquire younger brides. Further works include *le demier de L'empire* (*The Last of the Empire*) in two volumes, and *Niwam and Taaw: Two Novellas* (1987).

From the above, in terms of African literature in general even without taking into account the paucity of available writing about West African Islamic society, we can see that Sembene's literary output has been prodigious. As Martin Bestman remarks with unconcealed admiration, 'it is astonishing how determination, courage, hard work, travel and experience have enabled this self-taught individual to become one of the most remarkable of all African writers'. [2] Indeed in addition to his writing, Sembene is also much applauded for his cinema work. He states in an interview that his decision to extend into film making comes primarily out of a desire to communicate with the African masses:

> What interests me is exposing the problems confronting my people. I consider the cinema to be a means for political action. Nevertheless I don't want to make 'poster films'. Revolutionary films are another thing. Moreover, I am not so naïve as to think that I could change Senegalese reality with a single film. But I think that if there were a whole group of us making films with the same orientation, we could alter reality a little bit. [3]

Evidently committed to raising the awareness of his target audience, Africans who can neither read nor write in French, Sembene has produced a number of major films. These include *Borom Sarret* (1963) which is an account of the frustrating day of a Dakar cart-man; *Niaye* (1964) a tragic tale of incest in a rural village; *Le Noire De* (1966); was followed by *Mandabi* (1968) which depicts the trials of a middle-aged man who is forced to deal with the contradictions found within a developing nation; *Taaw* (1970) on the other hand deals with the fate of young unemployed youths in Dakar and was followed by *Emitai* (1971); *Xala* (1975); *Ceddo* 1976) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1989). [4]

As Mbye Cham notes, the last three in particular are some of the most compelling and radical filmic reinterpretations of African history. They deal with how Arab-Islamic and Euro-Christian histories are implicated in Africa's history. [5] But of more significance is the fact that these films attempt to reconstruct African women's histories. For example *Emitai* depicts a village uprising spear-headed by women who collectively protest against France's increasing demand on its colonies for army recruits and for rice while *Ceddo* portrays a female protagonist who challenges religious imperialism on the part of both Muslims and Christians. Significantly, the film explodes the myth entrenched in popular memory that Islam is indigenous to Senegal. But because it questions the 'official' version of the history of Islam in Senegal, and established forms of patriarchal authority, it was banned for eight years from public screening in that country. However, it must be noted here that whatever the considerable merits of Sembene's film work, it is necessary to remember that ideas for them are more often than not acquired from his short stories and novels, a few of which I discuss in this chapter.

Critics generally agree that a major characteristic of Sembene's career as a writer is his socio-political commitment that is, his preoccupation with representing, challenging and denouncing social and political injustice in African society. But this is hardly unique to him as other African writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Festus Iyayi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Nurrudin Farrah and Alex La Guma to mention a few, have displayed similar commitment in their writings. After all most African writers have always believed that their art should be directed at exposing the realities of African life in the belief that once this is done the way forward would become clearer. But, perhaps because of his personal experiences and also having come into contact with socialist realism while studying film in Moscow in the 1960s, Sembene appears to be more devoted to the common people whose ideas, attitudes, hopes and aspirations he focuses on. Frederick Ivor Case notes that throughout his career Sembene has been remarkably consistent in his preoccupation with the working poor and the unemployed. [6] Critics such as Emmanuel Ngara in *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* (1985), are similarly quick to point out that the themes found in Sembene's writing spring from the materialist ideology he espouses and therefore consider conflicts in his novel solely in terms of class struggle. Yet while Sembene identifies with the struggles of the working class against relentless capitalist exploitation, just as much as the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo or the South African Alex La Guma both of whom share his belief in socialist ideology, no other writer comes close to his emphatic recognition of women's part in that struggle. Long before others awoke to the fact of women's roles in the construction of a sound and dynamic society, Sembene pulled them out of the shadows of the margins to which they are usually relegated. He situates them right in the midst of social tensions and explosive situations triggered by differences of opinions in matters of social justice and he attempts to interpret their legitimate struggles and aspirations as women.

Karen Smyley Wallace notes that Sembene's writing presents us with finely chiselled portraits of women as 'real, palpable individuals'. [7] Also according to Brenda Berrain, far from representing his female characters in secondary roles in which they merely complement their men, Sembene allows them to 'express their feelings, hurts, joys, and to think and react to pressing situations'. [8] Karen Smyley Wallace also goes on to assert that by 'creating women figures who do not merely represent shadows of the male figure, nor echoes of the male voice, Sembene's

works reflect the complexities of a changing Africa'. [9] His female characters are rendered as dynamic beings who must struggle constructively to redefine their own perceptions of self and to do this he delves deep into their psychic universe and explores their experiences of cultural ambivalence between tradition and Islam and in some cases, Western civilisation.

I will suggest here that Sembene's collection of short stories *Tribal Scars (Voltaique)* best sums up the issues concerning women that interest him as a writer. [10] It is interesting to note how amazingly similar they are to the ones usually raised in women's writing. In one of the stories in the collection titled *The Bilal's Fourth Wife*, polygamy and men's appetite for young women is challenged. Sembene uses the character of Yacine to question the Islamic marriage law which allows a man to have four wives and yet prohibits a woman from taking a lover as Yacine does in the story. Her community is deeply scandalised by her behaviour as well as by her refusal to be coerced into a divorce merely because she has had a child by a man not her husband. Her unyielding stance and arguments in defence of her actions force the male elders to eventually accept that a woman's point of view regarding her position in a marriage might just be as valid as a man's. In this story as in many others by Sembene, women triumph no matter how small the victory.

Senegalese society is apparently built upon a patriarchal system with a Muslim/ traditional foundation which not only allows double moral standards to operate but also encourages men to dominate and exploit women. This is amply illustrated in another of Sembene's short story titled *The Mother* in which a woman defends her daughter against a tyrannical King. This ruler appears to harbour a deep hatred for women and enjoys exerting his power over them. So when a girl resists his overtures he has her locked up. The rest of the male population cowardly fail to protect their womenfolk until the girl's mother fearlessly confronts the King and attacks him for disrespecting mothers. This courageous defiance of one who is usually considered to be of the weaker sex and the truth of her words finally arouses the rest of society from its stupor and the King is finally overthrown. The message here is that anyone who abuses power will not keep it. Yet another interesting idea offered in Sembene's depiction of the mother is that she is deliberately described as ugly not because he has succumbed to one of the biased attitudes directed at women but because that is how strong willed women are described in Senegalese

society. Fully aware that in African literature the good woman is usually the one who is gentle, beautiful, and biddable, Sembene sets out to celebrate the courage of women who rise to defend themselves and their children. The most important point he makes in this narrative is that simply because one is of the female sex does not preclude women from assuming responsibility either for themselves or for the collective community simply.

In a third story '*Her Three Days*', Sembene attacks the misuse of polygamy just as his fellow country woman Mariam Bâ does in *So Long a Letter.* [11] The story is told sympathetically from Noumbe's point of view as she waits in vain for her husband to come and stay with her for the three days Islamic law deems is her right in a polygamous setup. In her anger and frustration, Noumbe briefly contemplates revenge and even divorce but these thoughts frighten her because they contradict the ideas instilled in her. What Sembene skilfully points out is that she has been raised to be submissive and dependent upon her husband's whims just as her husband Mustapha's behaviour has been conditioned by years of indoctrination that the male is the dominant person in a marital relationship. In this way Sembene attempts to show that African women are also guilty of accepting unfair rules that are imposed on them and must therefore accept responsibility for some of the social evils. But he is also constantly aware of the powerful forces of religion and tradition that women have to contend with and therefore refers to these again and again in his writing.

As I noted earlier in the introduction to this thesis, because the background of the majority of better known writers and the general orientation of African literary practice is towards the Christian West, it has been customary among critics to think of European ideologies when the question of influences on ethics, language and so on is raised in African literature. It seems that because Sembene himself has articulated on several occasions his support for socialist ideology, critics look no further for explanations about his work. Those who have done otherwise have differed in their perception of Islam in Sembene's narratives. For instance Mbye Cham categorises him under the label "apostates" declaring that because Sembene posits a 'fundamentally materialist ideology' which portrays Islam as 'colonial in nature', his view of the religion is iconoclastic. [12] Yet in his conclusion to the same article he claims that even for writers like Sembene Islam occupies a central position

in their thoughts attesting to 'the almost absolute hegemony of Islam in Senegal'. Edris Makward on the other hand notes that Sembene's apparent criticism is directed at the unethical deployment of religious authority rather than a questioning of specific Islamic truths. [13]

I believe that Sembene's awareness of the primacy of indigenous culture and of Islam as the motivating forces of the modes of thought of his people has determined his choice of issues and characters. He has chosen to produce his work within the cultural norms of African society which tends to live out its tensions and conflicts on a family and communal basis. In the following I will argue that this perspective has to do with the centuries old Islamic concept of the Umma (the collectivity) rather than socialist ideas of the group. From the Islamic viewpoint, all human actions are regarded as duties whether it is to the individual self or to the group. According to Haifaa Jawad, in Islam the obligatory nature of any action including political ones is based on the concept of human representation of God on earth and this includes both men and women and entails personal as well as corporate responsibility. [14] In short both sexes share the duty described in the Quran as 'enjoining good and forbidding evil'. [15]

In this chapter I examine the female characters found in two of Sembene's novels, *White Genesis*, and *God's Bits of Wood* in order to consider how they function in the narratives and their importance in Sembene's vision of African society. These two novels provide a useful means of following Sembene's shifting concept of the Islamic religion and his perception of traditional values as they affect women in particular and society as a whole. In addition, they each approach women's subjectivity from different angles thus offering a comprehensive portrayal of their lives. Indeed, compared with the other writers whose works (often in the singular) I examine in later chapters, Sembene's larger volume of writing has the added advantage of enabling the critic to effectively trace the development of his female characters. Placing them in small rural as well as urban social contexts, Sembene tries to extricate modes by which women access power in male-orientated and male-dominated societies. By raising the taboo subject of incest in *White Genesis*, he examines the self-absorption of patriarchal power which left unchallenged threatens the very survival of society. In *God's Bits of Wood* he offers one of the earliest depictions of the revolutionary

potential in women with some unexpected results arising from their radical views of their roles in society.

WHITE GENESIS

The novels I have chosen for discussion here are important examples of Ousmane Sembene's art not only because of the possibilities he envisions for women but also because of the literary devices he employs in each narrative. Of the two, the above named novel exemplifies best the 'cross-fertilisation of conservative and innovative trends' that Albert Gerard speaks of in his article 'Preservation of Tradition in African Writing'. [16] In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka also asserts his belief that the secular imagination more often than not recreates existing methodology. 'Since even the most esoteric world of symbols, ethics, and values must originate from somewhere, the authentic images of African reality give such writers (who employ them) a decisive imaginative liberation'. [17] It seems that what most African writers do is to utilise what is familiar and closest to hand by drawing on their heritage while linking their traditions to Western models. For Ousmane Sembene this seems to entail adopting the role of the Senegalese griot. In *L'Harmattan* (1963) he explains the affinity he feels with this traditional wordsmith:

> I do not intend to produce a theory of the African novel. I remember, however that long ago, in that Africa that is revered, the griot was not only the dynamic element of his tribe, and village but also the authentic witness of each event. It is he who recorded and deposited before us under the tree, the deeds and exploits of each person. The concept of my work is derived from this teaching: to remain as close as possible to reality and to the people. [18]

Frederick Case identifies a 'consistent aesthetic' in Sembene's work in which African artistic principles at once underline and undermine the limitations of Western forms of expression since these do not always provide the author with the semantic, linguistic and symbolic tools he needs. [19] From the above declaration, it is clear that Sembene's realism is derived directly from an African vision of literature and as Soyinka suggests, while this is at once liberating it also demands that the writer conforms with the requirements of his society. Thus it is as a griot working within a moralistic and didactic framework that Sembene tackles a multiplicity of topics in his

writing. It is as an attentive and concerned griot that he attempts to interpret the socio-historical and cultural heritage of his community. It is an interesting and significant fact that in traditional Senegalese society, griots have historically served multiple functions as chroniclers, storytellers, mediators and advisors, roles which for example the character Dethye Law fulfils in *White Genesis*. But as Françoise Pfaff also notes, the griot occupies an ambiguous position in Senegalese society. While he enjoys freedom of expression and respect for his knowledge and oratory from both the elite classes as well as the masses, he is also stigmatised because he belongs to what is considered an inferior caste. [20] This contradiction is dramatised in Sembene's novel when other characters attempt to gag the eloquent griot Dethye Law. In *White Genesis* the role of traditional griot and what Sembene considers his task as a writer are both skilfully integrated into the narrative in answer to potential criticism from fellow Africans that a story about incest and the corruption it implies would bring 'dishonour.... To the Black Race'. In the forward to the novel Sembene writes:

> I also know, and so do you, that in the past, as well as in the present, there have been many anonymous heroic actions among us. But not everything we have done has been heroic. Sometimes, therefore, in order to understand a period fully, it is good to concentrate our minds on certain things, on certain deeds, and certain kinds of action. [21]

Pre-empting in this way arguments against his focus on unpleasant truths, Sembene indicates his intention to be the voice of conscience speaking what needs to be said. To be able to do so effectively, no subject can be considered taboo. Undoubtedly this view of himself as a modern day griot lends authenticity to Sembene's art but at the same time it is incumbent upon him to bear witness or testimony to both what is admirable as well as what is reprehensible in his society just as a traditional griot would do. Hence, skilfully employing incest as a metaphor for the crimes committed against one's own, in *White* Genesis he launches into a powerful criticism of the forces which work against women and other disadvantaged people in society.

The novel explores the mental anguish of Ngone war Thiandum. As the mother of Khar Madiagua Diob who is pregnant with an illegitimate child, events force her to confront her lack of power or voice in a male dominated society which continues to

hold fast to stifling ideas of tradition and religion. The tale ends tragically as unable to bear the shame and dishonour of the act of incest committed by her husband and daughter, Ngone commits suicide. Her husband, the incestuous father, is eventually murdered by their mentally disturbed son Tanor, a veteran of the French wars in Indochina and Algeria while the young daughter is expelled from the village. Setting the story of *White Genesis* in a remote village that is transparently African with an overt expression of Islam in the dialogues and practices of the people, Sembene skilfully articulates an eloquent plea for change, particularly for the renunciation of the hierarchical structure of society based on gender and caste, the first apparently supported by the Islamic religion and the other by Senegalese tradition.

Despite the literary merits of this novel, it is as Frederick Case has observed one of the least studied of Ousmane Sembene's works. The reason for this neglect is probably because it deals with the uncomfortable subject of incest. To quote Case:

> The abuse of the body of young children, and most frequently young female children, when placed in the context of the infringement of human rights, of religious precepts and paternal authority, is not a subject that many wish to discuss because it is truly a universal situation of sexual exploitation that produces reactions of shame and disgust and that no human community wishes to face with frankness and honesty. [22]

Similarly, Mary Harmer agrees that there is much a resistance to knowing about incest and that in many countries national pride intensives further the pressure for secrecy which is already exerted within families. [23] In *Incest A New Perspective* (2002), Harmer offers answers to the question of why an artist would choose to depict something as painful as incest. She claims that when some writers look at what is happening in society and see sexual abuse taking place, they refuse to look away or to be cowed by society's disapproval of speaking about it. Such writers find that they have questions to ask about the notion of incest, about the power relations involved, and about the loss of language concerning it. They perceive as Ousmane Sembene does in *White Genesis,* a 'link between the notion of incest and other forms of abuse that were not sexual, recognising abuse in all its forms.....'. [24] Edris Makward points out that as *White* Genesis explores society's reaction to incest, the

novel's denunciation of societal abuses comes from a 'discriminating evaluation of specific individual and community behaviours and practices' [25] which on closer scrutiny revolve around issues of gender and caste as much as they do religion and tradition. Therefore when Martin Bestman notes that Sembene 'paints an image of Africa that is convulsive, a world that questions its norms and values' [26] in this particular novel it is achieved mainly through his depiction of the two main characters, the mother Ngone War Thiandum and the griot Dethye Law.

In the introduction to this thesis, I argue at length that it is impossible to speak of a monolithic African woman because the experiences of different women are not identical. Ousmane Sembene appears to be particularly aware of this when he situates the various women characters in his novels within specific socio-cultural environments as if to underline that although their common gender experiences are crucial to their identity that alone is not the determining factor of their lives. Noting the same, Frederick Case asserts that at the very centre of Sembene's prose fiction is a deep concern with people's 'daily struggles in the context of the prevailing religious, social, political and economic realities that determine community mores'. [27] Certainly in *White Genesis* there is an insistence on the particularity of place and culture in an attempt to specify the social conditions in which the characters operate. Sembene begins the narrative by explaining that the word *niaye* (which is also the title of the film version of the novel) is singular in the Wolof language but that the French colonialists had written it in plural. [28] This piece of information in itself appears insignificant until we realise that Sembene is foregrounding the process and effects of colonial discourse and its inability to properly understand the African people, cultures, or languages. In the novel markers of place and time are also deliberately given in Wolof, defined only the first time they are used ensuring that the reader is constantly aware of the distinct characteristics of the setting of the story. For example, time is marked by the nearest prayer, discussions take place in the *pienthien* (village square) and the changing seasons are named as *Navet, Loli and Thorone*. Greetings, exclamations, and curses represented in the dialogues of the characters also point to a society steeped in Islam. As Ann Willey notes in her article, the characters here are more identifiably Wolof Muslims than any others Sembene has created. [29]

Thus from the onset of the narrative the reality of the inhabitants of Santhui-Niaye is made clear to the reader as the writer first emphasises the geographic isolation of the location and then the cultural and religious homogeneity of the people: 'They were true believers, wearing away the skins on their foreheads and knees in prayer five times a day (p. 9)'. Here then is a people in whose daily life Islam is a constant factor but the narrator goes on to inform us that whenever they are faced with a difficult situation, the same people also 'sought comfort in the adda, the tradition (p. 10)'. John Spencer Trimmingham's observations in *Islam in West Africa* are useful here in explaining the cultural synthesis that appears to have taken place in the novel's referent society. According to him, when an African community adopts Islam, it does not entirely change its traditional social values and practices but remains distinguished by its own peculiar customs. While over time Islam is integrated into communal life it often does so without altering much the basic structure of society, for example, the composition of the extended family, the authority of its head, the status of women, or the rules of interaction between various groups. Frequently a situation develops whereby Islamic principles are simply interpreted in ways which do not conflict with traditional values but are instead exploited to perpetuate certain indigenous cultural practices.

Throughout *White Genesis*, as Sembene skilfully paints a picture of a way that is based on a double foundation, Islam and tradition, we come to realise that the people of Santhiu-Niaye are in a position to negotiate problems by appealing to more than one belief system. When the leaders of the village are called upon to take action against the incestuous Guibril Guedj Diob, they vacillate between wanting to uphold Islamic law with regards to the punishment for incest and what tradition requires of them. One character by the name of Massar points out that 'According to Koranic law, Guibril Guedj Diob deserves to die. That is what the scriptures say '(p. 42) [30]. But another village elder insists, 'The adda has always been the first rule in the lives of our fathers. If that rule is broken, it deserves either death or expulsion' (p. 42). In this instance, the two are seen as separate and the question the men of the village struggle with is whether incest offends Islam or tradition most. Eventually we discover from this novel, and indeed from Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* that whenever a major conflict of interest occurs between the two, tradition prevails.

A number of historical accounts referred to in Chapter Two claim that West African people once tapped into the revolutionary potential in Islam, invigorating their societies through openness to learning and willingness to accommodate change. Yet in Sembene's *White Genesis* the people of Santhiu-Niaye seem to be gripped by a sense of inertia fostered by a particular view of Islam. The faith which they profess at any given moment seems to be based on:

> ..... the hypothetical promise of one of the best places in paradise. Allah's paradise like a nail fixed on the cornerstone of every activity of their daily existence, weakened and breached their faith in the future. Burying themselves in the old saying: 'Life is nothing', they had reached a state where they no longer felt desire (p. 10).

Criticism of this frame of mind is implied in the above, but as Edris Makward warns, such passages in Sembene's writing must not be misconstrued as 'sweeping condemnation' of either Islam or tradition. What is articulated however, is a vehement opposition to a situation where some members of society cling to the privileges they have carved out for themselves using religion and/or tradition to justify the exploitation or oppression of others. While the two are frequently put forward by characters in *White Genesis* as reasons why the status quo must remain as it is, change becomes not only necessary but desirable in the light of the crisis that the community faces.

More than any other character in *White Genesis* Ngone War Thiandum embodies the major tensions in her society. More immediately affected by the incest that has taken place between her husband Guibril Diob and their daughter Khar Madiagua Diob, she is forced to question and re-evaluate everything about her life. In an attempt to establish the psyche of this character, Sembene starts the process of interrogation by first examining her identity 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 (p. 14).

Ngone's upbringing and beliefs are depicted as an essential part of her mentality and are described to aid our analysis of her reactions to events. The above is clearly the voice of the narrator which emerges at critical moments in the novel in an attempt to focus the reader's attention on significant points, but an even more effective device is the long monologue that runs through her mind:

> 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 (p. 13-14).

Sembene's description of the socialisation Ngone has received echos what Nawal El-Saadawi has to say about the upbringing of a female child in Arab Muslim societies. From an early age she is given a series of warnings about the things that are forbidden, shameful, or outlawed by religion:

> 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]

This certainly seems to sum up Ngone war Thiandum's state of mind. What Martin Bestman incorrectly describes as Ngone's "outdated" ideas are in fact the traditional notions and the Islamic ideology which continue to frame the thinking and perceptions of self of many West African women. Hence even the comparatively

better educated and perhaps more 'enlightened' Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâs *So Long a Letter* declares 'my heart concurs with the demand of religion. Reared since childhood in their strict precepts I expect not to fail'. [32] In another of his novels, *God's Bits of Wood,* Sembene writes of Assitan, a woman who has similarly internalised such expectations that 'she lived on the margin of her husband's existence, a life of work, silence and patience'.[33] However, unlike Assitan who never challenges her subordination to her husband in spite of being married to the revolutionary union leader Bakayoko, Ngone's thoughts above waver between a prayer beseeching Allah for guidance and a list of complaints about all that constrains her as a woman. As she grapples with the sense of chaos that invades her when tradition and faith are corrupted by inaction, her deeply troubled mind is forced to question her place and role in society.

By portraying Ngone's frustrations in the above manner, ontological questions are raised at both the level of the individual and of the larger society. As Frederick Case points out culture and religion are interdependent aspects of being therefore it is hardly surprising that in a society that is at once overtly Islamic and traditional African, expressions of Being are revealed through factors that are non-Islamic and Islamic at the same time. That they also emanate from the individual as much as they are imposed by the community is evident in the novel. We have only to look at the way Ngone sees herself and what she considers permissible action on her part to gauge the extent to which she has internalised and in some ways, even perpetuated the oppressive traditions of her society. Significantly, even when her worst fear is confirmed, she remains totally incapable of confronting her husband with the knowledge of his incest because in this society to question things is especially for women seen as 'a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a crime against the established order (p. 10)'. So morally defeated she continues to receive her husband into her bed. Sembene carefully offers this explanation for her lack of action early in the novel in order to emphasise the magnitude of the initiative she exhibits later on.

Certainly, throughout the novel an atmosphere of intense tension is maintained in the novel by the writer focusing on Ngone's sense of utter confusion and bewilderment in the face of the debasement of values she has been reared to hold dear. The apparent indifference of her community to the crime of incest contradicts the usually

stringent adherence to both the laws of their religion and traditional ethics of honour and she is deeply affronted by this. However her refusal to be complicit with a system that is breaking down alienates her from others in the village. [34] Her only confidant is the griot woman Gnagna Guisse. But even here while Sembene salutes the friendship and spirit of cooperation that exists between women as the first step towards building a united front against male dominance and exploitation, their relationship is not entirely unproblematic as issues of caste and rank stand between them and each is wary of what she says to the other.

The complexity of this narrative relies on interlocking themes of religion and tradition, gender and caste, morality and justice, honour and nobility, all of which are implicated in the struggle Ngone war Thiandum wages within herself. It is interesting to find that while she feels virtually powerless as a woman, her noble lineage fills her with immense pride helping her to arrive at the decision to stand by 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' (p. 23). And yet as a woman she has endured many. This goes to confirm what Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie states in *Critical Transformations* 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]. Where Ngone is concerned it is her desire to protect the honour of her family and caste that strengthens her resolve to act even as she makes the astonishing discovery of 'her own capacity to assess events from her own woman's point of view' (p. 15).

Sembene deliberately allows this realisation to coincide with the discarding of religious beliefs she holds. He does not question the truth of Islam in the novel but he nevertheless appears to blame it for the passivity and inertia it fosters in the people of Santhui-Niaye. His heroine only awakens to the possibility that she might after all be responsible for making her own decisions after it dawns on her that the door to paradise which is supposed to open for her through her husband is slammed shut against her by his incest. Subsequent actions she takes continue this break with restrictive beliefs and traditions unleashing the potential inherent within herself and in her daughter through the alternatives she makes possible for her. With the help of her life-long friend Gnagna Guisse, she sets about arranging the future, and in a significant departure from tradition and Islam which require the child to take the name of its father, she bequeaths all her worldly possessions and the noble name of

Thiandum on her daughter's child. Her suicide after this acts as a kind of purge which at last galvanises the degenerate community into some reaction.

The novel seems to be suggesting that when men abdicate responsibility it is up to women to take over the reins and force the pace of change. It is this radical treatment of the role of women which assigns them more agency than is usual in African literature that has led Edris Makward to conclude that the novel lends itself to obvious feminist readings. Certainly the novel successfully articulates the pain and suffering of women in patriarchal society through its exploration of the implications incest has especially for women affected by it. However, it is interesting to note that in writing about incest in *White Genesis* Sembene has chosen not to treat it as a matter of fantasy or desire as Bessie Head does in *The Cardinals* (which treats father/daughter incest as a love story), but is rather more interested in the role of the incest taboo as a social structure. Usually defined as sexual relations that are forbidden because there is a blood tie between the partners already, anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Margaret Mead also claim that the law which forbids incest is universal to all societies regardless of what their religious beliefs might be. In his famous *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Levi-Strauss argues that 'society expressly forbids only that which society brings about' because it is not inconceivable that blood relatives might find each other sexually attractive. [36] However, the prohibition of incest is said to mark man's transition from nature to culture because as he transcends his instincts, nature's sovereignty is ended and civilisation is born. While arriving at this theory, anthropologists also find that the primary function of the incest taboo is not just for the protection of the sexually immature as one would assume, but that it exists rather for the sake of exogamy – that is the law which prohibits a father from keeping a daughter to himself. Levi-Strauss explains it more clearly when he writes:

> The prime role of culture is to ensure the existence of the group. The group intervenes through incest prohibitions to ensure its own existence. Groups exist because they exchange valuables among themselves; the two most important valuables are food and women. [37]

But this means that while the structure of society is based on the incest taboo, daughters can and are treated as objects of exchange circulated like commodities

among men. The dilemma here is that both the incest taboo as well as its transgression fails to take women into account as subjects. So it be could argue that when incest is committed, it serves to call to question the usual treatment of women as things. However, I will not pursue this line of interrogation here, suffice to say that when novelists write about incest they are registering a supposedly private world of the psyche and a public outer world of politics that are not clearly separated but function in tandem.

In *White Genesis* Sembene treats incest as expression of profound social malaise particularly when society turns a blind eye to Ngone's suffering. The griot Dethye Law's counsel to the village leaders enable us to recognise the means by which this blindness is preserved in Santhiu-Niaye. The novel also asks us to bear in mind the trauma and damage caused by incest because from whatever point of view we choose to approach father/daughter incest, some element of exploitation seems to be implicated in the relationship. This is perhaps best illustrated by a number of case studies Nawal El-Saadawi presents in the sociological text *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980). In one, a victim recounts how a male relative, in this case her seemingly pious grandfather abused her sexually when she was only five years of age. [38] With bitter irony she tells how her mother who had warned her against physical contact with men outside the family even at that young age 'would feel relaxed and secure the moment she learned that I had been with my grandfather in the garden' because the same grandfather would immediately slip back into the posture of respectability once he had finished with her. It is this deception, the breaking of trust and the abuse of power that Sembene also attacks in *White Genesis* when Guibril Diop returns to his duties as husband and village chief all while denying any knowledge of his daughter's condition. Another case study in El-Saadawi's text illustrates further the chilling extent a father's violation of his daughter can go:

> Among the cases that I examined during my research study on women and neurosis was that of a young female doctor who had just graduated. She had been engaged and then married to one of her colleagues. On the marriage night her husband discovered that she was not a virgin. She explained to him that she had lost her virginity while still a child and that her father was the culprit. But her husband

> was unable to take the shock in his stride and divorced her. The young woman returned to her parent's home. She was unable to tell her mother the truth out of fear for the father. The good woman accused her of being perverted and the father zealously joined in, heaping blame upon his daughter. The girl, at her wits end, wept and finally confessed to her mother all that had happened. In turn, the poor woman exposed to the terrible shock of finding out what her husband had done, almost collapsed. The father however accused his daughter of lying and beat her savagely. She was seized with a nervous breakdown which the father used to his advantage. He accused the girl of being insane and sent her off to a hospital for mental disease. [39]

Perhaps extreme examples like this are rare, but the power relations involved in father/daughter incest and the secrecy which generally surrounds the subject is accurately taken into account in Sembene's depiction of a similar case. In his article on *White Genesis*, Jonathan Peters argues that since the two characters involved in the matter have very little to say for themselves they should both be held equally guilty, but as Otto Rank suggests, is such a view not merely an attempt to find justification for the father's shocking desire or indeed an attempt to shift the blame onto the daughter? [40] In rejecting the idea that some form of coercion has been exerted on the daughter, Peters apparently does not take into consideration the authority that the father wields which inevitably lends more force to whatever impulses or wishes he may have regarding his child. His stance therefore merely continues the practice of covering up the cruellest abuse of young girls. Furthermore, as the novel informs us, a society where a girl's virtue is measured by how submissive she is to her father's authority and where men exchange their daughters in order to acquire second, third, or fourth wives cannot claim equality between fathers and daughters. The general problem of older men preying on young adolescent girls is posed by the most enlightened man in the village.

> 'A girl the same age as your daughter, a girl who has played with your daughter in your house; who yesterday you called "my child", a girl whose parents said "Go tell your father .....", a girl whom you named; if you marry her, you are marrying your daughter' said Dethye Law staring at the imam in defiance (p. 44).

The link between abuse and religion is made and finally acknowledged when the imam is forced to concede that such behaviour however prevalent as we see in Sembene's *Xala* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is "morally abnormal" even if no religious text forbids it.

In fact both father and daughter do not speak about what they have done in Sembene's novel is significant but not unusual, because as Mary Harmer points out incest involves the deepest family secret which is frequently denied by both the perpetrator as well as the victim. The denial of the latter is similarly alluded to in Yvonne Vera's *Under The Tongue* where the young girl Zhiza awakens to find herself being violated by her father and feels her tongue is weighted down by an incapacitating a sense of disbelief and fear:

> 'I feel my eyelids fall while my tongue grows thick and heavy pressed between my teeth. My tongue is hard like stone. I dare not cry or breathe'. P.106 [41]

Here the experience of being raped by her father robs the young girl of her voice. Analysing Zhiza's reaction, Meg Samuelson argues that 'the trauma of violence, physical and psychological teaches silence'.[42] In Vera's novel, this silence is posed as authentic response to trauma of all kinds whether of personal rape or of the colonial dispossession of an entire nation. The search for a language or voice with which to relate this experience is ultimately what the novel is about. However in *White Genesis* we are not told about the circumstances surrounding the act of incest. It is left to the griot Dethye Law to sum up Khar Madiagua Diob's predicament when she refuses to blame the *navertanekat* (migrant labourer) for her condition but nevertheless seems unable to name the person responsible. Fully aware that her situation is fraught with complications he says: 'Now we can understand her. Can a daughter declare publicly: "The child I am carrying is my father's?"'(p.46)' In this novel, not only does the community have to contend with secrecy and silence from Khar and her father but the text itself revolves around the unspeakable. As anthropologists point out, what is taboo is frequently also a prohibition against speaking because naming something as taboo as we do the act of incest implies that it is to be avoided even in discussion. This silencing operates most fully under the

restrictions of taboo which mutes whatever cries the female child may want to utter. And just as the object of taboo is placed beyond the reach of language, so neither Khar nor her father is allowed to speak about incest in the novel and in the end are both eventually ostracised from normal society.

Through Khar Madiagua Diob's silence, the writer/creator makes a statement about women's loss of speech and the concomitant loss of the power or ability to refuse. While Yvonne Vera's text attempts to represent the movement from silence to voice of her female characters, those in *White Genesis* seem to have completely lost the power to articulate their pain. The reader is aware of Ngone war Thiandum's views on a number of issues but much of what is attributed to her is presented in the form of long monologues that are never voiced aloud. Therefore while it is tempting to read differences into the individual silences of mother and daughter, are we not supposed to see Ngone's suicide as an admission of her impotence in a society where she has no voice? Yet on the other hand, while women rarely speak in the novel, their silent action contrasts sharply with the men's paralytic oratory which could suggest that talking is useless when action is required.

Men and women are rarely seen engaging in dialogue with each other in the novel preferring instead to either keep their own counsel or consult with other members of their own sex. Sembene carefully shows them occupying separate spaces but this separation is shown to even greater effect in the film version *Niaye* where the sexes are depicted as occupying what Ifi Amaduime describes as 'parallel worlds', something not uncommon in traditional African society but which also falls in line with Islamic prescription of male/female segregation. In the film, apparently lacking a public forum women are seen whispering together behind bamboo screens while the men gather in village square to play endless games of *yothe* (the local version of draughts) and in the mosque to make, albeit reluctantly, decisions concerning the welfare of the village.

Some Western feminists put forward the idea that because the activities of African Muslim women are largely confined to in the domestic sphere, they lack influence or agency in their societies. However, while the actions of Sembene's female characters are placed within the context of the isolation imposed by marriage, this claim is disputed by the impact the collaborative actions of Ngone war Thiandum and

Gnagna Guisse have on events. While their efforts to resolve the problem of incest are unobtrusive and secret, they nevertheless demonstrate an ability to influence the outcome of the crisis. Sembene's women in both *White Genesis* and *God's Bits of Wood* defy the usual patriarchal master narratives as he ensures that they take up the task of changing the course of their society's history. An example of this is when he makes a positive symbolic use of Khar's departure from Santhiu-Niaye. Banished from the village in an attempt to suppress the evidence of incest, the young girl is understandably tempted to abandon her baby but instead overcomes this urge. Her decision to keep the baby who would probably be a handicap to her life in new environments effectively signals a turning point after a long reign of corruption and evil. Thus within a short space of time, we witness her growth from a vulnerable child into a self-assertive woman whose independent decision restores balance to the natural cycle.

Thus Sembene's belief in the potential inherent in women is clearly affirmed in this novel as in a number of his other works. Even a writer such as Ngugi war Thiongo whose work is often compared to Sembene's because they share a socialist concern with the exploited and the disadvantaged masses, fails to depict a similar consistent faith in the ability of women to move society into a better future. In his prison diary *Detained* (1981) Ngugi makes a statement of authorial intention with regards to the role of his female characters which is meant to indicate his commitment to gender reform. He opens the diary by hailing Wariinga as his inspiration: 'Wariinga heroine of toil.... There she walks haughtily carrying her freedom in her hands'.[43] But the promise he makes to 'create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and struggle against the conditions of her present being' although carried out to some extent in *Devil on the Cross* (1982) is withdrawn in his later novel *Matigari* (1986).[44] In this novel, Ngugi's call for a social revolution initially appears to embrace women as active participants in the struggle against oppression. He has a former prostitute Guthera fighting alongside the warrior Matigari but by the end the narratives, social change is personified by the boy Muriuki whose name literally means resurrection or rebirth and upon whom the task of continuing the struggle is conferred.

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In contrast, Sembene is able to envision a female child in a similar role again and again. For instance, union leader Bakayoko's adopted daughter in *God's Bits of*

Wood is portrayed as his natural heir, the one who will carry on the worker's fight for social justice. In *White Genesis* as Jonathan Peter's points out, Khar's daughter, the non-racist *White Genesis* is held up as a symbol of hope for the future. As far as Sembene is concerned, even this child of infamous ancestry despite being female may well grow up to be the one to glorify an entire people. This belief is reiterated in earnest both at the beginning and at the end of the narrative and runs like a litany through Ngone war Thiandum's mind as she contemplates the future. Sembene directs the reader to look to the future with optimism as the novel ends with Khar and her child journeying away in a truck from Santhiu-Niaye and all the dishonesty, corruption and stagnation it represents. The truck driver's comment that it is a pity the baby is female is immediately counteracted by the narrator's concluding words, "This story had no other ending, it was a page in their life. A new one starts, which depends on them "(p. 73).

Gerald Moore suggests in his chapter on Ousmane Sembene in *Twelve African Writers* (1980) that the phrase 'depends on them' might be taken as an epigraph to the whole of Sembene's literary output.[45] Certainly an insistence on the individual's capacity to change his fate runs through all his novels and short stories but a prerequisite seems to be the individual's ability to discern and to reject conditions that are unhealthy for personal and society's development whether they originate from religion, tradition, or capitalism. Sembene himself refers to this concept as 'le refus' which he explains in detail in an interview with Sada Niang:

> .... Refusal of oppression and humiliation is an act or process of accepting responsibility for one's self. It is therefore a regenerative process of great significance for the individual and for the collectivity. It is an act of pride and human dignity that signals the rebirth of a people.
> [46]

In *White Genesis,* this concept is enacted by both Ngone war Thiandum and her daughter particularly when Ngone bequeaths both her family's revered name and wealth on her daughter's child. But the most articulate exponent of this concept is undoubtedly Dethye Law, the griot leather worker who in his capacity as griot/narrator sets the story before the reader. His discourse concerning incest incorporates arguments against the manipulation of Islam and tradition towards evil

ends and his demand for the right to freedom of speech regardless of gender or caste is addressed to the reader as much as it is to the villagers of Santhiu-Niaye. Frederick Case observes correctly that very rarely does a male character give voice to the pain and suffering of women in Sembene's novels, but here it is the task of Dethye Law to educate other men about their abuse of power and privilege. The reader soon discerns a link between the prejudices exhibited against the griot on the basis of his caste and those suffered by women because of their gender. Hence it is hardly surprising to find that it is Dethye Law and his wife Gnagna Guisse who are the only ones to give support and advice to Ngone war Thiandum and her daughter Khar Madiagua Diob.

For Sembene, giving voice to suppressed narratives also means focusing on fissures in discourses of power. The convergence of issues of gender and caste in this novel which he investigates by raising the taboo subject of incest testify to his ability to discern links between what at first appear to be unconnected problems. The reader is consequently forced to consider larger ideological issues of hypocrisy and the debasement of some members of society by others. Through the character of Dethye Law Sembene denounces a situation where truth is seen as the prerogative of a particular class. When the machinations of Medoune, Guibril Diob's brother go unchallenged and are even condoned by the Imam who is the religious leader of the village, Dethye Law decides to leave Santhiu-Niaye rather than stand by and watch the old virtues which had once made their society great being trampled upon. His dialogue with Medoune emphasises the fact that freedom and truth are not confined to the rich or those of noble ancestry.

Medoune Diob repeated the question:

> 'You haven't told us where you are going'.
> Part of Medoune Diob's face showed above the head-rest. 'I am going where, I hope, truth will be the concern of honest minds and not a privilege of birth', rejoined Dethye Law.
> 'True one must be a griot to possess that freedom'.
> 'Freedom of thought has never been a gift, nor an inheritance. It has always been bought for a heavy price in blood. The ruler who opposes it will find himself undone sooner or later'.
> 'And is that freedom denied here?'

> 'No. In truth, no. It is early yet. But the basis of our community has been undermined. If it is not said now, it will be one day. You are your brother's murderer, and our community has lost its foundation'.
> 'Take care what you are saying, Dethye Law', interrupted Medoune Diob abruptly getting up. His eyes went from one elder to the next. Dethye Law continued:
> 'What have I said? People will not be able to say anymore that truth is the weakness of Santhiu-Niaye'.
> 'My ancestors have always ruled Santhiu-Niaye, and yours have always served them'.
> 'That is indeed true. But that was in the past. I have inherited from my ancestors a concern for the truth which I shall preserve until the end'.
> 'Are you trying to say you are of noble blood?'
> 'Yes the blood of truth is always noble, whatever its origin'
> (pp. 65-6).

Disapproval of women's silence is implied when Dethye Law's outspokenness effectively challenges the pernicious caste system on which Senegalese society is based. In the novel, language appears to reinforce social hierarchies and this is particularly evident when other men in the village make sarcastic remarks about Dethrye Law's eloquence when they themselves do not have words adequate to describe their present situation.

> They would have liked to speak, to express their feelings, the pain they felt in their hearts each time one of them went away, but they lacked the words.... Long years of servitude breaks a man, deprive him of the aristocratic use of words. In other countries, the ability to embellish language is the preserve of the high-bred (p. 34).

By the time the above dialogue takes place, Guibril Guedj-Diob has been murdered by his son Tanor at the instigation of his uncle Medoune in an act of patricide that at once avenges the crime of incest but also attempts to cover it up. It is the latter that arouses Dethye Law to speech and action particularly as the Imam attempts to further confuse matters by indulging in unnecessary religious exegesis when the crime and punishment of incest is clearly stated in the Quran. Ironically, the imam

appears not to have the moral sense one expects in such a person but is more concerned with proving the superiority of his knowledge over his rival Palla. The conduct of this religious figure is evidently of great concern to West African writers who frequently ridicule or criticise them for abusing their power.[47] One is reminded of Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, where the main protagonist is depicted as being similarly preoccupied with consolidating his position among his people even though in his case, his self-seeking efforts are tempered by an ingrained fear of God's wrath. In *White Genesis* however, Sembene demonstrates that institutionalised religion is often an empty shell of rites and practices simply serving to conserve a certain order.

Historically, rivalry has always existed between traditional griots and Muslim clerics because they have both acquired mastery of the word and are interested in safeguarding their positions in society. But according to Brett C. Bowles and Thomas Hale in their study, griots have also served syncretic functions in West Africa. [48] This is why on closer scrutiny, we realise that the character who appears to bridge the gap between the two world views most effectively is Dethye Law. Although those of the griot caste are generally regarded as guardians of traditional values, in *Xala* they are seen as an important part of the 'Senegalisation' of the Chamber of Commerce and of El Hadji's wedding festivities, griots they have also influenced the spread of Islam in West Africa because of their ability to adapt to social changes. In the end in *White Genesis* when the values of tradition and Islam conflict to the extent that truth becomes a casualty, it is the griot who points out the right path. In so doing Dethye Law upholds a fundamental principle of Islam but the same characterises the truth behind the words of a traditional sage because although born into a lower caste he ennobles his community with his steadfast witness to the truth. Indeed in his role as the muezzin who calls the villagers to prayer an interesting allusion is made to Bilal, the black slave Prophet Muhammed chose to make the first call to believers which indicates to Muslims that faith is not a matter of class. Dethye Law's decision to make the evening call to prayer from outside the environs of Santhiu-Niaye signifies that it is no longer dar-al-Islam (the abode of Islam). Designed to test their will, this act immediately serves to unite the faithful against the conniving Imam and leads to Medoune being ostracised in much the same way as his brother Guibril Diob when his incest became established. This sequence of actions not only indicates the possibility of change but deliberately

linked to Islam as it is, seems to affirm Sembene's belief that religion can be employed in the search for truth and justice.

As Edris Makward writes in his article in *Faces of Islam in African Literature,* by the end of *White Genesis* we are left with the impression that even as women question the privileges accorded to their men-folk and still others challenge the pernicious caste system, life in Santhia-Niaye will continue to revolve around the five daily prayers and the other basic tenets of Islam. The conclusion this writer has arrived at is that the intensely moral tone of this particular novel is a result not only of Sembene's role as the truth-telling griot, but that is also in keeping with the dictates of the Islamic religion which requires art to be of meaningful value to mankind. To achieve this he represents the reality of peoples' lives as they are moulded by tradition and religious practice. And successfully connects the theme of incest with the themes of honour and nobility as well as morality and justice, all of which interweave to form a moral world not only as things are, or as they used to be, but most important of all, as they ought to be.

GOD'S BITS OF WOOD

The next novel I shall focus on in this chapter is Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood,* a fictionalisation of an actual historical event that occurred under French Colonial rule in West Africa. [49] Namely, the railway workers' strike which paralysed rail services from Dakar to Niger between October 1947 and March 1948 when African workers mobilised themselves to demand for "Equal Pay for Equal Work", "Old Age Pensions", "Proper Housing" and "Family Allowances", benefits which were already being enjoyed by white workers. Sembene's narrative is an imaginative account of what happened in the railway towns of Thies, Dakar, Bamako, and numerous settlements which lie between them inhabited by thousands of people whose lives were dependent on the trains.

If as mentioned earlier, *White Genesis* is one of the least studied novels by Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood* on the other hand has had much critical attention devoted to it. With radical features in both form and content, it has deservedly earned Sembene the reputation of being a revolutionary writer. Along with a number of other critics such as Simon Gikandi, Arthur Shatto Gakwandi and

Frederick Ivor Case, Chidi Amuta believes that the novel derives its candidature for classical status mainly from the fact that it represents a fictional elaboration of the materialist thesis that 'existence precedes essence'.[50] In *Art, Ideology and the African Novel* (1988), Emmanuel Ngara asserts that the systemic injustices the toiling workers experienced which led to social agitation on their part as well as a resultant increase in their political awareness is clearly an expression of the Marxist idea of consciousness that is articulated in a *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

> It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing productive relationships..... From forms of development of the productive forces these relationships are transformed into fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution opens.[51]

Terry Eagleton claims that 'the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression'.[52] This is precisely the position from where Marxist readings of Sembene's novel start out. As Charles Nnolim points out, *God's Bits of Wood* is generally considered 'the proletarian, Marxist novel par excellence' dealing as it does with trade disputes, strikes and the attendant brutalities inflicted by the capitalist compradors; the treachery of certain members of the proletariat who have been bought over by the capitalist oppressors; the trails of traitors who attempt to subvert the workers' solidarity; and finally, the denouement which has the proletariat emerging triumphant over the authorities.[53] All these are indeed staple elements of proletarian Marxist novels however, while discussions of Sembene's novel in terms of socialist or Marxist ideology are helpful in assessing the material conditions which motivate people to fight economic injustices, in many cases the same tend to de-emphasise the unique role of women in the narrative. And secondly, they diminish the importance and relevance of other ideological forces at play in the novel's referent society.

In the following, I endeavour to argue that women occupy a central position in Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* not only because the author conceives of them as active members of the proletariat but because he is writing about an Islamic society where the gaze is frequently fixed on the actions of the female sex.[54] Therefore it is fitting that he elaborates the role of women in the African Muslim society he writes about, as it undergoes a process socio-economic transformation. But first, I will suggest that the communal effort he describes in the novel can be attributed to African traditions as well as to the Islamic concept of the *ummah* (group) both of which insist on the full participation of the individual in activities that are meant for the greater good of society. While *God's Bits of Wood* evidently contains most of the staple elements of the Marxist-oriented novel, it transcends mere Marxist propaganda because of the author's artistic and aesthetic arrangement of the various aspects that help to make his story into a coherent meaningful whole. It is therefore pertinent to also examine the various techniques and devices through which Sembene is able to achieve his artistic purpose.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, when the strike is declared, it sets in motion forces which bring about a new awareness of several facts of the people's lives not least the mutual dependence that exists between the men and the trains they serviced: [55]

> When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the Savanna, they realised that an age had ended – an age their elders had told them about, when all Africa was just a garden for food. 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 (p. 32).

The novel explores this relationship of interdependence in an attempt to illuminate the problems inherent in the conflict between labour and capital. Arthur Shatto Gakwandi asserts that when the workers decide to go on strike they are in effect revolting against being treated as 'slaves of industry'.[56] But while the railway workers claim their right to control the machine, the complexity of their situation is at once highlighted by the realisation that 'it did not belong to them; it was they who belonged to it. When it stopped, it taught them that lesson (p. 32)'. Several passages in the

novel go on to suggest that in the emerging new world order technology will reign supreme and will inevitably link the destiny of Africans and white workers:

> ..... because of their fellowship with the machine was deep and strong; stronger than the barriers which separated them from their employers, stronger even than the obstacles which until now had been insurmountable – the colour of their skin (p. 77).

Critics refer to passages like the above when they argue that the novel is basically a revolutionary call to workers of the world to unite.[57] Undoubtedly, the strike serves to link the purposes and activities of various groups of the toiling "masses" but when critics insist on a solely Marxist reading they fail to recognise the importance of several significant devices Sembene employs in the novel and which are crucial to our reading of the text. As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, before we hasten to apply Western theories to African phenomena, it is pertinent to look closer home, to the place itself for explanations of what drives African societies. Critics have frequently compared Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* with Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* (1977). Yet in the latter, incidents described appear to merely provide opportunities for the author to criticise the spirit, ideology, and lifestyles of those who occupy the upper echelons of capitalist society in Kenya. The misery of its main characters such as Abdalla, Karega, Munira, and the fact that Wanja becomes a prostitute are clearly attributed to capitalism without much reference to other influences in their lives. Indeed, on the whole the novel reads like an ideologue for a party especially when the author's political arguments are expressed with such slogans as 'A Luta Continua' or when the 'trade union agitator' Karega's vision is portrayed in the following manner:

> Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing the power to overturn the system and all its prying, blood thirsty gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh.[58]

Such overt promotion of the socialist agenda is less evident in Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* where instead, we find social transformation being impelled mainly by distinctive cultural values that obtain in this particular West African society.

In his article titled 'Cross Currents: The "New African" After Cultural Encounters' Wole Soyinka correctly observes that *God's Bits of Wood* is:

> a work which comes closest to the harmonisation of cultural status and security of traditional African society with a visionary outlook in the evolution of a contemporary African society, resulting in the transformation of the New African. [59]

Certainly the process of 'elicitation' that we find in *God's Bits of Wood* as opposed to the more common iteration of traditional values, mostly static, that is found in other African novels gives the work a permanent relevance to society in any phase of its development. On the other hand, the following pronouncement by one of the characters in the novel: '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 or a race' (p.76) may be read as expressing a tradition-hostile view. Yet in relation to this avowal, or indeed in dynamic complimentarity to it, we are presented with a traditional society of such organic coherence that it is apparent that the social transformation which occurs could not have taken place without the pre-existence of those traditional values. But what are these traditional values and how do they help propel the narrative of *God's Bits of Wood* to the conclusion that it arrives at?

Gerald Moore has already noted the 'insistence on the primacy of change' that runs through all of Sembene's work. Yet while Sembene desires to document the process of change in either economic relationships or interpersonal ones, he also strives to demonstrate that a consciousness of that need lies within the very bosom of the society he writes about. In order to achieve this, he finds it necessary to harness what is of positive value in his society. Critics have noted how the characters that people the narrative of *God's Bits of Wood* are represented as a mass, a single entity bound by a common destiny and who through persistence, solidarity, and a collective will come to realise their own strength. Sometimes Sembene achieves this by depicting the community through overt descriptions of its

key institutions where people gather in large numbers such as in the market place or at the union building. At other times he does this by giving prominence to social units such as the extended households where women of different generations interact and support each other. Both communal consciousness and communal struggle are depicted successfully through the portrayal of a society where almost all the people share the deprivations caused by the sanctions imposed on them by the French authorities. As readers, our moral indignation is aroused as we trace the sequence of brutal methods by which the authorities attempt to frustrate the workers and their families – from cutting off their water supply, to using fire hoses against the men and women, to the shooting at crowds of protesting Africans. The people's solidarity and persistence is amply demonstrated when after 'the foodstuffs were gone, the meagre savings eaten up, and there was no money in the house' they employ a variety of survival tactics. Nothing calls for more pathos and sympathy and identification with their plight than the scene where Mariame Sonko, wife of Balla the welder saw

> Dieynaba, surrounded by women and a swarm of children who had just cut off the head of a vulture they had caught in a trap. Dieynaba held the bird up by the feet, and the blood dripping from its neck fell on her own feet, spotting them with red. "Here is what we will have to eat and at least we won't starve" (p. 224)..

As two other characters, Ramatoulaye and Houdia M'Baye come to realise, "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" (p. 101). This awareness of the threat to the survival of their society simply serves to increase the people's sense of solidarity and thus as they share plans, hopes and face their fears together, they seem to coalesce into a single entity. Sembene writes that it is 'as if some giant eraser had rubbed out their individual traits, they had taken on a common mask'... (p. 41).

In line with Sembene's essentially dialectical design, we find that just as there are those who epitomise unflinching commitment to the cause of the strike, for instance Doudou who turns down a promise of promotion and the offer of three million francs if he defects, so also do some characters represent a betrayal of the communal

consciousness which underlies the strike action. What Sembene does is to sketch the strike as having a catalytic effect on both individual characters as well as on the entire fabric of society. After first emphasising that the consciousness of a common destiny helps the people to subordinate personal interests to those of the community and motivates them to act together, he then goes on to provide examples of the negative results of not being part of that group. The greater majority of people that the fate of every person is believed to be inextricably tied to that of the community, consequently, isolating oneself amounts to a self-inflicted death sentence as we see in the case of Sankore the watchman who is eaten up alive by rats in his hiding place. Or as Diara the traitor discovers, that it leads to social exclusion and a permanent sense of humiliation that is like a wound that 'would never heal' (p. 96).

Although Simon Gikandi claims that the celebration of the people's communal values that we find in Sembene's novel is presented without being mediated through a predetermined ideological perspective, there is no denying that the novel is specifically about an African Islamic society and that surely, influences from tradition as well as Islam are likely to be part of the consciousness of the characters as much as they are part of the author's himself. Frederick Case is right to argue that as the society Sembene describes is held together by deep-rooted principles of community, the interdependence that gives it meaning is in itself, 'a powerful ontogical statement'. [60] In a rare article that investigates the importance and relevance of Islam in Sembene's delineation of society, Case perceptively asserts that 'there is no inherent contradiction between the Islamic concept of the *ummah* and African communal living'. [61] African societies generally emphasise the primacy of the community, but similarly, the Islamic religion professed by the majority of Senegalese people places great emphasis on the ummah – the Islamic community that is a manifestation of spiritual unity under God. As Akbar Ahmed explains in *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society* (1983) Islam possesses a highly developed sense of community, one that transcends national and tribal boundaries.[71] Hence, since the strike in *God's Bits of Wood* covers a large tract of land with a predominantly Muslim population, it is possible that the religion may have played a significant part in enhancing the people's sense of solidarity in their struggle against the French. [63]

The fact that religious faith is often harnessed to political power is highlighted in *God's Bits of Wood*. Inevitably, in both traditional African community as well as the Islamic *ummah*, the quest for power and the greed of individuals have been known to destroy structures that are meant to protect the weak and to regenerate society. Thus Sembene carefully presents us with the characters of the Imam and El Hadji Mabigue both of whom advocate acquiescence and cooperation with the French authorities. Enjoying the privileges of their positions as traditional and religious leaders, they claim that tutelage is divine:

> God has decided that we should live side by side with the French toubabs and the French are teaching us how to make things we need. It is not up to us to rebel against the evil of God even when the reasons for that will are a mystery to us. Cp.124)

Historical accounts mentioned in Chapter Two have shown that Islam is clearly central to the political sociology of Senegal. They have also noted how Senegalese Islam is 'conformist' and capable of accommodating itself to the 'prevailing political reality'. However, Sembene's point is that people will turn away from religious leaders who do not espouse their cause because Islamic society expects the imam to be just and to lead the community to happiness on earth as well as beyond. Therefore an imam such as we find in God's Bits of Wood that condemns the actions of the strikers as 'communist-inspired' and 'anti-Islamic' merely makes himself irrelevant to his people.

However, compared with all the other issues raised in the novel, more prominence is given to the rising consciousness of women with regards to their abilities and their contribution to the development of society. In an article, Gerald Moore once stated that Sembene appears to consider African women as 'the most powerful force which can shift the whole society into the future'.[64] This certainly is confirmed by the author's treatment of the strike in *God's Bits of Wood* as an opportunity to demonstrate women's strengths and contributions to family and society. In contrast to the general trend in African literature, particularly those works written by male authors where women often remain secondary characters in the works in which they appear, in Sembene's novel they not only contribute to the main action in the narrative, they virtually take it over. When the French Colonial administration brings

severe sanctions to bear against the strikers and whole communities along the rail tracks are threatened with lack of water and starvation, it is the women who rise to the challenge superseding all previous expectations of their courage, resourcefulness, and organisational abilities. The role they assume of ensuring the daily survival of themselves, their children and husbands forms the backbone of the strike and leads to a major transformation of their status which is neatly summed up by Mame Sofi: 'You'll see – the men will consult us before they go out on another strike. Before this they thought they owned the earth just because they feed us, but now it is the women who are feeding them (p. 7)'. Emmanuel Ngara concedes that if like the railway workers the women were initially unaware of their fundamental interests before the strike, after going through experiences that are similar to liberation struggles elsewhere, they definitely emerge from it with a higher degree of political and economic consciousness. Not surprisinly soon, their men folk 'begin to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women' (p. 34).

One of the first indications in *God's Bits of Wood* that the author intends to recognise women as full participants in the transformation of society is when he dedicates the novel to:

> The men and women who took part in the struggle for a better way of life owe nothing to anyone: neither to any "civilising mission" nor to any parliament or parliamentarian. [65]

The thrust of this statement is especially true of the women because unlike the men, they had no pre-existing organisation and very little literate leadership. Yet after the men fail to shake the French colonial management, it is ordinary illiterate women who through their initiative bring the strike to a triumphant conclusion. In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of* Gender (1994) Florence Stratton points out that too often embedded in the unconscious of the literary tradition is a deep attachment to the theory of separate historical roles for men and women.[66] Invariably this theory continues to justify and reproduce structures of male power and deny women agency in 'public' affairs. However in *God's Bits of Wood* is concerned we find evidence of his desire to situate women in the centre of historical process as well as in his narrative. This can be seen in the greater number of

chapters titled after the more prominent women characters such as 'Maimouna', 'Penda', 'Houdia Mbaye', 'Ramatoulaye', 'Mame Sofi' and 'Adjibidji'. Significantly one third of the book centres around the women as they seek to understand their situation and to combat the deprivations caused by the sanctions imposed on their communities. Indeed, from Ramatoulaye's slaying of the ram which belongs to her influential brother El Hadji Mabigue, to the women's subversive actions against the police who attempt to curb their activities, to their epic march to Dakar to put their demands to the colonial administration, the women seem to be in firm control of the fight against exploitation and injustice in whatever disguise.

From the onset of the novel, instead of the male perspective of the strike, the author appears to deliberately concentrate on the women's preoccupations and reactions to events. For example, in the first of a number of moments of cinematic quality in the novel, Sembene skilfully captures and documents the details of a scene that sets a trend in the novel. The cultural context of the story is immediately established when allusion is made to the two powerful forces in this society, the Islamic faith symbolised by 'the towering minarets of the mosque,' and the presence of French colonial power as indicated by the governor's residence 'poised like a sugar castle on the heights that bore its name' (p. 1). Besides these impressive structures, the mud-walled houses of the African railway workers almost pale into insignificance. Yet it is in them that we find the characters who provide much of the action and interest of the narrative. The women-wives, mothers, and daughters of the railway workers are all gathered together in a domestic scene that will soon be disrupted by the decision to go on strike. Four distinct generations of women emerge from this picture exhibiting varying degrees of attachment to traditional ways and to the precepts of the Islamic religion.

The fact that the lines of demarcation between the two influences is blurred in Senegalese society does not escape Sembene as he goes on to depict women's lives as being influenced as much by traditional mores as they are by Islam. Edris Makward has observed that Sembene is not against traditions which serve a useful purpose. [67] Hence in *God's Bits of Wood,* some of the older characters such as Fa Keita and his wife Old Niakoro appear to manifest the more positive aspects of tradition. However, it is interesting to note that while Fa Keita is also a man of deep religious faith, Old Niakoro hardly makes any references to Islam. More than any

other character in the novel she speaks for tradition and for the preservation of the old ways, a past which in contrast to the turbulence and uncertainty of the colonial state appears to her stable and ordered. Concerned about the corrosion of indigenous culture and language, she is frequently exasperated by little Adjibidji's spontaneous use of French words and phrases:

> What use is the white man's language to a woman? To be a good mother you have no need of that. Among my people, who are your father's people, too, no one speaks the white man's language, and no one has died of it! Ever since I was born.... I have never heard of a white man who had learned to speak Bambara, or any other language of this country. But you rootless people think only of learning his, while our language dies (p. 4).

Sembene is evidently keenly aware of the effects of the colonial experience on the cultural values and institutional structures of his referent society. But, beyond this affirmation of cultural identity, the strike compels certain changes as well as the re-evaluation of some traditional practices and beliefs. When we look closely at old Niakoro, we soon realise that despite of her apparent disapproval of the younger generation, having once been involved in a similar strike action in which she lost a husband and a son, she in fact embodies her people's tradition of resisting oppressive forces. As far as she is concerned, the 'Bambara have never run before an enemy' (p. 2). The suggestion here is that the courage needed to embark on current struggles actually springs from ancient female sources. Ngugi wa Thiongo employs the same idea in *Petals of Blood* when he represents old Nyakinyua as embodying the spirit of the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya.

Furthermore, as Simon Gikandi points out, the relationship that exists between Niakoro, her son, the union leader Bakoyoko, and her granddaughter Adjibidji constitutes an effective silent commentary through which the author hints at the link between the past, present and future.[68] When other members of the family go in search of food and water, Niakoro and the young girl are left to look after each other. And later when militiamen arrive to arrest Fa Keita, the pair together rush to defend the old man as he was being slapped around the head but both end up having violent injuries inflicted on them. Niakoro dies calling out to Adjibidji thus effectively

reinforcing the idea that the fight against injustice is passed on from one generation to another. Indeed, contrary to Edris Makward's assertion that the vain young woman N'Deye Touti is meant to represent the future African woman, in the novel, it is Adjibidji who is in fact pointed out as the prototype of the new African woman. Whereas Niakoro is confined to the family compound, perhaps because in her younger days this is the space in where women occupied themselves, Adjibidji makes several excursions into the world of men and public affairs when she accompanies Fa Keita to the union building. Articulate and aware, she is adopted as the striker's mascot. Sembene clearly sees her as the torch bearer of the future and hints that intelligent men will not curb her development simply because she is female. With her curiosity and insatiable appetite for knowledge which she gathers from the sources available to her such as her grandparents and the books in her father's library, we can envisage the aspirations of her people becoming a reality in her. By the end of the novel, through the suffering she has witnessed and the moral lessons of Fa Keita, she gains more insight and is able to provide an answer to a question that had earlier baffled her: 'What is it that washes water?' The answer she discovers is that it is the purity of the spirit alone can perform such a feat.

The willingness to harness women's potential that Sembene demonstrates is rare in works by male authors. But as Frederick Case notes in an article, as a work of art that is committed to both the 'interpretation and change of existing social reality *God's Bits of Wood* is essentially about changes in positions that were initially perceived as firm and unchangeable'. [69] Consequently we find that just as the African workers rise to challenge the might of the French colonial authorities so also do the women confront and overcome patriarchal notions of male superiority which surface frequently in their society. The shock and amazement which greets their first attendance at the workers' meeting is a testimony of how far they have transgressed the spatial boundaries set for them by tradition and religion. The fact that the same attitudes underlie and link tradition, Islam, and colonialism is further indicated by the patronising attitudes adopted towards women by traditional elders, religious leaders and the colonial authorities. In Sembene's novels and films, the Imam is often depicted as an extension of abusive traditional patriarchy, intent on dominating and exploiting the younger and weaker members of society. We find an example of this character in the Quranic teacher in the short novel *Taaw* who seeks to exercise

despotic power over others. In God's Bits of Wood his role as community leader, El Hadji Mabigue addresses the following speech to the women:

> I know that life is often hard but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He had assigned a rank, a place and a certain role to every man and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design(p.182).

This is not just an appeal to religious fatalism, but a reminder to the women to remember their place or station in society. The same is echoed by the French supervisor's dismissive attitude towards the women: 'it's just shouting and yelling, as usual. What do you think they know about the strike? They're just making noise because they like to make noise (p. 179)'. Certainly racism is partly to blame for Isnard's belittling remarks, but his view that women do not have anything worthwhile to say also smacks of gender prejudice.

It is interesting to note that some critics such as Olalere Oladitan are convinced that the women in the novel act with such resoluteness only because the one area they exercise some control – that of feeding their families - is being threatened by the sanctions[70].

Such a suggestion is hardly surprising especially where 'conservative' Muslim women are concerned. Fatima Mernissi is fully aware of this when she writes that 'women's demands in politics are regarded as reflections of moral or familial commitment, rather than an authentically political stance'[72]. The common belief that the quality of women's political engagement is less radical than that of men is precisely what Sembene challenges in his novel. In *God's Bits of Wood* he offers a 'political' reason for the women's actions. Although prior to the strike they rarely dealt directly with the colonial authorities, the women are nevertheless aware that the French attitude towards them is prejudicial. This is highlighted when the wife of the French supervisor on being informed of a shooting incident in which children died, derides the loss suffered by the Senegalese women:

> 'After all, one or two children more or less won't make much difference to them. The number of children running around over there is incredible

anyway.... The women don't wait to have one before they're pregnant with another....' (p. 103).

Hence recognising that they are considered ignorant primitives, and particularly resenting the aspersion that because of the Islamic practice of polygamy in their society they are mere 'concubines' rather than actual wives, the Senegalese women were determined to demonstrate that on the contrary, the African woman possessed a mind, body, and soul of her own.

It is necessary to note at this point, that even as the strike action helps to construct the transmutation of women's status in Sembene's referent society, it is also those of the female sex who strive hardest to reverse the erosion of traditional values. In an attempt to go beyond the immediate and surface reality, in *God's Bits of Wood* Sembene sometimes makes use of symbols and images to point to the laws which govern the experiences of his particular society. To explain one woman's identification and sense of responsibility to her family and community, he refers the reader to the 'motherhouse of Ramatoulaye... a big shed-like structure painted the colour of the earth standing on a foundation of bricks (p. 50)'. A deep grounding in history and tradition is at once suggested by the strong foundations, while the earth symbolises the community's primeval character. Like so many other writers of his generation, Sembene appears to regard women as the real preservers of African culture and traditions because he goes on to he describe Ramatoulaye as being so immersed in her people's history that she is like a 'walking encyclopaedia of every family in the district (p. 40)'. Importantly, the idea of 'home' conjured up in association with her character prepares the reader for the support she is able to generate when faced with the possibility of imprisonment. Tenacious in her commitment to the survival of those under her care she slays El Hadji Mabigue's goat and distributes the meat among her starving family and neighbours. This act ignites a series of violent confrontations between the women who rush to stand by her and the police who demand that Ramatoulaye either pays a fine or goes to jail for her actions. An explanation for the women's adamant rejection of oppressive authority whether in the form of the colonial administration, or by local leaders who choose to collaborate with them as her own brother El Hadji Mabigue does, is offered by Ramatoulaye herself:

> 'When you know that the life and spirit of others depend on your life and spirit, you have no right to be afraid – even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard (p. 69)'.

This affirmation of what women are capable of is an indication of Sembene's unwavering belief in the potential inherent in women. Critics have asserted in various articles that since *God's Bits of Wood* is primarily concerned with the idea of a collective struggle, individual characters and destinies are made irrelevant in the narrative. Citing the example of union leader Bakayoko, Gakwandi claims that the characters we encounter in the novel are more archetypal than real. This maybe true of Bakayoko who, represented as the driving force behind the strike, inspiring the workers with utterances such as 'It isn't those who are taken by force, put in chains and sold as slaves who are the real slaves; it is those who will accept it morally and physically (p. 20)', nevertheless remains for the most part an abstract ideal. Certainly, his dedication to the struggle is admirable but because it is devoid of emotion it does little to endear him to the reader. However, the same cannot be said of the more prominent women in the novel whose personal battles and engagement with others are portrayed in such a way as to elicit sympathy with their perspective of the struggle. Sembene is at pains to convince us of the transformation a woman such as Ramatoulaye undergoes during the course of the strike. Without intruding his authorial presence, he skilfully allows other women characters to bear witness to the changes in her:

> She had always been quiet and unassuming and gentle with the children; at the street fountain she never took part in the arguments, and she never spoke badly of her neighbours. Where, then, had this violence been born? What was the source of the energy so suddenly unleashed? (p. 74).

The women's increasing awareness of their situation is subtly emphasised when again it is they who answer that 'it had been born beside the cold fireplace in an empty kitchen' (p. 74).

The strategy Sembene adopts in the novel of depicting contrasts is employed to greater advantage in his characterisation of women. While the strike becomes the occasion for

bringing out the noblest qualities of endurance and resourcefulness in some women, it also serves to highlight the lack of insight and initiative of others. This period of tension and conflict forces Ramatoulaye to redefine herself and her values, but others like Houdia Mbaye, the worn out mother of nine, as well as Assitan, wife of the union leader Bakayoko remain mired in negative traditional ideas of women's roles and place. In contrast to Ramatoulaye, both are held up as examples of women who have not only accepted subordinate positions in their families and in society, but who have also managed to suppress any natural instincts of self- preservation. The reader is informed that while Houdia Mbaye is at least troubled by a vague sense of 'something missing in her life', Assitan for her part appears satisfied to live 'on the margins of her husband's existence, a life of work, of silence and patience' (p. 235). In his next novel, *Xala* (1973), Sembene recreates a similar character in the long-suffering Adja Awa who never complains about her husband's neglect and is the only one of his wives to stand by him when he faces financial and professional ruin. Women like Assitan and Awa elicit ambivalent responses because on the one hand their quiet dignity and loyalty demands respect, but on the other we feel exasperated with their passive suffering. Assitan's situation eventually changes but only because the social upheaval created by the strike obligates Bakayoko to recognise and readdress the lower status of his wife within their marriage.

We cannot help but compare N'Deye Touti with the other women in the novel. While most identify closely with their own traditions and community, this young woman who is alienated from her people is ashamed of her surroundings 'the tortuous alleyways, these vermin-ridden courtyards and gloomy cabins' (p. 186). Instead, she holds before her 'a vision of houses painted in clear fresh colours, of gardens filled with flowers, and children in European clothes playing in tidy courtyards' (p. 186) as well as an 'image of some Prince Charming from her books' (p. 57). The only literate woman in the narrative, Sembene informs us that she has been taught about a universe 'in which her own people had no place, and by the same token she no longer had a place in theirs' (p. 57). Once she is represented as having yielded to the hegemonic colonial culture, her growth and transformation is then brought about through two key ironies. First, her perspective is dealt a blow when the colonials refer to her as just another savage and then she who had been against the idea of polygamy falls in love with the married Bakayoko. By means of the latter the author reinforces the fact that she is in no position to question the values of her people and as she begins to revise her ideas the reader is

also directed to consider the positive alternative sometimes offered by this African/Muslim institution. Yet in spite of her newfound willingness to share Bakayoko with Assitan, she is nevertheless punished with a broken heart when he rejects her offer.However, before the end of the strike, she goes some way towards redeeming herself by getting involved in the daily trials of her people.

Significantly, each phase of the strike appears to prop up its own female leadership. If, during the initial stages of the struggle the wisdom and indefatigable efforts of older women such as Ramatoulaye and the market woman Dieynaba help to strengthen the resolve of others, later on it is the organisational abilities of Penda which carries the women's participation to new heights. Frederick Case rightly believes that Penda should be seen as the main protagonist of the novel not only because she initiates and leads the most important action in the novel – the women's epic march to Dakar to present their demands to the capitalist owners of the trains, but also because the writer pays more attention to the development of her character than any other in the novel. When we first encounter her, like Ndeye Touti she appears 'alienated from the daily life of her community preferring instead the unreal world of film stars, pop singers', and 'drawings of white women from fashion magazines' (p. 139). But eventually, she restores her honour, sense of self-worth and establishes herself permanently in the hearts and minds of her people when by the end of the women's march she dies a hero's death.

Against the traditional background of much of the novel, Penda undoubtedly stands out as a most unusual woman. Perceptive in his treatment of the effects of culture on women, through her Sembene carefully illustrates the lack of respect in African Muslim society for the woman who rejects marriage. An example of this can be seen when during one of Penda's visits to the union building, she is molested by a man who sees her unattached status as an open invitation for any male attention. As one who is unwilling to be tied down with the domestic lot of other women, her unconventional behaviour of flitting from one man to another as she pleases contravenes traditional and religious rules of female behaviour. As we also find in Zainab Alkali's *The Stillbom*, such behaviour seems to offend most women who pride themselves on being obedient members of their society. This illustrated when on another occasion, Awa wife of the foreman Sene Massene, is quick to remind Penda of her inferior status when she rejects the rice rationed out to her by the young woman on the grounds that a 'whore'

has no right to assume a position of command over a married woman. Interestingly, although Penda merely acts in a fashion that is in some ways comparable to that of Bakayoko who similarly pays little attention to cultural expectations, it is her behaviour that Simon Gikandi criticises as being "selfish" and "licentious" and thus inadvertently further emphasising the gender bias that Sembene wishes to highlight.

Certainly in Penda, Sembene goes further than most writers to project a female character who subverts all the usual social expectations with regards to women. I will suggest that there is perhaps more revolutionary potential in her than even in the well educated union leader because her actions and pronouncements challenge directly not only the economic structure of her society, but also basic beliefs and practices that are an inherent part of it. Her responses to criticism of her chosen lifestyle are immediate, effective and in character, involving breaking several taboos in her society especially those that are prejudicial to women. For example, to the male sexual violence she encounters in the union building, she responds by publicly slapping her assailant. The narrator comments that this 'was something that no one had ever seen before (p. 42)' ensuring that the reader grasps the seriousness of her action. Her act of retaliation humiliates the man before others but also importantly asserts her right to appear anywhere without male interference. This reaction to arbitrary male behaviour is similar to that of another of Sembene's memorable female characters. Yaye Dabo in the short novel *Taaw* revolts against being subjected to the will of her despotic husband by pushing him roughly to the ground and publicly repudiating him 'before witnesses' as she says. The import of her statement is made all the more clearer when we realise that in Islamic society it is men who are vested with the power to so repudiate their wives. The public pronouncement of *talaq* (divorce) by the husband effects an immediate legal end to the marital union whereas women usually have to apply to the courts if they wish to initiate the separation. Therefore in their individual ways, by appropriating what is generally considered male prerogative, both Penda and Yaye Dabo reverse the order of things and set examples for other women to follow. In both instances the assumption of male superiority is questioned in both instances, but Sembene's particular choice of Penda to spearhead the women's most important action in *God's Bits of Wood* needs to be examined further.

In her book *The Politics of Gender* which I referred to earlier, Florence Stratton asks a question that is pertinent to our understanding of Sembene's view of women; why

choose a prostitute to take on the role of heroine? We encounter other literary representations of the prostitute in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), Mongo Beti's *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness* (1974), Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* (1977), as well as Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1980). In these texts as Stratton notes, the condition of the prostitute is used to serve as an index of the state of the nation. In other words, her experience of 'sexploitation' is seen as enactment of the economic exploitation of various African nations. However, while this use of the prostitute figure exploits male-female power relations of domination and subordination, it is rarely related to the female condition in patriarchal societies. Instead, as Stratton goes on to explain, it is merely used as a metaphor for 'man's degradation under some non-preferred socio-political system'. [72] Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* which is reminiscent of Sembene's novel in a number of ways provides an apt example of Stratton's argument with regard to the use of the prostitute figure in African literature since the Kenyan writer seems to consider the prostitute as a member of the lumpen-proletariat, an example of those whom capitalism has exploited and impoverished. The portrayal of Wanja as the sexually abused young girl who later as a barmaid-cum-prostitute continues to be exploited by ruthless members of the capitalist class is suitably adjusted to the rhetoric of Ngugi's socialist text. But while the issue of prostitution cannot be abstracted from the socio-economic and political relations in which it is embedded, Stratton points out that writers such as Ngugi appear to be primarily attracted to the metaphorical potential of their situation rather than in exposing the injustices done to them as women.

Ngugi's novel validates some of Stratton's argument against the trop but Sembene's depiction of Penda in *God's Bits of Wood* is significantly different. For one thing although he espouses some of Ngugi's socialist ideas, he does not hold the view that Penda's situation is forced on her by her material condition. She is apparently what she is by choice because she has developed 'a hatred for men and had turned away everyone who had wanted to marry her (p. 37)'. In Sembene's novel the sexual exploitation of women is not mentioned explicitly but alluded to indirectly through the character of Maimouna, the blind beggar woman with whom Penda forms an attachment. Protective of both Maimouna and her twins, the results of a sexual union with an unnamed man, Penda is determined to seek out the culprit and to punish him for having taken advantage of Maimouna's disability. That is, until Maimouna herself confides in her during the march to Dakar.

> I was not betrayed by that man. He thought that he was possessing me, but it wasn't true, my flesh was calling out to be satisfied, just as his was. I knew that he would abandon me, and in my heart I had already abandoned him (p. 196).

Such clear acknowledgement of her own sexuality is intended to discourage any ideas of victimisation or pity where Mainmouna is concerned. Sembene's insight into the nature of women allows for them to make individual personal choices without a hint of condescension towards them. Therefore, rather than the word 'prostitute' perhaps Kenneth Little's terms 'free woman' is a more appropriate description of Penda's character. Little defines the term as 'one who flouts or disregards conventional beliefs concerning the proper role and position of the female sex'.[73] The most commonly held belief is of course that a woman's place is at home and that it is her duty to marry and have children, both ideas which Penda rejects.

Psychologically self sufficient and markedly independent of men, Penda also displays qualities of leadership in what is regarded as a peculiarly male sphere. During the strike she adopts a combative stance when she takes to wearing a cartridge belt and leading her 'crew' of apprentice boys on successful raids on the Syrian shops and the chicken coops in the French quarter. Interestingly, the first articulated male opposition to Penda comes after she claims to "speak for all women" and then proceeds to inform the men of the women's decision to march to Dakar. Because she seems to be usurping the male prerogative of making major decisions, Balla one of the men confident that his view will be supported by many in this society immediately voices his disapproval confident 'I'm against letting the women go. 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 '(p. 185).

As I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, ordinarily in African societies men and women inhabit two somewhat different universes. In public affairs particularly, men are expected to lead and women to follow but as Kenneth Little also points out in practice, each sex tends to have its own forms of leadership and its own leaders of opinion. In *God's Bits of Wood* however, the men's inability to effectively combat the French regime on their own altered the entire complexion of things. While conflict brought the women's latent resources to the fore it simultaneously gave them the opportunity of becoming the

men's political partners. Since Sembene evidently insists on women's participation in the 'dynamic determination of the destinies of the African people', his ideological position with regards to their contribution in public affairs is expressed through the more progressive male characters who refuse to pass moral judgements on Penda. Lahbib the Secretary General of the union and Bakayoko recognise that where their struggle is concerned, Penda has virtues that are much more important than those of a so-called respectable woman. Understanding her psychology, they realise that as Elizabeth I of England once said of herself, Penda has the heart and the stomach of a man and could be relied on to lead the women to Dakar. By the end of the narrative we realise that her role is vital because she almost single-handedly transforms the women's participation in the struggle from one of simply supporting their men into a determined quest to improve their own lot. When she dies by the end of the strike, it is perhaps an attempt on Sembene's part to immortalise her contribution to the cause.

From this depiction of the positive contribution Penda makes, it would seem that the author believes that non-conformity with social norms engenders an independence of thought and action in women which can be harnessed in times of crisis. In order to further illustrate how women are affected by the transmutation of their social status, a socio-linguistic change occurs whereby Penda issues only orders to the men who accompany the women on the long difficult march to Dakar:

> 'The women must continue walking: You men with your water cans go ahead and give drinks to those who arrive at the trees over there. And you take me to the others '(p. 192).

Here four orders delivered in three short sentences are addressed to the men leaves them in no doubt about who is in command here. This new female discourse announces the birth of a new gender relationship - one in which men must accept that women are capable of organising and taking control of their own destinies. Sympathetic men can only follow and assist them when necessary. But Sembene does not disregard the fact that even some women will find it difficult to adjust to this new discourse as much as they are discomfited by the military belt Penda wears around her waist. When Awa wife of the foreman Sene Massene refuses to obey Penda's instruction, mere jealousy is not the only reason for the taunts she directs at the young woman but is caused by a deep seated belief that Penda has overstepped the

boundaries set for women. To understand Awa's disapproval, there is need to refer to Fatna Sabbah's *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1984) which provides us with a revealing analysis of how women are placed in Islamic society. According to Sabbah, in Islam, the ideal woman is expected to be obedient, silent, and immobile, qualities which inevitably translate into passivity and inertia. However, women's obedience should not be seen as a marginal device but rather as a key law for the viability of the Muslim social system. On the one hand, explains Sabbah, 'the male believer is fashioned in the image of woman... committed to obedience to God'.[74] But on the other hand, as well as being servants to God, men are also masters of women. Therefore where women are concerned, submission to God also means submission to God's interpreters on earth in the shape of imams and husbands. Consequently since Islamic society is fundamentally based on the notion of submission to God and where authority flows from the top to the bottom in hierarchical manner, and not the other way around, Penda's forceful behaviour threatens the order of things that women like Awa have been brought up to believe in. However because the purpose of the strike is not only to create a new economic order but also gives birth to a new man and woman, Awa reconciles with Penda by the end of the march.

It is interesting to find John Spencer Trimmingham's observations about West African Muslim societies being dramatised in *God's Bits of Wood*. Apparently when the social balance is disturbed, people will revert to traditional beliefs and practices in their effort to resolve the problem. This predisposition among African people is still fully illustrated by an incident which occurs during the march when one of the women falls into convulsions and another, Yacine, simultaneously cuts her toe and is bleeding. Some of the other women insist that Seni is possessed by a devil and that it is already sucking Yacine's blood and immediately a horde of hysterical women fall on the pair in a murderous panic. But just as ancient beliefs to threaten to destroy their new political consciousness, Penda's quick thinking saves the situation from descending into total chaos. Administering a severe shock to their modesty, she manages to shake the women out of their blind panic:

> '..... It is you who are the devils! Leave that girl alone or I'll eat you all raw! Mariam! Go and get Boubacar and his men. Fetch Maimouna too!

> She managed to free Yacine, half-dead with fear and with all her clothes in rags. Seni was lying on her back in the road, surrounded by a circle of women. Her legs were straight and stiff and her teeth were chattering violently.... Maimouna leaned over the prostrate woman, her fingers moving swiftly over her face and feeling her pulse. 'It is not serious, she said, it is just the heat. She'll have to inhale some urine.'
>
> 'Go on you sluts go and piss!' yelled Penda. The women looked at her motionless. 'What, there are hundreds of you here, and not one of you can raise a bit of piss?' (p. 198).

Wole Soyinka rightly asserts that Sembene's skill as a writer is demonstrated in his evocation of an authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process. While his recipe for transitional society includes ingredients selected from contemporary reality it also harks back to the cultural past. This is why Wole Soyinka goes on to describe *God's Bits of Wood* as a 'literary irony' because although in some ways it appears committed to a rejection of sentimentality in tradition; it nevertheless results in the triumph of the strengths of the positive in tradition.[75] The idea of tradition as a lived thing and as a cohering mechanism of society is similarly apparent in the incident that gives the novel its title. In an effort to rally the tired women, Penda delves deep into a realm of consciousness that precedes Islam and begins a process of "counting" the women. The threat of breaking the traditional taboo associated with the enumeration of individuals who are only ever referred to in this society as *God's Bits of Wood*, has the immediate effect of galvanising the women forward:

> Anger and fear tearing at their hearts the women take up their pagnes, adjusted their head scarves, went back on the road and began to march again. (p. 194).

Embedded in the psyche of the women is an ancient but potent idea that they are essentially a whole people whose intrinsic quality is sacred and uncountable. Through this incident, Sembene attempts a fusion of the positive elements in traditional wisdom with the emergent revolutionary culture set in motion by the strike. Traditional myths, songs and legends are also incorporated into this tale of the people's heroic struggle

against the powerful colonial apparatus. For example their titanic struggle is further symbolised by the legend of Goumba, the song blind Maimouna sings during the march:

> 'I have come to take a wife' the stranger said.
> 'My bridegroom must be stronger than I; there are my fathers' fields,
> And there are the abandoned scythes', replied Goumbe N'Diaye.
> And the stranger took up a scythe
> Two days each week, and still they came not to the end,
> But the man could not vanquish the girl (p. 21).
>
> For two moons they cleared the land,
> And neither the stranger nor Goumba N'Diaye would confess to being vanquished
> Beat on all the drums!
> 'Stranger, demanded Goumba N'Diaye
> 'From what country do you come?'
> And the stranger replied, 'I am from every country. I am a man like every man'.
> 'It is not true, said Goumba N'Diaye
> For many seasons, men have fled from me.
> Men are not alike' (p. 22).

At first glance, Maimouna's song appears to evoke a common theme found in traditional African tales where a suitor is set great tasks which he must accomplish in order to win a hand of the girl who has no intention of marrying him anyway. Emmanuel Ngara is of the view that the arrogant girl of the legend is meant to represent the capitalist railway company which also has no intention of including the African workers in the material benefits it enjoys. On the other hand the man represents the strikers who must be indefatigable in their pursuit of better working and living conditions. While Ngara's conclusions are pertinent to his reading of the novel as a Marxist text, turning the heroine into a mere symbol (the railway company) and a masculine one at that, robs her of power as a female which is surely what Maimouna and the other women wish to emphasise.

In an article titled 'The Liberation of the Female Consciousness in African Literature' Rosamund Metcalf expressed the opinion that although male African authors are

accomplished promoters of African liberation in general, they cannot, no matter how admirable their intentions speak with full conviction of the liberation of African women.[76] She goes on to add perhaps a little unnecessarily, that they cannot 'achieve complete authenticity in the representation of the case for women because they are not women'. This may be so, but in *God's Bits of Wood* neither does Sembene suggest that anyone except women themselves can instigate their own freedom from the shackles that restrict them. As far as he is concerned, women can be instrumental in their own liberation. Furthermore, by adopting a strategy of representing the conflict in the novel as one involving boundaries, with accepted frontiers of action being transgressed again and again by the women this belief is expressed convincingly.

The march in particular marks a turning point whereby the women arrive at a full realisation of their strength and potential. As they finally arrive at the capital and break through a barricade of soldiers placed in position to prevent their advancement, the power of women in active movement is described in the following words: 'But how could a handful of men in red tarbosshes prevent this great river, from rolling onto the sea' (p. 202). In this one sentence, Sembene succeeds in portraying women as a force which neither their own men nor the colonial state apparatus can control. The women here are identified with the river, their march from the hinterland which gathered strength from the hordes of women who like tributaries joined at different points along the route, is likened to the inexorable flow of water to the sea which is represented as a symbol of universal humanity. It is this important point, that women are a vital part of human society that Sembene strives to convey throughout this novel. The strike is both a means and an end not only intended to improve the material condition of the peoples' lives but also as a process by which the strikers learn to recognise and overcome their blindness where their women are concerned. As Lahbib writes to Bakayoko, the catalytic effect of the march on the women produced a disquieting effect in the men:

> The women got a big welcome and when they came back, of course, but now the men are having all sorts of trouble with them. At first they even pounced on me like tigresses – they wanted to start running everything! In future, though, we will have to reckon with them in whatever we do (p. 334).

Thus does Ousmane Sembene reject the stereotype of the powerless African Muslim woman who is too frequently seen as lacking potential or initiative. In both *White Genesis* and *God's Bits of Wood* he insists that she represents a strength of character and a moral resolve that have to be acknowledged.

NOTES

1. Victor Aire, 'A Panorama of the Francophone African Novel from 1920s to the 1990s' in *Francophone African Literature,* ed. by Olusola Oke and Sam Ade Ojo (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2000) p. 163.

2. Martin Bestman, 'Sembene Ousmane: Social Commitment and the Search for an African Identity' in *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, ed. by Bruce King and Kolawale Ogunbesan (Zaria: Ahamandu Bello University Press, 1975) p. 139.

3. From an interview cited in 'The Uniqueness Ousmane Sembene's Cinema' by Francoise Pfaff in *Ousmane Sembene Dialogues with Critics and Writers*, ed. by Samba Gadigo, Ralph Faulkingham, Thomas Cassirer and Reinhard Sander (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) p. 14.

4. Sembene's empathy with Senegal's masses has led him to embrace a film career. As one of West Africa's best-known film directors his works by their very nature, content, and style have left indelible marks on the history of African filmmaking. In his desire to reach out effectively to both literate and non literate Senegalese viewers he has found within his own culture strategies which allow him to express himself.

5. Mbye Cham, 'Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the Films of Ousmane Sembene' in *Ousmane Sembene: Dialogue with Critics and Writers*, ed. by Samba Gadijago et al. For other critical works on Sembene's cinema see *A Call to Action: The Films of Ousmane Sembene*, ed. by Sheila Petty (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996. See also *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene: A Pioneer of African Film* by Francoise Pfaff (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984). *African Cinema: Post Colonial and Feminist Readings*, ed. by Kenneth Harrow (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1999).

6. Frederick Ivor Case, 'Aesthetics, Ideology, and Social Commitment in the Prose Fiction of Ousmane Sembene', *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 3.

7. Karen Smyley Wallace, 'Women and Alienation Analysis of the Works of Two Francophone African Novelists' *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Ann Graves (New Jersey: African World Press, 1986), p. 64.

8. Brenda Berrain, 'Through the Prison of Social and Political Contexts: Sembene's Female Characters in Tribal Scars' in *Ngambika* p. 196.

9. Karen Smyley Wallace, Ibid. p. 64.

10. Ousmane Sembene, *Tribal Scars and Other Stories* (Washington, DC.: Inscape, 1975).

11. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (Nigeria: New Horn Press, 1981).

12. Mbye Cham, 'Islam in Senegalese Literature and Film' *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, ed. by Kenneth Harrow (London: James Currey Ltd, 1991), p. 178. Other categories Cham elaborates on include "traditional promoters" "modern promoters" "the irreverents" "the iconoclasts" and finally "the apostate" in an attempt to show the range of individual assessments of the impact of Islam in Senegal. Sembene is placed under this last category mainly because of his film *Ceddo* which is frequently seen as the most severe attack on Islam. But although Edris Makward agrees that it indicates more boldness in the treatment of Islam, he believes it is not an overt attempt to discredit the spiritual practices of Islam.

13. Edris Makward, 'Women, Tradition and Religion in Sembene Ousmane's Work' in *Faces of Islam in African Literature* ed. by Kenneth Harrow, p. 189.

14. Haifaa Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998) p. 83.

15. There are a number of verses in the Quran in which the term khilaga (agent) is used to denote both men and women. For example, Chapter 3, verse 194 states: 'Their Lord answers them, saying: I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labours. You are offspring of one another'. Chapter 16, verse 98 says 'we shall reward the steadfast according to their noblest deeds. Be they men or women, those that embrace the faith and do what is right we will surely grant a happy life, we shall reward them accordingly to their noblest actions'. It is because of verses like these that Muslim feminists such as Nawal El-Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi believe that it is incumbent upon Muslim women to play an active role in the affairs of their societies.

16. Albert Gerard, 'Preservation of Tradition in African Writing' in *Contexts of African Literature* (Amsterdam: Dodopi, 1984), p. 123.

17. Wole Soynika, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 121.

18. Ousmane Sembene, *L'Harmattan in Presence Africaine* (Paris, 1964), p. 8.

19. Frederick Case, 'Aesthetics, Ideology, and Social Commitment in the Prose Fiction of Ousmane Sembene', p. 3.

20. Francoise Pfaff, *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene*, p. 30. In terms of style and content the griots handling of social satire is legendary in African societies. See also 'Piloting Through Turbulence: Griots, Islam, and the French Encounter in Four Epics about Nineteenth Century West African Heroes' by Brett C. Bowles and Thomas A. Hale in *Faces of Islam in African Literature* which makes an important distinction between the kinds of griot found in the West African region.

21. Ousmane Sembene, *White Genesis with Money Order*, Trans. by Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 5. Subsequent references will be from this text.

22. Frederick Case, Ibid, p. 9. Here he is of course talking about father/daughter incest but Claude Levi-Strauss details additional social categories of human relationships that the term covers in various societies. See his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Beacon Press, 1969), p. 19.

23. Mary Harmer, *Incest a New Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 10. This insightful study explores the contradiction between widespread occurrences of incest and the fact that it is a universally taboo subject. It is not possible to speak of incest says Harmer without addressing the entire social order – a view Sembene obviously agrees with as we shall see in the following.

24. Mary Harmer, Ibid, p. 102.

25. Edris Makward, Ibid, p. 189.

26. Martin Bestman, Ibid, p. 140.

27. Frederick Case, 'Ontological Discourse in Ousmane Sembene's Cinema' in *A Call to Action: The Films of Ousmane Sembene*, ed. by Sheila Petty, p. 143.

28. This film version of *White Genesis (Niaye)* was acclaimed best work by an African at the first International Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966. By 1967 Sembene himself served as one of the official judges at the Cannes Film Festival.

29. According to Ann Willey in 'Language Use and Representations of the Senegalese subject in the Written Work of Ousmane Sembene', Sembene seems to imagine the reader as already saturated in Senegalese subjectivity, p. 147. Find in *A Call to Action* ed. Sheila Petty.

30. According to the Quran, Guibril Diob would be found guilty of adultery which is punishable by death while Khar would be given the penalty for fornication and therefore receive a hundred lashes on her back. However the Quran appears to be silent on the question of incest.

31. Nawal El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*: Women in the Arab World (London: Zed Press, 1980).

32. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 49.

33. Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood,* Trans. by Francis Price (London: AWS, Heinemann, 1985), p. 235.

34. In the film, Ngone's isolation is underscored in a scene in which Sembene contrasts long shots of a solitary Ngone with shots of other women performing domestic tasks together.

35. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1994), p. 35.

36. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London: Beacon Press,1969) p. 15.

37. Ibid, p. 25.

38. Nawal El-Saadawi, Ibid, p. 17. This example is found in the aptly titled chapter 'The Grandfather with Bad Manners'.

39. Nawal El-Saadawi, Ibid, p. 22. These stories were to inspire the powerful novel *Woman at Point Zero* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1975).

40. Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press), p. 300.

41. Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), p. 106.

42. Meg Samuelson, 'A River in My Mouth: Writing Voice in Under the Tongue' *Sign and Taboo Perspectives on the Prose Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. by Robert Muponde and M. Maodzwa-Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), p. 20.

43. Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Detained: A Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 10.

44. Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Matigari*, Trans. by Wangui wa Goro (London: Heinemann, 1989).

45. Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1980), p. 79.

46. Ousmane Sembene in an interview with Sada Niang in *Ousmane Sembene Dialogues with Critics and Writers,* ed. by Samba Gadijgo et al, p. 97.

47. The most pointed criticism of this figure is of course in Sembene's film *Ceddo.* Although the Islamic religion the Imam professes stresses the right of the individual to interpret the meaning of the Quran, the impression we get is that of one who considers himself interpreter or spokesman of God. He is depicted as not only having usurped the throne of an earthly King, but also the very voice of God.

48. Brett C Bowles and Thomas Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and the Novelist:Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire*(Gainsville:University of Floride Press,1990), p.23. By incorporating Islamic beliefs and values into their narratives, e.g. The Sundiata Epic, griots appear to travel with ease between the Quranic text and tradition. In Chapter Two I mentioned how they played a part in softening the impact of first Islam on their societies and latter played a similar role in parrying the shocks produced by colonialism and independence.

49. Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970). Subsequent references are to this edition.

50. Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 137.

51. Cited in Emmanuel Ngara's *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 63.

52. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London, Methuen, 1979), p. vii.

53. Charles Nnolim, *Approaches to the African Novel* (Lagos: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p. 50.

54. See Nawal E-Saadawi, 'Woman and Islam' in *Women and Islam,* ed. by A. Al-Hibri (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982).

55. The train here serves a symbolic purpose; it announces a new age and signifies the end of the old feudalistic caste-bound Western Sudan. In Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* the arrival of the train is similarly seen as the first long finger of the industrial order.

56. Arthur Shatto Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 120.

57. The text does attempt to align the African workers as a class with international labour rather than their own traditional leaders. Thus the novel can be read simultaneously as a celebration of the workers' power and as a warning to capitalists. But while we do so, we must remember that class also interacts with race as is evident in the novel in the paternalistic attitudes adopted by the entirely French management towards the African workers.

58. Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977), p. 344. Further page references are from this text.

59. Wole Soyinka, 'Cross-Currents: The "New African" After Colonial Encounters', in *Writers in East-West Encounters: New Cultural Bearings* ed. by Guy Arnirthanayagan (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 58.

60. Frederick Case, 'Ontological Discourse in Ousmane Sembene's Cinema', in *A Call to Action: The Films of Ousmane Sembene*, ed. by Sheila Perry, p. 86.

61. Ibid.

62. Akbur Ahmed, *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 149.

63. Karen Pfeifer in her article 'Is There an Islamic Economy' in *Political Islam,* ed. by Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (London and New York: I.B. Travis, 1997), offers a pertinent explanation of how the individual is located in the Islamic social context. She writes: Homo Islamicas, like his cousin homo economicus, may well aim to maximise his utility, but he does so along two dimensions. He maximises his own individual material utility, but this prosperity is hollow unless it is accompanied by the spiritual development that comes from serving others and the Muslim community (ummah), p. 158.

64. Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 70.

65. Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*, see under author's notes.

66. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994). See pp. 50-52. Yet in spite of Stratton's reservations, Sembene in this novel does attempt a reconstruction of history from the perspective of women.

67. See Edris Makward's article 'Women, Tradition, and Religion in Sembene Ousmane's work', in *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, ed. by Kenneth W. Harrow (London: James Currey Ltd, 1991), p. 187.

68. Simon Gikandi, *Reading the African Novel* (London: James Currey, 1987), p. 115.

69. Frederick Case, 'Aesthetics, Ideology, and Social Commitment in the Prose Fiction of Ousmane Sembene', *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 10.

70. Olarere Oladitan, 'Revolution in God's Bits of Wood' in *Introduction to Francophone African Literature* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2000), p. 246.

71. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil, Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (London: Asqai Books,1985), p.23.

72. As far as Stratton is concerned the prostitute metaphor is merely the flip side of the Mother Africa trope favoured by the exponents of negritude such as Leopold Senghor and Okot p'Bitek. She goes on to assert that although texts which belong to this category are denounced for their reductive stereotypical images of women while those of Sembene, Farah, Beti, and Ngugi are lauded for their portrayal of complex and politically committed women, they are in fact one and the same.

73. Kenneth Little, *The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 134.

74. Fatima Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (Pergamon Press, 1984).

75. Wole Soyinka, 'Cross Currents: The "New African" After Cultural Encounters', p. 55.

76. Rosumund Metcalf, 'Liberation of Female Consciousness in African Literature', in *Literature, Language and the Nation*, ed. by E. Ngara and A. Morrison (Harare: ATOLL, 1989), p. 15. While there are inevitable flaws in male writers' perceptions of the female condition, a writer such as Sembene deserves to be given some credit for his portrayal of women. His empathy with their situation may be intellectual rather than something acquired from personal experience but that does not make the case he presents for them less valid.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN, RELIGION AND TRADITION IN THE NOVELS OF AMINATA SOW FALL AND MARIAMA BA

This chapter examines the works of Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Bâ, two of the most important women novelists to come out of French speaking West Africa.[1] Compatriots of Ousmane Sembene, they provide a feminine perspective on contemporary Senegalese society. Their various novels speak of the female experience of the effects of Islam and tradition on the personal and public lives of women.

To date, Aminata Sow Fall has published five novels: *Le Revenant* (1976), *La Grève des Battu* (1979), *L'Appel des arènes* (1982), *L'Expere de la nation* (1993) and *Le Jujubier du patriarche* (1993). Her second novel which I have chosen to concentrate on here, and which is published in English as *The Beggars' Strike*, won the Grand Prix Litteraire de L'Afrique Noire in 1981. Similarly, Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre* (1979) which has been translated into English under the title *So Long a Letter* also received the first Norna Award for Publishing in Africa in 1981. According to the Chairman of the selection panel, Eldred Jones, it 'offers a testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth'. [2] In good literature, form and content create a harmonious whole that is pleasing to the reader, but perhaps Mariama Bâ's novel was given such an enthusiastic reception because it offers an insight into the world of one that is rarely heard from, the West African Muslim woman. Male writers such as Camara Laye, Abdoulaye Sadji and Ousmane Sembene have written about her, but in the novels of Bâ and Sow Fall she seems to speak for herself. The apparently autobiographical nature of *So Long a Letter* has excited more critical attention than Bâ's second novel *Un Chant Ecarlate (The Scarlet Song)*, which was published posthumously in 1981, or indeed, Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* which in contrast, sets out to analyse a societal rather than a personal problem.

Some critics such as Florence Stratton, Peter Hawkins and Aduke Adebayo have noted striking similarities between *So Long a Letter, The Beggars' Strike,* and one written by their more famous compatriot, that is, Sembene's *Xala* (1973) which Frederic Jameson

considers an apt example of 'third-world' texts which are effectly national allegories.[3] *Xala* is a satirical tale about a middle-aged Senegalese businessman whose excessive materialism and corrupt practices is representative of a parasitic and exploitative class which took over the reins of power from the French colonialists. His downfall is brought about by those outcasts, of bourgeois society, the beggars of Dakar who place a curse on him so that on the night of his marriage to his third wife, a beautiful young girl, he finds himself impotent. The search for a cure leads him to neglect his business and consequently to bring about his financial ruin. By the end of the novel, in an attempt to be rid of the curse of *Xala*, he submits himself to a horrific shower of spittle from the beggars who have taken over his house.

Similarities between *So Long a Letter* and *Xala* can be seen on the level of character portrayal. Like Sembene's El Hadji, Modou Fall, a lawyer and the husband of Bâ's main protagonist Ramatoulaye, was similarly a trade union activist in his youth who after independence betrays the movement and leads the unions 'into collaboration with the government'.[4] Also like El Hadji, he marries a second much younger wife but soon dies of a heart attack. Florence Stratton believes that Bâ's novel is an interrogation of *Xala*, and in particular, 'deals with the issues that Sembene suppresses'.[5] Importantly, while in his examination of the neo-colonial situation in Senegal Sembene exploits the metaphorical potential of polygamy, Mariama Bâ for her part gives it thematic status in *So Long a Letter*, treating it as a subject worthy of exploration in itself.

In *The Beggars' Strike*, Aminata Sow Fall similarly reworks the material in *Xala*, reinterpreting the main theme from a different ideological position. While Sembene uses his novel as a vehicle for the Marxist ideas he is known to espouse, Sow Fall on the other hand, appears less concerned with the social and political implications of what happens in her novel and instead, redirects the reader's attention to the moral and religious relevance of the action in it. In an interview where she speaks out against the distortion and the abuses of secular power, as well as those conducted in the name of Islam, she also makes clear her position as a moderate Muslim:

> I think people have given an unfair image of Islam, an image that is not true.... No, I'm not progressive, but I do think that, in itself, the Muslim religion is not backward, not as narrow as people think. I told myself that in fact the voice of the people was... being usurped, and that, in any case,

> men in power were not like other men, inasmuch as they are isolated. Is that kind of power a real power? They are people who end up losing sight of the reality of things, and they are praised, they are flattered. So it was the hypocrisy of people towards men in power that I wanted to analyse in my novel. [6]

Well aware of the all-embracing hold that Islam exerts on Senegalese society, Sow Fall's interest lies not in challenging this domination but rather in reaffirming its legitimacy and potential. This is perhaps why in his article in *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Mbye Cham includes her under a category he calls 'The Modern Promoters'.[7] This is the same category in which he places Cheikh Hamidou Kane whom Wole Soyinka also labels 'a diligent expositor of the faith'. In Kane's novel, *The Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), the African and the Islamic are seen as one indivisible whole juxtaposed in conflict with Western Christian colonial culture. Islamic mysticism is contrasted with Western individualism and materialism and the conflict is played out in the person of Samba Diallo, the main protagonist. His death at the end of the novel far from signifying the defeat of Islamic doctrine reinforces the primacy of the spiritual and the transient nature of mortal existence. This is a point which Soyinka notes when he writes:

> The victor is not traditional Diallobe society, nor the West which was responsible for the weakening of Diallo's spiritual roots, but the doctrine of death, The Teacher: the Word of Islam.[8]

Although it lacks the philosophical intensity of Kane's novel and despite its more secular orientation, Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* projects a similar belief in Islam and Islamic principles as the way forward for the people of Senegal. Standing up for respect of tradition, religion, and the collective values of African society, this novel seems more politically oriented than Marama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* which appears to be concerned with personal disillusionment. Yet in their different ways, both reflect and comment on the changing social reality of Senegalese Islamic society. Hence in the following, I examine the main thematic preoccupations of the novels as well as their literary value. In particular, I focus on two Islamic practices, *Zakat* (alms giving) and polygamy as they are represented in Aminata Sow Fall's novel and *So Long a Letter* respectively.

THE BEGGARS' STRIKE

In this novel, Aminata Sow Fall underscores the importance of an essential part of the Islamic religion if the individual and society are to attain harmony and fulfilment. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of faith and ranks in importance with the Muslim's declaration of belief in the One God, the five daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan and pilgrimage to Mecca. In order to examine the divergence between the principle and practice of *Zakat* in present day Senegal, Sow Fall presents us with the politician Mour N'Diaye who as Director of Public Health is assigned the task of clearing beggars off the streets of Dakar in the hope of encouraging Western tourists into the country. However, in doing so, he goes against a principle that is fundamental in the organisation of the Islamic social order – that of helping the needy which the Quran insists upon as being a necessary part of the Muslim's faith. When they are forcibly removed from the city centre, the beggars on their part counter with a Western invention, the strike. This alien concept effectively thwarts the political ambition Mour nursed of being appointed to the newly created post of Vice President of the country. He finds that because there is no one to receive it, he cannot distribute the sacrificial meat prescribed by the marabout Kifi Bokoul who had assured him that such an action would guarantee his political elevation.

The main theme of this novel is the interdependence of all members of society and the correlation that exists between giving and receiving. Depicted on the cover of the novel is a picture of the begging bowl, the central symbol of the narrative which Susan Stringer sees as 'an expression of an ever recurring ritual or cycle'. [9] Sow Fall suggests that where charity is considered a vital means of gaining favour to assure the desired outcome of a particular situation, people really give in order to receive. Thus when the beggars go on strike and choose to refuse alms, they disrupt the equilibrium society.

In the novel, Mour's assistant Keba, is also vehemently opposed to the presence of the beggars, but his reasons are different and 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'. [10] Physically repulsed by the beggars who 'expose their infirmities for profit', for him, the campaign against them assumes the nature of a crusade. As he zealously leads the campaign of ridding the city of the presence of beggars, he disregards the variety of reasons that lead people to resort to begging. The fact of interdependence between all people is lost on him but this is

precisely what Sow Fall seeks to emphasise. The able-bodied, educated, and influential class owe a duty to the weak and disadvantaged segments of society. Yet when they reach out to give alms to beggars, it is not always out of pure altruism. It is this knowledge that leads one of the beggars to lucidly observe:

> 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 (p. 38).

Writing in *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991), Trinh Minh-ha that the vitality of the receiver of alms lies in understanding that the act of giving is a mutual exercise because rarely do people give without expecting something in return whether it be material benefits or of the spiritual variety. The question then, is 'who is giving to whom?' And 'what exactly is given?'[11]

The eloquent account above of how the practice of *Zakat* is bastardised in this society is contrasted with the views of Serigne Birama, the marabout holyman who serves as the spokesperson for the true Islamic intent of *Zakat*. When his client – Mour attempts to explain how the beggars pose a threat to public hygiene and the tourist trade, Birama warns him: '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"' (p. 17). Indeed, one of the ninety-nine names by which God is known in Islam is "The Giver", and the believer's understanding of this attribute is expected to lead to a deep commitment to charitable giving, generosity, and a willingness to assist others. In fact, according to Birama, ones earthly fortune is merely a divine loan, not a permanent gift and therefore we must never cease to remember that.

The irony here is that while Senegalese leaders such as Mour attempt to rule the country according to Western norms, they remain psychologically dependent on the marabouts, some of whom are simply charlatans who attempt to exercise control over the minds of people. However, Sow Fall represents Serigne Birama as the genuine holy man who neither shirks his duty to the less fortunate nor to his wealthy client. His supplications on behalf of Mour end with the words "Insh Allah" (if God wills). But placed in contrast to him is Kifi Bokoul, a marabout who is shrouded in mystery and magic. The physical description of him as a shrivelled wisp of a man, wrapped in a dark voluminous boubou, with eyes like bottomless apertures is not the portrait of an ascetic man who fills his audience with awe, but rather one who inspires fear. He looks like the harbinger of death, yet because he invests himself with the power to manipulate the material world through sacrifice and magic portions; it is his advice that Mour chooses to heed. Knowing that his talents are limited but nonetheless intent on attaining high political office, he puts all his faith in the supernatural. Historical and sociological accounts refer to the fact that in Senegal people are frequently born into a connection to a marabout and popular belief has it that the individual's fate is in many ways tied to the efficacy of the marabout with whom he associates. But as we see in Sow Fall's novel, while these ties are central to people's lives, they are also, both fluid and manipulable. Since this relationship is a crucial component of people's strategies for advancement and since people do not believe that marabouts have equal power, the search for a particularly efficacious one to aid some difficult situation is a familiar aspect of Senegalese life.[12] Eventually, when the death of his ambitions strip away his blindness, Mour gains a true spiritual and moral vision of life. At this point, he finally awakens to his responsibilities both as a public official and as a Muslim.

In the novel, Sow Fall writes: 'the contract which links each individual to the society can be summed up by this: giving and receiving' (p. 30). This is an attempt to develop the idea of exchange or reciprocity in a new way. Hence while it is initially employed in the relationship between the beggars and the bourgeoisie in Senegal, Sow Fall extends the concept to include also the relationship between men and women. In spite of her claims that she is more interested in general social problems rather than the female condition, women nevertheless occupy an important place in her work. Minh-ha and Stringer point out that the position of the beggars is closely related to that of women. In the novel the description of one of the female characters' reaction to the inequalities of polygamy is immediately followed by that of the beggars being terrorised by government roundups.

The reader is thus invited to draw parallels between the conditions of these two examples of oppressed people. 'After the storm, resignation' settles in as Lolli forces herself to submit to her husband's decision to take a second wife. In reply to her daughter's plea to continue fighting her case, Lolli replies, '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?' Then after a brief period of making her displeasure known, her 'zeal to regain her master's favour redoubled' (p. 48). Lolli's reaction here echoes that of the beggars when the subject of the strike is first broached: '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' (p. 51).

Whereas the beggars succeeded in mounting their opposition, Lolli is represtative of submissive women who are reluctant to overthrow their oppressors and as a result become mere chattels of men. 'Isn't it me,' shouts Mour as his hand threatens Lolli, 'who feeds and support? And tell me what contract binds me and prevents me from taking a second wife if I want one?' (p. 44). The irony here is that while her husband acts like a petty tyrant to Lolli, he in fact relies on her totally in the home and in his transactions with the marabouts. Nonetheless, he obviously sees polygamy as his right and is not interested in his duties. The same can be said of his relation with the beggars, until they make a stand against him. As Trinh Minh-ha states, the 'ambiguity of giving and of duty is manipulated at will by men according to the circumstances',[13] when it serves their purpose they will adjust their attitudes as Mour does in the case of a second wife. Sine, is far more demanding than Lolli, refusing to be at his beck and call and yet he makes allowances for her even though she probably only married him because he is rich and powerful.

It is significant that in the end, the conflict in the novel turns into a trial of strength between Mour and the beggar woman Salla who as Ifi Amadiume puts it, 'denies the myths that confine her'. The phenomenon of women leading revolts or rebellions in West Africa is well documented in history. These women, who are often traders, have learned the advantages of solidarity and are skilled in organising themselves into a formidable group. These are the same skills Salla puts to use during the strike; she initiates a kind of co-operative banking system whereby each beggar saves some part of his takings and they then take turns in collecting their share. A natural leader whose

shrewdness and sense of humour wins her the respect of others, she reminds the beggars they would lose all they have gained in self-respect if they went back onto the streets just because Mour wants them to do so. Also realistic, she has no pity for the man who was once prepared to sacrifice the beggars for his own needs. Her conviction that 'we (the beggars) are useful to them as the air they breath' (p. 54) is similar to her view that men are perfectly conscious of women's role although 'they always pretend to look down upon those whom they need' (p. 34).

The inconsistency of men is further highlighted in Salla's portrait of Galaye, a former union leader she once worked for as a maid. His treatment of Salla varied depending on whether or not his wife was present, amorous one time and rough at others. Similarly, while on the one hand he was known to vilify marabouts, he never went out of his house 'without coating himself with the contents of seven jars filled with mixtures of powders and fermented roots'. But perhaps the greater irony is that the injustice he suffers at the hands of his boss is then projected onto the beggar woman whom he insists must accept a blank piece of paper – which according to his marabout would guarantee him a new job – because 'beggars can't be choosers' (p. 57).

The belief that a gift cannot be refused because charity is 'divinely recommended' is questioned repeatedly in this narrative. According to Minh-ha, the message of Sow Fall's novel gains further relevance in the international arena where Third World countries are expected to be grateful for handouts from the Western world which in the first place created the unequal relations that exist between them. [14]

The multiple faces worn by the 'gif' and its close relationship with oppression is skilfully taken apart and put together again several times in *The Beggars' Strike*. However, apart from returning to the same idea, the novel also offers unusual literary strategies that deserve to be recognised. Demonstrating a clear desire to disengage herself from the traditional conventions of the novel, Sow Fall attempts to transform the act of reading into one of listening, as seen in the following examples:

> This morning the newspaper again spoke about the human congestion caused by these beggars, these *talibés,* these lepers, these cripples, these derelicts. (p. 5).

There is something distinguished about him, this Nguirane Sarr, maybe because he always holds his head up very high and slightly inclined to the left. (p. 15).

A true businesswoman, this Salla Niang, who had formerly worked as a 'maid of all tasks' [bonne à tout faire"]. (p. 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! (p. 97).

At first, the reader finds this voice intrusive until its continued appearance becomes more familiar and then takes on the aspect of 'a pointing finger'. Some critics find that this style of writing makes us complicitous with the author. It certainly achieves the function of inviting us to share her opinion. The illusion of the objective author is not even maintained in the introspection of main characters such as Mour, Lolli, Keba and Salla. For example, when Lolli reacts to Mour's announcement that he is to take another wife the voice of the author seems to insert itself into Lolli's consciousness so that the reader is left wondering whose views we are being made privy to. Some critics would find all this inappropriate procedure to use in a novel, but Sow Fall's interests lie in getting the reader to participate in the troubles and foibles of men who through their anger, frustration and personal vanities reveal their limitations, limitations which are best overcome by acknowledging their mutual dependence on other members of society.

SO LONG A LETTER

Dorothy Blair calls this 'the first truly feminist African novel',[15] and in the introduction to her bibliography, Christine Guyoneau says of the novel that it ' Has heralded, it seems, a new era for African women writers'.[16] Aminata Kaiga Ka, herself a writer and a compatriot of Bâ's, similarly emphasises her role as torchbearer for women. In general, most female readers and critics seem to embrace Mariama Bâ's novel because it represents for them the marginalised voice of a woman speaking out. And what is more, the novel dwells on the institution of marriage and in particular what is seen as the most unequal marital union of all – polygamy. However, while the novel is eagerly appropriated by feminist critics, other responses to it have been less than favourable.

For Frederick Ivor Case states emphatically that *So Long a Letter* has no redeeming features because it fails to integrate 'sociological .... detail' into its framework, or indeed to present us with a plausible plot. In his view, the novel is a reminder of 'the worst elements in Flora Nwapa's literary production'. Also, using the occasion of their reviews of the novel, Abiola Irele and Femi Ojo-Ade launched similar scathing attacks on women writers in general and on Bâ in particular. In his article 'Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's Une si Longue Lettre', Ojo-Ade is most strident in his criticism of the novel.[17] As far as he is concerned, the feminism writers like Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo advocate is a purely 'occidental phenomenon', one which 'smacks of Beauvourism', an ideology of liberation which supposedly 'engulfs the erstwhile victim in another abyss, solitude'. His reading of Bâ ignores her celebration of female solidarity. And in contrasting her novel to those of women writers he approves of such as Flora Nwapa and Grace Ogot who are apparently, 'steeped in the traditions of the land, complaining of their sufferings as subjects of the male master, but seeking solace in a society that has proclaimed woman the mother', he further replicates the prejudices of conventional male literary and critical discourse.

Yet in spite of Ojo-Ade's obvious dislike of the novel, Mariama Bâ portrays women's situation realistically in *So Long a Letter*, grounding her characters in society and making them subject to a variety of historical forces. Much has been written about the issue of polygamy in this novel, hence, although I touch upon it briefly, I will focus more on other matters such as how the main protagonist negotiates her way between personal desires and the claims of religion and tradition. I will also examine briefly male/female relationships and female solidarity as they are seen through the eyes of Ramatoulaye.

So Long a Letter is undoubtedly an important text in that it problematises the social codes of Islam in contemporary Senegalese society. It takes on the unusual form of an epistolary novel, not often seen since the eighteenth century. However, by taking this approach, Mariama Bâ is able to bring the reader closer to Ramatoulaye so that it is almost as if we were sharing in her diary. Written in the form of a letter to her friend Aissatou and although it is never sent, proves to be a cathartic experience for the writer who because of it, is able to sift through her feelings and thoughts on a variety of subjects. At first, the letter recounts the events surrounding the death of Ramatoulaye's

husband Modou, recording the moment when she receives the news of his death, her reactions, and especially the details of her thoughts and actions during the period of mourning that followed. The account provides us with some idea of Islamic Senegalese practices dealing with death. Quranic verses are invoked movingly to suggest Allah's compassion for the widow:

> 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 (p. 5).

The first-person point of view used here has the strange effect of creating a distance between the narrator and the scene she describes. The sets of rhetorical oppositions – virtue/evil, comforting words/warnings indicate the conventionality of the sentiments expressed. Ramatoulaye goes on to set the scene for us to judge the social standards of contemporary Muslim society in Dakar:

> Alas, it's the same story of the eight and fortieth days, when those who have 'learned' belatedly make up for lost time. Light attire showing off slim waistlines, prominent backsides, the new brassiere or the one bought at the second-hand market, chewing sticks wedged between teeth, white or flowered shawls, heavy smell of incense and of *gongo*, loud voices, strident laughter. And yet we are told in the Koran that on the third day the dead body swells and fills its tomb; we are told that on the eighth it bursts; and we are also told that on the fortieth day it is stripped. What then is the significance of these joyous, institutionalised festivities that accompany our prayers for God's mercy? Who has come out of self-interest? Who has come to quench his own thirst? Who has come for the sake of mercy? Who has come that he may remember? (p. 8).

In contrast to the disturbing pattern of ceremonial behaviour described above, as a devout Muslim herself, Ramatoulaye elaborates a Muslim code of righteousness that she holds up as a model for her own comportment. 'I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict

precepts, I expect not to fai' (p. 8). She therefore obediently observes the compulsory period of *idda*, the three months relative seclusion that bereaved must go through.

According to Mbye Cham, the notion of *mirasse*, the Islamic custom of confinement, is crucial to our understanding of *So Long a Letter*. As he points out, *mirasse* is a 'religious as well as juridical principle... of inheritance which implies the disclosure of all known and unknown or secret material possessions of a deceased for division among the survivors'.[18] It also provides the means within which to analyse the confusing transformation and adaptations relationships between husbands and wives undergo in polygamous situations. Combined with the epistolary form, it creates a structural framework for Ramatoulaye's narrative. At first, it seems that *mirasse* is primarily a narrative device which enables Ramatoulaye's personal disclosures. But, points out Uzo Esonwanne, it does more than merely facilitate the narrative because with *mirasse*, 'Bâ boldly redefines the relationship of African women to the secular and the sacred, to European epistolarity and to the Islamic ritual mandated by the Koran'.[19] Never an apostate, Ramatoulaye works within Islam, finding new uses for its rules and rituals. Her invocation of *mirasse* grants her the right to disclose what is hitherto not known about the deceased, and through it, we learn that Ramatoulaye's husband had totally abandoned the religious standard his wife adhered to:

> 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 (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account. (p. 9).

From the above we realise the main crisis in Ramatoulaye's life came not with the death of Modou, but with his acquisition of a second younger wife, the teenage friend of their daughter Daba. The inscription of polygamy in the novel provides a site for retelling the story from the inside. It provides an opportunity of seeing this Islamic practice through the eye of the 'other', the one who is actually involved in it.

But as Kenneth Harrow asserts, the Ramatoulaye who takes a stern position toward her wayward husband is not the image of the traditional, submissive Muslim wife.[20] We learn that in their youth, Madou and Ramatoulaye considered themselves part of a new generation of modern emancipated Africans. They had bought into the Western notion of romantic love, even eloping without the blessings of their families. Even after Modou's betrayal, Ramatoulaye remains committed to the idea that marriage should above all be based on the choice and attraction of the two principle partners. For her, family success depended on the harmony of the founding couple, and in turn, it was successful and happy families that would constitute the success of a nation.

It is of significance that for Ramatoulaye, Western education means 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' (p. 16). Bâ's celebration of this education is the opposite of the account of it we find in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's criticism of the same in *Ambiguous Adventure*. Yet in some ways, she is reluctant to take advantage of the alternatives it provides for her friend Aissatou who utilised that education to embark on a career in the Foreign Service when she is similarly betrayed by her husband.

In spite of the fact that they share similar backgrounds and education, Aissatou's reaction to what Bâ refers to as the 'polygamic' instincts of her husband is to reject it outright. Unconvinced by his explanation that he has married Nabou out of duty to his mother but that he reserves his love and respect for her, Aissatou replies:

> I cannot accept what you are offering me in the place of the happiness that we once had. You want to draw a line between a heartfelt love and a physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance however little that maybe.... I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. (p. 31-32).

Imam Ghazali would accuse such a woman as Aissatou of being a '*nashiz*', an Islamic term for a rebellious wife.[21] In refusing to participate in a polygamous marriage, she subverts the established order of things. since polygamy cannot be practised if women

refuse to comply with what is commanded by religion. Having views that are different from what is defined by religious law is an alien concept to the group orientation of Islam. Therefore in condemning polygamy, Aissatou commits '*bida*' that is, innovation. Taking upon herself the right to change her fate, and to act critically based on her own judgement of the situation, she deviates from the 'right path' traced out for her by Islam. As Fatima Mernissi points out, this is a dangerous activity because not only do innovators dissent from the community, but because in doing so they challenge the very existence of order based on consensus. [22] However, Aissatou's reaction here dispels from the mind the stereotype of the timid, traditional Muslim woman who mutely and passively surrenders to the whims of men and the dictates of her religion.

The question is since choice can be exercised in the matter of marriage, why does Ramatoulaye not make the same decision as her friend? The main reason she advances for not choosing 'the right' and 'dignified solution' of obtaining a divorce, is 'the immense tenderness' she feels for Modou. But on the other hand, it seems that like Lolli in *The Beggars' Strike* she has interiorised her dependence. In the following, she contemplates what becomes of divorced women of her generation:

> I knew a few whose remaining beauty had been able to capture a worthy man, a man who added fine bearing to a good situation and who was considered 'better, a hundred times better than his predecessor'.... I knew others who had lost all hope of renewal and whom loneliness had very quickly laid underground. (p. 40).

Ramatoulaye may have been unable to face the consequences of divorcing Modou, but even after his death, she continues to remain faithful to his memory, rejecting alike the desirable doctor Dauda Dieng, as well as her brother in law Tansir who also asks to marry her. Instead, what she relies on emotionally is her friendship with Aissatou:

> Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. (p. 54).

This praise of the bond of friendship between herself and Aissatou does not overstate the feeling of solidarity that exists between them. As Ramatoulaye's letter reveals,

while she has remained faithful to Modou, she has a number of times betrayed Aissatou's friendship. For instance although she knows of Mowdo's plan to marry a second wife, she does not warn her. And even after Aissatou leaves, she retains Mawdo as a confidant. But, she also increasingly turns to her griot that provides good advice when needed. As the period of mourning comes to an end, having begun with the portrait of a Muslim wife who is forced to deal with abandonment and death and who is reliant upon her faith to see her through life, the focus of the narrative shifts. Ramatoulaye finds herself having to deal more and more with her children's problems instead of her own. Indeed, as she passes from the portrayal of herself as wife to mother, Islamic practices and beliefs fade gradually into the background and issues of female and national identity come to the fore. During the period of her confinement, Islam's moral imperatives enabled her to come to terms with what was wrong in her old life but as she records her final thoughts, it plays no role in her hopes for the future.

NOTES

1. Senegal is the first predominantly Islamic territory in West Africa to produce successful women novelists. Including the two under discussion in this chapter other women writers such as Nafissatou Diallo, Aja Ndeye Boury Ndiaye, Mame Seck Mbacke, Aminata Maiga Ka Khadi Fall and Aicha Diouri have made considerable contributions to literature from this part of the world. In Brenda Bernam's *Bibliography of African Women Writers and Journalists* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1985), five out of fifteen women writers mentioned are Senegalese. Similarly, half of the novels Christine H. Guyonneau lists in *Francophone Women Writers from Sub-Saharan Africa: A Preliminary Bibliography*, (Paris: Callaloo, 1985), pp. 453-483 are from Senegal.

2. Hans, M. Zell, 'The First Noma Award for Publishing in Africa: Africa Book Publishing Record, 1980, 6.3-4, 199-201.

3. Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 1986, 15, pp. 65-88. According to Jameson, Third-World intellectuals are almost always preoccupied with the state of their nations and therefore consistently privilege the nationalist ideology in their writings.

4. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (London: Virago Press, 1982), p. 25. All pages references are to this edition.

5. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*(London: Routledge, 1994), p.16

6. Peter Hawkins, 'An Interview with Senegalese Novelist Aminata Sow Fall', *French Studies Bulletin* (Spring, 1987), pp. 19-21.

7. Mbye Cham, 'Islam in Senegalese Literature and Film' *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (Portsmouth: James Currey, 1991), p. 168.

8. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 85.

9. Susan Stringer, *The Senegalese Novel by Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 78.

10. Aminata Sow Fall, *The Beggars' Strike* (Essex: Longman, 1981), p. 2.

11. Trinh Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

12. However, in his book *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Leonard Vallalon argues that in secular discussions of Senegalese Islamic organisation, the very real centrality of the metaphysical is often ignored. Citing Aminata Sow Fall's T*he Beggars' Strike* as an example, he points out that literary descriptions of the social and economic powers of marabouts at times read as if the spiritual aspects the marabout is only elaborate ruse by the people are tricked into acquiescing to their own exploitation.

13. Trinh Minh-ha, p. 181.

14. Ibid. p. 183.

15. Dorothy Blair, *African Literature in French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 139. Or, *Senegalese Literature: A Critical Literary Approach* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), p. 139.

16. Christina Guyonneau 'Francophone Women Writers from Sub-Saharan Africa: A Preliminary Bibliography', *Callaloo*, 8.2 (1985), p. 453-483.

17. Femi Ojo-Ade, '"Still a Victim?" Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre*,' in African Literature Today, 13, ed. by Eldred James (Oxford: James Currey, 1982).

18. Mbye Cham, '*Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ'*, Women in African Literature Today (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1987), p. 91-92.

19. Azo Esonwanne, 'Englightenment Epistemology and "Ascetic Cognition" Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter, '*The Politics of Mothering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature,* ed. by Obioma Nnaemeka (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 85.

20. Kenneth Harrow, 'Islam in Literature in Africa', *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. by Nehemia Levitzion and Randel Powells, (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), p. 536.

21. Imam Ghazali, 'Book of Marriage' in The Revivification of Religious Sciences (Cairo: Al Maktaba Al Tijariya, Alkurba,1964)

22. Fatima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion' in *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. by Diana Eck and Devaki Jain (London: Women's Press, 1986), p. 90.

CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN AND THE IMAM IN IBRAHIM TAHIR'S 'THE LAST IMAM'

Since Chiekh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1964), no other novel from West Africa has dealt with the presence of Islam with the single-mindedness of Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984).[1] Although published in the same year as Zaynab Alkali's acclaimed novel *The Stillborn*, and set in an area of Nigeria rarely written about in fiction, it seems to arouse very little scholarly interest. The wall of silence it met on arrival cracked for the first time when Kenneth Harrow mentioned it in his introduction to *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991).[2] Here he observes that the majority of Muslim characters in African fiction 'testify to a growing desire of writers to focus entirely upon comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos'.[3] Certainly among the examples he cites such as Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers, The Interpreters, Season of Anomy, and* Zaynab Alkali's second novel *The Virtuous Woman,* none deals more explicitly with this concern than Tahir's novel. After Harrow's comment more was written about the novel until 1996 when it received its first proper critical attention in Ahmed Sheikh Bangura's essay, "The Quest for Orthodoxy in The Last Imam".[4]

Recently, Ako Essein also took up the gauntlet when he included *The Last Imam* in his case study of three Nigerian novels under the title 'Communicative Competence and Dialogue in Bilingual Novels'. Dwelling at length on the comparative linguistic abilities of the writers he is concerned with in his article, Essein quotes and agrees with Emmanuel Obiechina that a writer should 'exploit the advantages of his bilingual knowledge to make available to the world at large the culture, traditions and heritage of his people'. [5] Like Achebe in *Arrow of God*, Tahir attempts to define a particular socio-cultural context in *The Last Imam.* In Achebe's novel it is Igbo society during the early days of British colonialism; Tahir's on the other hand is Hausa-land after the Fulani Jihad. Both novels focus on the religious life of their people, but whereas Achebe embarks on the task of rehabilitating what is culturally and politically indigenous to his people, Tahir for most of his novel admits no history nor any other ideology save that of Islam in Bauchi.

An explanation for Ibraham Tahir's preferred perspective is offered in a statement once made by Rupert East in the late 1930s. East was instrumental in not only establishing the first Hausa-language newspaper *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo* in Northern Nigeria, but also

encouraged Hausa intellectuals to 'write prose fiction on the western model'. According to him:

> 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 story telling, 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.[6]

The above account is replete with the racial and cultural assumptions of the period but nevertheless hints at the attitudes a Muslim writer such as Tahir brings to his work. In *The Last Imam*, Tahir appropriates an 'alien' form to express concerns that are relevant to the experiences of Nigerians in his part of the country. Hence what we find here is a novel deeply saturated with a consciousness of Islam, where religion is duly treated both as a 'subjective state and an objective factor, as both a matter of personal experience and as a social factor'.[7] Quotations and references from the Quran and Hadith abound to such an extent that if taken out of the novel the length of it would be considerably shortened. Allusions to these sacred texts are as Bangura observes, 'altogether reverential', leaving no doubt that it is the yardstick by which all thought and action is judged in the novel. In the novel, social crisis arises from conflict between concerns with orthodoxy and accommodationism because while the people of the novel's referent society of Bauchi now consider Islam their natural religion, elements of traditional beliefs and practices continue to persist in their midst. This is not an unusual phenomenon as we have seen in several of the novels discussed in this thesis, but one which is singularly untenable for the hero of Tahir's novel, the Imam Alhaji Usman, who devotes his life to the task of bringing the people to a strict adherence to Islam. His struggles to implement a rigorous form of Islam both in his personal life, and more significantly, in the rest of the old Bauchi kingdom is the main focus of the novel.

My aim in this chapter is to take into account the exceptional emphasis on religion found in *The Last Imam* and to examine the conflicts that arise between those who uphold a fundamentalist approach to the practice of Islam and those who would allow other influences to compromise its authority. There is almost a sense of inevitability when this polarisation of society takes on a gender character with Alhaji Usman on one side, while ranged on the other is the next prominent person in the novel, his wife Aisha. Or is it merely a coincidence that women appear to act as the main catalyst in the struggle that ensues between religion and tradition in the novel? Before I embark on an in depth examination of these issues, and because *The Last Imam* is a novel comparatively unfamiliar to many readers of African Literature, it would be pertinent to recount in some detail the story of the main protagonist around whom the narrative revolves.

Through the character of Alhaji Usman, Ibrahim Tahir explores the devout Muslim man's relationship with his faith as well as how this affects his social interactions. All the events in *The Last Imam* are underscored by the personality of this man who throughout the course of the novel clearly aligns himself with the inscrutable power that is God. Even his physical appearance accords well with the role he is determined to play in his society. Of his hero, Tahir writes: 'He was 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' (p13). Who better then, to extol the pre-eminence of the divine than this messianic figure? Like the prophets of old, Alhaji Usman's task in life was preordained. When only a young boy it was revealed to him in a dream that he would succeed his father as Imam of the old Bauchi Kingdom in what is now present day Nigeria. Therefore, in order to be deserving of such high office, he works very hard to supersede all others in his learning and piety. This brings him great respect in a society where Islam and those who hold knowledge of it are revered. People would greet him with words like 'Out of the blessings God has given you, may He give us a little to comfort us in our old ages' (p16). The depth of his own devotion finds many ways of expressing itself. Indeed, for a while as a young man he intended to lead an ascetic life dedicated solely to worship, until he is reminded that to eschew normal human activities is to go against the practice of Prophet Muhammed. He therefore reluctantly allows himself to be persuaded into an alms marriage that is reminiscent of the Prophet's to a girl by the name of Aisha. But subsequently, in an act of vengeance because his wish to be celibate is frustrated, he brutally rapes his young wife on their wedding night.

For a while this marriage stifles his spiritual ardour, but then he goes on to marry three more wives in rapid succession, thereby filling the quota of four that Islam allows him. He then goes on pilgrimage to Mecca with his father upon whose death in the holy land he returns to Bauchi to be turbaned as the next Imam. However, while in the arid environment of the desert they cross to their destination, Alhaji Usman's attention turns upon a young slave girl in his entourage. His spiritual flame re-ignites at the same time as he is gripped by an overwhelming desire to marry and possess the young Hasana. In spite of the fact he already has four wives, this union is made possible by the permission granted in the Quranic verse: 'And take also what you may from what your right hand possesses, your slave maidens' (p.34).For the next thirteen years, Alhaji Usman ignores all his other wives and devotes himself entirely to Hasana and their son Kasim. When she dies suddenly, he is overcome with grief. Inconsolable and tortured by a sense of being abandoned by the power he has served all his life, he demands a sign from God. In his hour of need, it is Aisha his first wife who comes to his assistance, showering help and encouragement on him until she eventually succeeds in bringing him back from the brink of apostasy. Inevitably, her efforts create a special place for her with Alhaji Usman and she quickly takes advantage of it to exert her rule over the rest of the household.

To show his appreciation for what she has done for him, Alhaji Usman instructs the childless Aisha to adopt as her own his son Kasim, but this request does not take into account the mutual antagonism they feel towards each other. As they both jostle to maintain their individual closeness to Alhaji Usman, their jealousy of each other finds expression in subtle domestic battles until Aisha accuses Kasim of being a thief and of disrespect to his "mothers". Mindful of the Quranic injunctions which command believers to show deference to parents, Alhaji Usman loses his temper and subjects Kasim to a severe beating. In so doing, he breaks a promise made to Hasana on her deathbed to be kind to her son. Immediately after, overcome with guilt, especially after Kasim runs away and seeks refuge in the arms of a wandering teacher, Alhaji Usman begins to frequent Hasana's grave once again in order to seek her forgiveness. Eventually for the sake of peace in his household, he decides to allow Kasim to be raised and taught by the less knowledgeable Malam Shuaibu.

In the meantime, while Alhaji Usman struggles to contain the crisis in his domestic life, the month of Ramadan (fasting) comes upon the community. Using his authority as

Imam, he forces the Emir to ban the Hausa custom of gwauro, a tradition that demands the utter humiliation of any married man whose wife leaves him in this most holy of months. But the people's suspicions are aroused as the timing of this new decree coincides with his own wives' rebellion against his lack of consideration for them. This immediately leads the whole community to begin questioning not only his wisdom, but also his much vaunted piety.

Eventually it comes to light that the despised Malam Shuaibu is in fact Alhaji Usman's half brother, sired by his late father with a slave girl he raped when a young man. This discovery unleashes a maelstrom of panic and anger in the Imam. He cannot believe nor excuse this terrible act committed by a father he considered pious and beyond reproach. What he finds even more unbearable is the realisation that his own conduct towards his wives is no better than his father's. By not respecting the Islamic principle of fairness which regulates the number of nights each wife in a polygamous marriage spends with the husband, the Imam himself is guilty of what he accuses his father: 'A child conceived in a stolen embrace was as much a bastard as if he had been conceived out of wedlock' (p.177). This realisation of his own complicity deflates for a while his sense of superiority over others in his community and he quickly moves to seek forgiveness from his wives. In addition, determined to bring the Bauchi Kingdom back to a strict adherence to Islamic laws on marriage, he gives a sermon on the nuptial and bastardy. But, not surprisingly, because of the implications contained in it for the whole community, the sermon proves unpopular and brings the anger of the people once more on his head.

Despite their professed belief in Islam, the people of Bauchi are unwilling to give up all of their traditional practices. Besides the custom of gwauro, they also retain a firm belief in omens. Thus the groan of the Bauchi hyena is believed to portend terrible disasters which befall society after a great crime has been committed. When coincidentally, thunder and lightning strike for seven consecutive days without the relief of rain and killing many people, no amount of Quranic exegesis the Imam offers will convince the people that the tragedies have nothing to do with the cry of the hyena. Crucially the people believed that his ill treatment of the motherless Kasim is believed to be the crime which brought the ancient curse on them.

As panic overcomes the people, some even flee their ancestral homes in a bid to escape the drought and deaths. The Emir then summons Alhaji Usman to the palace to persuade him to take back Kasim and thereby appease the people. But still the Imam refuses, believing that to make any concession to the community's fears or traditions would be tantamount to disregarding the will of God and pandering instead to the wishes of mere men. Words like 'hostile', 'resentful' and 'intolerant' which are used to describe the aspect of the hills which enclose Bauchi area become a fitting description of the one who believes that he alone is responsible for the religious belief of this society. Alhaji Usman's uncompromising stance on a number of issues in the end alienates him from his people. Finding himself faced with the possible disintegration of his Kingdom, the Emir pragmatically unturbans the Imam and replaces him with his 'bastard' half-brother Malam Shuaibu. A man who according to him will be 'an agreeable Imam much better suited to the ways of some of us' (p241). The author hints that in future, those appointed to this post will be selected with this quality in mind.

The question then is how is the reader meant to view Alhaji Usman? Certainly, as the central character in the novel, much of our attention is focused on him. In an important way he is different from other religious figures we encounter in some of the novels under discussion here. Where Alhaji Usman is concerned Tahir does not paint a figure of ridicule or of scorn whose piety is a disguise for nefarious activities. Instead, we have one who frequently asserts with unmistakable sincerity his own belief that he should lead his people in their religious observances. Deliberately, Tahir establishes a link between his creation and the legendary Usman dan Fodio when he informs the reader that Alhaji Usman apparently comes from a long line of Fulani scholars of great learning and devotion to Islam, who were initially recruited during the jihad movement.

Bangura notes in his article that we cannot analyse Alhaji Usman's desire to reform the Islamic practices of his society without taking into consideration the special relationship he has with his father which is later problematised in the novel, his great love for Hasana, his rather ambivalent relationships with his son Kasim and his first wife Aisha, and the dynamics of the polygamous set up he creates. These various aspects of his life combine together to produce a complex character. And throughout the narrative, although he frequently displays a tendency towards excessive behaviour both in his personal life as well as his public one, particularly on occasions when he acts as though intoxicated with the power he wields in this society, the reader never doubts the depth of

his faith. Thus does Tahir's characterisation of the Imam depart from what has become a stereotype of the unscrupulous religious figure we often find in West African literature.

What conclusions we reach about the Imam and indirectly of his society, are greatly helped by the man himself. Throughout the narrative, this pivotal character, like Andre Malraux's 'articulate hero', is constantly engaged in taking the measure of the various forces involved in his individual fate revealing in the process severe tensions which exist in a society which is exceptionally predicated on Islamic concepts of faith, worship and righteous conduct. From his lucid self-conscious introspection it emerges with unmistakable emphasis that women play an important part in his personal fortunes, and indirectly through him, by virtue of his public role, women similarly exert influence in the affairs of their community.

The evident impact women make on the psychology of the Imam is carefully established when the crisis of faith he suffers is attributed to the anguish he feels over the loss of Hasana, 'the one and only woman he had ever loved' (p.2). Motivated by an injured sense of his own worthiness he desires direct communication with the divine power: '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' (p.2). When this fails to happen, anger replaces reverence and 'he thought it a colossal confidence trick that Islam had permitted no other prophet after Muhammed'(p.2). This attitude brings him close to heresy until the revelation he prays for comes '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!' (p.3). This revelation of the depth of feeling Hasana inspires in him is then immediately followed by another, the rage he harbours against his first wife Aisha for daring to lead a rebellion against him. Introduced as they are into the narrative from the point of view of the disruptive power they exercise over the Imam, both women are cast in a negative light as embodiments of disorder or chaos. The following is an analysis of Tahir's contribution to the concept of women as a source of fitna (chaos) not only for that figure of religious and political authority that is the Imam, but also for the whole of society. During this examination I shall endeavour to take into account the views propounded by the Islamic scholar Imam Ahmad Ghazali (1050-1111) because his profuse writing on the subject of male/female relations has had considerable influence on Muslim thought.

The central character in *The Last Imam* is portrayed as a son, a husband, and a father but it is his public position as imam that is of most significance. The way he deals with people and issues necessarily affects our views or evaluation of Muslim society because in his capacity as spiritual leader of his people he carries so much representative value. This is why the relationships Alhaji Usman has with the two most prominent women in his life Aisha and Hasana, offer rare but important explorations of sexual love vis-à-vis Islam. Tahir skilfully adds to the complexity of his narrative by expanding the scope of the subject with the inclusion of issues of class, power, and tradition. Significantly, early in the novel, attention is drawn to the diverse potential contained in women when the Imam reflects that what 'he took in Aisha had given him doubts' but that in Hasana 'he had found Allah and his work' (p.25). This claim invokes extremely opposed images of women, one as the agent of the devil (Sheidan) who distracts him from the way of God, and the other, as the guardian of his soul. The reality of this reference to the immense effect women have on his personal religious life can be explored further by examining the conditions under which he encounters either woman.

Of the two women in the novel, the presence of Aisha is most felt by the reader. Carrying the weight of a variety of female experiences from forced marriage, rape, childlessness, to being abandoned by her husband for his concubine, she stands out in her capacity to suffer and in her resolve to struggle against the condition of her life. Unable to accept with quietude the cultural dictates of her Hausa/Fulani Islamic society, her character is different from that of the ideal model of femininity upheld by orthodox religion, that of the obedient woman who is modest in speech and in behaviour.[8] These same qualities which according to Fatima Mernissi, allow for submission not only to God but also to his interpreters here on earth, Khalifs, Imams, fathers, and husbands.[9] Not for Aisha the unquestioning acceptance of Islamic teachings that Ramatoulaye expresses in *So Long a Letter* when she declares 'my heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail'.[10] Nor for her, Ngone war Thiandum's fear in *White Genesis* that to question things may be seen as 'a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a moral crime'.[11] Her attitude in *The Last Imam* remains constant throughout the trials she undergoes and are similar to that of Li in *The Stillborn* who adopts a pragmatic rather than a religious approach to life. This is evident in her quick realisation of Alhaji Usman's need of her when he is overcome by grief, in her manipulation of the advantage her support of her co-wives

gives her in domestic battles against her husband, in her ability to put aside her jealousy of Kasim when his removal from the household threatens the family's position in society, and her awareness of having public opinion on her side.

On several occasions in the novel, Aisha is given the opportunity to speak her views on her personal situation. We first became aware of this in the third chapter where she indulges in a moment of reflection which corresponds closely with that of her husband in the first and second chapters of the novel. The struggle between unquestioning faith and man's individual desires, between moral duty and rebellion that the novel dwells on at length are introduced within these first three chapters. The contrasting perspectives and concerns of Aisha and Alhaji Usman are clearly defined here. But whereas the Imam's cogitation involves much self-exploration as he examines the spiritual and political implications of his personal decisions, Aisha dwells on how she has been manipulated by others with power over her into the situation she finds herself. In representing Aisha's perspective immediately after that of the main protagonist, the author ensures that her views are seen as an important and relevant part of the narrative. Certainly divulging the inner thoughts of husband and wife in this way enables Tahir to outline both the dominant patriarchal view of women's place in Bauchi society, as well as a woman's own perception of her situation.

Since her father forces her into an 'alms marriage' [12] with a man whose identity is concealed from her until she arrives at his home, Aisha perhaps has reason to 'care little for all the pious talk.....about the blessings Allah reserved for girls given away to Muhammed' (p.48). Justifiably outraged since 'everybody knew and said she was one of the prize girls in Bauchi', Aisha is deeply conscious of a lowering of her social status when in her view, she is 'given away like a goat' (p.48). Later in the novel, her scepticism about the religious virtue of this type of marriage, which is reminiscent of the Prophet's to his beloved wife Aisha, is validated when it does not guarantee her similar love and respect from Alhaji Usman.

Her awareness of the parallels between the two marriages only increases Aisha's frustrations: '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' (p.173). Ngone war Thiandum in *White Genesis* experiences a similar sense of being abandoned by Allah when she discovers incest in her family. Interestingly, in spite of

Aisha's initial reluctance, her willingness to accommodate the marriage is in fact based on her susceptibility to her people's belief that piety invests a man with exceptional character. She had hoped that being a man of great learning and from a long line of revered imams, Alhaji Usman would indeed be what her people call 'Mutumin Kirki' (a good man),[13] a concept which imbues a man with saintly qualities including compassion and respect for other people. Unfortunately, for thirteen years her husband the Imam contravenes basic Islamic laws on polygamy when he ignores all his other wives and children in favour of his concubine Hasana and her son Kasim. Like Nnu Ego's father Agbadi in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* who is depicted as 'cruel in his imperiousness' and 'who ruled his family and children as if he were a god' so too does Alhaji occupy a 'position not so different from that of a god'. In the early days of their marriage instead of giving her some attention he would 'sit like a god reading his books' (p.50).

In the Muslim mind there is a firm connection between religious belief and the conduct of male/female relationships is established by Prophet Muhammed's instruction: 'Whoever marries safeguards half his faith, let him fear God for the second half'. In *The Last Imam*, the abuse of one is seen as necessarily affecting the other. This why as far as Aisha is concerned, Alhaji Usman's integrity both as a husband and as the religious leader compromised. 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' (p.32). Loudly calling attention to the injustice of her situation, she proceeds to struggle to gain the upper hand by any means, even mobilising her co-wives against their husband. For her, it is a case of 'either fight or we fall'. Perhaps underlining her whole attitude is a realisation that all she can ever aspire to be is a wife. And indeed were she to ask for a divorce 'no man in Bauchi would have dared to marry the ex-wife of one as revered as the Imam' (p. 52).

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'(p.179). After the death of Hasana, her refusal to countenance being sidelined again in her husband's affection, this time by Kasim, forces her into the role of the wicked stepmother. But she makes her position clear in the following: "It is the

indignity that I cannot tolerate. Why should we play second fiddle to the son of a slave, the spoilt son of a concubine?" Then demonstrating her awareness of the ploys used to enforce her suppression such as references to Quranic instructions and appeals for more 'feminine' conduct, she argues, '"Patience, patience you say! That is what you have always told us. That is how we took years of degradation"' (p.5).

There is appears to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the writer to divorce Aisha's ideas and actions from religion. This probably springs from notions of women's subordination in matters of faith that Mernissi, El-Sadawi, and Ghattas-Soliman believe is embedded in all patriarchal religions whether Islam, Christianity or Judaism. However, not all male writers can be accused of subscribing to this view. In an interview with Armado Pajalich, Nuruddin Farah clearly states his intention regarding the presence of women in his fiction:

> It is as if women in my novels determine the pace at which life is lived; whether they are absent or present they seem to determine how men should operate, or should look at them or how they should view them.....I create conditions in the imagination in which women reign absolute. [14]

Where better to reign absolute than in spiritual leadership? In *Close Sesame*, Farah expressly designs Nadiifa's feminine spirituality in order to correct the general imbalance of gender in his native Muslim Somali society. Tahir on the other hand, chooses to reinforce negative views of women's lack of spirituality and thereby of women's role in a religious society. Hence, while in his novel he 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. Similarly in Chapter three, there seems to be 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 in the following paragraph:

> 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 tender

words in her ear, someone of whom she could sing unashamedly in the market place. (p.48)

Aisha's sentiments are not unlike those of numerous young women in African fiction who consider the freedom to choose of spouse as essential for marital happiness, but in the Islamic context of *The Last Imam*, such notions appear immature and trivial beside the reasons Alhaji Usman gives 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...."' (p.19). Obedience to the tenets of his faith rather than filial duty is offered as the only reason for his eventual acceptance of Aisha as wife. This is appropriate behaviour from the good Muslim he is supposed to be. It is implied that he could not do otherwise when arguments against his personal inclination are couched in religious terms! 'Will you tell the people that alms marriages are legal but that you their Imam disapproves?' (p.20)

Throughout the novel the ideological basis of the Imam's various decisions, private and public, is emphasised whereas Aisha is arbitrarily portrayed as bent on thwarting her husband's work of bringing the people to a strict adherence to Islam. Her actions and reactions to situations she is confronted with are portrayed as being merely due to her self-seeking rebellious nature, faults Imam Ghazali finds inherently feminine. Writing about this tendency in women in his classical work *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*, he sees civilisation as constantly struggling to contain women's destructive potential.[15] His view echoes that expressed in a statement attributed to Prophet Muhammed, 'After my disappearance, there will be no greater source of chaos and disorder for my nation than women'. Taking their cue from this statement, a number of Islamic scholars conclude that the Muslim social order faces two major threats, from the infidel without, and from women within. Ghazali goes on to insist that women must be controlled in order to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. With this in mind, one wonders if this is why in *The Last Imam,* Alhaji Usman alternately 'shouts', 'barks' and 'roars' at his womenfolk, and not as Ako Essein claims because Tahir does not possess the 'communicative competence' that Achebe undoubtedly displays in *Arrow of God.* Essein's argues is that although in many respects Alhaji Usman is a replica of Achebe's Ezeulu, since both are custodians of their people's faith, his personality is not conveyed by well chosen words but instead by the decibel of his utterances. However, the resultant reaction from his wives that 'they would tremble and their hearts would jump and their livers quiver. All would be

peace....' (p.59) conveys successfully where the balance of power lies in Tahir's society.

It seems that the destructive power of women that Ghazali speaks of is inscribed into Aisha's character. Thus while her husband works tirelessly to reinforce a rigorous form of Islam in Bauchi society, the novel tells of how she 'threatened him with domestic disorder' by making allegations of thievery against his favourite son Kasim, inciting his other wives against him, and forcing him into making politically dangerous decisions when she issues him with an ultimatum. So well does Tahir succeed in entrenching this image of Aisha that later tentative efforts to redeem her character, instance when she gives comfort to the Imam after Hasana's death, or when she warns him of the possibility of impeachment from office fail to be convincing. Depicted as loud, rebellious, and unkind to the orphan as well as inclined towards certain traditional practices, she is in many ways a stereotype of the undesirable woman in Islam.

In *The Last Imam*, Ibrahim Tahir employs a literary strategy that Florence Stratton notes in the works of women writers from Nwapa, Emecheta, to Ba.[16] Like them, he makes good use of comparisons and contrasts between the situations of different women characters and thus makes particularly creative use of the convention of the 'paired women'. Juxtaposed against Aisha, the character of Hasana in spite of minimal presence in the novel, is thrown into sharper focus. Of her, Alhaji Usman believes 'she should have happened to him before Aisha and the others' (p25). The question that immediately springs to mind is why this marked preference for her? What makes her so different from Aisha and why is she held up as the best kind of wife for the Imam? Before attempting an analysis of his relationship with Hasana, it is pertinent to refer to questions Fatna Sabbah asks in *Woman in the Muslim Conscious* (1984). 'How does a man love a woman?' 'Why does one type of woman excite desire and win love while another provokes anxiety and mistrust?' And what are the links between desire and submission?[17] These are relevant questions in the light of what happens in *The Last Imam*, answers to which will help elucidate why Hasana receives a different treatment in the novel.

The temptation to read the relationship between Alhaji Usman and the slave girl Hasana as a romance that transcends social class is greatly encouraged by the intensity and eloquence of his emotions where she is concerned. Depicted as a paragon among

women, her physical beauty is what first attracts him and is duly eulogised in the following paragraph:

> 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. (p31)

This description is similar to Ghazali's idea of the ideal Muslim wife 'Beautiful, non-temperamental, with black pupils, and long hair, big eyes....'[18] and both are probably inspired by Quranic descriptions of houris-women of surpassing beauty and virtue who dwell in paradise waiting to be given as reward to deserving men. Significantly timed to coincide with his pilgrimage to Mecca, the most holy site of Islam, Alhaji Usman's discovered passion for Hasana rekindles the spiritual flame stifled by marriage to Aisha. With the words 'The heat of the sun set his heart on fire for her and made her and his rediscovered passion inseparable' (p.31) his ardour for this image of heavenly beauty is deliberately linked to his faith and when their union is eventually consummated, her cries sound like 'music' in his ears as it blends with the call of the muezzin and he is convinced the 'gates of Heaven were open to receive them' (p.3).

Tahir excels in his handling of the Imam's heightened senses as carnal desire and religious fervour fuse together and become one and the same in his mind. In *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*, Ghazali gives a detailed explanation of how Islam integrates sexual desire into the social order and places it at the service of God. In brief his explanation is that the sexual instinct is important because it enables the perpetuation of the Muslim community without which there can be no Islamic social order. It also serves as 'a foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise' and therefore encourages them to strive for a place there.[19] Finally, he believes that sexual satisfaction is necessary to intellectual effort. In *The Last Imam,* all three functions become possible in the relationship Alhaji Usman has with Hasana. Not only does he find in her company a 'relaxation which drives out sadness and pacifies the heart' and making him even more willing to strive for God's pleasure, but the birth of Kasim completes his sense of happiness perhaps because in his son, who like himself is diligent study of the Quran, the future of Islam appears to be assured.

Mernissi notes in *Beyond the Veil* that because of the dual nature of sexual desire (earthly and heavenly) and its tactical importance in God's grand design, its regulation had to be divine as well.[20] This she believes, is achieved through the sacred institution of marriage, upon which the Islamic social order is built. The need to maintain the moral climate preferred by Islam is therefore the rationale behind what is known as 'alms marriage', which has been designed allow even the less materially fortunate acquire a wife. However, while sexual desire is not in itself frowned upon in Islam, it is viewed with considerable caution because erotic love has the potential of growing into something totally encompassing, of evolving into an emotional bond giving man a sense of plenitude that only God is supposed to give. According to Mernissi, such absorption with another human being is not pleasing to the Islamic God who demands total love from his subjects as a verse in the Quran makes clear:

> Yet of mankind are some who take unto themselves (objects of worship which they set up as) rivals to Allah, loving them with a love like (that which is due) Allah (alone) those who believe are stauncher in the love for Allah. [21]

This ambiguity in Islam which demands that man enjoy the female body without letting that enjoyment interfere with his allegiance to God is highlighted in *The Last Imam.* As far as Islam and Ibrahim Tahir are concerned, the depth of feeling Alhaji Usman has for Hasana borders on idolatry. So completely does love for her take over his entire being she was on his mind even when he led the town prayers and it was 'as though he were singing her praise when he recited verses' (p.35). The reader is expected to question this relationship when it is revealed that 'he would suddenly stop the lesson, and walk out of the hall, coming back later looking more composed' and especially when the people mistake this behaviour to be 'one of those things which separated those possessed like him with the spirit of Allah from ordinary men like themselves' (p.32). This view of the Imam's unusual behaviour, as well as the implied criticism in the use of the words "incensed", and "intoxicated" to describe his state of mind suggests certain inappropriateness about the whole affair. On the domestic front, this intense love for Hasana causes the Imam to abandon Islamic principles of fairness and justice that are supposed to guide his relationships with his wives, leading eventually to a major crisis in his life. The worst possible consequence of this particular relationship occurs when on Hasana's death, the Imam begins to question and challenge God almost bringing him to

the brink of apostasy. From these several indications, this writer therefore concludes that Tahir fully subscribes to Ghazali's view of the disastrous effect women have on the male psyche as Hasana even more so than Aisha turns out to be a source of great fitna (chaos, disorder) for the Imam. Perhaps for this reason alone, she has to die in order to protect the imam's religious integrity.

While the inclusion of Hasana's character serves to reinforce the view of women as the main source of fitna in the Islamic social order, it also affords Tahir the opportunity of weaving into the narrative little known details which add to our knowledge of the dynamics of Muslim society. For example, in spite of the often cited Quranic verse which claims the numerical option has been limited to four wives, the Imam's union with the slave girl Hasana demonstrates the existence of loop holes which allow men to legitimately add concubines to their menage '....and take also what your right hand possess, your hand maiden' (p.34). Incorporated into this revelation is an admission of Islam's acceptance of slavery because it is what makes concubinage possible as freeborn women like Aisha can only be taken as wives.[22]

In his article, Sheikh Bangura observes that many a critic would describe *The Last Imam* as completely pro-Islamic, particularly when compared to Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, which is 'sweepingly vitriolic' in its criticism of Islamic society and particularly in its condemnation of slavery. [23] The preference in *The Last Imam* seems to be for a more subtle approach to the subject. Authorial indignation is reined in as Alhaji Usman reassures himself: 'He could make her a concubine. He already had two, his father had them, all the notable houses in Bauchi had them' (p.34). In a succinct statement that conveys how little other influences impinge on the society here and which at the same time establishes the supremacy of the Islamic world view in this part of Nigeria, Tahir explains Hasana's position in Bauchi society: 'her people had been made free by the British but that had been a mere technicality' (p34).

Religion is evidently entangled and implicated in the social inequality of the slave girl. The same is recognised in Ouologuem's novel where the sexual exploitation of slaves is carried out by saifs, religious leaders who impose their authority over the novel's referent society [24]. In *Bound to Violence*, sexual and political oppression are treated as if analogous and women are invoked as symbols rather than as subjects. But as Eileen Julian argues, this only serves to naturalise the oppression of women.[25] We find a

similar treatment of the sexual use/abuse of women in *The Last Imam*. For instance, while Tahir excels in his description of the passion Alhaji Usman feels for Hasana, the power to act upon it is placed entirely in his hands, while she remains a mute recipient of whatever is inflicted upon her. However, a vague sense of the rapacious element in his desire for her drives him to consecrate their union with a prayer, not because Islam demands it, but because it made the deed 'much more glorified'. It is also revealed that in more or less similar fashion, his father in his youth had taken advantage of a slave girl in the Emir's court who eventually gave birth to his half brother Malam Shuaibu. Knowledge of this occurrence awakens in the Imam a realisation that he is no better than his father. His opinion of his own piety is deflated and his pride in his son Kasim suffers because any 'child conceived in a stolen embrace was as much a bastard as if he had been conceived out of wedlock' (p.177). The significance of this particular story lies in the turbulence it effects in the whole society.

On the whole, women in *The Last Imam* are treated as objects or as property to be disposed of according to the will of the more dominant section of society, such as fathers, husbands or imams. This objectification rationalised in terms of gender and in terms of enslavement, appears in the novel to be fully sanctioned by Islam. Denied by religion the right ever to be called a 'wife', the objectification of Hasana and the other slave girl in the novel strike one as reaching a depth that the freeborn Aisha may never experience, until under closer scrutiny, we come to realise that the conditions of their lives are not very different. Just as Hasana's future is decided by the Imam in his capacity as slave owner, so also is Aisha's determined by her father. In marriage, the woman who is a mere concubine and the one who is a wife are both expected defer and to acquiesce to the demands of their husband. Recognising the similarity between the status of a wife and that of a slave, even Ghazali notes that marriage for any woman is equivalent to slavery because it places her in a situation where she has to obey her husband without restrictions.[26] When asked to describe the best kind of woman, the Prophet gave the following definition:

> The best of your women, he said, is one who rejoices when her husband looks at her, who obeys him when he commands her, and who guards his memory and his possessions when he is absent.[27]

One area where total obedience is demanded from women is that of sexual intercourse. From what we witness in Tahir's novel, just as in novels by female writers such as Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* or Bessie Head's short story *Collector of Treasures*, this is another arena where women have to struggle against being humiliated and exploited. Aware of the possibility of conflict in conjugal relations, the Prophet is again reported to have said: 'When the husband calls his wife to bed and she does not come and he spends the night offended with her, the angels keep cursing her through the night.' While the Prophet is known to have also defended the rights of women, interpretations given to sayings such as these have the unfortunate effect of placing women in a subordinate position, thereby causing them to suffer in the hands of men.

Religion therefore necessarily comes under interrogation when certain acts are inflicted upon women. In Tahir's *The Last Imam,* and also with particular poignancy in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969),[28] we find terrible examples of rape. Women's lowly status and lack of power is particularly highlighted in the novel by the Sudanese Salih as it explores the way Islam is used to buttress a variety of decisions and practices concerning them. Through the tragic story of Hosna bint Mahmoud, Tayeb Salih focuses on the consequences that can arise from such a state of affairs. Hosna bint Mahmoud, a widow with two sons is in spite of her vow not to remarry, forced by her father into marriage with the elderly Wad Rayyes.[29] The circumstances of the marriage are reported thus in the novel:

> He (her father) had given Wad Rayyes a promise – and they married her off to him. Her father swore at her and beat her; he told her she'd marry him whether she liked or not..... I talked to her father, added the leader, who said he wouldn't be made a laughing stock by people saying his daughter wouldn't listen to him. (p.122)

Here, like Aisha's father in *The Last Imam*, Mahmoud acted on the belief that the choice of a husband can be dictated by the father. 'Her father had charge of her and was free to act as he thought fit', said Majoub (p.132). But two weeks later, because Hosna adamantly refuses to consummate the marriage, Wad Rayyes resorts to rape and in that moment overcome with rage she stabs him to death before taking her own life. Members of the community alerted by the commotion arrive on the scene to find:

> Wad Rayyes was as naked as the day he was born, Bint Mahmoud too was naked apart from her torn underclothes. The red straw was swimming in blood. I raised the lamps, said Bint Majoub and I saw that every inch of Bint Mahmoud's body was covered in bites and scratches – her stomach, thighs and neck.....The nipple of one breast had been bitten through and blood poured down her lower lip. (p.27)

Similar images of violence and cruelty are depicted in Tahir's graphic account of the ordeal Aisha suffers on a 'night of terror'. After being ignored for a whole month since their wedding, Alhaji Usman 'walked in and pounced on her like a wild animal' and undeterred by her struggles, 'whines and pain and the blood' assaulted her again and again. Tahir concludes: 'She was truly hurt. She was stuck to the leaf mat, caught there by the dry cake of her own blood' (p.25).

Echoing Ghazali's view in her article on Tayeb Salih's novel, Sonia Ghattas-Soliman argues that such brutal assaults on women have nothing to do with Islam because it abhors such acts of indiscipline. According to her such acts are really a testimony of the evil and bestial nature of men who lack self-control in sexual matters. However, the community in the novel have a different opinion. As far as they are concerned Bint Mahmoud is to blame for the atrocity that has taken place, for bringing fitna (chaos) to their village. Their verdict is that she was a "hussy", "a sister of the devil", and 'a mad woman....she wasn't worth a millieme. If it wasn't for the sake of decency, she wouldn't have been worth burying.....' (p.33). Hosna is condemned because her attempt at subverting her father's decision threatens the social order they know. The only acknowledgement of what she suffered comes from Mabrouka, Wad Rayye's eldest wife:

> 'Good riddance', she said at the news of his death. When some women wanted to commiserate with her she yelled, 'Women, let everyone of you go about her business. Wad Rayyes dug his grave with his own hands, and Bint Mahmoud, God's blessings be upon her paid him in full' (p122).

Tayeb Salih does not allow his personal opinions to intrude on the narrative, but the reader is left in no doubt that he shares Mabrouka's view. As the one whose position is most threatened by her husband's remarriage, her recognition of the injustice done to

Hosna is meant to hold value for the reader. In contrast, the perspective from which Tahir chooses to handle Aisha's ordeal simply serves to redefine women's place as secondary to that of men. In spite of the pathos of the narrative when her experience is being described, concern is not for the physical and psychological consequences for Aisha, but for the damage done to Alhaji Usman's spiritual condition: 'it is not the ugliness that bothers me', says Alhaji Usman's father, 'Your action can be explained away even to yourself.....What have you lost?' (p.26)

For a while Alhaji Usman is indeed thrown off-course by this experience but what explanations can there be for the treatment he metes out to Aisha? Given to him as the 'bride of the Prophet', she certainly does not expect, nor by his own Islamic standards, deserve ill usage at his hands. Furthermore, although it is rightly suggested that the violence of that night links Aisha forever to the person who inflicted the pain on her, making her 'incapable of thinking about herself without thinking of Alhaji Usman', the narrative descends into the realms of male fantasy when this humiliating and brutal experience is transformed in her mind into something she 'always wanted and desired from him' (p.51). As Juliana Nfah-Abbeniyi notes in *Gender in African Women's Writing* (1997) it seems that male writers can only speak of women's sexuality when it can be used to give credit to his hero's male virility or in other words so long as 'the phallus both as a sexual organ of pleasure and as truncated signifier is affirmed'.[30] Tahir it seems is not an exception.

Significantly, the word 'rape' is not mentioned in connection with the obvious violence visited upon either Hosna in Tayeb Salih's novel nor Aisha in *The Last Imam*. Aidoo offers a possible explanation for this omission in *Changes*, where her own heroine Esi is also raped by her husband. According to her, 'if there is not and never was any word or phrase in that society's indigenous language which describes that idea', in this case 'marital rape',so how can writers or their fictional characters name it as such. [31] In Aidoo's novel, it is named but only because Esi's western education enables her to analyse her predicament. However, even Esi hesitates to talk about her experience to other people because in her society 'sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Anytime and at his convenience. Besides any 'sane person, especially a sane woman, would consider any other woman lucky or talented or both, who can make her husband loose his head like that' (p.12). Within the African cultural context, what happens between a husband and his wife is not considered rape. David Finkelhor and

Kersti Yllo confirm the prevalence of this view in their article in *Rape and Society* (1995)[32] where they point out that for most people, forced sex in marriage has little to do with what would be called 'real' rape. For that to happen, a stranger, a weapon, and a threat on a woman's life would have to be involved. In general, forced marital sex merely conjures up an unpleasant but not particularly serious marital squabble. But whether women involved in the experience choose to feel assaulted as Esi and Hosna do, or if like Aisha they translate the violence into something which sets them above other wives, there is no denying that it is an act of power, the domination of one person over another because coercion is involved.

Observations carried out by the anthropologist Margaret Mead support the novel's preferred reasoning that Alhaji Usman's brutal assault on Aisha is an act of vengeance directed at those who suppose him impotent. According to Mead, 'it is fairly easy for a culture to regulate the active behaviour of the human male, to stylise it, isolate it and to confine it to certain times and certain places', but, she goes on to add, 'if a culture is patterned so that a man is required to make love to a particular woman at a particular time and place then rebellion may set in'[33]. Is Aisha therefore simply a victim of her husband's revolt against his people's traditions? The novel informs us that, 'The taking away of the wife's chastity on the first nuptial night had been ritualised and had become part of the customs of the lower orders of society....' (p.23). Tradition demands that the girl proclaim her family's honour by screaming loud enough for all to hear as her virginity is being taken. The implication of this practice is that the first night becomes a public event. Yet, in spite of the Imam's abhorrence of a practice he considers a 'carry-over from the darker days', he nevertheless takes full advantage of the same in order to restore his dignity which has been dented by allegations of impotency. Patriarchal power is asserted and reaffirmed when fellow men place their hands on his shoulders and shout heartily, 'The male's male' (p.29).

If we read Islam in *The Last Imam* as a powerful patriarchal force which has successfully established itself in Bauchi society, we will also note how women and pre-Islamic traditions are aligned together by the writer against the Imam and his quest for orthodoxy. We are informed that the inhabitants of the novel like the people of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Diollobe country have been purified with the 'waters of Islam' and the religion seems to have become 'their real nature' (p.122). However, the illusion

sustained through most of the narrative that this is the people's only frame of reference is shattered when we are reminded that:

> 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. (p.121)

This passage serves as an effective prelude to one of the major conflicts in the novel. The continued existence of ancient myths and legends trigger off a fierce struggle between orthodoxy and syncretism. As among the people of Santhui-Niaye in Sembene's *White Genesis* who when faced with inexplicable situations 'sought comfort in the adda (tradition)', so also do the people of Bauchi revert to ancient beliefs to explain tragic occurrences. According to Trimmingham and Mbiti, in most African societies, illness, misfortune, and death continue to be ascribed to causes such as magic, the action of spirits or people with special powers, or as in the case of Tahir's society, with taboo breaking. In *The Last Imam*, when the cry of the hyena is heard in the vicinity of Bauchi and people start dying from excessive heat and drought, the disaster is immediately blamed on the sacrilege committed by the Imam. By abandoning Kasim into the hands of a teacher of ill repute, Malam Shuaibu, and thus breaking a promise made to a mother on her deathbed, it is believed that Alhaji Usman unleashed the malevolent powers of an ancient curse. In spite of explanations based on Quranic exegesis offered by the Imam, traditional beliefs and practices resist erasure in this community. As the novel explains, the people of Bauchi 'needed diversion like the gwauro ceremony and other rituals whose roots lay deeply buried in the long-forgotten history.....' (p.123).

This tendency towards accommodationism that Trimmingham recognises in traditional African society is severely tested by the Imam's reaction to the custom of gwauro which is usually practiced during the month of Ramadan. This time of the year is 'every discontented wife's favourite month' (p.90) because it is when husbands could be made to atone their misdeed to their wives. The culprit is festooned with the accoutrements of women's domestic work pots and pans, and paraded around the town to the sound of drumming and jeers from the crowd. Although men have been known to flee the land

because of it, the ceremony is meant to chasten those who are unable to keep their wives happy in the marital home. To bring home to him the gravity of his wifeless state such a man is accused of harbouring a desire to commit what is considered a most heinous crime in Islam, that of adultery.

Frequently, Islam and tradition appear to collude in silencing women's voices and in limiting their social influence. But in this instance where the gwauro custom is linked to the Muslim month of Ramadan, not only is 'female' work indirectly given some recognition, but women are also empowered. Seizing the opportunity presented, Aisha quickly mobilises her co-wives into staging a departure from the Imam's house. Unanimously, they declare to him, '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' (p.89). For the first time in the novel, the balance of power shifts from the Imam to his wives. The first evident sign of insecurity we witness in him is born out of this gwauro threat to his dignity and self-respect. For although 'he was doing his best to hide his emotions, it was clear that he was crying inside, dripping with despair' (p90). Not at all certain that the gwauro ritual would not be inflicted on him, he is forced for once to listen patiently to the women's grievances after which he begs their forgiveness and consents to Kasim being raised by his half-brother Malam Shuaibu.

In a society where the male is privileged, traditions which give women the upper hand are rare. Indeed there is an insistence on the part of the writer and his hero to relegate them to the irretrievable past is apparent in the way such traditions are negatively inscribed in the novel. Constructed through images of enslavement, debauchery, and idolatry, the gwauro tradition is not described in terms that the reader can identify with. The ugliness of the practice is linked metaphorically to ancestral deities: 'When the man (gwauro victim) was stood up he looked to Kasim like the pagan monk gods he had seen coming in Bauchi on Sallah and Empire day to dance their ritual dance' (p.97). Here the author makes an interesting link between tradition and western imperialism. This negative metaphorical allusion is called upon again to describe the sombre attitudes of the wives of the Imam as they await to tell him about their disgust at Kasim's behaviour. He arrives to find a 'grim circle of women sitting there like ritual carvings in a juju shrine' (p.59). Not surprisingly, the practice of gwauro inspires fear in men, not least because the stature of the gwauro is diminished from one who once had women to do his bidding to a person who becomes the laughing stock of his community.

Apart from this, as Mernissi argues, in any society that claims to be Islamic, the social order is secured only when men are in a position of command.[34] Male supremacy here has as its objective the protection of society from women's uncontrolled actions. Hence, the Imam is quick to denounce the one recourse women have and he proceeds to institute a ban on it. Furthermore, the Ghazalian theory of women as a source of fitna is given more credence when it is the son Kasim who decides to take refuge elsewhere in order to save his father from the disgrace of the gwauro.

What we find in Tahir's text is as Florence Stratton observes, a negative 'identification of women with 'petrified' cultural traditions and the allocation to male characters the role of regaining control over the historical development of the societies'.[35] In *The Last Imam,* women and tradition are represented as dragging back into the ignorant past a society that could enjoy the enlightenment offered by Islam. Certainly, having searched out an example of women's power, Tahir seems reluctant to explore further the advantage they gain through the custom of gwauro. Instead, they simply accept the Imam's apology and perhaps 'weighed down' as much by patriarchal social arrangements as by religious ideology retreat into the background.

Nonetheless this relegation of women does not diminish the fact that they are able to influence the life of the Imam and indeed the direction towards which their society moves. Indirectly through them, the community comes to realise that it is not yet ready to give up entirely its pre-Islamic traditions. This is highlighted when in spite of a reproachful community the Imam continues to pursue his goals while insisting that 'this is a Muslim Kingdom and the Word of Allah must be kept' (p199), he is soon reminded as Ezeulu is in *Arrow of God* that 'no one wins a judgement over his clan'.[36] Realising that the Imam has 'ceased to provide for what they need', the Emir is forced to unturban him and thus end the reign of Alhaji Usman.

NOTES

1. Ibrahim Tahir, *The Last Imam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). All quotations from the novel come from here.

2. Kenneth Harrow, Faces of *Islam in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991). My debt to this seminal text has already been acknowledged in my introduction to this study, however, because nothing more was offered about Tahir's novel, curiosity drove me to seek out and read it for myself. The result has been an interesting journey into the psyche of Nigerian Hausa/Fulani Muslims.

3. Kenneth Harrow, *Face of Islam*, p. 7.

4. Ahmed Sheikh Bangura, 'The Quest for Orthodoxy in The Last Imam' in *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, ed. by Kenneth Harrow (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), pp. 176-190.

5. Ako Essein 'Communicative Competence and Dialogue in Bilingual Novels: Three Nigerian Novels as Case Study' in *Goatskin Bag and Wisdom*, ed. by Ernest Emenyou (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2000), p. 188.

6. Rupert East, 'A First Essay in Imaginative African Literature', pp. 350-7. Quoted in Albert Gerard's *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Harlow: Longman, 1981).

7. Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 189.

8. Women it seems, are required by this school of thought to share the same characteristics laudable in obedient and efficient servants, well adapted and resigned to their inferior position. As we shall see later, these attributes are embodied in the person of Hasana. But in contrast to this model of feminity,

masculinity on the other hand is distinguished by the qualities of a master, of strength, determination and boldness, qualities which Alhaji Usman is certainly not lacking.

9. Fatima Mernissi in *Faces Beyond the Veil* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1983), p. 32, quotes but disagrees with Aqqad's justification that 'males in all animals are given the power – embodied in their biological structure – to compel females to yield to the demands of the instinct (that is sex)... There is no situation where that power to compel is given to women over men'. The thrust of Aqqad's argument here is that women have an innate desire and need to be conquered, overpowered and subjugated.

10. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (London: Virago Press, 1982), p. 8.

11. Ousmane Sembene, *White Genesis* and *Money Order*, Trans. by Chris Wake (London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1972), p. 10.

12. Alms marriage has been designed for the sole purpose of enabling less materially well off men to acquire a wife because the dowry is paid by her own family. This reason is however negated here since the Imam is well able to afford a wife. Not surprisingly, he is not overcome with gratitude.

13. Tafawa Balewa's Shaihu Umar more than Tahir's hero truly embodies this concept which Hiskett in his introduction to Balewa's novel describes as representing both an Islamic and Hausa ideal.

14. From Nurruddin Farah Interviewed by Armado Pajalich, Kunapipi 15, 1: pp. 61-71. In *Close Sesame*, Farah ensures he differentiates God and Nadiifa by name and sex but not by action. God's presence becomes Nadiifa when filtered through Deeriye's consciousness: 'God had returned, Nadiifa had come.' Such presence is not granted women in *The Last Imam*.

15. Ahmad Ghazali, 'Book of Marriage' in *Revivification of Religious Sciences* (Cairo: Al Maktaba Al Tijariya, Alkurba, 1964).

16. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994).

17. Fatna Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984), p.7.

18. Islam recognises that women are married for three reasons; her religion (Muslim faith), her fortune and for her beauty. The Prophet encourages believers to be guided in their choice by the first.

19. Imam Ghazali's provides one of the most detailed and comprehensive descriptions of how Islam views sex and sexuality. He starts by stressing the antagonism between sexual desire and the social order before going on to explain how it is placed in service of God.

20. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. 27-30.

21. Quran, Surah 2: 165.

22. Mernissi notes in *Beyond the Veil* (p. 48) that the institution of concubinage died out in Morocco when female slavery disappeared at the beginning of the 20th century.

23. Yamobo Ouologuem, *Bound to Violence* (London: Heinemann, 1971). This novel is often credited with delivering the final blow to Senghorian negritude, with clearing the way for a more honest literature. Soyinka approves of it because according to him it also proves that Islam which often claims indigenous antiquity is in act 'essentially hostile and negative to indigenous culture'.

24. Christopher Wise, ed., *Yambo Ouologuem, Post Colonial Writer, Islamic Militant* (Colorado USA: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1999) argues that the inherent oppositionality of Ouloguem's Sufism beliefs which seek to protect and chastise Islam from within Islam is often misunderstood by Western critics. According to him, *Bound to Violence* is not merely a condemnation of Islam but rather a criticism of Islam from within Islam in an effort to renew it from within.

25. Eileen Julien, 'Rape, Repression and the Narrative form in Le Devoir de Violence et La View et demie', in *Rape and Representation* ,ed. by Lynn A Higgins and Brenda R Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 160-181.

26. Citing the Moroccan Code of Conduct of 1957, Mernissi observes that in that Muslim society it seems that husbands owe no moral duty to their wives. That even the so-called rights of women are in fact mainly restrictions on her freedom.

27. Fatna Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, p. 36.

28. Tayneb Salih, *Seasons of Migration to the North*, (London: Heinemann, 1969).

29. Islamic law holds that no widowed or divorced woman should be contracted into marriage without her consent because she is deemed experienced enough to be able to judge the character of a future spouse for herself.

30. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbeniyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (USA: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 128.

31. Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story* (London: Women's Press, 1991), p. 12.

32. David Finkeller and Kersti Vllo 'Types of Marital Rape' in *Rape and Society: Readings on the Problem of Sexual Assault*, ed. by Patricia Searles and Ronald J Berger (USA: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 152-159.

33. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1950), p. 209.

34. See John Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). And also, J. S. Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

35. The role of the Emir in Muslim Bauchi is that of a mediator between everyday practical reality and that of the spiritual represented by the Imam. On his shoulders is the task of maintaining a balance between the two.

36. Fatima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion: Reflections on the Concept of Nushuz' in *Speaking of Faith* ed. by Diana L Eck and Devaki Jain (London: The Women's Pres, 1986), pp. 92-93.

37. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature*, p. 8.

38. Chinna Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 46.

CHAPTER FIVE

DREAMS AND THE NIGERIAN WOMAN IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S *THE STILLBORN*

Published in 1984, the same year Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* is remarkable for being the first Nigerian novel in English to be written by a female writer from an Islamic background. [1] This was followed in 1987 by *The Virtuous Woman*, a moral tale Alkali claims to have written for the benefit of young people and a collection of short stories published under the title *Cobwebs and Other Short Stories* in 1997. [2] Although in an interview with Adeola James, Alkali reveals that "'I don't feel any special responsibility towards my own culture....'", it is likely that aside from its literary value, her novel was nevertheless awarded the Association of Nigerian Author's prize because it speaks about Muslim women, a section of the Nigerian society that is rarely represented in literature. The novel remedies what is lacking in the Nigerian literary landscape not so much because it can be labelled 'authentic' having been penned by a writer who comes from the same cultural background as her characters, but because it exhibits an informed understanding of the varied influences behind the choices Muslim women make.

Maryse Conde has observed that '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'[3], all which is true of Muslim women in Nigeria whose lives have in fact elicited very little serious academic interest. Dismissed as passive and backward, and often consigned to the margins of contemporary Nigerian society, the condition of life of women from the mainly Hausa speaking Northern Nigeria has been prey to misconceptions, and more often than not, has been shrouded in silence. This neglect is all the more glaring when compared to the level of attention women from the Ibo and Yoruba ethnic groups of Eastern and Western Nigeria have received in anthropological, historical, and literary studies. It seems that anthropologists hired by the British colonial regime during the early part of the 20th Century fed a European preoccupation with the exotic past of 'pagan' African societies against which their patron's 'civilising' mission could easily be measured. Their research into the indigenous social arrangements of the Ibo and Yoruba peoples was made possible largely because among them traditional practices comparatively unaffected by foreign influences were still accessible for study. On the other hand, Muslim societies in

Northern Nigeria that had adopted Islam as far back as the 11th Century did not have the same curiosity value.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the accounts of Islamic societies in West Africa by the North African traveller and scholar Ibn Battuta, who sojourned in this part of the world in 1353-1354 as well as and those of the German Heinrich Barth who later followed in his footsteps paint pictures of communities that were highly prosperous, literate, and more advanced in many respects than the coastal people British colonialists first encountered. [4] What emerges from the descriptions of both travellers is a strongly supported belief that the development of these societies was due to the influence of the Arabic culture that West African Muslims had been exposed to, particularly when they went on pilgrimage to Mecca. However, despite obvious ethnocentricity on his part, Ibn Battuta nevertheless noted traditions and practices regarding women, marriage, and inheritance that were distinct from what obtained in Islamic societies in other parts of the world. While there was strict adherence to many Islamic precepts, African societies retained some of their own concepts, practices, and traditions especially those that had to do with the status of women. It is therefore safe to reason that the position and concerns of West African Muslim women today would to some degree continue to reflect some of these differences. Yet the general conclusion arrived at by contemporary scholars such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, is that Muslim women in Nigeria have completely discarded traditional roles and rights as well as the will to initiate compromises that will benefit their position in present day society.[5]

The point of view Zaynab Alkali subscribes to in her novel is that at any given time, a number of forces are at work in society influencing attitudes and choices of women. Hence explaining the lives of Nigerian Muslim women solely in terms of the creed they profess would be tantamount to imposing non-existent boundaries on their experiences. Before and after colonialism, Islam in West Africa has had to contend with indigenous traditions that sometimes permit actions which are against Islamic precepts. And, alongside this, western education has continued to effect changes in the social arrangements of the Nigerian people.

In *The Stillborn,* Alkali is concerns herself with the subject matter of the female presence, the strengths, weaknesses, and resourcefulness of women in a traditional/Islamic society where the interests of men seem to take precedence. This

chapter focuses on her examination of the complexities and contradictions inherent in women's situation in a multi-textured society. And in particular, her concern with the status of daughters in the parental home, the need for viable relationships between husbands and wives, and the part education plays in women's perception of themselves and their roles.

From the state of perpetual conflict that seems to exist between men and women in the novel, it would appear that Alkali participates in the struggle for equality that has concerned African feminism for some time. It is a preoccupation which Anthonia Ekpa blames on African women writers' uncritical acceptance of what she considers a western concept of a world divided along gender lines in which the male dominates all spheres of life.[6] Agreeing with Ekpa, Helen Chukuma writes:

> When feminist novels are treated, the class is polarised on gender lines and barriers of art collapse into life. The dialectics of sexism lies in the presence of only two sexes, male and female with no mediation. This means in effect, the rise of one means the subsumation of the other. The one strives to maintain its position, the other strives to change it.[7]

What both Ekpa and Chukuma find most displeasing is how some women writers become so embroiled in the battle of the sexes they end up glamorising ideas and practices that are contrary to traditional African values. In support of her view, Ekpa cites Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* as an example of how women are encouraged to abandon the traditions of their people to the extent the sacred institution of marriage is seen as one which incarcerates women. She goes on to observe with great disapproval that female characters in literature by women are increasingly given the freedom to explore their sexuality with or without male partners simply to indicate the level of independence they have achieved. Yet surprisingly, one notable exception which she does not take into account is her own countrywoman Zaynab Alkali who seems to subscribe to Catherine Achonolu's view that:

> It is impossible, almost suicidal, for African women to adopt western feminist ideologies without regard for the basic fundamental historical, cultural and ideological differences in the experiences, world-view and raison d'être of both cultures.[8]

There is no denying that Alkali may be somewhat influenced by western ideas: the fact that she adopts the novel form as well as the English language is an obvious sign of this. But the concerns raised in her novel demonstrate a keen awareness of the implications tradition and religion has on society. Her women characters never reject their world but attempt to solve their problems within it. For example, since marriage is a vital part of the cultural milieu she writes about, *The Stillborn* exhibits the profound respect normally accorded to it. In addition, this writer would like to posit that a large part of Alkali's inspiration comes from a source closer to home that is familiar to many Nigerian scholars. That is, the movement towards social change spearheaded by Usman Dan Fodio the 18th century Islamic reformer.[9] In an eloquent essay, that defends the rights of women, Dan Fodio criticised what he termed the 'oppressive customs' of married men:

> .....they fail to dress, house and feed their wives adequately, they show favouritism between one wife and another and make unwise and hasty marriages without due thought..... They revile their wives and beat them excessively... they do not educate them and if they divorce them they spread malicious tales about them thereby ruining their chances of remarriage...others refuse to divorce unhappy wives.... My goodness! All these are evidence of ignorance.[10]

The trials of the women in *The Stillborn* mirror the concerns raised in the above to a degree that suggests Alkali may have been influenced by Dan Fodio's teachings. Certainly, a sense of continuity is projected by the similarities between the experiences of women during his time and of those in the present day Nigeria Alkali writes about. Religion and tradition continue to be the most powerful determinants of women's place in society, therefore Alkali's preoccupation in her novel remains relevant. However, as I pointed out before, she is also mindful of the fact that new influences such as western education may direct the lives of contemporary women along different channels.

Set in post colonial Nigeria, the narrative of *The Stillborn* is structured around Li, a young woman whose attempts at defining a place for herself on her own terms brings her into regular conflict with her father who is depicted as the main upholder of religion in the novel, and with traditional expectations. The reader is asked to assess other characters and the happenings in the novel through her eyes while Li herself goes

through a process of personal development that spans her childhood, adolescence, maturity into womanhood and her old age (if her final dream is taken into account). We first meet Li as a young child just returned home from boarding school and witness the sowing of the first seeds of resistance against stifling male domination as she initiates various escapades in direct challenge to her father's authority. Her marriage at the tender age of fifteen to the flamboyant Habu provides Li with the means of escape from the confinement of her parental home and the constant criticism of a village community that regards her spirited behaviour as the result of being 'badly trained'.

During courtship, and the long period of waiting that she endures until she joins Habu in the city, dreams of happiness and of mutual achievements for herself and her chosen husband sustain Li. Habu would qualify as a doctor and herself a Grade I teacher and they would live 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'.[11] At this stage in her life, Li seems to be drawn to polite and middleclass notions of feminine beauty and social status. The city also represents for this young girl, an environment where usual traditional restrictions would not apply and men and women could create more fulfilling relationships. However these nascent hopes are stillborn because she finds herself physically and psychologically constrained by the non-cooperation of her husband. During the course of the narrative we see Li learning from personal disappointment as well as the trials of women closest to her, her sister Awa and her best friend Faku both whose stories run parallel to her own. From their combined experiences she learns the danger of relying on anyone but herself. As she struggles to change the course of her life, the strength, determination and resourcefulness she has exhibited since childhood come to her aid. In spite of its title the novel eventually ends on a positive note in spite of its title as Li makes a triumphant return to her father's house and to a newly acquired eminence in the affairs of her family.

According to Stewart Brown, *The Stillborn* grows out of a finely observed recreation of a culturally and religiously 'mixed village', that is akin to Alkali's own personal experience of living in northern Nigeria. [12] Instead of propagating the common myth about the entirely Islamic nature of this particular area, the novel demonstrates a firm grasp of the situation by depicting the reality of co-existence among the people who live in it, the Muslims, the Christians and those who continue to venerate ancestral gods, thus

offering a legitimate explanation for the blend of attitudes and practices we find in the novel especially regarding the level of mobility, visibility and autonomy of women.

Let us first consider the place and effect of traditional religion upon the social consciousness of the people in Alkali's novel. Although fast disappearing, this ancient faith which is represented by the compassionate figure of Li's grandfather Kaka, is seen as the natural belief system of the novel's referent society. Amidst the 'cluster of thatched mud huts' the drone of the electricity generator in the European quarter of Hill Station and the Mission Memorial Hospital, symbols of encroaching foreign elements, intrude on the rhythm of life in the unnamed village of the novel. Yet in spite of these foreign features among which the Muslim prayer house is included, ancient gods housed in a cave in nearby woods continue to exert some influence over the people. Belief in the existence an unbroken link between the past and the present as demonstrated by traditional religion's equal celebration of the major events of life and death, which is comforting for many in this society who find more harmony here than in the tensions generated by foreign forces. Accommodation of all creeds and all people seems to be the overriding principle of this old faith and the tolerance imparted by this view of life appears to invest ardent followers like Kaka with an understanding of human relations that seems to be absent in adherents of other religions. Significantly, the old belief system also enfolds within its embrace women who understand the 'language of the gods' (p. 37). The reader is informed that Kaka is especially fond of Li not only because she reminds him of his own mother after whom she is named but also because he admires her spirit. In return, the young woman respects his views and although he is neither a Christian nor a Muslim, sees him as a 'lion among men. A man without equal, the last of his kind' (p. 10).

It is a testimony of Alkali's artistic skill that although the frequent use of Islamic phrases found in other texts dealt with in this thesis is less evident in her novel, Islam nevertheless maintains a strong presence in *The Stillborn*, colouring the attitudes of one of its main characters and through him affecting the lives of others. The only references to the Islamic faith which separates its adherents from those Baba scornfully refers to as 'heathens' and 'unbelievers' are occasional mention of 'Allah', the Islamic term for God. Its obvious presence notwithstanding, the alien nature of Islam is emphasised by its unwillingness to adapt to certain traditional practices that the villagers in the novel are

accustomed to. The passage below hints at Baba's attitude towards interaction between men and women during social gatherings:

> Today was the end-of-year-festival and the village would be in a festive mood from dawn to dusk.....It had always been a joyous occasion for the healthy, the strong, the men and women of hot blood. No one would remain at home except pregnant women, the infants, the infirm and the eccentric. Li knew her household fell into the last category...But fate has its own way of dealing with things. Baba was away from the village and would not return for the next three days (p48)

Right at the beginning of the narrative when we are informed of Li's trepidation at the thought of returning home from boarding school, the focus seems to be on the repression of women in both family and society. However, Alkali appears to suggest that the symbolic and physical segregation of the sexes that is recommended by Islam cannot always be blamed for the subordination of women because even in societies that attempt a strict adherence to this kind of social arrangement, the degree to which it is practiced is determined by factors such as class, education, and particular where West African societies in particular are concerned, history and tradition.

As the main upholder of the Islamic religion in the novel, the ideas of Baba, Li's father, conflict with what normally obtains in his society. Implicit in the passage quoted above is the belief that traditional rituals involving gatherings during which public gestures of approval or displeasure can be expressed are vital for the cohesion of different elements of society. Hence, Baba's refusal to allow his daughters to participate in traditional communal activities is viewed as an aberration that could lead to the disruption of interpersonal relations. That dreaded breakdown in communication is immediately evident in his interaction with members of his own family, especially the women with whom he shares a relationship that is nothing less than acrimonious. Of Baba and his stepmother who the children refer to as Grandma, the novel says 'they shared a hatred for each other though this was thinly disguised under a veneer of polite tolerance' (p8). However, no such pretence is practised where his wife is concerned, instead he heaps abuse on her for the misdemeanours of the 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 after I have civilised you, you still behave like heathens. (p13)

Aside from the disrespect evident in the above speech, a firm belief in the superiority of Islam over traditional forms of worship is conveyed as well. Also of significance is the fact that it emerges from a mentality that sees man as being in a position to confer legitimacy on woman's relationship with God. But perhaps Baba's sense of superiority is not without a basis because in the hierarchical structure that is widely accepted by Muslims, God occupies an exclusive position at the top of a pyramidal order followed by man who has been created for the sole purpose of worshipping his maker and at the bottom of the ladder is woman, his handmaid, .

Elsewhere in this thesis I referred to Fatna Sabbah's *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* where she puts forward a convincing theory that elaborates the concept of surrender in Islamic thought and to which women's position in society can be directly linked. Islam is said to demand the complete submission of the individual to the One God and the believer is expected to dedicate his life to worshipping, obeying and abiding by the will of the Almighty. However Sabbah goes on to explain, that woman's obedience to the husband is not just a marginal device in Islam but a central element and a key law for the viability of the system. In the following she argues her point thus:

> 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 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.[13]

Where such an ordering of the sexes is accepted or taken for granted as we see in *The Stillborn* as well as in Tayeb Saheh's *Season of Migration to the North*, men then reserve the right to describe and prescribe what appropriate behaviour is for women. But their attitudes are often fraught with contradictions. Hence it is ironic that although Baba in *The Stillborn* positions himself as the head of the family who by virtue of his

male gender is naturally vested with the responsibility of moulding his family to Islamic ways, he in fact relies on the women to carry the heavier burden of that Islamic identity. Fatima Mernissi, Fatna Sabbah, Camillia Fawz El-Solh and Judy Mabro are all agreed that it is women who are charged the duty of figuring Islam's cultural 'difference'.[14] They argue that through the practice of segregation of the sexes, Islam is able to render visible the difference between those inside the religion and those outside of it and the place women occupy has been the main means of conveying this. They believe that women have therefore become the border without which Islam would not appear as such and so inadvertently, the power 'to be or not to be' has been placed in their hands. Consequently, no matter how ardently Islamic Baba himself is, he finds no satisfaction until the women in his household behave in a manner he deems appropriate for Muslims.

In The Stillborn, character of Baba is used to communicate the novel's insights into attitudes towards women which have their basis in patriarchal notions that underline both tradition and Islam. Two reasons can be given for his harshness towards his wife and daughters. One, that he is a man with a 'mad obsession with discipline' as Kaka describes him or if Fatima Mernissi's argument is taken into consideration here, that he is simply a steadfast upholder of his Islamic faith. According to Mernissi, while Islam's construction of strict social boundaries conflict with indigenous practices that allow women more freedom and influence in the family and in public life, the unfettered Muslim woman is seen as the symbol of disorder, because she has 'rampant disruptive potential that needs to be contained'.[15] Therefore in *The Stillborn,* Baba forbids his daughters from going outside the family compound except to run necessary errands but he then further 'instructed Mama never to send Li to fetch water. Awa was to go while Li did the dishes. This was because Li had always visited friends on her way to the riverside' (p.7). It could be said of Baba that by restricting his daughters' movements and possible interaction with the opposite sex he is not being dictatorial but only doing his duty as a good Muslim father.

While upon the publication of her novel *The Beggars' Strike,* Wole Soyinka and Mbye Cham on different occasions accused Aminata Sow Fall of being uncritically pro-Islamic, the same criticism cannot be extended to Alkali. Her depiction of Baba as the epitome of unmitigated prejudice which is exemplified by his contemptuous tirades against people of other faiths as well as the many strictures he heaps on his daughters,

discourage sympathy for the religion he stands for. Watching the manoeuvring between the father and his daughters, Grandma observes that, 'He is never tired of playing God with his children' (p.24). Since the superior position Baba insists on occupying makes for an uncomfortable relationship with all the women of his household it is hardly surprising that the women are correspondingly less interested in the religion he uses to justify limiting their activities. The reader is informed that so stifling is the control Baba maintains over his daughters that Li in particular suffers bouts of claustrophobia:

> After a few weeks at home, Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound suffocating. She felt trapped and unhappy. Already, she missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, free and gay. (p.3)

However before all blame for Baba's attitude towards women is laid on Islam, there is need to remember Deniz Kandiyoti's pertinent warning that just as there is no universal system of patriarchy we must not look for a universal interpretation of Islam because,

> Different systems of male dominance and their internal variations according to class and ethnicity, exercise an influence that inflects and modifies the actual practice of Islam as well as the ideological constructions of what may be regarded as properly Islamic.[16]

What the above is trying to convey is amply illustrated by a significant incident in *The Stillborn*. In one instance of rebellion against her father, Li persuades her older but more malleable sister Awa to join her in a moonlight dance in the village. This is an occasion where both sexes mix freely with each other and therefore a 'heathenish' practice by her father's standards. When reminded of this, in apparent revolt Li says to her sister; '"Let me be a heathen, I'd be much happier. At least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been"' (p.3). Baba's urgent desire to whip this defiance out of her is only checked when his son Sule confesses to being involved in the same escapade. As on other occasions when Alkali delves into the minds of her characters in order to press home a particular point, this incident triggers a train of thoughts which vividly illustrate not Baba's views on religious obligations, but in addition, thoughts on gender hierarchy that have their roots in a traditional patriarchal past:

> What worried him now was what was he to do with this man-child? He was a man now, it wasn't just his age, but what he stood for. He could beat Awa easily if she erred, no matter how old she was, but not Sule, firstborn male child. And to beat a man for going out to dance at night was outrageous. (p.23)

This is an apt representation of the kind of man Baba is because, as the critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie asserts, the traditional ideological position that men are naturally superior to women in essence and in all areas continues to permeate social structures in contemporary Nigeria. [17] Unfortunately, the same ideology prolongs attitudes of discrimination against women in spite of the egalitarian message of Islam. What happens in everyday life is that the privileges of self-autonomy and choice continue to be weighted in favour of men. Therefore to conclude here that the privileged status of the male child is used to buttress the patriarchal structure of society is not to overstate the sociological reality.

The inner strength or weakness of the women in *The Stillborn* and the extent to which they challenge male authority stems from the degree to which they have internalised these modes of perception regarding masculine privilege and notions of female subordination. But perhaps the biggest barrier in the way of the African woman is her own self-perceptions. As Ogundipe-Leslie points out, often because 'Women are shackled by their own negative self-image....Her own reactions to objective problems therefore, are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self assertive actions are needed...'.[18] Let us compare for instance, the reactions of Li and Awa when confronted with their father's anger over the moonlight dance incident. Overcoming her initial trepidation after noting her father's hesitancy when her brother Sule comes into the fray, Li 'no longer looked fidgety. Her eyes grew bold.... Sule had covered for her but Li knew very well that Sule's heroism was on his own account' because she had caught him smoking, and, 'she was not one to take any beating alone' (p23). In spite of Sule being her favourite sibling with whom she enjoys a close relationship, she is not blind to the advantages his male gender affords him and therefore dispassionately weighs the value of his support. It is her evident awareness of the unjust reasons behind the position she finds herself in which forces her father to back down. At this point, the

question that the novel intends the reader to ask because the whole premise of the narrative is based on it, is why is Li's reaction so different from that of her sister and how does it affect her standing within the family and in the society?

Although they have been raised in the same family where their parents have made vigorous attempts to inculcate similar ideas into them, the sisters nevertheless display diametrically opposed responses to male dominance which in fact echo the attitudes of the older women in the novel, Grandma and Mama. Awa's conciliatory replies to her father's inquisition not only illustrate Ogundipe-Leslie's observations about the diffident nature of some women, they also repeat a pattern of female behaviour towards men that is inherited from her mother. In *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally,* Filomena Steady asserts that motherhood is crucial to women's status in African society because 'even in patrilineal societies women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of their husband's lineage'.[19] This claim is however challenged by the experiences of the women in Alkali's novel. Whether or not they have provided their husbands with numerous offspring as Mama and Awa have done, or just the one child as in the cases of Li and Faku, all appear to be equally traumatised by their relationships with their husbands. In fact Mama exemplifies the kind of woman Ogundipe-Leslie refers to in her article, a woman who once married becomes a mere possession, voiceless, and without rights in her husband's house. She seems totally consumed by a deep sense of inferiority that is palliated only by her right to labour for her family as the reader is informed: 'The woman would go to the farm at cockcrow and won't come back until the chickens have gone to roost' (p87). Yet in spite of her notable contribution to its welfare, she lacks influence in the affairs of her family – so that even what should traditionally and Islamically accrue to her through her children is denied her. 'Even Mama's step as she walked away was mechanical', the novel says, an apt metaphor for a woman whose whole demeanour as she lives under her husband's shadow is devoid of will or the energy to struggle against the domination exerted over her.

However, in a novel that is obviously devoted to examining the condition of women's lives, an incongruous note is struck by the brevity of the narrative where this mother figure is concerned. Simply depicted as the stereotypical traditional African woman who is mired in an unchanging perception of her low status, Mama is marginalised by the author as she is by her family so that she hardly impinges on the consciousness of the

reader. The only time she speaks out directly in the novel is when she rebukes Li for her forward manner towards the master of house. This insubstantial involvement of the mother with what happens in the novel is at odds with Alkali's own stated views regarding the presence of women in African Literature. Speaking in an interview with Adeola James, she had this to say:

> I can confidently say that in African Literature, women are not even adequately presented, not to talk of being treated in one way or another. With very few exceptions, women are minor characterizations to give the story life-likeness...[20]

Yet as far as Alkali's own representation of the mother in *The Stillborn* is concerned, it could be said that she is as much at fault as the male writers she refers to above because employed merely to buttress her writer's art, the mother's subjecthood in the novel is undoubtedly denied.

Mama's presence in *The Stillborn* assumes some significance when we realise that her unquestioning meekness towards the demands of the opposite sex is passed on and repeated by a younger generation of women. Like her mother, Awa also harbours a mortal fear of Baba 'which made her humble and submissive beyond reason'. She often wonders where her sister 'Li got the nerve to look their father in the face' (p.13). The very choice of the name Awa is perhaps a deliberate indication of the kind of character Alkali intends to portray. As in Sembene's *Xala*, Awa the Muslim name of Eve (the first mother of mankind) seems to be reserved for those women who act out scriptural attitudes of self-sacrifice that have become entrenched in traditional perceptions of women's character. With more maturity, it seems to Li as she watches her older sister work tirelessly for the welfare of the family that 'this was another person who had given her life for the happiness of others' (p.102). Like Ladi in Alkali's other novel, *The Virtuous* Woman, Awa projects dutiful conformity with societal expectations both in her own behaviour and the advice she gives Li when she later hears of Habu's neglect and betrayal; 'every woman needs a man, if only to mend the fence' (p68), she reminds Li in a bid to get her to reconsider the marriage proposal of the rich but unscrupulous Alhaji Bature, who chased after her when she returns to the village a woman abandoned by her husband.

Outwardly, Awa like her mother appears satisfied with the role delineated for her by tradition and religion, a stance that leads them both to view members of their own sex who desire change as problematic. They see alternative ways of coping with their situations as a betrayal of traditions, which will simply result in a confusion of women's roles. Not surprisingly, Li's open demonstration of her interest in Habu during their courtship period elicits a shocked response from Awa because it is a departure from the norm in this community where women are expected to bottle up their feelings rather than take the initiative where their relationship with men is concerned. Hence Awa herself dissembles in her reception of Dan Faima's advances:

> She was playing to the tune of a traditional courtship. A woman was not supposed to show interest in a man on their first meeting. His seriousness would only be determined by how well he took a rebuff and how persistently he pursued his woman (p18).

The authorial voice is loud and clear here in spite of its attempt to remain objective and simply provide the reader with an insight into the cultural background of the character. More often than not, Alkali's prose attempts to weave into its style – it works by implications rather than by direct references, the subtle nuances in the motivations which drive her characters. For instance, Awa's desire to observe the traditional etiquette for courtship which allows women to dictate the pace of the ritual arises not from mere obedience to tradition, but rather derives from a need to subvert even if temporarily the balance of power between the sexes. In answer to Habu's polite words at the end of his first encounter with the sisters, "may we live to see tomorrow girls. Greet your people for me", the normally timid Awa is withering in her reply, "Uhmmm....see who is sending his greetings to my people". But her enjoyment of gaining the upper hand for once in her life lacks depth or scope as she sees her own marriage to the popular Dan Faima as a reward for her 'goodness'. Respectful to his elders and deeply conscious of his duties as a provider which he had already demonstrated in his care of his deceased wife, the young headmaster is a paragon of all the virtues the villagers value in a husband and this is what recommends him highly to Awa.

While a shared acceptance of the roles and status that tradition ascribes men and women lends the pairing of Awa and Dan Faima a sense of inevitability, unfortunately

therein also lies the tragedy of their lives. As their society evolves from a feudal communal one to 'modern' postcolonial Nigeria with all its attendant implications, such insistence on static gender roles has a debilitating effect on male/female relationships. When developments overtake the village they reside in, and Dan Faima loses his job as headmaster to another man with better qualifications, he immediately perceives this as an assault on his traditional and sacred role as provider for his family, a position he believes he has sole right to because of his gender. Overwhelmed by this blow to his male ego he takes to drink thereby compounding his disgrace in the eyes of the villagers. Yet in spite of this drastic alteration in her husband, Awa continues to maintain her roles of wife and mother dutifully producing a child every year even when they are fathered as she says in a moment of bitterness, by the 'chief alcoholic'. For a woman who once declared 'I have always wanted to do something big in the village', she gives in completely to traditional ideas of a woman's primary role and place just as her husband is trapped by ancient notions of manhood. As far as Awa is concerned, there is no escape from a woman's duty. Thus, as she shares the burden of raising the young children with her mother, her attitude is that men can break down but women must learn to cope with whatever is thrown at them, and at the same time in so doing, sustains the double standard that is the bane of women's lives.

Through her depiction of Awa's compliant nature and the fact that she does not take recourse in the provisions set out for her benefit in Islam, Alkali ensures that she is seen as a willing victim of her circumstances. Though neither she nor Dan Faima hanker after the modern lifestyle which Li so desires, their lives are nevertheless affected by urban trends which infiltrate their village. Awa should have taken notice of her own prediction that 'the city will come to us' and be prepared to be more adaptable in her views because by the end of the novel, the way of life both she and Li had previously known is in the process of being replaced. In the new dispensation, both tradition and religion would have to accommodate alien influences that are already becoming physically manifest in the village:

> The main street was lighted by the numerous kerosene lamps and mini gas generators from the rich houses. She moved slowly among the throng of busy people, hawkers of all kinds of wares, idlers and streetwalkers. On each side of the street, shops, kiosks and stalls were springing up. Li also observed with sadness that the front yards of elders

> and ward heads, that used to serve as recreation centres for yelling children were now commercial centres for petty traders. The days of dancing, singing and holding hands under the watchful eyes of the full moon were over. (p.94)

The Stillborn certainly makes its strongest impact on the reader when it represents women who refuse to buckle under the combined pressure of traditional and religious demands which conspire to limit their activities or the full utilisation of their intellectual capacities. Catherine Achonolu observes, '*The Stillborn* is essentially a vehement registration of a feminist discontent, which is at once dynamic, fiercely radical, positively revolutionary and progressive'[21]. Desiring to also highlight women characters whose response to the diverse situations they are faced with is strong, courageous and opposite of Mama's and Awa's, Alkali introduces Grandma to the narrative. Other representations of the grandmother figure in African fiction, notably Nyankinyua in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and old Niakoro in Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* seem to be based on anthropological and folklorist ideas of her as the repository of traditional and family wisdom and the communicator of values. When more dynamic roles are ascribed to her, it is usually as tribute to her contribution in struggles against colonialism and the forces of capitalism. Deviation from this norm is only found in the fiction of African women writers like Ama Ata Aidoo and Zaynab Alkali who are more interested in the grandmother's life, choices, and the qualities she possess which help to clarify issues of female struggle or rebellion.

Of Grandma in *The Stillborn*, Adeola James notes that 'she has a vibrancy that is unique in African literature'.[22] This is entirely due to the fact that Alkali's portrayal takes into account the old woman's personal dilemmas and struggles not against external forces, but against intimate adversaries such as fathers, husbands and sons. This perspective supports Paula Gidding's claim that black women as writers and as characters tend to look within themselves while their male counterparts concentrate on the external forces that shape their lives. [23] In her article which is included in the critical text *Ngambika*: *Studies of Women African Literature* (1986), Mildred Hill-Lubin rightly asserts that the grandmother provides a useful example for other women because, 'she has participated in kindred subjugating experiences and has survived'. [24] These older women, hardened by time and circumstances, have looked life directly in the face and have not wavered. It is they who speak the language of perseverance and survival, to

younger generations of women. As a model of and for female assertion, Grandma in *The Stillborn* provides a response to that poignant cry uttered by Anowa in Aidoo's play of the same name:

> Someone should have taught me how to grow up to be a woman. I hear in other lands a woman is nothing. And they let her know this from the day of her birth. But here, O my Spirit Mother, they let a girl grow up as she pleases until she is married. And then, she is like any woman anywhere: in order for her man to be a man, she must not think, she must not talk.[25]

In asserting their own choices of how to be women both Anowa and Li reject their mothers' ways of life. However another example of female behaviour they have in front of them are their grandmothers. Like her husband Kaka, Grandma recognises and applauds Li's spirit of independence in spite of the fact that her attempts at camaraderie are rebuffed by the young girl. Although Li is not immediately aware of it, she has much in common with the old woman who has mastered the art of how to be an individual, survive criticism, and perhaps even thrive on it in a society that demands conformity with its expectations of women. The reader is informed that 'Li liked her funny stories but disliked her dirty habits and foul language' (p.8). However, language is a well-honed tool that Grandma employs in retaliation to the threat of male physical violence that is regularly issued to the women in *The Stillborn*. The incident involving Baba and his daughters has already been mentioned, but there is also the time when the seemingly gentle Kaka warns his wife: 'Next time anything happens in my absence you scrub that dirty face well before I come in, or else I will scrub it for you' (p.27). As Shirley Ardener rightly points out that when talking about 'oppression' or 'suppression' in the relationship between men and women we must remember the part played by the discrepancy in the muscle power of the sexes. [26] Although Alkali alludes to this indirectly it seems that in the case of Kaka once the superiority of the male sex has been established, the need to exercise it may no longer exist instead, he allows the threat of physical violence to hang over his wife like the sword of Damocles of Greek legend.

Indeed, in Alkali's novel, other damaging methods are used more actively to subdue contentious women. Here a woman who refuses to succumb to its rules can in

retaliation be castigated and treated like a malevolent presence. Hence, because the witch is seen as the most deliberate violator of social norms, everyone from her own immediate family to the villagers accuse Grandma of being one. The society appears to move with ease between ancient theories of perverted feminine power and the Islamic religion they profess without radical changes in its attitudes towards women. This is possible because as indicated in a Chapter titled *Al-Falaq* (The Daybreak) in the Quran, the latter retains a certain awareness of the subversive power of witches. In the fourth verse of this particular chapter, the believer is encouraged to seek refuge in God from 'the mischief of those who practise secret arts'.[27] According to Abdullahi Yusuf Ali, the renowned translator and commentator of the Quran, this refers to the feminine identity of those who practice witchcraft but he carefully goes on to explain that chapter is actually intended to warn against the danger of believing in superstition and the need to avoid it whenever possible.[28] Unfortunately, the same is often interpreted by those who retain traditional ideas in their memory as Islam's acknowledgement of the existence of witches and the efficacy of their spells and potions. But perhaps more to the point here is Carole Boyce Davies points out, if the witch appears wicked it is simply because such a woman poses a real danger to patriarchal society. This is distinctly illustrated by the reaction which greets this outburst from Grandma:

> Listen to my words. I was married fourteen times in the eastern part of this land. I left for this part because I could find no lion among them. The village was filled with red monkeys, black monkeys, jungle pigs, wild cats, toothless dogs and lame cocks. Did I know, gods of my fathers that I was coming to meet a worse pack? This village is full of lizards, snakes, worms and by the gods of my ancestors, cold slippery fish'. She bellows with laughter. 'And the women? A pack of domestic donkeys with no shame, when they are not under the whip of their wizard husbands, they are busy plotting witchcraft' (p53)

Grandma's ability to voice her opinions the way she does contradicts the stereotype of male power and female impotence favoured by Western discussions of African/Muslim women. She speaks the language of a defiant woman who would rather run the risk of being labelled a witch or a troublesome woman than submit to the coercive tactics of male gender oppression. As Trinha Minha points out, 'an enunciation is only defined in relationship to its verbal surroundings'.[30] Therefore, the derogatory terms Grandma

employs in her criticism of the hypnotic influence men seem to exercise over women and women's own culpability in the situation inspires great dismay in those who listen to her because they are taken from within a social context that is familiar to them.

On the occasion of the above speech, such is the power of her words 'the men went about their business nervously, not daring to walk in the old woman's direction' (p53). Their natural wariness of female rebellion that has the potential of overturning a social system that privileges them especially when the rules of marriage, traditional and Islamic, are contravened by Grandma's absolute refusal to be part of a polygamous arrangement is skilfully captured in the novel. 'She drove three other wives from the compound', the reader is informed, and as if this is not enough, adamantly refused Kaka's several attempts to divorce her. Such an unapologetic resistance to polygamy is rarely recorded in fiction because the practice is usually treated as the norm in African society. Contrary to what the critic Femi Ojo-Ade sees as the misguided campaign of western educated women, Grandma in *The Stillborn*, Aisha in *The Last Imam*, and Lolli in *The Beggars Strike* have not been exposed to 'alien' views, yet they provide some of the most indignant female rejection of polygamy found in African fiction. In all three cases, the vehemence of their objections is not caused by harsh treatment they receive from their husbands but is provoked by the apparent injustice of a situation where their spouses have the right of choice that is denied them. Certainly, as a woman who has no 'feminine' fear of appearing aggressive in making her demands known, Grandma in *The Stillborn* is unrivalled. However, Alkali's attempt to trace the sense of power Grandma is imbued with to a position she once held as priestess of the old religion is wholly unconvincing as it is only mentioned in a passing reference. Instead, her personal strength seems to emanate from a rather clear-sighted understanding of how social injustice is perpetrated under the guise of gender differentiation, tradition, and what is regarded as proper Islamic conduct.

As far as Alkali is concerned, subversive action by women is not only inspired by examples they have before them or how much they are conditioned to certain responses by either tradition or religion, but depends to a great extent on the mettle of their characters. What Seiyifa Karoye terms the 'ascetic feminist vision' of Zaynab Alkali is conveyed through the character of her main protagonist. [31] She therefore goes to great lengths to emphasise how exceptional her heroine Li is in order to convince the reader of her capacity to pioneer a new direction for women. For instance the very

manner of Li's birth communicates the advent of a breed of women who will transcend present reality and reach greater heights. The reader is told that 'she came with the bag of water intact' neither did she cry like a 'normal' child (p.6). Her hair was kinky like an adult's; her ears seemed to have no holes in them, while her eyes were like old Yakumba's. These physical manifestations bespeak not only an unusual appearance but also a uniqueness of outlook. Even her name Li, an abbreviation for Libira (needle) which is meant to describe her slender frame, hints at a penetrative intellect that will upset those who prefer women to be of a soft amenable disposition. For example, the last words on the matter of Manu's impotence whose story is examined later in this discussion is spoken by Li when she observes 'How can it be that the hunchback is a man like Habu and my grandfather?' (p.55). This same readiness to ask questions would pit her against the people around her. Yet hers is a pertinent question in the traditional Islamic culture she lives in where identity and status is foremost dependent on one's sex. Left unanswered as it is in the novel, the reader is invited to interact with the text regarding the implications for women.

Central to Alkali's purpose in *The Stillborn* is the way Li's sense of self is constructed and impacted upon by her relationship with her father is because it establishes a precedence and motive for the girl's actions in adulthood. When at the tender age of eleven Li predicted a disaster that came to pass, in the manner typical of her father's attitude towards the women of his household, he dismissed her fear with 'undisguised irritation'. But after the building where he attended a meeting collapsed with the loss of many lives just as it happened in her dream, his position as the all-knowing male figure of authority is challenged. This incident which is told retrospectively questions patriarchal ideas of the innate superiority of the male and the notion that men are in sole control of society's future. It also establishes two facts for Li, one that her father did not have a monopoly over truth, and second, that the power which comes with the ability to predict the future is not acceptable in a woman because it threatens the status quo. From this point onwards, Li's ability to strip off the various guises under which the subordination of women is paraded arouses a deep antagonism in her father that lasts until his death. The clash of wills between father and daughter is represented vividly in the following paragraph:

> Baba stared back with growing irritation. Suddenly, the irritation turned into anger and he trembled. Li had the power to stir such emotions in him.

> He thought she was impudent, but it was something else. He hated to stripped him naked and saw through his soul, assessing, judging and condemning him, weighing his strength against his weakness. They were no child's eyes (p.9).

Both tradition and Islam would have Li retreat from the paternal gaze in acknowledgement of his authority. Her refusal to do so is therefore immediately recognised as subversion of the rules that underline this society. Not only do the visionary qualities of Alkali's heroine set her above other women in the novel, but are also pertinent to the structure of the narrative. As Stewart Brown notes correctly that 'dreams are an important element of the story for they show Li and the reader pictures of the future and their occurrence always mark a turning point in the plot.'[31] This ability to see the future through the medium of dreams is according to J S Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy*, closely connected to the world of traditional beliefs, which in spite of the presence of Islam, Christianity, or western education continues to retain a firm grip on African societies. Mbiti points out that many African people do not always distinguish between witchcraft, sorcery, the evil eye, or other methods of employing mystical powers, all are simply held in awe.[32] Hence Li's gift is feared and disapproved of by her father because of its supernatural potential as well as because of the advantage it gives her over him. In a similar manner, in Ama Ata Aidoo's play, Anowa's visions of slavery and the foreknowledge it gives her of the consequences to be suffered by her people gives her a power her husband Kofi is uncomfortable with. However while this ability is given prominence in *The Stillborn*, Alkali carefully resists the temptation to glorify it as an aspect of African tradition, preferring instead to treat it as an integral part of her heroine's psyche from which she draws strength and confidence. Thus not only do the dreams propel Li through the different stages of her life, but each time they seem to help her redefine her sense of self and her personal goals so that by the end of the novel we see a woman who has grown from a seemingly rebellious child in constant conflict with the men in her life to one who is compassionate, in better control of her life, and an example to other women.

In order to highlight the problems women encounter in the adult part of their lives, the marital home like the parental one is also deliberately constructed as a site of gendered subordination. Tradition and Islam seems to collude with each other to perpetuate the idea that in order for women to gain in esteem they have to enter into marriage. In *So*

Long a Letter and *The Last Imam* the relevance and sanctity of marriage is constantly alluded to but the non-verbalised expectation that women will go into it that is found in *The Stillborn* is all the more forceful for being unspoken. The novel seems to work from the premise that nothing affects the female personality like marriage hence how they cope with this aspect of their lives is of great concern for Alkali.

Consequently, the women in *The Stillborn* are meticulously represented as striving to survive within marriage in spite of the obstacles they encounter in the form of masculine behaviour that clings fiercely to ancient notions of manhood, as well as traditions which allow men to deport themselves as they please while women are tightly confined to a regimented code of behaviour. Aside from viewing it as a convenient means of escape from stifling parental control, all the young women in the novel aspire to the marital state because they have internalised their society's preference for it. Appropriately, their acceptance of what is expected of them is expressed in hopes for marital relationships that remain true to customary gender roles. Before her wedding, Li 'yearned to be in her husband's house. She would cook his meals, wash his clothes and cuddle him to her breasts' (p.6). Implicit in this is an expectation that in return her husband would provide her with emotional and material support.

However, in due course all the women are forced to change their ideas about marriage. While at first Awa is represented as the one who is more traditional in her approach to marriage, and Li more likely to baulk at the same, by the end of the novel the younger sister emerges as a strong supporter of the institution. The comparisons thus offered by the sisters like the one provided by Ramatoulaye and Assatou in *So Long a Letter*, demonstrate possible outcomes of different female perceptions and actions. While some women become embittered by their experiences as is Awa, and give up on the institution, others who are more resourceful refuse to be swamped by the challenges it poses and work to remould it to suit their individual needs.

Cautioning against totalising presumptions about people of the same faith regardless of the peculiarity of their cultural backgrounds, the absence of arranged marriages in *The Stillborn* challenges one of the most widely accepted notions about the lives of Muslim women. Similarly, neither monogamy nor polygamy is considered a precondition or recipe for happiness in the novel. The prevailing attitude towards polygamy is summed up by Faku who declares that if her husband 'could afford to feed a dozen wives who

was she to object'. Such a view leans towards the more pragmatic traditional approach to the union of the sexes rather than the romantic concept espoused by the more highly educated women in Mariama Ba's novel, or the all consuming passion of Aisha in *The Last Imam*. Only on this issue are the three men cast opposite Li, Awa, and Faku allowed to express individual opinions as Alkali carefully acknowledges that not all men are in favour of polygamy. In one of those moments in *The Stillborn* when the reader is made privy to the thoughts of the characters, Dan Faima's position is revealed: 'But as for marrying more than one wife, the idea had never occurred to him. He didn't consider himself a suitable candidate for polygamy' (p.46). Clearly, even when there is opportunity to practice it, some men are less disposed to plural marriages, recognising the need for certain qualities if they are to make a success of it. Habu's belief that it is not possible to love more than one woman at a time is confirmed by his own behaviour later on when he neglects Li for another woman.

Throughout the novel, Alkali handles the women's awareness of their predicament with considerable artistic skill. For instance, halfway through the narrative a neighbourly conflict is used as a platform for recounting a past incident in order to reveal the lessons embedded in it for all. Told against the background of communal disapproval of Grandma's outspokenness when she launched into her stinging verbal attack on the villagers, the story about the plight of a woman confronted with the problem of her husband's impotence returns yet again to one of the most difficult obstacle women have to overcome. That is, the self-policing world of women which persuades them that the very values which oppress them are coterminous with their identity as women. Since women themselves are often involved in perpetuating hegemonic discourses of femininity that values them only in terms of their productivity as childbearers and as labourers; Alkali can legitimately write that all the villagers, male and female, approved Manu's declaration that he had nothing to offer his wife except hard work. Because, 'that was good enough for them' where women are concerned. When Manu's impotence eventually comes to light, there was no recognition of the injustice done to his young wife who through no fault of her own suffered the ridicule meted out to infertile women. Rather, 'They regretted asking deep questions. Without meaning to, they had stripped their clansman naked for all eyes to feast on' (p.55). It is therefore a courageous woman who refuses like the young bride does in the tale above to accept the role of sacrificial lamb that is expected of her. It is also to the credit of this young

woman and her creator that they had the foresight to couch her complaint in a manner that is traditionally appropriate:

> My blood is hot, but my flesh is famished,
> I fear I will burn to ashes.
> The rains have come, the field is prepared,
> But my field remains untilled.
> Do not ask me to stay, my clanspeople.
> Who can stand the sneaking whispers of the wicked market women?
> Who can avoid the mocking looks of the age group?
> Who would rebuke the innocent children when they call me barren?
> Who, indeed, can stop the wagging tongues of my enemies in the dancing arena?
> Age-mates of my father,
> Have you an answer to my plight? (p.54)

The use of the device of the song above to articulate the young woman's difficult position achieves two goals. First, it mediates a way around the reserve that is expected of women on such a delicate matter, and second, it maintains her right to speak of her problems. The message of the song is clear and unavoidable no matter how much the villagers would like to ignore it as predictably 'the elders with downcast eyes, had started leaving one by one even before she had finished' (p.54). This brief tale of courage, resourcefulness, and self-help encapsulates the writer's ardent wish that women take the initiative in negotiating the course of their lives rather than allow themselves captives of tradition. Because while tradition may serve as a tried and tested guide of a people, it is also flawed in its treatment of certain members of society.

This evocative tale is placed strategically in the middle of the text acts as a bridge between the formative years of the heroine's childhood and her adult life when she assumes responsibility for her own life. The next chapter immediately brings the reader up to date with the happenings of the last four years, time during which although married to Habu, Li is left to her own devices in the village while he works, not as a doctor as they had planned, but as a salesman in the city. At first, her patience and loyalty as she resists advances from unscrupulous men wins her the sympathy of the villagers, but in time this turns to ridicule when on the other hand her sister Awa's

fecundity is displayed repeatedly. After a brief period of living with Habu in the city and enduring a marriage that is only consummated we are told in a moment of 'drunken intimacy', Li decides to return to the village. But then she suffers further humiliation when Habu neither comes for her nor acknowledges the birth of his daughter Shuwa, or to console the family on Baba's death. The estrangement between husband and wife is at once placed on a serious level because his non-action in the events of a birth and a death is seen as the ultimate insult a man can bestow on his wife, since it proclaims to the world at large just how little he values her.

The rigidity of social expectations where women are concerned and the double standards in operation in this society are skilfully captured in the novel's examination of Li's and Habu's marriage. Interestingly, her interpretation of Habu's neglect as signifying the end of their marriage and her consequent behaviour as a free woman strikes a discordant note with the villagers who see not a positive resilience in her actions, but contempt for their code for feminine conduct. Here, it is not for women to take the initiative in such matters, but whether this rule comes from Islam or tradition is not clearly stated in the novel. However a sense of the unrelenting scrutiny women are constantly under and the swift condemnation meted out to them when they depart from the norm is imparted in the following paragraph:

> In fact she felt greatly flattered that she could still command a man's attention after Habu's rejection. She began to dress extravagantly and to frequent cultural dances and festivals. The flow of suitors increased and her name began to come easily to men's lips. She had reached the peak of her womanhood and was overwhelmed by her own popularity. Everybody could see the direction Li was heading except her; in her new glory she was oblivious to everything (p.83).

By flaunting herself to such an extent that public attention is turned on her person, Li commits the cardinal sin of immodesty. Seen as running amok, she is variously described as the 'unsaddled horse' and 'the vulture that isn't anybody's chicken'. Abuse and harassment eventually drives her into seclusion in the family home. What happens to Li seems to confirm Mernissi's argument that the 'unfettered' woman is viewed as a threat to order in Muslim society. Clearly, as a woman who dares to leave her husband to occupy an indistinct zone without the definite boundaries circumscribed by male

authority in her life, Alkali's heroine falls outside normative paradigms and is therefore severely punished.

Society's insistence on women's conformity is further exposed in Faku's poignant story. Having grown up without a father in a society where women are identified by their male kin, this young woman's sense of identity is very much battered causing her to desperately want 'any man that would claim relation with her' (p.99). Driven by such a desire it is hardly surprising to find her plunging into an unsuitable marital union with the first man to ask for her hand in marriage. However what is supposed to confer on her the respected status of wife while at the same time distancing her from the stigma of witchcraft her mother is branded with simply because she lost her husband and two sons in a freak accident brings nothing but misery for Faku.

The novel attempts to pinpoint exactly what puts Faku at a disadvantage in her marriage to Garba. We are told that she is not averse to sharing her husband, yet her harshest criticism of her unhappy marriage is directed at her co-wife whom she complains of behaving like the mother and master of the house. However, she does not as some younger wives have been known to do dispute these positions with her, perhaps conceding that the senior wife has the greater right in this marital setup. That Faku chooses to exercise the deference traditionally accorded to the first wife rather than demand the equal rights Islam grants all wives within polygamy points to the beliefs that most influence her perceptions and behaviour. [34] For a while we fear that like Mama and Awa she will immolate herself on the altar of marriage. Six years later when they meet again, Li is shocked to find that the plump village girl she used to know has now become a thin haggard woman who appears to be 'famished in body and no doubt famished in soul' (p.77). Years of living under the rule of Garba's first wife whose firm grasp on the domestic reins precludes any intrusion by a third party, have undoubtedly taken their toll on Faku. Yet in spite of her suffering, a deep sense of shame about the true nature of her marriage drives her into maintaining a facade of happiness even in front of her best friend. Uppermost in her mind is the fear that her unfortunate situation would simply be exacerbated by the scorn of the villagers was she to return to her mother's home. She therefore bids Li, '"Go to the village and when you get there, say this from me to my mother. The land is still brown and unyielding. Not until it is covered with green will I come to the village"' (p.80).

The imagery of marriage being like a piece of land that needs to be tilled in order for it to produce fruit is repeated in one of Li's dreams which confirms for her the bitter futility of Faku's marriage

> Li woke up, disturbed, but soon fell asleep again. This time she was crossing a desert land and saw from a distance the shape of a woman tilling the land. As she moved closer, the shape became that of Faku. She tilled with all her strength, but the land was dry and remained unyielding. The dust that rose enveloped her until she was one with the earth. Li stopped and watched her for some time. At last she said 'The land is no good Faku. It is barren. You are wasting your energy for nothing'. But Faku did not pay attention to her. She continued to till desperately. Li turned and left her friend still tilling. (p.80)

The images of ruin, despair, and abandonment conjured up in Li's dreams caution against placing too much reliance on husbands. Eventually, Faku does divorce Garba but any hopes of remarriage she may have entertained are ruined by the malicious tales of prostitution he spreads about her. On hearing this news, Awa sadly lament their shattered illusions: 'None of our dreams seem to have come true, not even Faku. I learnt the world has collapsed on her head' (p.93). So desperately did all three women want their romantic illusions to come true they had chosen to ignore the other voice of their people that is audible in the adage 'a woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan' (p.85).

Seyifa Karoye notes that the loss of her father seems to strike Li with far less force than the living death marriage turned out to be for Faku. Contradicting Adetayo Alabi's view that Li has passively accepted her lot, Karoye observes that this is 'the point at which the spirit of independence she has shown since childhood assumes the form of a steely, feminist determination to rely not on a husband but on herself for the fulfilment of her dreams'.[35] The decision Li arrives at to leave the village after her estrangement from Habu and train to become a teacher may on the hand seem merely a balm for the matrimonial wounds she suffers, but it is also an act of reclaiming an aspiration she had set aside for marriage. As Filomena Steady once wrote, 'True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and the determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of the black women in Africa ... have developed these characteristics,

though not always by choice'.[35] This describes exactly both Li's and Faku's phoenix-like rise from the ashes of their marital disappointments. By the end of the novel Faku returns to the village a confident career woman who as a social worker is not only in control of her own life but in a position to help others.

The profound attitudinal change the villagers in *The Stillborn* undergo when Li also returns, can be linked to Audrey Smock's claims about the effects modern education has had on the structures of transitional societies such as the Nigerian one.[36] Like Ogundipe-Leslie she believes that different rules and standards are applied to educated and uneducated women. For one, the connection between education and waged employment provides the better-educated woman with more options because she is potentially able to support herself, contribute to the resources of the family and therefore exercise greater influence. Also like Buchi Emecheta whose heroine in *Second Class Citizen* (1975) forces her way into the classroom to procure for herself an education and thereby pave the way for better opportunities, Alkali uses education to bring about the triumph of her women characters. Certainly in *The Stillborn,* when Li returns for her beloved Grandfather's funeral she is held in higher esteem than before mainly because of her recently acquired economic strength. The accolade Awa bestows on her clearly defines her sister's new status: "You are the man of the house now", she tells Li as the assembled mourners await directions. Since assuming responsibility for the material welfare of others is considered a commendable task for anyone to take on, the villagers change their opinion of Li's character and pay their respects to her in acknowledgement of her new role in the fortunes of her family.

Indeed by exploring the dynamics of modern Nigerian society and using it to construct an eminent position for her heroine Alkali is able to challenge the prevailing patriarchal belief that the destiny of the family and by extension of society resides in men alone. There is subtle irony in her representation of the favoured son Sule in whom Baba had invested all his hopes choosing to abandon both father and home so that it falls on the undervalued daughter to take up the mantle of leadership in the family.

Earlier in the novel, the bewilderment caused by the impact of modernity in the form of urban trends such as men and women taking on roles previously exclusive to the opposite sex is documented in the conversation of a group of villagers. Their comments then provided an overview of their community's stance on 'alien' ways that filter into the

village. In like manner, their present acceptance of role reversal reminds us that traditions inscribed in common memory are not as static as they are often rendered, but are mutable and in flux just like their identities. This willingness to participate in changing tradition is where Li differs most from other women in the novel.

Several examples of how tradition describes women's behaviour and status have been examined in detail in this analysis of *The Stillborn,* but it must be noted that some of the more important decisions the women make recall us to the influence Islam exerts on them. From Ngone war Thiandum in *White Genesis* to Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* Muslim women demonstrate a reluctance to defy the tenets of their religion. The same is discernible in Alkali's heroine. On closer examination, the most important role Islam delineates for women, that is, the nurturing one is not subverted by her decision to pursue her ambition to become a teacher. Furthermore, by returning to higher education she retains her 'virtue' as a Muslim woman because the training college provides the kind of custodial care Islam deems necessary for the protection of women. Kept out of sight, and her interaction with the opposite sex limited by the presence of a guard at the gates, Li's chosen course of action does not deviate very far from what Islam prescribes for her.

But most important of all, the conclusion towards which the narrative of *The Stillborn* is directed becomes apparent when it does not end at the point of Li's triumphant return to the village. Rather, Alkali goes on to write: 'Li ought to have felt fulfilled but instead she felt empty. It wasn't just the emptiness of bereavement but an emptiness that went beyond that' (p102). The reader is left to wander about where this discontent springs from? Has she not triumphed over those who once denigrated her particularly the husband who had so humiliated her? We are told in retrospect that he visited her several times at college begging her to return to him but she had stood firm, acquired her teaching certificate and in so doing salvaged her dignity. Now an independent woman of thirty-three, she suddenly announces to her amazed sister her intention of attempting married life with Habu again. Crippled from a terrible car accident and abandoned by the other woman he neglected Li for; he is now a different man from the one she had married. And as far as Awa is concerned, being broken in body and spirit he has even less to offer Li. Hence her utter bewilderment when she questions her sister's motives:

'Why Li? The man is lame', said the sister. 'We are all lame, daughter of my mother. But this is not the time to crawl. It is time to learn to walk again." "So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way?' Awa asked.
'No', answered Li.
'What then, you want to walk behind and arrest his fall?'
'No. I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk'.
'May the gods of our ancestors guide you,' Awa said.
'May the good God guide us all,' replied Li. (p.105)

The novel ends clearly advocating neither the supremacy of one sex nor the submergence of the other but suggesting instead partnership between men and women. While it expresses the writer's optimism about the future this ending also validates and reaffirms something Alkali has never doubted for one moment and what Islam totally approves of, that is, the institution of marriage. The most important message of the novel is conveyed in the last dream in the novel which coincides with her old age, a time of turning inward, when Li speaks to her great-granddaughter on the eve of her wedding and passes the wisdom gained to another generation of women:

> It is well to dream child.....Everybody does, and as long as we live, we shall continue to dream. But it is also important to remember that like babies dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn. (p.104)

Through the metaphor of its title, the novel calls upon women to purge themselves of romantic illusions. It is as much a warning against the false consciousness that they induce in women as it is a rallying call for them to have confidence in their own abilities to construct the kind of lives they want.

NOTES

1. Although Nigerian female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Adaora Lily Ulasi and Buchi Emecheta were one of the first women writers to arrive on the African literary scene, the output by those such as Alkali who came from Muslim backgrounds has been almost non-existent. See Chapter Two for reasons for this state of affairs.

2. Alkali was awarded the prestigious Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Prize for fiction for *The Stillborn* in 1985. Other contributions from her include *The Virtuous Woman* (Nigeria: Longman, 1987) a moralistic tale which she claims to have written for the edification of adolescents and a collection of short stories published under the title *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1997).

3. Maryse Conde, 'Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot' in *Presence Africaine* 82 (2nd Quarter, 1972), p. 132.

4. *Ibn Batutah – Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, translated and selected by HAR Gibb (London: DARF Publishers Ltd, 1983), p. 321. In his histories, Ibn Batutah demonstrated an ability to select the essential and give that touch of the intimate to the people and places he wrote about to make them live again for the reader.

5. See Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994). This is the claim Ogundipe-Leslie seems to be making in the chapter titled 'Women in Nigeria' although she allows that in spite of the practice of purdah among the Hausa in Islamic northern Nigeria, women retain some of the economic independence they had known before Islam.

6. Anthonia Ekpa, 'Beyond Gender', Warfare and Western Ideologies: African Feminism for the 21st Century' in *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical*

Perspectives on African Literature, ed. by Ernest N Emenyonu (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2000), pp. 27-38.

7. Helen Chukuma 'The Identity of Self' in *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*, (Enugu: New Generation Books, 1994) pxvi. She goes on to claim that a main characteristic of African feminism is its 'accommodationist' nature. This view Catherine Achonolu concus with when she says 'our societies have always maintained a different notion of gender from that of the Westerners', meaning that men remain a vital part of women's lives.

8. Catherine Achonolu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Oweni: Afa Publications, 1995), p. 103.

9. See *State and Society in The Sokoto Caliphate,* ed. by Ahmad Mohammed Kani and Kabir Gandi (Sokoto: Usmanu Danfodio University Press, 1990). See also J S Trimmingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (London, 1962). Dan Fodio made it his mission to revive the Sunna (way) of the Prophet Mohammed and to remove customs and innovations that were contrary to Islam. Particularly concerned about the condition of women he accused the Ulama of failing to pursue the rights of women in their communities. His concern extended to the failure of parents and husbands to uphold the rights of women and daughters to education, the right to own property, and the right to considerate treatment in marriage. Most especially he abhorred the way woman's subservience to the husband was emphasized at the expense of obedience to God.

10. From Jean Boyd *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asmau* 1793-1865 (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 5. In researching this biography of Dan Fodio's daughter Boyd had access to original manuscripts through a descendent of the family Wazin Junaidu, and with the help of Muhammed Magaji achieved the translations used here.

11. Zaynab Alkali, *The Stillborn* (Essex: Longman, 1994), p. 55. Henceforth all quotations from the novel come from this edition.

12. 'Introduction', *The Stillborn*, p. viii.

13. Fatna Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (Pergamon Press, 1984), p. 118.

14. See Fatima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion: Reflections on the Muslim Concept of Nushuz' in *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change,* ed. by Diana L Eck and Devaki Jain (London: The Women's Press, 1986), pp. 88-100. Mernissi asserts that for many Muslims any issue is negotiable except women's position in society. Islamist resurgence, exemplified by movements as varied as Jamati-Islami in Pakistan, Ikhwan al-Muslim in Egypt, the Islamic Republic in Iran, the Izala movement in Nigeria and as we have recently seen in the Taliban regime in Afghanistan insist on singling out women's relation to society as the supreme test of the authenticity of the Islamic order they want to propagate. See also *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality,* ed. by Camillia Fawzi El-Solh and Judy Mabro (Oxford: Berg 1994), pp. 4-12, who note that there is discernible differences in the ways in which Muslim traditionalists, modernists or fundamentalists interpret matters regarding women.

15. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil, Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, (London: Asqai Books, 1985), p. 41.

16. D Kandiyoti, 'Islam and Patriarchy', in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* ed. by N.R. Keddie and B Brown (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 24.

17. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *African Women and Critical Transformation* (Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), p. 34.

18. Ibid., p. 36.

19. Filomena Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Rochester: Vt. Schenkman, 1981), pp. 35-36.

20. Interview with Adeola James in *Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* (London: James Currey, 1990), p. 29.

21. Catherine Achonolu 'The Woman Comes of Age in the Nigerian Novel: A Study of Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn*' (paper presented at the 1986 African Literature Association Conference, Michigan State University), East Lasing, USA.

22. Ibid., interview with Adeola James, p. 29.

23. Paula Giddings, 'A Special Vision, A Common Goal' in *Encore*, June 23rd 1975, pp. 44-48.

24. Mildred Hill-Lubin 'The Grandmother in African and African-American Literature: A Survivor of the African Extended Family' in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature,* ed. by Carole Boyce-Davies and Anne Graves (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1986), p. 258.

25. Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 52.

26. Shirley Ardner, ed., *Defining Females*: *The Nature of Women in Society* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993), p. 13.

27. *The Holy Quran and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989), see Surah 113 (The Daybreak).

28. The full text of the chapter goes thus:

Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn
From the mischief of created things
From the mischief of the Darkness as it overspreads
From the mischief of those who practice secret arts

(Quran, Surah 113) According to Yusuf Ali, by teaching Muslims to seek refuge in God from all kinds of evil, this early chapter provides an antidote to superstition and fear. He goes on to explain that 'those' referred to in the line 'From the mischief of those who practice secret arts' alludes to the feminine identity of the women who practiced witchcraft during the time of Prophet Muhammed.

29. Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 74.

30. Trinh T. Minha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 92.

31. Seiyifa Koroye, 'The Ascetic Feminist Vision of Zaynab Alkali' in *Nigerian Female Writers*, ed. by Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1989), p. 49.

32. Stewart Brown in introduction to *The Stillborn*, p. xx.

33. J S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 164.

34. See Tove Stang Dahl's *The Muslim Family: A Study of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. by Ronald Walford (Stockholm: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), pp. 180-195.

35. Seiyifa Karoye '*The Ascetic Feminist Vision of Zaynab Alkal'*', p. 49.

36. Filomena Steady, Ibid. pp. 35-36.

37. Audrey Chapman Smock, *Women's Education in Developing Countries* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), pp. 123-132.

CONCLUSION

The novels examined in previous chapters highlight what Fatima Mernissi writes in *Beyond the Veil* where she notes that 'the discourses people develop about themselves respond to the need for self-representation and identity building'[1]. As the individual writers explore the complex links between traditional African cultures and Islam, we find characters and preoccupations that are clearly distinguishable as coming from a particular background. The texts by all five writers reflect the conflicts and tensions generated by relations between the two in West African societies while simultaneously focusing with great insight on the effects they have on the condition of women's life.

When Callaway and Creevey assert that 'throughout West Africa, Islam has had the greatest impact on women's lives among those who converted earliest and who were relatively isolated from contact with other cultures,'[2] they appear to claim that the longer Islam has been present in a society the more likely that it suppressed pre-Islamic customs and practices favourable to women, and consequently, the more subordinated their position became in relation to that of men. Yet a close scrutiny of the novels of Mariama Bâ, Zaynab Alkali, Aminata Sow Fall, Ousmane Sembene, and Ibrahim Tahir suggest this may not entirely be true. According to these writers, women's perceptions as well reactions to their situation differ considerably from what is ascribed to them by Western scholars. It seems that on the whole they regard gender relations with a critical eye and are deeply conscious of the obstacles they have to contend with in order to secure a better life for themselves. Also from the evidence in the texts, it seems that they actively seek out solutions either in indigenous traditions or in Islam, sometimes resourcefully employing both in their attempts to achieve individual and /or group goals.

Just as they fail to take into account women's agency in Islamic societies, Callaway and Creevey also neglect to investigate in depth the syncretic nature of the cultures found in this part of Africa. However the novelists studied here exhibit a constant awareness of the peculiarities of the societies they from which they take their inspiration. They all come from the Muslim tradition and are conscious of the degree of Islamic orthodoxy in the societies they write about yet they do not in any way suggest that traditional belief systems have given way completely to Islam. The situations they depict are closer to the historical realities discussed in Chapter Two because instead of the disappearance of indigenous customs, they see the West African situation as one where the traditional

base has merely expanded to accommodate the inclusion of Islam. Therefore, all their narratives offer numerous indications of deeply rooted pre-Islamic beliefs and practices which continue to serve the needs of present day societies.

In Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, this tendency towards accommodation that JS Trimmingham and other historians have also observed in African society is severely tested by the Imam's rejection of indigenous traditions and his unshakable conviction that 'This is a Muslim Kingdom and the word of Allah must be kept' (p.199).Such emphatic denial of the legitimacy of age old practices is portrayed as highly controversial and capable of throwing society into confusion. In the novel, the disintegration of Bauchi society is only averted because the Emir responds quickly to the danger posed by the Imam's view. Removing the Imam from his position as the spiritual leader, and immediately appointing another who would be more agreeable and 'much better suited to the ways of some of us' (p. 241), he secures the continuation of a way life that is peculiar to this part of West Africa. Recent Nigerian history also bears witness to the fact that when groups such as the Yan Izala attempt to enforce a more orthodox form of Islam they are invariably met with stiff and sometimes violent resistance from certain powerful sections of society.

In *The Last Imam* while Alhaji Usman's ideas create immense social turmoil, the conflict is also exacerbated by the discrepancy between the Islamic ideal he preaches and his own flawed personal practice of the same. As elsewhere in West African fiction about Islamic societies, the contradiction between the views and values religious leaders are expected to uphold and their disregard of the same in their personal lives is looked upon with great suspicion by those they are meant to guide. This inherent tension is conveyed by Tahir's skilful treatment of the opposition between the Imam's anterior state of grace and his decline into worldly politics. Yet at the same time, whatever his shortcomings as a religious leader, the Imam is successfully portrayed as one who is untiring in his struggles against anything or anyone who would compromise the "true" practice of Islam even if this includes battling his own desires.

Similarly in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Islam is embraced in earnest by the main character Ramatoulaye. Although she grapples unhappily with certain Islamic ideas, in particular the practice of polygamy, she is nonetheless as convinced as Tahir's Imam is of the validity of her chosen faith. But like many of the other women we encounter in the

novels, her understanding of Islam does not simply rely on what religious leaders tell her but rather on personal interpretation. She is representative of the majority of Muslims, who as Andrew Rippen observes, are far more concerned with the implementation of their religion as a vital part of their lives than they are with the theoretical knowledge which underpins of their faith. Yet when Muslim women choose as Ramatoulaye does to make decisions based on individual views they run the risk of being accused of the kind of female rebellion that Fatna Sabbah reveals is greatly feared in Muslim societies.[3]

Interestingly, unlike the other novels, while Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* is situated in an area of Nigeria that similarly proclaims itself to be Islamic, it does not depict Islam as the predominant religion and neither is Islam constantly reaffirmed as the most efficacious source of guidance. Instead it is represented as an alien presence intent apon disrupting a traditional belief system that once encompassed every thing from spiritual matters to modes of interpersonal interaction. In an interview with Adeola James Alkali reiterates her allegiance to Islam; nevertheless, we are still left wondering if her view of the religion is not indirectly represented in her depiction of the tyrannical Baba who is also the main spokesman of Islam in the novel. Perhaps what is even more significant is fact that she does not offer an alternative Muslim figure the reader can sympathize with. Indeed her heroine Li demonstrates virtually no interest in religion but the integrity of her character and her inherent ability to see the truth behind the many strictures her father imposes on her in the name of religion is presented as an example for other women to follow.

In African Women and Critical Transformations, Molara Ogundipe-Lesley asserts that we can read back from literature the outlines of the society that produced it.[4] If we agree with this view, we can confirm from what we find in the novels that in West Africa the female is usually equated with tradition while the male is with Islam. Thus we find Ngone wa Thiandum in Sembene's *White Genesis* s initially portrayed as a devout Muslim woman, revolting against Islam after discovering her husband's act of incest. Howeve,r it soon becomes apparent that while the crime goes against her religious principles, it is the honour of her traditional caste that is most offended. As she questions and rebels against Islamic ideas which erode the traditional privileges and dignities that her high caste allows her, the implication is that her main allegiance is not to the religion she professes to be guided by. Similarly in all the novels there are

numerous examples of Muslim women taking refuge in tradition in times of conflict with their men, but significantly whatever dissatisfaction they feel towards Islam, the religion is never criticized directly.

Perhaps it is hardly surprising that women rebel against some of the ideas that are put forward as Islamic when those who bear the task of instituting the religion in society also seem intent on putting in place male-dominated structures. Indeed in the various novels, the patriarchal bias of much that is dictated to women is immediately recognizable, and consistently in all of them, the hypocritical use of Islam as an instrument of male domination is condemned. All five writers seem to share an urgent desire to establish justice within social systems which have drawn authority from the autocratic power exercised by either the father or the husband. At first, the example Ousmane Sembene provides in the incest case in *White Genesis* appears extreme, but it is a warning of possible consequences if the status quo is left unchallenged.

Certainly, contrary to Western perceptions about African/Muslim women, most of those we encounter in the novels grasp how social injustice and gender discrimination is perpetrated under the guise of tradition or what is regarded as proper Islamic conduct. They differ from literary representations of women in the West in that they are also meticulously represented as striving to survive within the traditional institution of marriage. Thus in *So Long a Letter*, we find the woman as wife most notable probably because of Mariama Bâ's interest in couple relationships. In *The Beggars' Strike*, Aminata SowFall shows how marital experiences vary from woman to woman. While in Alkali's *The Stillborn*, on the one hand the more traditional Awa is completely disillusioned by her experience of marriage yet on the other, her sister Li dedicates herself to salvaging her relationship with her husband.

Unlike their Western counterparts, Bâ, Sow-Fall, and Alkali do not question the importance of motherhood, the sexuality of women, nor the idea of marriage as a basic and desirable condition. They appear to believe as Filomena Steady claims in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, that it is possible for women to be emancipated without being 'castrated,' to 'strive for equality and still remain female.'[5] It is the acceptance that biological as well as cultural demands bind women inexorably to men that leads Alkali to effect reconciliation between her fiercely independent heroine Li and her estranged husband.

However, while the three female writers dealt with here are particularly keen to affirm the right of women to happiness in traditional spheres of life, at the same time they avoid a wholesale idealisation of traditional and/or Islamic practices as they pertain to women because they realise that in embedded within them are structures that deny women equality. A pertinent example of this is their unrelenting condemnation of the Islamic acceptance of polygamy which they regard a betrayal of trust in couple relationships. Thus in their attempts at reconciling traditional moral values with the freedom of choice they want for women, we find their characters engaged in multifaceted struggles that are at once psychological, intellectual, economic and political. Importantly, through depictions of the contradictions in the lives of women, all five writers, Bâ, Sow Fall, Alkali, Sembene and Tahir, are able to offer a vision of reality, of a world interconnected spatially and temporally where cultures are not distillations of values, mores, and aesthetics invented by some extraordinary people at some golden historical period, but rather, as living, changing phenomena through which we able to trace their evolution both as individuals as well part of large social groups.

The novels of Bâ, Sow Fall, Alkali, and Sembene are particularly preoccupied with the personal development of the individual woman and especially with the element of choice in her life. Emphasis is therefore placed on her inner resources, her self-confidence, and her values because it is through utilizing them is she able to overcome the many obstacles in her path to fulfilment. The difficulties women encounter come in a variety of forms and from different directions, not least as Fatima Mernissi notes, because 'Muslim societies resist women's claim to changing their status' regardless of available evidence all over the Muslim world.[6] But while the initiative displayed by women can be seen as a form of power, of seizing control, it comes with its own burden as women such as Ramatoulaye, her friend Aissatou, Li, the beggar woman Salla Niang and the women in Sembene's novels realise. In *Faith and Freedom*, Mahnaz Afkhami arrives at a similar conclusion when she writes that 'right is a property of control a woman achieves over her person over time' involving not only 'the appropriation of individual power but also an acceptance of responsibility for self as well as for others'.[7]

In their attempts to pursue personal aspirations, women are confronted with what appear to be insurmountable obstacles many of which are tied to the religion they profess to believe in. For example individualistic inclinations are regarded as impious,

whimsical, or egoistical and are discouraged in Muslim society because of the great fear that they lead people to deviate from the instructions laid down in the Holy Quran. Submission or obedience to this book of divine laws which governs every aspect of life from the most intimate to the public is expected from both men and women. Mindful of this, the women in the novels are bound by a sense of duty to the larger society and are cautious in pursuing personal happiness. This attitude of mind is a reflection of the group orientation of Islam where the *ummah* is of paramount importance. Furthermore, Islam has also established in the minds of its adherents a sense of responsibility beyond this life consequently; an awareness of being accountable for their actions is always present in the minds of Muslims. But since they are not excluded from this responsibility, the result is that Muslim women are secure in the knowledge that they have valuable roles to play in their domestic lives as well as in society.

Again and again in the novels, when a section of society insists on implementing only those ideas most convenient for itself while neglecting the rights of others, a dynamic of strife is created and is manifested in more or less aggressive forms of behaviour. This is what happens in *God's Bits of Wood* when the women rise against the capitalist owners of the railway lines and those in cohort with them. The imam Alhaji Mabigue is singled out in the women's rage against the injustices they suffer because in siding with the opposition, he effectively removes himself from the *ummah*, an offence which brings severe consequences to bear on the individual. Similarly, dissenters and innovators such as we find in the characters of Mour and his assistant in *The Beggars' Strike,* challenge the order of a society which is based on the consensus of the group when they attempt to abolish the sacred Islamic law of zakat which requires the wealthy to give to the destitute. Indeed all five writers reject the type of individualism which is closely tied to the competitive idea of personal ambition and gain, and advocate instead, a kind of individualism that is firmly rooted in an African Islamic cultural perspective, one where the community is foremost.

Ousmane Sembene and Aminata Sow Fall, in particular, revel in the depiction of the pathetic circumstances of the poor masses of Senegalese society. The uneasy co-existence between the oppressed and oppressor, the exploiter and exploited is explored effectively in both *God's Bits of Wood* and *The Beggars' Strike* where prevailing male interpretations of Quranic instructions are denounced for departing from the egalitarian spirit of Islam. By having the beggar woman Salla Niang lead the entire population of

beggars in Dakar in revolt against the new edict, Sow Fall demonstrates her belief that women have a duty to defend themselves and others as well as the tenets of their faith.

In all the novels women are dynamic forces in the plots and both male and female writing reflect the view that the private role of women rather than the public one is more instrumental in bringing about eventual change. Lloyd Brown has observed that Sembene in particular appears to advocate personal growth before social transformation and we find this occurring more frequently among his women characters who then proceed to influence the affairs of their societies in innovative ways. But perhaps of even more significance is his unwavering belief that when the survival of society is threatened, women come to the rescue, breaking out of moulds and from behind social barriers that limit them. As noted in Chapter Three, such conviction about women's possibilities in the development and evolution of their community is rarely shared by other male West African writers and indeed is yet to be taken up fully by emerging writers of either sex.

From all indications, the field of African Literature appears to be dominated by highly educated individuals. Consequently, it is not surprising to find a considerably lesser number of women writing fiction since only recently have they been able to access the educational opportunities that have long been available to men. All three women writers whose novels form a large part of this study belong to a pioneering group and even though to some extent their experiences and social status may differ from the characters they represent in their writing, they competently use the opportunities available to them to speak of women's lives, struggles and hopes in ways the majority of male writers even with the best intentions have not been able to do. As Molara Ogundipe-Leslie rightly notes, their writings are a "reflection of their sense of self as concrete human beings living in particular cultural situations"[8] so perhaps if they do not represent their women characters with the same ambitions Sembene gives to his, it may be that the realities they have experienced or witnessed do not allow for such aspirations.

Thus in some ways the interests and approaches of the male and female writers dealt with in this study differ. While both Sembene and Tahir devote a great deal of attention to issues that are political or economic in nature, in narratives by the women writers

cultural conflict is almost always related to the female condition. Unlike their male counterparts, Bâ, Sow Fall and Alkali do not differentiate between female protagonists who accept Islamic/traditional values, those who question them or those who reject them, because they are more concerned with the harmonious reconciliation of traditional, moral and communal values. However they do satirize extreme reliance on superstitious practices as we see in *The Beggars' Strike* as well as in *The Stillborn*. In all the texts the use of Islam as an instrument of male domination is condemned, yet, for most of the right thinking characters in the various novels, a true relationship with God through Islam is assumed or openly promoted.

The feminist inclinations of the three women writers are apparent in their works as they address omissions and misconceptions about West African Muslim women. The stereotypes of passivity, confinement, piety, and compliancy usually attributed to Muslim women are questioned and their social roles re-evaluated. But the task they set themselves is a complex one. Their wider objective is to illuminate the female condition, but while they deconstruct discourses that serve to exclude them as women, they also try to remain faithful to the cultural facts of that feminine condition. They vigorously defend their communities against detractors, and at the same time, claim multiple sometimes overlapping or contradicting allegiances recognising that others may ignore these plural identities and ascribe to them allegiances other than the ones they advance.

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The novels of both male and female writers examined in this study embrace a wide range of ideas and perceptions regarding how tradition and Islam influence and affect women's lives and how women sustain or fight against them. Together they fill gaps and absences in each other's texts providing a composite picture of the life of Muslim women. The literary quality or the artistic integrity of their works may not be uniform, but in all of them there is a constant striving for congruity of form and content.

The women characters that Bâ, Sow Fall, Alkali, Sembene and Tahir portray are in tune with African historical realities and are neither stereotyped nor limited into postures of dependence or submergence. Above all, their greatest achievements lie in the fact that they succeed in redeeming the disparaged and debased image of Muslim women as helpless, dependent or brutalised. They show them as having dignified comportment and of being capable of personal and economic independence. By studying and

concentrating on these female images we can come to appreciate, affirm, and celebrate their many achievements and contributions to West African societies.

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3. Fatna Sabbah, *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984) , p.118.

4. Molara Ogundipe-Lesley, *African Women and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1994) , p.27.

5. Filomena Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Rochester:Vt Schenkmen, 1981) , p.22.

6. Fatima Mernissi , 'Femininity as Subversion,' in *Speaking of Faith* (London: The Women's Press, 1986) , p.89.

7. Mahnaz Afkhami 'Faith and Freedom', *Women's Rights in the Muslim World* (London: Taurus Publishers, 1983) , p.4.

8. Molara Ogundipe-Lesley, *African Women and Critical Transformations*, p.27.

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