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Contrasting Representations of West African Muslim Women on Social Media, in Film and in Literature

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Université de Liège
Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département de Media, Culture and Communication

Contrasting representation of West African Muslim women on social media, in film and in literature

Mémoire présenté par BANNANI Abrar en vue de l'obtention du grade de Master en communication multilingue à finalité spécialisée en communication interculturelle et des organisations internationales

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Table of contents

Acknowledgment ... *1*

Introduction ... *4*

Research question ... 6

1 Theoretical framework ... *8*

1.1 African feminisms ... 8

1.2 Womanism ... 9

1.3 Nego-feminism ... 12

1.4 'Western' feminism and African feminisms: the politics of difference ... 12

1.5 Islamic feminism ... 14

2 (Mis)representation of West African Muslims in the Film Cuties and the "#BringBackOurGirls" and "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists" Campaigns ... *18*

2.1 In Film: *Cuties* ... 18

2.2 On social media: the "#Bringbackourgirls" campaign ... 23

2.2.1 The response of Nigerian and non-Nigerian social media users to #BringBackOurGirls: "A lived experience versus an uninformed opinion of third world countries" (Oladele 1) ... 25

2.2.2 The imperialist resonance in the 'Western' adoption of the #BringBackOurGirls movement: The White Saviour Complex ... 29

2.3 #WeShouldAllBeFeminists campaign ... 34

2.3.1 Commercialization of feminism (femvertising and faux feminism) ... 34

2.3.2 Feminist campaigns and the exclusion of African and Muslim women ... 37

3 Hausa literature: an effective means of improving the representation of Nigerian Muslim women ... *42*

3.1 Introduction ... 42

3.2 Sharing feminist views: gender conflict in the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zaynab Alkali, and Hauwa Ali ... 48

3.2.1 Gender roles ... 48

3.2.1.1 The Stillborn ... 48

3.2.2 Marriage ... 55

3.2.2.1 The Stillborn ... 55

3.2.2.2 Destiny ... 59

3.3 The African feminist's Muslim women: The female characters' reaction to gender conflicts 63

3.3.1 The Stillborn ... 63

3.3.2 Destiny ... 70

3.4 Islamic perspectives on the gender conflicts that the female characters encounter : a brief overview ... 72

3.4.1 Forced marriage ... 72

3.4.2 Education and work ... 75

3.4.3 Gender roles within marriage ... 77

3.5 Debunking the narrative of escaping or exposing Islam through rebellion ... 81

Conclusion ... *85*

Bibliography ... 89

Introduction

Generations of African Muslim women have been subject to different types of representation, many of which rely on stereotypes, such as that of the victim, the oppressed and submissive woman, or the non-human entity. According to Priscilla Offenhauer (a historian), it is important to divide narratives into two groups: the scholarly and the non-scholarly. She claims there are two "negative" poles of representation of Muslim women in non-scholarly expression: "on the one hand, apologetics about women's lives that come from within conservative/fundamentalist Muslim camps, and on the other hand, 'Orientalist' sensationalism about how completely oppressive Islam is to women" (Offenhauer 13). The scholarly representation of Muslim women, as Offenhauer claims, "avoids the blatancy of either pole, but is similarly fissured along lines of relatively positive and relatively negative 'takes' on what is happening to women in Muslim societies and whether Islam bears responsibility" (Offenhauer, 13). The negative pole, as described by Mohja Kahf, is about the depiction of Muslim women as victims or as individuals who are oppressed by Islam. According to Kahf, there are variations in the narrative of the victimised Muslim woman: "the woman may be a willing accomplice, or she may be escaping her victimization. But 'the Muslim is being victimized' is a common point in mainstream representation (Kahf 1). The positive pole often concerns the portrayal of Muslim women by Muslim scholars or feminist Muslim hermeneutics. In this representation, the Muslim woman is strong and independent, and she is not oppressed by her religion but finds solace and guidance in it (Kahf 1). Offenhauer associates this positive representation with a modern ideology that some have called "Islamic feminism", which, according to Margot Badran, "became evident in the late nineteenth century" (Badran 6).

In this thesis, the two poles of representation that Offenhauer addresses are analysed. In the second chapter, the negative pole is examined with reference to the representation of West African Muslim women in film and on social media. The first section of that chapter briefly analyses the representation of a Senegalese Muslim woman in the film *Cuties*. It refers to critical blog posts and YouTube videos by African Muslim women and Muslim women in general. The section on social media presents an analysis of the reactions of 'Western' Internet users to campaigns such as "#BringBackOurGirls" and "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists". In the "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists" campaign, the focus is on the target audience chosen by Dior for their 2017 spring collection and the manner in which the campaign seemingly targeted wealthy feminists while disregarding others (African feminists and Muslim women who have particular

views on the subject of women's empowerment). The main issue in the analysis of the "BringBackOurGirsl" campaign is the representation of African Muslim girls as victims who must be saved from an oppressive religion. The section also explains the negative consequences of online activism and contrasts it with grassroots activism.

The third and final chapter, in contrast to the second, analyses the positive pole of the representation of Northern Nigerian Muslim women in Hausa literature. That chapter compares works of Hausa literature written in the 20th century by Nigerian Muslim authors, such as Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* (1988) and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1989), with contemporary non-fictional texts, such as *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The analysis shows that the three authors, who represent different generations, different religions, different cultures, and different social positions, share certain feminist stances on gender inequality. The choice of authors and novels is explained further in the introduction to the chapter in question. The chapter is divided into three sections, which respectively discuss the gender conflicts that the female characters face. These perspectives touch on issues such as forced marriage, prohibiting women from pursing education and careers, and gender inequality within marriage. The purpose of the final section is to separate the cultural practices from which the gender conflicts emerge from Islamic rules. The final section also provides a brief explanation of the rules by references to *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Quran verses, and their interpretations. Finally, an alternative to the narrative of escaping and exposing Islam by means of rebellion or by means of displaying arguably controversial behaviour is suggested. This alternative narrative draws heavily on Shirin Edwin's notion of cognitive consciousness, that is, of self-acknowledgment as a part of the journey of the striving Muslim woman toward recognising her faith. To this notion, I add the ideas of the weakness and fluctuation of faith that result from rebellious behaviour: "Muslims [who are] trying to hold on to their faith […] often find themselves struggling to achieve a calming sense of certainty for the beliefs they hold" (Abdul-Rahman). Weakness of faith is a familiar occurrence in everyday Muslim life, which, the third chapter explains, is mentioned in the Quran and the Sunnah.

It is also important to clarify some terms. In this thesis, the term 'Western' is used as an umbrella term to refer to the Global North (developed countries), which is also known as the Occident (as opposed to the Orient). Even though Muslim women are often represented as subjugated both in the Occident and in the Orient, here, I adopt Mohja Kahf's justification of the use of the term 'Western' to denote a "multiplicity of cultures that have been soldered together at various times in history, sometimes violently, for ideological purposes [and not as]

one stable unitary field" (Kahf 3). Another point of conflict that should be clarified is the use of 'Western' representation to denote negative portrayals of Muslim women. Even though I analyse the positive pole of representation from the point of view of Muslim women, who are better equipped than non-Muslims to represent themselves in a realistic manner, I also acknowledge the existence of positive representations in 'Western' works, such as, among many others, *Sweetness in the Belly* by Camilla Gibbs, an English writer. [1] Firouzeh Ameri describes Gibbs' novel as "a "text […] [that] emphasizes the possibility of overcoming the dualism of 'Western' culture and an Islamic worldview through the creation of a character who, while allowing herself to enjoy the spiritual and mystical aspects of Islam, takes to an individualistic, reason-based interpretation of Islam" (Ameri 198). Ameri adds that the female character is a reverent Muslim woman who is attached to her newfound religion, which she associates with love and tranquillity (Ameri 202). The association between Islam and love is an unusual motif that is also found in *Destiny* and *The Stillborn*. It should also be noted that the representation of Muslim women as individuals who are oppressed by their families and obliged to wear *hijabs* reflects a reality that needs to be acknowledged. In some Muslim countries, there are Muslim women who are brainwashed into submission and oppressed by male authority (Barlas, "Muslim Women" 118).

Research question

The thesis begins by presenting the negative representation of African Muslim women on social media and in film. The choice of social media and film is important because they have global audiences and thus influence a substantial number of individuals, especially the young (Teitelbaum 5-6). In general, the media often shape society. They function as mediators between individuals and the world (Teitelbaum 5-6). By misrepresenting African Muslim women, 'Western' media participate in the creation of a negative image that can make the lives of those women more difficult. This representation often encourages islamophobia and excessive control over Muslim women's right to dress as they please. This misrepresentation' effect may extend to indirectly "encouraging" violence toward Muslim women (Civila et al. Luis 4). In light of this, this thesis asks the question: How might the representation of West

[1] *Sweetness in the Belly* recounts the story of Lilly, a white Muslim woman who lives in a complex that witnesses the arrival of Ethiopian immigrants who remind her of her lost love Aziz that she once met in Ethiopia years ago. Lilly goes back to Ethiopia and find herself more attracted than before to Islam thanks to the walls of the ancient city of Harar, a revered centre of Islam. She then struggles with her faith, her romantic relationship with Aziz, and the political turmoil that the country witnesses (Ameri 200-6)

African Muslim women on social media and in film reflect a more nuanced reality? In the third chapter of the thesis, I answer the question by examining literature (Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Hauwa Ali's *Destiny*). Specifically, the chapter draws on Hausa literature by Nigerian Muslim writers, which is treated as a blueprint for the imaginative depiction of West African Muslim women. Hausa literature is often inspired by the reality that Muslim women inhabit. The characters face realistic struggles that occur in Africa. Hausa literature is thus a suitable medium for answering the research question and for investigating what a nuanced image of African Muslim women might look like. As mentioned above, the comparison between the Hausa novels and Adichie's non-fictional feminist works will allow this thesis to show how two different perspectives of feminism can find common ground in their fight for women's right. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fictional texts allow this thesis to present a feminist view that many 'Western' critics consider as the blueprint of feminism (Jali). I then use, in this thesis, this blueprint of feminism and compare it or associate it with the female characters feminist's behaviours in *Destiny* and *The Stillborn*.

1 Theoretical framework

1.1 African feminisms

African feminism takes several forms, which draw on ideologies that are different from those of 'Western' feminism, including Stiwanism, nego-feminism, motherism, femalism, and womanism. Accordingly, Obioma Nnaemeka (a Nigerian academic) writes that it is "more accurate to argue not in the context of a monolith (African feminism) but rather in the context of a pluralism (African feminisms) that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism/movements in Africa" (Nnaemeka 361). In a similar vein, Susan Arndt comments on the necessity of discussing African feminisms as a plurality: "Gender debates influenced by post-structuralism have given rise to an understanding of the dynamics, complexity and diversity of feminism, which make it necessary to speak of feminisms rather than feminism. This plurality emerges from a wide range of coordinates, with regional differences playing an important role" (Arndt, "Perspectives" 31).

African feminisms, as schools of thought, were created by African scholars who sought to differentiate themselves from Euro-American feminists and to create an ideology that acknowledges the complexity of African societies. Shirin Edwin states that African feminisms identified "the weaknesses of European and American feminisms to refute the application of ill-matched concepts to African societies and developing a feminist discourse that is accountable to African women's realities" (Edwin 38). According to Nnaemeka, any African feminisms should draw not on 'Western' feminism but on the specificities of African settings, that is, on African realities (360). The core purpose of African feminisms (creating an ideology that depends on African reality) is related to Claude Ake's theory of "building on the indigenous":

> We cannot significantly advance the development of Africa unless we take African societies seriously as they are, not as they ought to be or even as they might be; that sustainable development cannot occur unless we build on the indigenous. […]. The indigenous refers to whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves. (Ake 1)

In the same vein, in her article "The White Woman's Burden: African Women in 'Western' Feminist Discourse" Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí emphasizes the importance of creating African realities without imitating existing concepts in order to escape the colonialist grasp on feminist

discourse. She writes that colonialism "spurred, commissioned and sanctioned scholarship on Africa" and brought with it a period "of unprecedented European domination of non-European peoples" (Oyěwúmí 26), which she calls "gender imperialism" (Oyěwúmí 26). According to Shirin Edwin, the European colonisers of Africa brought with themselves a preconceived idea of feminism that entailed "the same racism and ethnocentrism of the European colonial enterprise, turning feminism into a natural heir of the production of an unmistakably imperialistic discourse on Africa" (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 93).

The importance of avoiding 'Western' feminism in order to create an African reality that is suited only to African women can be seen in Oyèrónké Oyěwúmí's "Conceptualizing Gender : The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies", in which she discusses gender politics in Yoruba culture and how different it is from the global definition of "gender" that follows the concept of "binarism" that separates men and women depending on their socially constructed gender and depending on physical aspects such as sex and body (7). According to Oyěwúmí, "feminist concepts emerged out of the logic of the patriarchal nuclear family, a family form that is inappropriately universalized" (5). She adds that in Yoruba culture, gender is not limited to the sex of the person, which means that men can be wives, that women can be husbands, and that females can be the superior gender, depending on their ancestry (5). Thus, subordination and oppression can be directed at any gender. The basis of subordination depends on descent (matrilineal or patrilineal; 5). Oyěwúmí supports her claim by criticising 'Western' feminist studies that define "family" and the corresponding gender relations strictly: "When African realities are interpreted based on these 'Western' claims, what we find are distortions, obfuscations in language and often a total lack of comprehension due to the incommensurability of social categories and institutions" (4). The ignorance of some scholars, racism, and ethnocentrism mean that concepts, such as polygamy and arranged marriage, are misrepresented in the 'Western' world. Therefore, Africans need their own theories of gender (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 39). Some of these are described below.

1.2 Womanism

There are many scholars who discuss the place of African women in African societies by reference to the modern feminist movement. The debate oscillates between classifying African women as career driven or as family driven. In other words, the African woman is labelled through the lenses of 'Western' feminism or through those of African reality. In this section, I

argue the existence of a branch, in African feminisms, that incorporates the career driven African woman and the family driven African woman. This branch is called womanism. The term 'womanism' originates from the works of several scholars and writers, such as Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems. Clenora Hudson-Weems's Africana womanism and Alice Walker's womanism include, in their definition of a Womanist, continental African women and their diaspora. However, their respective definition of this branch varies. Alice Walker defines a womanist as:

> A Black feminist or feminist of color […] who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexual. Appreciates and prefers women's culture… [and who] sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female… Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, xii)

On the other hand, in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* Clenora Hudson-Weems defines Africana womanism as:

> An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences struggles, needs and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. (24)

In her book, Clenora Hudson-Weems begins by differentiating herself from her predecessor Alice Walker by stating that womanism is different from Africana womanism. Hudson-Weems refers to Walker's definition of a womanist as a "mainstream feminist" (Hudson-Weems 23) because Walker only focuses on women's "sexuality and culture" (24). The lavender analogy shows that Walker associates womanism with feminism (24). Clenora Hudson-Weems adds that many African women do not relate to the discussion of the association between gender inequality and women's struggle against patriarchal society because they disagree with the idea that patriarchy is the only consequence of inequality and thus do not identify as feminists. They consider that poverty, racism, neo-colonialism as other consequences of inequality that need to be discussed (24). She emphasises that the Africana woman is assigned the position of "spokesperson" to enable her to create her own reality and to establish a counter-discourse to that of 'Western' feminism but also to that of African feminism. Hudson-Weems writes that "while African feminism is a bit less problematic for Africana women than is feminism in general, it is more closely akin to *Africana womanism*" (18). Womanism is dissociated from African feminism because the latter "naturally suggest an alignment with feminism" (19),

which can disrupt the self-creation of an African feminist narrative that goes with the Africana woman's reality. Africana womanism is an ideology that concerns the Africana woman, her environment, and her set of principles: while white women see men as enemies because of the historical oppression that saw them reduced to chattels, Africana women do not associate men with oppression because there are many matriarchal communities in African society (Hudson-Weems 25). Africana womanists think that oppression originates from within society and that its victim include women, men, and children (25).

As aforementioned, the definitions of Africana womanism of Clenora Hudson-Weems and womanism of Alice Walker concern the African women and her diaspora. However, in this thesis, I discuss Nigerian novels with continental African characters. For this reason, it is important to distinguish Africana womanism and womanism from African womanism. I argue, in this thesis, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's African womanism (but also some qualifier in Hudson's Africana womanism). Chikwenye Ogunyemi "arrived at the term womanism independently of and at about the same time as Walker" (Arndt, "African Gender" 711). Alice Walker, Clenora Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi share most of the aforementioned visions on gender, however, there are certain differences in their definition of womanism. The most prominent one is "that Ogunyemi wishes to conceptualize an ideology that clearly demarcates and emancipates African womanism from both white feminism and African-American womanism/feminism" (Arndt, "African Gender" 711). Since 'Western' feminism and African-American womanism often ignores "African peculiarities" (Ogunyemi, *Africa WO/Man* 114), the African womanist needs to re-appropriate the term African womanism. Therefore, Ogunyemi insists on creating a definition of the term (Ogunyemi, *Africa WO/Man* 114). Ogunyemi suggests in her book *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel* that "only African women may be African womanists" (Arndt, "African Gender" 712). Similarly, to Hudson-weems, Ogunyemi also differentiates herself from Alice walker. She refutes what she calls "original Walkerian precepts" (Ogunyemi, *Africa WO/Man* 133) such as the alleged "African obsession with children" that Walker argues in her book (133). Ogunyemi claims that gender must be discussed in the context of issues that relate to the African reality (Arndt, "African Gender" 712). She stresses that an African Womanist "will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 64).

1.3 Nego-feminism

Nego-feminism is an ideology that was formulated by Obioma Nnaemeka in her article "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way". According to her, the core message of nego-feminism concerns compromises and negotiation with the opposite gender. Nnaemeka calls nego-feminism the "feminism of negotiation [,] but it also stands for 'no-ego feminism'" (377). A nego-feminist "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (Nnaemeka 377-378). In order to introduce nego-feminism and its particularities, Nnaemeka uses what she calls the "third space of engagement" (Nnaemeka 360), a theory that allows "the coexistence, interconnection, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action" (360). Consequently, the third place "constitutes the arena where [she has] witnessed the unfolding of feminisms in Africa" (360).

The particularity of African feminisms is that it adapts to its environment. It shifts, it transforms itself, it is unstable. These characteristics typify the theory of the third place: "it is not the either/or location of stability; it is the both/and space where borderless territory and free movement authorize the capacity to simultaneously theorize practice, practice theory, and allow the mediation of policy" (Nnaemeka 360). Nnaemeka builds her theory on Achille Mbembe's work. Mbembe develops his argument by using Michel de Certeau's work on spatiality, *L'invention du quotidien* (*The Practice of Everyday Life*). De Certeau presents a distinction between place and territory. He defines "place" as a state of stability and a "territory" as "an intersection of moving bodies. It is defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it" (Mbembe 261). Nnaemeka uses the word "space" instead of "territory" to define the intersectionality and the shifting characteristic of nego-feminism: "In my view, space presents an expansive notion of terrain that allows for the interplay of resistances and realizations at the heart of the border and critical engagement I call nego-feminism—the brand of feminism that I see unfolding in Africa" (Nnaemeka 377). Nego-feminism is thus a shifting ideology that evolves according to the reality of African women and African society.

1.4 'Western' feminism and African feminisms: the politics of difference

According to Eyayu Kasseye Bayu, the main distinction between 'Western feminism and African feminism is that the former presents gender inequality as the sole struggle that women encounter, while the proponents of the latter "[consider] gender discrimination neither the sole

nor perhaps the primary locus of oppression of Third World women. […] other types of oppression like racism and economic exploitation [are] also to be defeated" (Bayu 54). Feminism should focus on all forms of injustice (poverty, the exploitation of labour, racism, ethnocentrism, neo-colonialism, (cultural) imperialism, and faulty education and health care) that infringe on women's rights. Susan Arndt also claims that the aim of African feminisms is to discuss "gender roles in the context of oppressive mechanism [such as,] socio-economic exclusion and exploitation, gerontocracy, religious fundamentalism as well as dictatorial and/or corrupt" (Arndt, "Perspective" 32). It should therefore not concern itself exclusively with 'Western' struggles, such as the disputes that revolve around "[gender], capitalism and global economy" (32). In her article, Oshadi Mangena argues that African feminists criticise 'Western' scientific feminism because of its claim to universality (Mangena 98). She then adds that 'Western' feminism consider that their ideology must be adopted by all women. They consider 'Western' feminism as an ideology that holds "the true credentials of 'science'" (98).[2] She claims that whenever African women try to challenge 'Western' claim of universality by presenting their own ideology, the West denies such difference "by according it a non-scientific status" (98). Responding to Susan Arndt's comment on the necessity of treating African feminism as a plurality, Mangena questions this requirement to associate plurality and African feminism: "why [is it] normal to refer to 'Western' feminism in the singular but problematic to do the same with regard to African feminism [?]" (98). She claims that "the answer lurking behind" the idea of resisting the singularity of African feminism comes from "the undying Western superiority complex" (99). She explains that according to radical 'Western' feminists, they are the only one who have "the exclusive right to confer the credential of [universality]" (99). The plurality in the term 'African feminisms' deny the African women the opportunity "to ascend to the heights of science" (99). This tendency excludes African women and emphasizes the inequality between 'Westerners' and Africans. Mangena's argument is worth discussing, however, in her article, she ignores an important point: as aforementioned, the idea of plurality of African feminisms is not only a label created by 'Western' feminists but it is an idea acknowledged by several African scholars such as, among many others, Obioma Nnaemeka, Oyèrónké Oyěwúmí (see above). Obioma Nnameka do not condemn the idea of plurality in African feminisms but she comments on the alleged universality of feminisms. She

[2] She explains that during the evolution of 'Western' feminism, "it has assumed the character of science" (Mangena 98). It has been taught and exported in the world as a 'science' claiming objectivity and universality (one of the basic principles of science) (Mangena 98). In her article, Mangena only questions and criticises this universality and objectivity of science adopted by 'Western' feminism and denied from "African feminism" (Mangena 98).

writes that "Western feminism is […] caught up in its ambivalence: fighting for inclusion, it installs exclusions; advocating change, it resists change; laying claims to movement, it resists moving" (Nnaemeka, 363).

'Western' feminists have also criticised African feminisms. They consider it to be too lenient towards men, and they argue that it bends rules and normalises gender inequalities, which could endanger women (Bayu 56): "Members of ['Western' feminism] strongly believe that African feminists oppose ['Western' feminism without] having [any] ground reason, but just for the sake of opposing" (57). When it comes to gender, 'Western' feminists believe that women and men, being social beings, are similar, and that their roles should not be determined by their gender but by their capabilities (57). Accordingly, 'Western' feminists criticise African feminism for the belief that men and women are different and that they would serve society better if each respected their role (see the discussion of womanism in Chapter 3; 57).

1.5 Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism is a form of scholarship that engages in the process of unreading patriarchy in the Quran and the Sunnah (*hadith* – a saying of the prophet; Abou-bakr 26). Abou Bakr writes that Islamic feminism has two main goals. First, it debunks dominant discourses that associate Islam with sexism or misogyny. Second, it provides an "egalitarian interpretation" that is supported by the Quran and the *hadiths* (26). She adds that Islamic feminism has four main corpuses:

> The first body of work examines the Qurʾan and its exegetical tradition. The second tackles Islamic jurisprudence. The third addresses the ḥadīth tradition and tends to be smaller in volume and scope as well as less systematic than the first two categories. The last type focuses on Sufism and its potential role as a theological corrective to religious patriarchy. (Abou-bakr 26)

Some scholars consider Islamic feminism to be a revolutionary project that will contribute to the study of gender-sensitive subjects but also to hermeneutical reform (a reform regarding the interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith that concerns women) (Abu-bakr 26). Others criticise Islamic feminism on several grounds. First, they claim that feminism and Islam are incompatible (African feminist scholars refuse to associate African feminism with Islam, see Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 37). Second, Yasmin Moll (a professor of anthropology of religion and media) criticises the weak methodology that Islamic feminists use to interpret Islamic tradition and canonical texts (the Quran and the Prophetic Tradition). She notes that the

main purpose of Islamic feminism should not be the modernisation of pre-existing Islamic concepts, which have already been interpreted by jurists and exegetes who are well versed in the matter, but to "[constitute] new relations to texts and their contexts, and new normative imaginings of what these relations should consist of" (Moll 41). She further explains that, even though Islamic tradition is sometimes not dynamic, diverse, or even multi-faceted, it is important to consider that it is not always possible to choose or reject whatever narrative fits a given purpose best : "The traditional commentaries are rejected [by Islamic feminists] not only because of their substantive content, but precisely because they fail to adhere to what Islamic feminists believe is the correct way to reason and argue within an Islamic horizon (and this goes both ways, of course)" (Moll 42). She also argues that there is another "lost" (43) point in the arguments of Islamic feminists: they claim that the fight for "gender jihad" is only a continuation of a tradition of diversity and that known inconsistencies in Islamic principles are disregarded by jurists in order to present Islam as a "monolith of consensus" (43). Thus, Islamic feminists believe that the relationship between a believer and the traditional sources should not be "mediated" but "immediate", which means that the believer should be the sole responsible of the interpretation of the Quran or the hadiths that concerns him. The believer should not count on scholars or other human beings to provide him an interpretation of the traditional sources (43). Dr Muqtedar Khan (a participant in the gender jihad, according to Yasmin Moll), points out that reliance on an intermediary and their limited interpretation of the Quran and hadiths encourage the emergence of a separation (or barrier) between Muslim women and the Islamic sources. Khan describes this separation as the "Epistemological Hijab" (Khan). This view encourages a new or modernised interpretation of the canonical Islamic texts that Moll criticises. She considers *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) as the main problem with Islamic feminism: Islamic feminists disregard the interpretations of religious scholars and treat them as irrelevant. Abou-bakr Omaima and Asma Barlas echo Moll's concerns by presenting a critical partial reading of the Quran without deriving arguments from the canonical text. A partial reading that only concerns verses about women. Omaima writes that the aim of Islamic feminism is not to interpret the entirety of the Quran but only to disambiguate the problematic and confusing verses that concern women directly.

Conversely, Shuruq Naguib criticises those Islamic feminist scholars who always try to highlight patriarchal ideologies in divine discourse. Naguib points out that Muslim feminists try to blame those who favour traditional Muslim hermeneutics for their patriarchal interpretation of the Quran and to salvage the Quran from its inadequate interpretation. To this end, Islamic feminists allege that the entire *tafsir* (hermeneutic) tradition causes women to

become voiceless participants in the development of Islam. He adds that Islamic feminists neglect traditional *tafsir* because they have been excluded from it for several centuries. However, they "[hastily] carry out" (Naguib 4) these interpretations without any thorough knowledge of the Quran.

In an interview on women's rights and gender in the Quran, Asma Barlas says that there is an "anti-patriarchal episteme" in the Quran in which the notions of "God" and "the creator" are not gendered. There is no male authority figure that resembles a father, the word of God is not gendered, and there is no "theological reason to assume that God, for unaccountable reasons, will favour men just because they are biologically male" (Barlas 1 :31-41). She then states that God created men and women from the same soul, which means that "both men and women act as vice-regents of God on Earth and have mutual obligation to enjoy the right and forbid the wrong" (Barlas 2 :04-07). Aysha Hidayatullah's counterargument to Muslim feminists such as Asma Barlas, who claim that there is no gender inequality in the Quran on the basis of spiritual equality, is that many questionable verses are written in a patriarchal tone. She also claims that some verses promote the authority of men over women (Hidayatullah 160). However, Asma Barlas, in her own words, is "very well aware of these verses that speak to male authority" (Barlas 2 :52-55). She states that "I see [these verses] as historical contingencies". The original audience of the Quran comprised patriarchal tribes living in the seventh century, and "it spoke to them in words that, I think, made sense to those particular people" (3 :04- 10). However, she adds that these specific notions of patriarchy have since disappeared, and there is no "ethological compulsion to take them as the sole focal point of interpreting the entire Quran" (3 :16-20). She concludes by saying that scripture has a variety of meanings and touches upon many "ethical possibilities" (3 :29) that the members of every generation need "to apply in their own time" (3 :37). Omaima echoes Barlas' view and adds that the main purpose of Islamic feminist hermeneutics is the "pursuit of religiously grounded gender equality [which] is first and foremost an endeavour to reclaim and foreground the central ethical principles and messages of the Qurʾanic text, which are integral to the Islamic faith" (Abou Bakr 28). Omaima then adds that there are many interpretations of the Quran. Those interpretations originate from male and female exegetes as well as from Islamic feminist hermeneutics. The Quran encourages believers to pursue knowledge in order to identify the best interpretations, the best teachings, and the best meanings (Quran 7 :145).[3] However, that

[3] "We inscribed everything for him in the Tablets which taught and clearly explained everything. [We said,] 'Hold on to them with [all your] strength, and tell your people to hold fast to those most excellent teachings'" (trans. Kaskas 83).

multiple interpretations are possible does not mean that they "are [all] equal in their ethical significance and moral priority" (Abou Bakr 28) or that they may deviate from the divine texts (28).

Another criticism concerns the term feminism in "Islamic feminism". In her article "Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative", Barlas disagrees with Margot Badran's use of the term "feminism" in the phrase "Islamic feminism". She explains her disagreement in five stages: The first reflects her unease after the release of her book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān*, which was called "feminist". She disagrees with the term because she calls herself a "believing woman" ("Engaging Islamic" 16) rather than a feminist. In the second stage, she adds that her indignation and discomfort with the term "feminist" are due to its association with white women's ideology: "many [but not all] of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color like myself and that too in our presence, as if we didn't exist" (17). Being called a feminist made her feel as if she had lost her identity. She argues in the third stage that the term is associated with Muslim feminists who believe that Islam is a sexist religion. Barlas' view is as follows:

> Muslims read Islam as a patriarchy partly because of how they read the Qur'an, who reads it, and the contexts in which they read it. In other words, I believe that texts are always read from and within specific material and ideological sites and that we need to be aware of these sites when attempting to understand readings of scripture. (17)

Unlike Barlas, Omaima feels that the term "Islamic feminism" can be limited, "hegemonic and concealing", but does not reject it because of the qualifier "Islamic". She considers that it "is the key framework under which this knowledge is to be situated" (Al-sharmani 84). After her exchange with Badran, Barlas realised that if her analysis of gender equality is derived from the canonical text, she cannot be said to have positioned the Quran within feminist discourse. Instead, her work may be thought of as "re-locating feminism in the Quran" (Barlas, "Engaging Islamic" 19). If this definition is correct, then, she says, "I am an Islamic feminist, and there's no escaping that fact!" (19). Although she accepts the term "feminist", she still does not call herself one because she did not choose to do so (the fourth stage). In the fifth stage, she states that at a time when the West "has unleashed such bloodshed against Muslims everywhere" (20), she finds pleasure in resisting a term that has connotations of Western imperialism and post-colonialism (20).

2 (Mis)representation of West African Muslims in the Film *Cuties* and the "#BringBackOurGirls" and "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists" Campaigns

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on film. Specifically, it concerns the film *Cuties* (2020), which is relevant to this thesis as it was directed by a Senegalese Muslim woman, Maïmouna Doucouré, and has a female Senegalese protagonist. The first section below describes the reactions of African Muslim women who are happy with the film and those of non-African Muslim women who criticise it. The second section focuses on campaigns that are related to West African Muslim women. "#BringBackOurGirls" is a campaign that aims to rescue the Chibok girls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria. "#WeShouldAllBeFeminist" is a feminist movement that was inspired by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's speech *We Should All Be Feminist*.

The chapter, which draws on social media and film, analyses the portrayal of West African Muslim women in 'Western' media. The two sections are presented in a single chapter because they are subjected to the same type of analysis. That analysis concerns reactions and criticism from audiences (Muslim women and, most importantly, West African Muslim women) whose members are concerned with their representations by the Global North. The selection was also driven by considerations of temporal proximity: the film and the two campaigns are recent events. The backlash that they attracted provides an insight into vestigial neo-imperialism and 'Western' control over Muslim women. Another commonality between the film *Cuties* and the two campaigns is that their negative portrayal of African Muslim women generated hostile consequences on Muslims and African Muslim women in particular. In the eyes of some online creators, *Cuties* consistently promoted a negative portrayal of African Muslim women. "#BringBackOurGirls" diverted attention from its ultimate objective, which may have reduced its effectiveness. As will be explained later, some blamed Muslims for failing to condemn the actions of Boko Haram. Finally, as for the last section, African Muslim women might have been excluded from "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists".

2.1 In Film: *Cuties*

Cuties is a French film that follows Amy, a Senegalese immigrant who is new to life in Paris. She comes from a strict and conservative family: "her family's repressive background is

highlighted after her father decides to have a second wife and Amy's mother is forced to accept this second marriage" (Lan). Amy is also forced to assume the role of a housewife. She cleans, cooks, and takes care of the family. She also is forced to join her family in prayer, a religious practice that she finds boring (Mitchel). In one of the first scenes of the film, her aunt preaches about the dangers of promiscuity by saying that "evil dwells in the bodies of uncovered women" (Mitchel 2020). Amy then meets Angelica, Jess, Coumba, and Yasmine and becomes a member of their dance troupe, which is called "Cuties". The members of the troupe dress inappropriately for their age and perform risqué dance routines: "Amy uses her love for dancing and popularity as a form of escapism from her restrictive home life. Unfortunately, her trip to this dreamland ends, and she finds herself fading and becoming someone else entirely" (Lan). The French-Senegalese filmmaker Maïmouna Doucouré presents *Cuties* as a film in which an eleven-year-old girl is torn between two types of femininity: one is provided by her Muslim Senegalese culture and the other is provided by the dance group called "Cuties". The former may stifle her femininity and the other excessively display a twisted understanding of what femininity is (Doucouré).

[4]

Figure 1. Posters of the film *Cuties* (Netflix)

As soon as its poster was released, *Cuties* attracted criticism on various grounds, such as its hypersexualization of young children and its stereotypical representation of African Muslim women. It is the latter criticism that is of interest in this thesis. According to Edward Ahmed Mitchell, one of the most vehemently criticised scenes is when Amy's family perform an exorcism on her. To that end, they employ "a melodic Arabic recitation that was clearly used to mimic the Quran". This recitation plays as Amy stands in the middle of a room (Mitchel). Amy's aunts invoke God and throw water on her, which make her twerk, mimicking obscene dances. Mitchell describes this scene as disturbing and offensive to the Muslim community (Mitchell). As mentioned above, the representation of Muslim women as rebels against Islam

[4] The first poster which received many backlashes has been removed from Netflix and replaced by the second poster.

recurs, especially in film. To cite one of many examples, *Elite*, a Spanish television series about teenagers struggling with their identities, families, religions, and social positions, portrays a Muslim character, Nadia, as a typical shy and quiet *Hijabi* (veiled) girl. She is then seen removing her *hijab* “to seduce” a white man (Qaderi).

Representations of the removal of the hijab as signs of freedom and escape from an oppressive religion are common on Netflix. Muslim women and Muslims in general demand that Netflix represent them more accurately. For example, Bashirat Oladele, an African Muslim blogger, writes in an article that “when we ask for representation, we mean genuine representation – not from non-Muslim women screenwriters who craft their own narratives based on their limited perceptions of what they think Muslim women should be like” (Oladele). This section concerns two reactions to the representation of African Muslim women in *Cuties,* namely the reaction of those who are content with the status quo and the reaction of those who oppose it. The analysis relies on statements made by Muslim women on their blogs and on YouTube.

On her YouTube channel, Samantha J. Boyle uploaded a video that reacts to the trailer of the film. In that video, she questions the notion that Muslim women who wear headscarves should be represented as needing a saviour from the occidental world, which is personified by what she calls “the white guy” (Boyle). She adds that the environment in which Amy lives is always portrayed as dirty (in the trailer, she is seen performing household tasks, and the camera focuses on the dirty floor and the dirty microwave). Boyle then questions the associations between modesty and oppression, between oppression and Islam, and between freedom and ‘Western’ culture. She concludes by saying that “teenagers are so impressionable” and that the negative representation of the Muslim woman might influence their relationship to the *hijab* and their faith.

Khadija Abawajy, an Ethiopian Youtuber, states that the removal of the hijab is not the most concerning issue in *Cuties*. However, she is concerned about the glorification and normalisation of the practice of removing one’s hijab in order to fit in. She adds that there is an association between happiness and conformity with ‘Western’ values in the film, which neglects the benefits of searching for one’s own identity within one’s own culture, religion, or beliefs. Abawajy then explains that the idea of acceptance from the ‘Westerns’ is “flawed. It puts the onus on others to validate us”. Abawajy then comments on the struggle of Muslim women who cover: “it is hard to wear the hijab in this day and age”. Seeing individuals to whom one can relate and who share the same struggle of wanting to fit in may prompt one to choose a path that is contrary to one’s religion, causing belief to become a source of confusion for

young Muslim girls. Abawajy then points out that, although there are Muslims who do not wear the *hijab* and are modest and religious, the film employs the hijab as a “recognized symbol” that is removed (Abawajy).

Khadija Mbowe, a Gambian YouTuber, provides an alternative analysis of the film. In her video, she says that, as a West African Muslim woman, she could “a hundred percent” relate to Amy. She cites the example of the scene in which the protagonist’s aunt says that hell is full of women and that the devil resides in unclothed and immodest women. Mbowe says that she had the same conversations with aunts and grandmothers as a child. Those conversations revolved around marriage, the importance of taking care of a husband, and modesty. She adds that young girls must meet very high expectations: “having the responsibility of ‘it is your job to protect yourself to remain chaste, to remain great […] it is your job to live for [your husband]’” (Mbowe). According to Mbowe, the film “was not for a lot of people and was not going to speak to a lot of people because Maïmouna […] was speaking to young girls through her lived experience and her lived experience has a lot of very interesting intersecting identities that [non-immigrant African Muslim women] will not get” (Mbowe). In Mbowe’s analysis, the representation of Amy as a Senegalese Muslim woman from a conservative family is not far removed from reality. Mbowe uses a quote from James Baldwin’s essay “Nothing Personal” (“It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within”) in order to send a message to those who think that “they have a stronger moral compass than most”. Mbowe explains the message and states that some of the online users criticised *Cuties* by only watching the trailer or the poster, they did not give the movie the benefit of the doubt by watching it. They decided that it is easier to point fingers at certain scenes that maybe problematic but ignore the West African reality that the movie tries to portray. The reactions of certain YouTubers and bloggers who criticise the film without considering the background of its director disregard and exclude this African reality from their reaction (Mbowe).

It is important to account for the background of a director when criticizing their output. Maïmouna Doucouré is a French filmmaker whose parents are Senegalese immigrants. In an interview, she states that she grew up in a polygamous family in which she had two mothers (Ali, “ShortList”). The story that is presented in the film is based on her experiences as a woman and as a second-generation Muslim Senegalese immigrant, the very identity of Amy in *Cuties* (Mbowe). Despite the criticisms of the representation of Muslim women as oppressed, victimised, and in need of a saviour, it is important to note that the film is supposedly based on the negative experiences of its director, which originate from her life in a traditional

conservative family with a polygamous father and restrictions that only apply to women (Ciuffreda). Amy's pursuit of freedom through dance might be her way of escaping the environment that she lives in.

As Aissata Amadou, an African-American YouTuber, states, in television series, Muslim women are almost always isolated from the Muslim community. Thus, no positive surroundings are portrayed, as if they did not exist in those communities (Amadou). The only interactions that Muslims are seen to engage in are with white individuals who represent the idea of freedom. Doucouré could have created another character to represent other Muslim women who are independent, assertive, and strong. In the film, there is a scene in which Amy's mother enlists an imam to chase off what she thinks is a devil that possesses her daughter. However, the imam refuses to participate and says, "she is not possessed, she is a young girl". He then looks at the mother who is forced to attend and accept her husband's second wedding and says "if you do not want to stay with your husband, you are not obliged to do so" (Mbowe). Mbowe claims that Doucouré created this scene "because in the Western world, there is this holier-than-thou attitude about how Islam is a naturally misogynistic religion" (Mbowe). The scene balances out one problematic character by a more positive one. However, Muslim women may have found it more relatable if the positive characters were Muslim girls rather than an imam. Such a positive depiction of a Muslim girl or woman could have helped the character to establish a comprehensive self-identity. At the end of the film, Amy leaves the dance troupe and does not attend her father's wedding. Instead, she finds tranquillity by playing in a park with children of her age. The common denominator between the two cultures is that they expect Amy to grow up prematurely: "Amy's familial culture dictates that she must come of age by devoting herself to her family and her future husband. Her new world [(the dance group)] looks to promiscuity as an indication of adulthood" (Rego). The ending may suggest that Amy could not find her identity or femininity either in the dance troupe or in her family but that she finds joy in the simple activities that her peers enjoy.

I echo the argument of African users who relate to the story of Amy. It is important not to deny this representation of a reality that exists within the West African Muslim community. In *Cuties*, Doucouré represents Muslim women who struggles because of an inaccurate interpretation of Islam that only benefits male authorities. Discussing this reality brings awareness to these issues and pushes individuals to act upon them. "African familial and cultural/religious expectations and the types of negotiations that often afflict young children in the home in the West have real implications on their behaviors and a nuanced and rich discussion on this dual-identity/negotiation is important and welcomed" (Boakye). A criticism

of the representation of Muslim women, in *Cuties*, is difficult to put forth because the movie relates a personal experience. However, Doucouré could have suggested an alternative and positive representation of the African Muslim woman.

2.2 On social media: the "#Bringbackourgirls" campaign

14 April 2014, members of Boko Haram (an Islamist terrorist group in Nigeria) forcibly entered a state school in Chibok (in the North East of Nigeria), kidnapped 276 girls, and burnt the building down (Chiluwa). Among the kidnapped girls, 43 escaped successfully, but 200 remained captive (26). The missing girls were later sold as slaves or forcibly married to members of the terrorist group (26). After discovering this tragic news, the families, aided by Oby Ezekwesili (a former Nigerian Minister of Education and Vice President of the World Bank), organized demonstrations in Abuja in order to pressure the government into acting to rescue the girls (26). The kidnapping of the Chibok girls gained massive attention on social media. The Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurGirls became popular, and celebrities soon joined the movement by sharing photos of themselves holding signs with the hashtag. Michelle Obama gave a speech about the kidnapping, which is analysed in the next section. Malala Yousafzai (a passionate advocate for girls' right to education) had multiple meetings with the desperate parents and promised that she would deliver their message to the then Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan (Robach). The hashtag became a "rallying cry for the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls" and was posted 800,000 times on Twitter (Litoff). It gained so much attention that even politicians, such as Hillary Clinton, tweeted about the kidnapping (Litoff). However, the online campaign was not fruitful and produced a sizable backlash.

Before examining the criticisms that the campaign attracted, it is important to understand the development of social activism as outlined by Rodrigo Sandoval-Almazan and J. Ramon Gil-Garcia. In their article "Towards Cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the Use of Social Media and Other Information Technologies for Political Activism and Social Movements", they develop a four-stage model that describes how social activism is used on social media. The stages are "(1) Triggering event, (2) media response, (3) viral organization, and (4) physical response" (369). A triggering event is what initiates social mobilization. More precisely, "[this] detonating factor is an extraordinary event that promotes a social reaction to it" (369). Secondly, because of social mobilization, news media are bound to cover the event and to broadcast it globally. Then, in order to reach a younger audience, a social movement has to enter the world of social networks and to begin building an online community so as to

develop a sense of identity and to pressure dominant groups, such as governments and corporations, into action. Finally, news coverage and social media activism should produce actions that promote the movement, such as street demonstrations (369).

Online activism sometimes weakens responses in the material world (369). The interconnection between online activism and the harm that it can cause to specific movements is captured by the term “slacktivism”. In the “#BringBackOurGirls” campaign, online activism hit a dead end, in the sense that the active sharing of the hashtag on social media did not yield any apparent results. A social movement that begins on social media often dies down when another extraordinary event takes place. The examples include the “#metoo” movement, the “#IranElection” hashtag, the “#BlackLivesMatter” initiative, and the #SavesheikhJarrah hashtag that is currently used on social media to draw attention to the Palestinian cause. In spite of the successful online mobilization of these movements, some of them have made little or no progress. For example, the “#Metoo” movement gained traction internationally owing to social media and the involvement of celebrities. However, despite the participation of important female figures, such as Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, and Jennifer Lawrence, as well as that of male personalities, such as Terry Crews and James Van Der Beek, no meaningful change resulted (Watt). #BringBackOurGirls also fell prey to slacktivism. The attention that the campaign drew shifted elsewhere over time and especially at the end of 2014. Over a year and a half later, 200 girls were still missing (Erin). At present, there is little interest in the campaign. The hashtag could not rescue all the kidnapped girls. In 16 august 2021, only 3 girls were rescued out of the 200 girls (Ozor)

Some meet this argument by stating that the “#BringBackOurGirls” campaign was unique in that it referred to no “divisive issue. Unlike hashtag campaigns that have come and gone before, #BringBackOurGirls has unified a global audience and, apart from a microscopic percentage of Boko Haram supporters, the whole world is behind the message, if not the means, of the campaign” (Wren). However, the reactions about the success of the campaign vary from those who believe that it was ineffective and those have a more optimistic view and consider that any small achievements can contribute to the success of the campaign. Asked about the online fervour for the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in an interview, Ben Hewitt says “that some people raise their voice once in solidarity, and others keep a much longer vigil, but both are valid campaigning tactics” (Shearlaw). Oby Ezekwesili, for his part, meets the claim that the campaign yielded little or no results by saying that the campaign has not failed as long as some individual lights even a single candle for a kidnapped Chibok girl (Shearlaw). Even though some have defended the campaign, it is worth analysing some of its aspects that were

subjected to intensive criticism, such as the difference between the reactions of Nigerian (these reactions concern Nigerians from Nigeria and not from the diaspora. For the sake of argument, I decided to only include the reaction of continental Nigerian in opposition to the 'Westerns'' reaction and 'Western' (mainly Europeans and Americans) users as well as the neo-imperialist connotations of the 'Western' adoption of the "#BringBackOurGirls" movement.

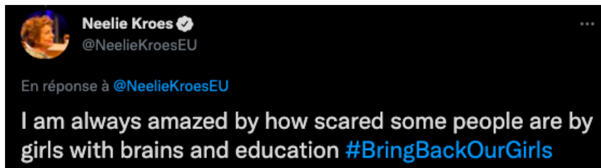
2.2.1 *The response of Nigerian and non-Nigerian social media users to #BringBackOurGirls: "A lived experience versus an uninformed opinion of third world countries" (Oladele 1)*

In the case of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, many members of the internet community united to share the hashtag across social media. On Twitter, #BringBackOurGirls was discussed by people from all over the world and of different religions, cultures, and political affiliations. In her MA thesis, Ebunoluwa Grace Oladele presents an interesting comparative analysis of the reactions of non-Nigerian (North American/European) and Nigerian social media users not only to the kidnapping of the Chibok girls but also to the way the crisis was handled nationally and internationally. Oladele notes that Nigerian users, for whom the kidnapping of the Chibok girls was a more intimate event, pleaded with the Nigerian government to take action. By contrast, examining tweets by North American/European users, she "observed a level of lack of empathy and disbelief in some of the [online] content" (46). This section will explore how the reactions of the #BringBackOurGirls online activists broadly differed according to their location.

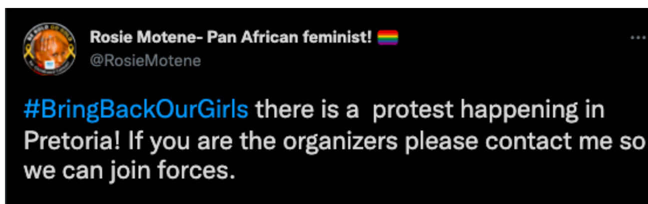
The globality of social media can hinder campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls because not all social media users are directly impacted by the movement. Different needs and priorities in the Nigerians' tweets compared with the non-Nigerians' tweets may lead to the dissemination of different information among the two groups and a loss of focus on the core intent of the movement (which is the rescue of the kidnapped Chibok girls). Put differently, the different experiences of online users, created by their different cultures, religions, and socio-political situations, might generate virtual clashes between activists and might also lessen the clarity and credibility of the message. As Oladele points out, the Nigerians' tweets targeted problems such as police brutality against protesters demanding the girls' release, while the non-Nigerians' tweets were focused on matters that were far removed from the main issue. For instance, Girls Right, access to education, using the #BringBackOurGirls campaign for political purposes (see Rep Frederic Wilson's tweets below) and transnational feminism (the tweets talk about other issue related to the aboriginal situation in Canada or to other protests that concerns Black women). Even though, these tweets are supporting the #BringBackOurGirls campaign,

their mentioning other issues may divert the attention on the demand of Nigerians to rescue the kidnapped Chibok girls. Oladele also adds that these tweets show how the Westerns' reaction is limited to certain themes when it concerns third-world issues (Oladele 57).

(Lalonde qtd. in Oladele 57)



(Kroes)



(Montene qtd. in Oladele 57)

The police brutality seen during protests clearly illustrates the different levels of responsibility and risk-taking in offline activism in contrast to online activism. In Nigeria, activists and the victims' families were on the front lines of the battle; they were risking their livelihoods and their lives to protest for the rescue of the kidnapped girls. In July 2015, the Bring Back Our Girls activists held a march in front of the presidential residence in Abuja but were met with several retaliations from the Nigerian police (Otas). According to Belinda Otas, "the more [Bring Back Our Girls] became vociferous with its demand for the girls to be rescued, the more antagonistic the relationship between state and the advocacy group became. This led to their sit-ins and protest marches being disrupted by the police" (Otas). Bring Back Our Girls protests were considered by the Nigerian government to be a form of opposition and as a justification for the protesters' arrest. The Nigerians' tweets are focused on socio-political issues surrounding the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, such as the 2015 Ekiti state election, police brutality, and security (Oladele 47-48-49).

(Kadiri)

(Ṣẹ̀san)

Before introducing the themes present in the non-Nigerians' tweets, it is necessary to further explain the importance of discussing these two different attitudes toward a single event, in this case, the abduction of the Chibok girls. Social media is known to be inhabited by a diverse range of people. While this diversity may be one of the positive elements of social media, it can also be a disadvantage when it comes to online social activism. Diversity on social media implies different forms of opinions, stances, beliefs, and allegiances; thus, when these different online users, along with their preconceived notions, come together to form a social movement, all these beliefs and preconceptions may obscure the core purpose of the movement. This phenomenon can be perceived in the analysis of non-Nigerians' tweets regarding the kidnapping of the Chibok girls. Ebunoluwa Grace Oladele claims that Americans/Europeans' tweets were not "focused on the larger context behind Boko Haram's violence, rather they were focused on what seem to be the regular bane of third-world countries, such as suppression of women [,] poverty [and rights and access to education]" (54). Although these issues are important, they are unrelated to the main goal of the campaign; in a way, they minimize the

credibility of the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag as well as divert the focus from the main purpose: bringing back the kidnapped girls.

Hillary Clinton
@HillaryClinton

Access to education is a basic right & an unconscionable reason to target innocent girls. We must stand up to terrorism. #BringBackOurGirls

6:05 PM · 4 mai 2014 · Twitter for iPhone

(Clinton)

Rep Frederica Wilson
@RepWilson

I have championed the fight to #BringBackOurGirls because every child should be able to safely pursue an education. We must not forget the 112 Chibok schoolgirls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram and remain missing after more than five years.

5:40 PM · 20 déc. 2019 · Twitter Media Studio

(Wilson)

One of the negative aspects of online activism, especially when it comes to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, is the backlash that Muslims and Muslim women received from the internet community and the mainstream media demanding that they condemn Boko Haram. Bob Beckel, a co-host on Fox News, expressed his displeasure about Muslim leaders and Muslim imams who did not condemn the kidnapping of the girls, saying that "I'm waiting for the first cleric or imam who has the guts to say this is not what Mohammed meant and if you don't I'll just assume it's what he did mean" (Fox News qtd. in Pathan). One expects every person, regardless of their religion, to be morally opposed to the kidnapping of young girls who were sold or were to be sexual slaves. However, Beckel's demand is problematic because it encourages the narrative of associating Islam and Muslims with a terrorist group that justifies its actions by citing verses from the Quran or Hadiths from the Prophet Mohamed, interpreting them in order to utilize them to their advantage.

This behaviour among many non-Nigerians reinforces an imperialist narrative in which the white superior invader interferes with a third-world country by pointing out societal flaws and the need to remedy them. According to Mary Maxfield, “the White, Northern world adopted and abandoned ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ with equal readiness, and both this support and its eventual expiration depended on the centering of imperial narratives about the Global South” (Maxfield 10). Maxfield also adds that

> among the Northern participants, the Chibok students were symbols, a contemporary recreation of an old picture—the poor African, the oppressed woman of color. The correct response to the symbol, according to colonial practice, was pity and military intervention. The request from other African women—that those in the Global North stop speaking for the people of Nigeria—largely went unheard in 2014, as it had centuries earlier”. (Maxfield 10)

This statement brings about the next section, in which the imperial resonance mentioned by Maxfield is further discussed.

2.2.2 *The imperialist resonance in the ‘Western’ adoption of the #BringBackOurGirls movement: The White Saviour Complex*

Before discussing the imperialist narrative regarding feminist hashtag activism and more specifically the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, it is important to understand the meaning of new/modern imperialism and the way it emerged. New imperialism is said to have evolved from a “colonial regime [which is a monopoly] exercised by the bourgeoisie of an imperialist country, based on economic and extraeconomic pressure in a dependent country” (Goncharov 467). This imperialist monopoly has two basic functions: on the one hand, it exploits the colonies; on the other hand, it maintains and develops the political enslavement necessary for its own existence” (467). This ‘old imperialism’ was mostly obtained by armed control of a region (e.g., British imperialism in India). In contrast, the new imperialism “may not occur with the tell-tale signs of a heavily stationed foreign army, but is still in place by means of economic, financial and cultural hegemony; with a showcase of a strong military force” (Deora). The imperialism of the modern day is a consequence of long-term colonialism and occupation of a powerless region by a powerful state. The African continent is still subjected to a modern imperialism/ neo-imperialism in the form of control over its economy, finance, culture, and

natural resources.[5] In other words, the former colonizers still hold the upper hand and exercise dominance over the continent. Furthermore, a neo-imperialist resonance probably exists in the conscious or sub-conscious minds of many 'Western' people; this can be noticed in discussions around issues (#BringBackOurGirls) and events that affect the Global South.

Such attitudes perpetuate a stereotyped view, based on a superiority complex, of a victimized Africa that must be saved and civilized by 'Westerners'. Online activism is one forum in which this view can be observed. Online social movements that emerge to address specific issues in the Global South are often subjected to neo-imperialist assumptions from the Global North. Take, for example, the Kony 2012 campaign, which was launched by an American charity called Invisible Children in the form of a short documentary film. Joseph Kony is the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army guerilla group. His group is said to have abducted 60,000 children (Curtis). The purpose of the video was to make Joseph Kony, a Ugandan militia leader and an International Criminal Court fugitive, known globally in order to have him arrested by the end of 2012. The Kony 2012 short documentary was viewed more than 100 million times (Meikle 373). According to Dailey, the film "was a number one topic of conversation on Twitter and was shared multiple times on Facebook by concerned citizens and celebrities alike" (Dailey). However, like many online campaigns, the Kony 2012 campaign was short-lived and ineffective. The campaign was criticized for oversimplifying a geopolitical struggle; according to Eleanor Tiplady Higgs, this behaviour is particularly common in "African-originated campaigns [that] cross national and cultural borders to engage a primarily Western audience" (Higgs 345).[6] This underestimation of an international problem is a common trait in online activism and is often due to a misunderstanding or ignorance of foreign issues.

The imperialist suppositions and the white saviour complex that accompanies the hashtags are yet another downside of online activism related to Third-world countries' affairs. Like the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, Kony 2012 was also criticized on the grounds of its neo-imperialist undertones. The campaign placed Uganda in the position of a victim that needed 'salvation' from the 'Western' world. However, it is important to note the difference between the two campaigns. The Kony 2012 initiative originated from the Global North (it was initiated

[5] In imperialism, the colonisers consider these populations as alien, inferior and uncivilised. One of the justifications used by the colonisers, in order to settle in a country, is the need to save these populations from their un-civilised mentality (Hansen). Neo-imperialism still holds the same mechanisms but in a modern world. In the case of #BringBackOurGirls campaign, the old mentality of 'saving the African victims' is still present. In addition, The U.S sent military groups in Nigeria to, supposedly, help rescue the kidnapped girls. This intervention may be a demonstration of a neo-imperialist mentality. (Maxfield 10)

[6] The Kony 2012 is a campaign that originated in America, however, #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which is the main focus of this thesis' analysis, originated in Africa and more precisely in Nigeria.

by a Northern organization), meaning that there were already risks of neo-imperialist undertones in the expression of the campaign's message. In contrast, the Bring Back Our Girls campaign found its roots in Nigeria, arising in response to local protests. Therefore, the campaign "was the outcome of such interventions; [it] called for international support of indigenous efforts" (Higgs 345). In the case of the Bring Back Our Girls movement, the location of the emergence of the movement shows that the imperialist weight did not arise within the campaign itself but rather because of social media and how the message of the initiative was interpreted and perceived by 'Westerns'. Thus, the Bring Back Our Girls campaign did not escape the white saviour complex, which completely changed the narrative of the campaign. As Shenila Khoja-Moolji states in her article, "the [online] participants' eagerness to take up hashtag feminism on behalf of third-world schoolgirls from Nigeria betrays the awareness and histories that they bring to feminist activism." She also notes that "the kidnapping fits [too] well within the all-too-familiar trope of the threat of Muslim terrorists, especially towards women" (Khoja-Moolji 348). Bring Back Our Girls falls within the narrative of victimization of African women and especially African Muslim women. Oversimplifying an issue that concerns the kidnapping of young women by pointing fingers and victimizing a larger group of women, in this case Nigerian Muslim women, could be argued to be a symptom of the white savior complex. Other than hashtag activism, the aforementioned symptoms can be seen in the feminist discourses that victimize Muslim women, and especially Nigerian Muslim women, by representing them in literature as submissive to a male authority. Nigerian Muslim women are often depicted by 'Western' feminists as non-feminists due to their submission and alleged unwillingness to fight back against religious zealotry and patriarchy (Bayu 5657). This accusation is made while disregarding the existing culture and without taking into consideration the women's religion, social classes, or belonging to a movement other than 'Western' feminism. To refute this presumption that consider the Nigerian woman as un-feminist or submissive, the next chapter will further develop this point by analysing novels with Nigerian Muslim women who fall into the category of 'feminists' or otherwise African feminists.

The narrative of white Northerners saving brown/black women from brown/black men, which is often used when third-world countries are concerned, is emphasized when foreign military operations are conducted in order to aid African peoples in handling their national affairs. This phenomenon took place during the Bring Back Our Girls campaign when the United States deployed "six US military advisers [in order] to assist the nation in its search efforts, bringing the total number of US military personnel there to 18, including the 11 who are permanently assigned to advise and help train Nigerian military forces" (NBC Universal,

2015). Online users urged the US government to help rescue the kidnapped Chibok girls by sending military troops to help the Nigerian army (Parkinson). However, the deployment of military aid in Africa would do more harm than good and would precipitate a much larger military confrontation on the continent. Jumoke Balogun warned online participants of the campaign that:

> the United States military loves your hashtags because it gives them legitimacy to encroach and grow their military presence in Africa. AFRICOM (United States Africa Command), the military body that is responsible for overseeing US military operations across Africa, gained much from #KONY2012 and will now gain even more from #BringBackOurGirls. (Balogun)

US military aid is an excuse from 'Western' powers to keep a firm hand on the African continent. Social media users, in the other hand, pressured the mainstream media to cover the issue, which it did ; however, as on social media, undertones of neo-imperialism and superiority were heavily present in mainstream media reports : The UK and US media did not focus on the Nigerian context or the rescue of the kidnapped girls ; instead, the mainstream media covered the issue according to their country's interest : they went beyond the kidnapping and depicted the girls as a symbol of "defiance against [Muslim] militants" (Ofori-Parku and Senyo 2490). The UK media framed the kidnapping of the girls as "an attack on Western education" (Ofori-Parku and Senyo 2489), which implies that education and schools are a 'Western' institution. The *Guardian* even translated the name of the terrorist organization Boko Haram as "Western education is sinful or forbidden" (2489). This translation of the term Boko Haram, often used by 'Western' media, has elicited many doubts among Hausa scholars such as Liman Muhammad who disagree with the 'Western' translation of the term (see below). The original full name of Boko Haram is: "Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, which in Arabic means 'People of the Sunnah (the practise and examples of the Prophet Muhammad's life) for Preaching and Jihad Group". The name Boko Haran was created by the Hausa population in order to shorten the name. While there was no debate about the word 'Haram', which in Arabic means 'prohibited' or 'sinful', and there was confusion about the term 'Boko'. 'Boko' is often associated with the term 'book' in English (Magazine Monitor). However, the correct translation was presented by a Hausa language expert, Paul Newman, who mentioned in his article that the original translation originated from "Liman Muhammad, a Hausa scholar from northern Nigeria, some 45 years ago" (Newman 7). Boko means "something (an idea or object) that involves a fraud or any form of deception" (Liman 8-10). It is interesting to keep in mind that, in the early 1900s, the British colonial government forced the Hausa population to pursue

British forms of education rather than Quranic reading. The Hausa population considered the British government as ‘fraudulent’ and ‘dishonest’. Therefore, according to Paul Newman, “the semantic development was not “book → *boko* → western education → sham, fraud, etc., BUT RATHER, *boko* sham, fraud → western education (including the writing of Hausa in Roman script)” (Newman 8). The current translation is incorrect because ‘boko’ does not suggest ‘Western education’ but rather “unauthentic” and “fake” (Magazine Monitor). The false translation of the term Boko Haram as “Western education is sinful” and associating the Islamist’ group intention as “an attack on Western education” might suggest that African issues are deemed important by the mainstream media only when associated with a ‘Western sentiment’ (Ofori-Parku and Senyo 2489).

It is important to discuss another aspect of the campaign: the imperialist affiliation related to the use of the pronoun ‘our’ and the association of the kidnapped girls with family members. This appropriation is very damaging. One recurring issue seen in hashtag activism around feminist or female-related campaigns is the use of personal pronouns in hashtags such as #IAmMalala or, in this case, the possessive determiner ‘our’ in #BringBackOurGirls. Although the use of hashtags proved to be prominent in ‘raising awareness’ and symbolizing solidarity, one cannot deny “the element of co-option within the campaigns through the use of the claims that “*I Am* Malala” or claiming the Chibok girls as [‘ours’]” (Berents 514). In her essay, Helen Berents addresses this issue of appropriation through the use of possessive determiners and pronouns, describing it as an imperialist appropriation by the Global North of the ideally victimized African girls:

> This language closely mirrors rights rhetoric in the United States through which we conceptualize women’s needs as valid because ‘she could be someone’s daughter, sister, friend or mother.’ The dualistic construction of women as worthy of political recognition due to their relationship to a more privileged agent works powerfully in the age of hashtag activism through its ability to draw emotional response and impassioned reaction from a non-contiguous and apathetic populace. (Berents 514)

As the wife of then US president Barack Obama, with all the privileges that this position entails, Michelle Obama was not in a position to address the Chibok girls (who are victims of gun violence and forced prostitution) as “hers” or similar to “her daughters” given their vastly different geographic, social, and cultural environments. The use of the possessive also supports an image of women in which their political and social representation is important only through their position as “property” (Loken 1100). The discourse of assigning importance to women

only when they are associated with another party is often used in the context of defending victims of sexual abuse. It is usually seen on social media discourse when online users attempt to conjure empathy by imagining a victim as their mother, daughter, sister, or family member; consequently, the victim is robbed of her own identity as a woman and is given 'conditional' value.

Another theme that is often seen in 'third-world'-related campaigns is the automatic association of all African women with a tragic event that happened to one or several specific African women. During the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, the aforementioned mistake was made by Chris Brown and the BBC when they retweeted a photograph of Jenabu Balde of Guinea-Bissau, a person unrelated to the kidnapping (Estrin). This is an example of how African girls are claimed "as indispensably ours while also constituting them as interchangeable others" (Loken 1101). In this case, all African women are, by a stereotyped definition, associated with the kidnapped girls and therefore given the label of 'miserable African women' who need saving. 'Westerns' thus transformed "a young woman without connection to the abductees—or even to their country of origin—into a literal poster child for the cause" (Maxfield 891). This confusion depicts the Global North's mindset of viewing women from third-world countries as a tool to demonstrate their alleged knowledge of the Chibok girls kidnapping and the campaign and their participation in it.

2.3 #WeShouldAllBeFeminists campaign

2.3.1 *Commercialization of feminism (femvertising and faux feminism)*

This section will examine the negative effects of social media and hashtag activism on feminist movements. More precisely, it will show how feminist movements are often used as marketing strategies to sell products and how selling women's empowerment is a strategy that has frequently been used by brands to attract clients. Take, for example, the Virginia Slims cigarette that debuted in 1968 (Iqbal). This cigarette brand was launched by Phillip Morris and was the first to target women. The image below presents an old-fashioned black-and-white image of a woman smoking in secret, with a caption that describes this woman as oppressed and infantilized by her husband: "In 1915, Mrs. Cynthia Robinson was caught smoking in the cellar behind the preserves. Although she was 34, her husband sent her straight to her room". This image is contrasted with a vibrant and colourful image of a modern woman posing with a proud posture, with a message conveying the difference between the two women and implying the

involvement of the brand in changing women's rights: "It's different now. Now there's a slim cigarette for women only. New Virginia Slims" ("How Tobacco Compagnie"). The feminist sentiment of the time, emphasized by the black-and-white photo evoking the suffragette movement ("How Tobacco Compagnie"), was used by tobacco companies to sell their cigarette by "making lung cancer an equal-opportunity disease" (Iqbal). Selling empowerment using women's struggle for equality to promote a brand of cigarette responsible for many diseases is considered by Katie Martell (a marketing consultant) corporate hypocrisy (Martell).

Many other brands have also attempted to associate social phenomena with commercial products. CoverGirl, for example, launched #GirlsCan, a campaign that included celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres, Katy Perry, Pink, Janelle Monae, Queen Latifah, and Sofia Vergara. The message of the campaign was that women's strength allows them to accomplish anything they want and that women can achieve goals they were previously prevented from achieving because of sexism and the prejudice of society holding them back. The message, although positive, was heavily charged with marketing to sell mascaras. In this case, feminism is used to sell empowerment by sexist and misogynistic companies. The toxic habit of teaching young women to be strong and independent by opening their wallets to buy shampoos, T-shirts, or mascaras is harmful to the movement and to feminist integrity.

There is a certain pattern in the commercialization of feminism: the type of brands that typically sell these products are often unaffordable to middle-class people (for instance, Dior). This brings us back to the main subject of this section: The *We Should All Be Feminists* campaign. Maria Grazia Chiuri's debut collection for Dior (Spring 2017 collection) showcased a plain white t-shirt emblazoned with the *We Should All Be Feminists* slogan inspired by the famous Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fiction book and Ted talk of the same title. *We Should All Be Feminists* is about Adichie's "experience of sexism growing up in Nigeria and how it has [affected] her life" (Elleonorreads). The text discusses why feminism is still needed and why everyone should be a feminist. The text conveys a positive message and was praised by many feminists (Elleonorreads).

Maria Grazia Chiuri is a feminist activist and the first female artistic director of the Maison Dior, which attributed particular significance to the selling of such a product. A female director designing a fashion item that empowers 'wealthy' women is a marketing strategy that works all too well and is frequently used in fashion shows (Fagan). The showcase of the model wearing the *We Should All Be Feminists* t-shirt was accompanied by the song track, "Flawless" by Beyoncé that features Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous TEDx talk about feminism (Yotka). After the severe backlash about the price of the t-shirt, it turned out that Dior already

intended to give a percentage of the sale of each t-shirt to Rihanna's non-profit organization, The Clara Lionel Foundation (Casely-Hayford), which funds education, healthcare, and emergency response programs across the world. Whether their intention to donate was planned prior to the debut of the spring collection (but was not publicly announced) or was a result of the severe backlash that Dior faced, this donation is still in itself a marketing plan that aims to bring profits and a positive image to the corporation.

To the undiscerning eye, this campaign seems to convey a genuine message and a clear mission that raises awareness about feminism. However, if Dior's logic is to be followed, people whose awareness has been raised must spend $860 (Dior) to buy the t-shirt and participate in the movement. The high price of the t-shirt is a representation of class inequality within the so-called feminist campaign. The *We Should All Be Feminists* campaign, which was launched using the Dior T-shirt can be described as a manifestation of femvertising: a modern phenomenon used by corporations to exploit feminism when it is convenient while, behind doors, they entertain a very different story (Martell). Furthermore, femvertising, also called faux feminism in marketing, "creates an illusion of progress in our struggle for women's rights" (Martell). By claiming a progressive image, corporations hinder the true fight for equal rights.

Virginia Slims, *You've come a long way, baby*, 1968. (Lowbrow)

Dior's spring 2017 collection, *White "we should all be feminists" print T-shirt*, 2017. (Fashionista)

Dior, Picture of the We should all be feminist t-shirt in the online shopping site of Dior (Dior)

2.3.2 *Feminist campaigns and the exclusion of African and Muslim women*

Femvertising also "[calls] into question harmful rhetoric that affects […] how women are perceived by others [,] how they perceive themselves [and how they should perceive themselves]" (Hunt 3). The last statement points to an additional theme, which relates to the use of the term "feminists" in the *We Should All Be Feminists* slogan. In this case, the title of the Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fiction book eventually lost its meaning when used out of context and associated with a movement that encourages female empowerment by selling expensive products only available to wealthy women who are often located in the northern part of the world. Feminism is often considered an inclusive ideology that can apply to women of any race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation**.** However, there is resistance to this claim among African women (who identify as other than feminists) and Muslim women. It is important to note that not all Muslim women reject modern/ 'Western' feminist ideology or otherwise known as third wave feminism. However, many of them and especially Muslim women who wear headscarves find it difficult to adhere to a movement that disregards their beliefs and principles. It is, therefore, difficult to describe feminism as an ideology that brings together all women because of the significant connotations and history behind it. "Feminism for all" is an expression often used by people whose research focuses on a specific category of women: middle-class white women from industrialized areas in the Global North. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, the term 'feminist' is loosely used and excludes women who do not identify as such: As will be explained later, many African and Muslim women do not use the term feminist to identify their fight for women's right. Either they have other alternative ideology (African feminism or/and Islamic feminism) or choose not to use a label to qualify their fight. The modal 'should' is suggestive of moral obligation and of an expectation that all people – including women – be feminists. However, *can* we all be feminists? And *should* we all be feminist? These are two important questions that radical 'Western' feminism appears to neglect. This reflection is not an attack on feminism as a movement but rather a criticism of the

consequences of modern radical feminism when it comes to the representation of African and Muslim women. This idea of exclusion caused by the choice of the term 'feminist' is associated with the negative connotation behind the term. Focusing on this negative connotation is essential to analyse the *We Should All Be Feminists* slogan because this negativity directly impacts Africans and African Muslim women.

Many women, particularly African and Muslim women, tend to distance themselves from the term feminism by choosing another way of expressing their fight for gender equality. For instance, African feminism has several strains of its own that differ from 'Western' feminism, including Stiwanism, Nego-Feminism, Motherism, Femalism and womanism. For example, womanists are African women who have chosen to express their African womanhood in a self-proclaimed manner because they cannot identify or relate to mainstream feminist ideology, which is permeated with a stereotyped image of the African woman (Collins 10). Although Womanism, or African feminism, shares similar points with feminism, it mainly differs in the representation that feminism has of women: "Many black women view feminism as a movement that, at best, is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men" (Collins 11). In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, an African American author Alice Walker defines Womanism as a form of feminism that only concerns women of colour (Walker xii). Many African women prefer the term womanism to feminism because the latter often holds a neo-imperialist weight that considers women of colour and especially African women as victims who need saving (Guy-Sheftall 32). In this regard, the Dior t-shirt, used as material symbol of the We Should All Be Feminist campaign, is not only inaccessible to middle-class women, but its slogan also disregards women who choose a path other than feminism and yet still uphold similar principles such as female empowerment and equal rights. In addition, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the original creator of the slogan *We Should All Be Feminists,* is often criticized on "her advocacy for gender equality [that] mainly centers on [a] westernized perspective which disregards the existing culture" (Okiriguo 47). Her belonging to or defending a certain ideology of feminism that does not conform to many African cultures is a form of exclusion that is, in a way, portrayed in the semantics of her title. While this representation is part of a negative connotation created by extremists, it remains ingrained in outside perceptions of the movement.

Regarding the Dior campaign and its message, the question that arises is whether the campaign includes, for example, Nego-feminists, who have a different perspective of what feminism entails. Nego-feminists are women who choose to compromise and emphasize negotiation when it comes to resisting patriarchy (Nnaemeka 377-378). This approach does not

conform to modern feminism, which often considers women who compromise to be men's pleasers. 'Western' feminists think that by bending the 'rules', Black feminists prove that they "are not ready to bring radical change in the deep-rooted patriarchist life style" (Bayu 56). They consider Nego-feminists' behaviour as a form of weakness and subjectivity (58). In her non-fiction book, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions,*". Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie insists on the fact that "being a feminist is like being pregnant. You either are or you are not. You either believe in the full equality of men and women, or you do not". With this statement Adichie gives a vague and restrictive definition of feminism that probably exclude an important number of women who do not conform to this definition. This raises the question of whether Nego-feminists (who, because of their social class, religion, and ethnicity, decide to compromise and 'pick and choose' when it comes to feminism and patriarchy) are considered feminists and, consequently, whether they are excluded from the Dior campaign. For a large corporation such as Dior, which claims via the message of their campaign the need of empowerment of all women, it is then important to consider all women, regardless of their race, religion, beliefs, and different views on feminism.

Finally, it is important to discuss Muslim women, who represent another group that often feels excluded from modern feminist ideology. A considerable number of Muslim women do not identify as feminists because they believe that modern feminism has taken a different road and diverted from its essential message. In his paper, "'Islamic Feminism' Encounters 'Western Feminism': Towards an Indigenous Alternative?", Hammed Shahidan makes an interesting comment about Islamic feminists' relationship to 'Western' feminism. He notes that "'Islamic feminists' have a push-pull relationship with non-Muslims. On the one hand, they distinguish themselves from nonbelievers in order to justify their claim for authenticity. On the other, they are attracted to non-believers for support and intellectual inspiration" (8). Often, Muslim women espouse feminist values but are reluctant to use the term 'feminism' given its definition and its negative connotations regarding Islam and Muslim women (8). In her article, Susan Carland, a Muslim journalist, interviewed Muslims and non-Muslims to ask for their views on whether Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive. The responses of Muslim women vary, from those who consider Islam a feminist religion and a useful tool to fight against gender inequality to those who, "even if they do not all subscribe to the word 'feminist', still believe that Islam has an inherently anti-sexist core" (Carland). One of the interviewees, Amina, shares an interesting analysis that illustrates how difficult it is for Muslim women to fully identify as feminists:

> We were forced to choose — either Islam or human rights. And of course, all the secular feminists went with human rights and said, ‘we’ll do without Islam’, and all the Islamists took Islam and said, ‘we’ll do without human rights’, and there we were in the middle with no name and no program. And at this point now we’ve managed to make a program, an agenda, a methodology, an epistemology, written books, and the position is: we do not accept either/or at all. We have to have full human rights and Islam and that’s what you call pro-faith feminism. (Carland)

The interviews responses show that they reject the stereotypes of what ‘feminism’ is, but are willing to come up with their own version of it, one that is compatible with Islam. Some of them are, however, more receptive to the term ‘feminism’ (similar to Oumaima abou Bakr; see above) than Asma Barlas who cannot fully adhere to the term feminism because it neglects an important part of their lives, which is their faith (Barlas, “Engaging Islamic” 20). In the late 1990s, a heated debate arose in France and the U.S. about allowing the headscarf and burka in public spaces[7]. Both the U.S. and France have similar attitude toward the wearing of the hijab in public spaces. In both countries women who wear the hijab were marginalised and faced legal actions (Dorminey 128).[8] This debate emerged at the same time as third-wave feminism, which focused heavily on individuality and freedom. Although third-wave feminism was trying to redeem itself by presenting a more inclusive ideology, it was still operating on criteria that only conform to “white liberal ways of being women” (Seedat 28). Consequently, Muslim women can relate to the Womanists’, Nego-Feminists’ and African feminists’ refusal or hesitance to adhere to modern ‘Western’ feminist ideology, which is known to exclude and ignore the religious and social aspects of a woman’s identity. For example, some feminist organizations, such as the International League for Women’s Rights (ILWR), spoke out against sporting goods retailed Decathlon’s collection that included hijab-like sportswear. They criticized the corporation for encouraging the use of a religious garment that, according to them,

[7] However, “France has used legislation to impose a society-wide prohibition, whereas in the U.S., restrictions have been authorized only upon a showing of compelling need in a specific and narrowly-defined, work-related context (Dorminey 128)

[8] In France (2004), this debate motivated the creation of a law that prohibit the wearing of religious attire in school, which include the Hijab. In 2010, France then prohibited attires that covers the face (Dorminey 128). In the U.S., The court considers the law that prohibit the wearing of the Hijab legitimate and “did not violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in the workplace because of sex, color, race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, or religion” (Dorminey 128).

is a symbol of submission. Feminism stands for the advocacy of women's rights; however, modern feminism failed Muslim women and African Muslim women in many ways. In France, the announcement that Decathlon would sell sports hijabs prompted a heated debate that was spearheaded by politicians campaigning against the presence of the Islamic headscarf (hijab) in public places. In an RTL interview, Agnès Buzyn, the Minister of Health, stated that these products are not "prohibited by law"; however, they mirror "a vision of women I do not share. I would have preferred for a French brand not to promote veils" (qtd. in Mira). However, the "vision of women" that Agnès Buzyn is referring to does not represent Muslim women or feminism as a whole. Les Effrontées (a feminist association in France) described the ban as "another controversy aimed at preventing [women who wears the *hijab*] from leading a normal life" (Mira). Yet many feminists chose to stay silent when the headscarf was concerned; their fight for equality is only directed towards one particular group: 'Western' women. This discrimination is the reason why many Muslim women do not associate with modern feminist ideology. Many 'Western' feminists who claim that the wearing of the hijab should be regulated because it is a form of oppression and gender inequality disregard an important group of women whose hijab is an essential part of their faith. The hijab, for some Muslim women, is a self-expression of submission—not to a male authority, but to a superior creator. In her article "Femininity, Submission, and the Hijab" Allison J. van Tilborgh interviewed Muslim women who chose or not to wear the *hijab*. A woman who wears the *hijab* states in her interview that "to be a Muslim is to fully submit [to god]" (Tilborgh). Those who wear the hijab consider it as "spiritual submission that transcends earthly desires" (Tilborgh). It is, however, important to note that many Muslim women consider covering the hair as not mandatory in Islam and therefore will not qualify this act as a submission to a creator (some Muslim women even regard the *hijab* as a by-product of submission created by male authority in order to control women; Tilborgh). Whether the Muslim woman choose to wear or not the hijab, she must be acknowledged by feminism, which is an ideology that promotes women's freedom to choose and to have the liberty to dress as they want (Budgeon 303). Following this logic, individual Muslim women can choose to wear or not the headscarf – but it should be their decision. While the #WeShouldAllBeFeminists campaign's core message is to promote female empowerment, it is, inadvertently or not, excluding a group of women who cannot or choose not to buy and participate in this campaign because of their separation from modern feminism.

3 Hausa literature: an effective means of improving the representation of Nigerian Muslim women

3.1 Introduction

Like social media and film, literature from the Global North has certain disadvantages when it comes to the representation of African Muslim women. In literature, Muslim women are often represented as the weakest link in the Muslim community. They are either accomplices to their oppression and they are escaping their religion, but a common feature in this representation is "victimization" (Kahf 15). This image of the Muslim woman needs to be debunked. Faith, the headscarf and prayer are often portrayed by 'Western' media and literature as obstacles that prevent Muslim women's social growth (Blakeman 16). In addition, when a Muslim character is in a family seting, she often becomes submissive to male authority, subjugated and silent: "This is particularly evident in the literature of the present age, where Muslim women are stereotyped as a signifier who is displaced from one position to another without being allowed any real substance or agency" (Al-Sudeary 69). This misrepresentation undermines Muslim women's ability to stand up for themselves and to fight for their rights. Therefore, this chapter focuses on giving an alternative representation of African Muslim women in Hausa literature.

'Western' literature and cinema often depict a particular narrative of the Muslim woman who rejects her faith and removes her *hijab* (veil) in order to assimilate into 'Western' society. Furthermore, in order to prove her feminism and womanhood, she has to separate herself from her religious beliefs, which promotes a misleading narrative that dissociates religion from feminism and women's rights. One of the most important women in Islam, Khadija, first spouse of the Prophet Muhammed, otherwise known as Khadija al-Kubra, that is, Khadija the Great, provides a salient example that contradicts the image created by 'Western' literature and media. Her surname reflects her crucial role in the era of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). Khadija was Islam's first feminist. She was a successful and esteemed businesswoman who "never compromise[d] her modesty or integrity to succeed in the male-dominated trades. [She hired] only those that could meet these standards" (Peracha).[9] She also rejected many marriage proposals. She was a woman who maintained herself financially and never needed a

[9] The term modesty, here, is used to refer to her behaviour with male businessmen.

man to support her (Blackburn). Khadija asked the Prophet Muhammed to marry her because she saw the virtues that she upheld in him. She was a woman that challenged customs and traditions in Quraysh (her village), and she was the first Muslimah, as she was the first person to which the prophet Muhammed confided his encounter with the angel Jibril in the cave of Hira in Mountain Al Noor (Ibn Kathir 279-280).[10] Terrified, he looked for Khadija who was the one to calm him down and explain to him that he is now a 'prophet' (279-280).[11]

Khadija is the embodiment of a thriving and successful Muslim woman who cherishes her faith, her modesty and her religious principles. She runs her business from the enclosure of her home. Khadija's journey shows that not all struggles for equal rights and feminism are conducted in the same manner. There are women who fight for women's rights by writing books, through digital communication, media interview, conferences, public uprising (Edwin *Privately Empowered* 5), but there are also private manifestations of feminism that result from small-scale actions: such as fighting for education, fighting against forced marriage, fighting for the right to choose your own partner, becoming the main authority in a male dominated society, enduring certain hardship for the sake of your family. All these African feminists' qualities can be seen in the characters of Zaynab Alkali's and Hauwa Ali's novels: Faku, Awa, Li in *The Stillborn* and Farida in *Destiny*. These female characters challenge the stereotypical depiction of Muslim women in cinema, literature, and on social media.

This chapter investigates the female characters' private self-expression of African Islamic feminisms. The chapter also shows how being Muslim does not impede their struggle for equal rights, autonomy, and independence. Li, Faku, Awa (*The Stillborn*) and Farida (*Destiny*) are inherently strong characters who do not succumb to any authority, except that of their creator, which they do willingly. These characters are very attached to their religion and beliefs while being African feminists. At first sight, Li may be perceived as an unconventional woman who despises her religion, wants to be a "heathen" (Alkali 3) and swears in the name of several gods throughout *The Stillborn*, an act prohibited in Islam (Kousar). In the end, she demonstrates behaviours that are, according to Islam, typical of a 'believing' woman and learns to embrace her religion and faith by swearing in the name of Allah: "she gestures to the

[10] The place cave of Hira is not directly mentioned in the Quran, however, the revelation is clearly mentioned in several surahs such as Surah Ash-shu'ara' (The poets) : "This [Qur'an] is the revelation sent as you received it from the Lord of the worlds, (26 :192) and brought down by The Trustworthy Spirit (26 :193) to your heart, that you may (Prophet] be of the warners (26 :194) in a clear perfected [Arabic] tongue" (26 :195)." (trans. Kaskas 190). Cave of Hira is mentioned in Sira Al Nabawiya – The life of the prophet Muhammed (Ibn Kathir 279-280).
[11] She did not know, at the time, that he was a prophet but that he became a very important figure. She then led him to her Christian cousin Waraqa bin Nawfal who confirmed that similarly to Moses he is now the Messenger of God (Ibn Kathir 279-288).

recognition of one God with her utterance that ends the novel" (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 81). She mentions a very important part of the *shahada* (the Testimony), which is that "there is no god but Allah" (Alkali 105). In *The Stillborn*, Awa is a virtuous woman who upholds nego-feminist and Islamic feminist choices such as, among others, "prioritising family, motherhood", and the importance of community (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 46). Finally, in *Destiny*, Farida is a woman of faith who prays, fasts, reads the Quran and practices her *din* (beliefs) religiously but is also assertive, full of ambition, interested in higher education and a career, and opposed to forced marriage.

The first novel that this chapter will focus on is Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. The main character, Li, is a rebel who violates traditional and societal norms in the patriarchal society of an unnamed village in the rural part of Northern Nigeria. The story opens with Li's return to her village upon the completion of her primary education in a neighbouring village. Throughout the novel, the reader is taken inside Li's home so that they may discover "the ritual, the routine of rural life" (Alkali vii) but also the constraints that Muslim women face in rural Northern Nigeria. The struggles of the female characters in a predominantly patriarchal society are depicted in contexts such as marriage, education, gender relationships, the consequences of men's fear of vulnerability on women emasculation, and the expectation of conformity with "established stereotypes of behavior" (Alkali vii). Li, Awa (Li's older sister) and Faku (Li's best friend) are on a journey to find various solutions to and escapes from these constraints. It is important to consider that the novel takes place "in the late colonial period" (Alkali vii), a time at which Nigeria was entering a process of modernisation (Alkali vii). In this book, Alkali touches on many themes that directly relate to the consequences of modernisation. Moreover, throughout the novel, women are subjected to increasing pressure (by the elders —men and women— of the village as well as male authority) because of a fear that modernisation may taint their behaviour, for instance, going to the city in order to pursue a career other than a teacher. Men in the village fear that the city will come to the village and change women's mentality (influencing them to be independent and to yearn for further education). The reader witnesses Li's growth chronologically, from adolescence to adulthood, focusing on the protagonist's psychological, educational, and religious development.

Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* recounts a love story that traces the attempt of a girl to be educated and become a career woman. Farida, the daughter of a policeman, and Farouk, the son of an ambassador, fall in love and wish to be married. However, even though the author emphasises that they belong to "the same linguistic group, the Hausa" (Ali 4), their different national backgrounds (Farouk is Senegalese, and Farida is Nigerian) mean their union is rejected by

Farida's aunt Nana and her uncle Abba. When Farouk is sent abroad by his father to study, his departure provides Farida's guardians with an opportunity to force her into marrying a wealthy middle-aged man called Wali Al Yakub. Yearning for Wali Al Yakub's money and wealth, they will not let Farida "ruin [their] hope of a comfortable old age" (Ali 45). Farida eventually marries Al Yakub, but she relentlessly expresses her wish to continue her education in spite of his opposition. At the end of the novel, fate reunites Farida and Farouk, and they become husband and wife (Ali 90). Wali Al Yakub marries another woman without informing Farida. The latter refuses this behaviour and demands a divorce. Like *The Stillborn*, *Destiny* addresses gender conflicts, gender roles within marriage, emasculation and its consequences on women and restrictive traditional rules, such as forced marriage and the practice of withholding education from women.

There are multiple reasons that motivated the choice of these specific Nigerian novels. These novels belong to a literary genre called Soyayya literature or the books of love, which is a genre mainly written in Hausa language and in English (mainly used in Northern Nigeria) (Anike).[12] Soyayya literature mainly circles around romance, is known to depict uncomplicated characters and simple plots but also addresses complex social issues in Northern Nigeria, "issues that speak to the reality of Hausa youth, and in particular, Hausa women of today" (Anike). *Destiny* and *The Stillborn* present issues that are considered the topoi of Soyayya novels: forced marriages, early marriages, education, personal problems, and relationship problems (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 164). In addition, these novels are inspired from the lives of Hausa Muslim women, and "[cater] to a Hausa audience and the influence of Islam on their lives" (165). Forced marriages, early marriages and the other topoi mentioned above will be used in order to analyse the gender discrimination that the female characters face.

Shirin Edwin, in her book *Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction*, notes that African feminists such as Zulu Sofola, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Ama Ata Aidoo among many others regard Muslim women as abused by a misogynistic and sexist religion, and these authors go as far as to declare that African Muslim women are unable to be feminists (37). According to Edwin, this group of African theorists promote Africa's plurality but excoriate Islam's influence on the African Muslim woman and

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[12] "The pervasive impact of the Hausa literary movement even resulted in the formal bifurcation of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Kano into two branches—one for writers in Hausa and the other for writers in English" (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 25)

call Islam "religious colonialism" (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 37). In this regard, African feminists may be said to have become what they criticised about 'Western' feminism: they disregard and exclude African Muslim women from their movement. The analysis in this chapter will show how Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali present Muslim characters who behave like African feminists by displaying characteristics such as perseverance, assertiveness, and strong personality that will be shown in Li and Awa's behaviour toward struggles and obstacles constructed by male authority and a patriarchal society that wish to impede their willingness to be independent (see below). This chapter will argue that, contrary to what some African feminists believe, African Muslim women can be African feminists.

The final reason for focusing on novels by Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali is that women writers in Hausa literature are often excluded from academic criticism (Newell 138). Male writers have been given more attention, but they tend to portray African Muslim women as passive and submissive: these women are characters who "[hover] silently in the background" (Newell 138). Female African Muslim writers, then, decided to re-appropriate the representation of African Muslim women in African literature because "for too long African literature had worn a masculine mask" (138). This chapter argues that Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali have contributed to removing this mask.

As can be seen in the unfolding of Alkali's and Ali's stories, their point of convergence is the gender injustice that each character faces. At first, the characters accept their situations. Later, they realise their own worth and begin to seek freedom by means of education, self-fulfilment, marriage, motherhood (Awa), pursuing a professional career. The characters in these novels fight for their rights privately in unique ways. They do not organise uprisings, nor do they display or publicise their fights openly (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 5). However, they fight in their own ways by imposing their opinions on traditional authority and by shattering traditions and misinterpretations of Islamic dogmas that prohibit women from exercising their rights to receive education and to select partners. according to Shirin Edwin, feminism and equal rights, as depicted in the aforementioned Nigerian novels, can be pursued and practiced in the confines of one's home. Edwin remarks that the approach that claims that public engagement is necessary in feminism "disenfranchises the private, personal and highly individualized dispositions of religious practice in Islam, thus further obscuring forms of Islamic feminism that do not conduct to public activity and roles" (Edwin 5). In this chapter, a discussion of the Islamic perspective on the gender conflicts that the female characters experience is provided in order to show the importance of separating tradition from religion. Some of the specific restrictions in the aforementioned Northern Nigerian novels are, for the

most part, socio-culturally created. At the same time, they are often associated with Islam. The examples include forced marriage, withholding education from women, the distinction between gender roles in marriage and treating daughters as less important than sons.

Furthermore, the feminist attitudes that the characters exhibit are also analysed by juxtaposing them with another Nigerian, non-Muslim feminist agenda that promoted by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* and *We Should All Be Feminists*. Choosing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Southern Nigerian author, as a point of comparison for the Northern Nigerian novels, was first inspired by a reading of Adichie's short story "A Private Experience". A short story that features two Nigerian women from different backgrounds, one a Northern Nigerian Muslim and the other a Southern Nigerian Christian. The two women were seeking shelter because of the violence in the streets caused by riots between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Throughout the short story, the two women become aware of their differences but are open to slowly learn about each other. However, at the end, they put their religious differences aside and protect each other from a riot that tries to separate them on the basis of their religions. By conversing privately, they gradually shatter the prejudices and the preconceived ideas that they have about each other. Adichie's works, this chapter will argue, shares a common understanding of the term 'feminism' with Alkali and Ali. I chose Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fictional texts because they are read as instructions, or manuals of feminism. Her texts "maybe the ideal introduction to feminism for everyone" (Telfer). Her non-fictional texts are well received by 'Western' feminists but also by African feminists. In her texts, she meets each ideology halfway. These essays are not written to "trick you, or make you feel terrible" (Telfer). They give "concrete" rather than "theoretical" example of gender inequality which makes it easier to understand and to relate to even if you do not identify as feminist (Telfer). In this thesis, these instructions of how to be feminists are compared with an alternative and often similar way of presenting as a 'feminist'. This alternative way of being a 'feminist' is argued through Hausa novels with Northern Nigerian Muslim characters written by Northern Nigerian Muslim women.

Adichie's views on gender have been criticised as too Westernised and therefore un-African. In her article "We Are Not All Feminists: Feminism Is Simply Un-African", Amari Jali (A west-African scribe for the magazine Grandmother Africa) claims that Adichie's essays are only based on the author's personal story and that these essays do not relate to the African reality. Jali states that the gender inequality that Adichie talks about is a "Western concept" that does not exist in African cultures (Jali). However, I chose Adichie as an author because she

presents, in her non-fictional books, a well balance idea of feminism. Her books convey the idea of negotiation, tolerance and allowing men to participate in the fight against gender inequality that radical 'Western' feminism often lacks. They also convey the strictness about gender inequality that African feminisms often disregard. This thesis also considers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's self-description as "a happy African feminist" (Adichie, *We Should* 10) and her views on gender inequality will be classified as belonging to the transformative and reformist African-feminist literature: "She understands that the situation can be changed through education, but also sees it as a socio-cultural construction. In her work, gender relations, androcentrism and binary relations have a central place" (Arndt, "Perspective" 34). Adichie believes that gender inequality exists in Africa and that the struggle for gender equality must start at home, through the upbringing that parents give to their children. The importance of upbringing on children will be shown in the analysis of *The Stillborn* and *Destiny* through the female protagonists' relationship with their parents (a relationship that is different for Farida and Li).

3.2 Sharing feminist views: gender conflict in the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zaynab Alkali, and Hauwa Ali

3.2.1 Gender roles

3.2.1.1 The Stillborn

Gender roles are commonly understood to be socially constructed concepts and ideas imposed by a society that has particular expectations from individuals based on their sex. However, the definition of these roles varies as it depends on "the society's values and belief about gender" (Blackstone 335). With gender roles come gender expectations. Gender roles have different meanings in different regions, generations, cultures, religions and ideologies. Feminism in the global North, for instance, considers gender roles as socially constructed phenomena that are created by patriarchs in order to subordinate and dominate the "weak" sex (Thobejane 455). In her article "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenges of African Epistemologies", Oyeronké Oyěwúmí discusses gender politics in the Yoruba culture and how different it is from the global North's discourse on gender (see above; section on African feminisms). Oyěwúmí supports her claim by criticising 'Western' feminist studies that define family and its gender relation strictly. She explains that there is a variety of families, such as the African ones who are based on ancestry, age or generation and they do not establish superiority based on body type (7). For example, the responsibilities of

motherhood and reproduction are often criticised by radical 'Western' feminists as causes of subordination (7). However, in African cultures motherhood is considered a "valuable institution" (Oyĕwúmi, *The Invention* 73) and was seen as an "impetus rather than an obstacle to economic activities" (73). She then explains that mothers participate in economy because they have a responsibility to work in order to provide for themselves but also for their children (73). She argues that the notion of motherhood should not be confused with wifehood (161): a mother who makes the choice to only provide for her children is not a submissive wife devoid of personal ambitions. The idea that females who are mothers "cannot be engaged in activities that take them too far away from the domestic sphere" should be debunked (72). Motherhood is, therefore, not an obstacle to women 's engagements in society (73).

There are different views and interpretations of gender roles and gender conflicts. In this chapter, gender conflict is regarded from the perspective of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' essays *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Manifesto of Fifteen Suggestions.* In these works, Adichie discusses her experiences of gender oppression. She points out that Gender roles are so deeply conditioned in us that we will often follow them even when they chafe against our true desires, our needs, our happiness [and] they are very difficult to unlearn, […]." (Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* 20). In her books, Adichie refers to "the relation of gender as unequal in African culture, and reveals the masculine superiority and androcentrism" (Calheiro et Eduardo 99). In an interview, Adichie is asked: "what is the role of women in Africa today?" (BBC News) and she answers that, in Nigeria, schools are still teaching children that a man's role is to work while a woman has to be a housewife. She suggests that gender inequality is still very apparent in African societies and that these "male-dominated societies […] are suspicious of change." (BBC News). In her non-fictional books, Adichie recounts instances of her life in which she was a victim of gender inequality: when a waiter ignored her and greeted her male partner (Adichie, *We Should* 19). When a man thanked Louis, her male friend, for the money given by Adichie, "the man believed that whatever money [she] had ultimately came from Louis. Because Louis is a man" (Adichie, *We Should* 16). Other encounters with gender oppression will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

One of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's wishes was to be a class monitor at her primary school in Nsukka (Adichie, *We Should* 12). Her attitude and her confidence in herself allowed her to think that she would be chosen to fill this position. However, the teacher announced that the monitor had to be a boy (Adichie, *We Should* 12), even though Adichie had "the highest score on the test" (12) and had performed better than the boy who was chosen. She notes ironically that said boy was "sweet [and] a gentle soul", while Adichie was "full of ambition

[…] in patrolling the class with a stick" (13). Interestingly, Adichie suggests that the position was given to the boy because, in the collective imagination, men should assume higher positions because of their strict, aggressive, independent, and strong characters, while women are thought to be more emotional, kind, nurturing, and incapable of being firm, hence their inability to attain leadership positions (Brescoll 416). However, when a woman tries to be a "tough go-getter" (Adichie, *We Should* 22), she is met with backlash. However, in this case, Adichie, the little girl, was tough and yearned to hold the stick in order to put her expertise to use. This situation was Adichie's first encounter with gender inequality in the distribution of high positions in society.

In Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, the gender stereotypes that categorise dominance, strength, independence, assertiveness, bravery, and innovativeness as masculine traits and vulnerability, care, and humility as feminine ones (Dean) are also depicted through the behaviour of the male character. Garba (a childhood friend who comes back to the village from the city), Habu (a young man from another village who lives with his uncle), Fiama (The village's headmaster) and the girls (Li, Faku and Awa) go to the forest in order to collect wood. The boys want to play a practical joke on the girls in order to scare them. Awa and Faku are filled by sheer fright. However, Li remains still and unafraid: the headmaster describes her as "brave, a he-woman" (Alkali 40). Even Awa is surprised by Li's courage and the manner in which "she behaved like a man and did not run when [Garba] sprang on [them]" (42). In this case, Fiama and Awa are treating strength, bravery, and chivalry as male characteristics and weakness, fear, and cowardliness as female attributes. In the same scene, Alkali provides another perspective on the distribution of roles according to gender: Habu demands that the boys "trim the branches [because] the rest is a woman's job" (42), and "the girls [then] set to work quietly, while the men watched the rhythmic movements of their bodies and made small talk about them" (42).

Alkali introduces her readers to female and male characters who inhabits a traditional society in which specific gender roles and gender-related restrictions predominate. After returning from a primary boarding school, an environment in which she felt "free and gay" (Alkali 3), the female protagonist Li sees the atmosphere of her father's compound as "suffocating" (3) and feels "trapped and unhappy" (3). Awa, who is eighteen years old and unmarried, is responsible for the house and for her siblings (3). Because of her marital status and gender, she is forced to stay "at home […]. Not allowed to go out at all except for the market, the riverside, the prayer house and the school. Even then, [she is] always watched". Awa and Li's main chores are "fetching water" or sweeping the house (4), and, on top of that,

they are “bossed by […] an irate father at home” (4). It can be seen from the roles of the female characters that “most of the socio-cultural practices of the societies are aimed at preparing females for varieties of social ‘feminine’ gender roles that are perceived to ensure that young girls take up their ‘appropriate’ future roles in the fictional societies” (Chinade 3).

From the beginning of the novel, the mother of the female characters assigns them specific roles that are attributed to women, such as “fet[ching] water, wash[ing] the dishes, sweep[ing] the compound” (Alkali 4). As Gloria Chukekere notes, the distribution of roles by a matriarchal figure socialises young African women “in the cultural norms of their respective societies, and role expectations are thus transmitted from one generation to the next” (2). According to Ibiyemi Mojola, this behaviour echoes the view held by the community that housework, which is “regarded as menial, is fit only for women” (Mojola 132). Therefore, the role of Mama in *The Stillborn* provides an insight to her daughters of what is expected of married women, in this case, housework. In Nigerian and other African societies, the matriarch’s primary duty is “to pass down traditional wisdom, cultural morals and value systems to future generations” (Adeghe 118). However, Mama does not serve Li positively: the only knowledge that she transmits concerns cultural and traditional restraints. Mama only appears to give the girls house chores and to be humiliated by their father (Alkali 4). Mama disregards the most important knowledge, which has to do with the complexities of marriage, most importantly in the eyes of young girls who are not mature enough to comprehend the concept of matrimony (Mojola 132). She therefore only appears in the novel when she needs to give strict instructions to Li, Awa and the younger sisters. The fact that the only interaction that she has with her daughters revolves around giving them orders indicates that she does not have a positive influence.

Conversely, Li’s father, a patriarchal figure, is always presented as a strict father and described by others as a “mad” man who “is never tired of playing god with his children” (Alkali 24). In *The Stillborn*, the consequences of bad behaviour are different for boys and for girls. When Baba finds out that there is an opening in the fence and that someone goes out at night, Sule, the older brother, confesses to protect his sister Li. However, the father hesitates to punish his son because “to beat a man for going out to dance at night was outrageous” (Alkali, 23). Traditionally, certain ethnic groups in Nigeria have been male-dominated. The first male child holds a very important position in a family because he inherits the father’s name: “The male child is clearly an important object of huge social and emotional investment in Nigerian cultures. He is valued more than the female child. Quite early on, his worth and superiority over the female child is made clear to both him and the girl” (Izugbara 8). Beating Awa, the firstborn

child in the family, is regarded by the father as a banality. Baba thinks that "he could beat Awa easily if she erred, no matter how old she is" (Alkali 23). This behaviour shows that violence toward women is normalised. Ibiyemi Mojola indicates that the father's mindset is representative of Nigerian patriarchal society, in which "a man is regarded as the substance, while woman is treated as a shadow" (Mojola 128). Another gender-related expectation is dictated by society and reveals the rigidity of tradition and its effect on women – it is Baba who is in charge of the household, and it is he who dictates its rules. Li's self-assertiveness and defiance of traditional norms, which her mother describes as her "forward and tactless manner" (Alkali 12), become a source of disagreement for her parents. Baba (Li's father) associates his daughter's refusal to conform to tradition as a consequence of her mother's upbringing. He blames Li's mother for his children 'misbehaviour': "Of course, the lion cub takes after its mother" (13). Baba's behaviour is "in consonance with the traditional conception that when the children turn bad, their mother is to blame. but when they follow the right path, their father gets the glory" (Okereke 103). In Nigerian society, the mother figure and female relatives play such important roles in children's upbringing that failure on the part of the child is considered tantamount to failure on the part of the mother (Adeghe 118). Witnessing their parents' separate roles (a strict and sexist father and an unassertive mother), Li and Awa acquire knowledge of the manner in which society distributes roles according to gender

To a reader who is unfamiliar with Northern Nigerian culture and African feminisms, these role distributions may seem as infringements of women's rights. However, the issue is more complex. Due to the diversity of cultures in Africa, which has resulted in diverse forms of African feminisms, it is difficult to limit the discussion of gender roles to questions of right and wrong (Arndt "Perspective" 32). However, it is clear that the aims of African feminisms include denouncing and criticising gender inequality in order to improve the situation of African women (32). There are several branches of African feminist literature, depending on the generation, location, religion and socio-cultural position of the author (32). In her article "Perspectives on African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures", Susan Arndt categorises African feminist literature into three main movements: the reformist, the transformative and the radical African-feminist movement. These three movement are important to discuss because they illustrate how African literature and African feminisms deal with gender inequality. These movement show that gender inequality has not a fixed and rigid definition and that it depends on how each person relates to it. Arndt explains that "there are diverse terminologies approaches to African challenges of gender issue" and this is why it is important to situate gender inequality in each current (32-33). In reformist African-feminist

literature, negotiating patriarchal society is prioritised, "men are criticised as individuals, not as representatives of men as such" (33), and the assumption is that society and men are always capable of reform (33). In transformative African-feminist literature, "men are criticised much more sharply and more complexly than in reformist literature" (34). However, the authors who are associated with that movement believe in the transformation of men. The men who are criticised have positive qualities. However, the transformation of the male characters, whether they are 'good' or 'bad', is so idealised "that they seem to embody a utopia rather than a notion of the future that seems realistic in the present" (34). In the transformative current, men are viewed as "accomplices" but also "product of patriarchal patterns of thought" (34). It has a more optimistic view, the discriminatory structure experienced by women is surmountable and even if it is not the case for the protagonist herself, it is "at least accessible to women on the whole" (34). Finally, radical African-feminist literature, as its name indicates, takes a radical view of gender oppression. Men are presented as inherently sexist and immoral: "men character who depart from this pattern are rarely found - and those who do are powerless. This powerlessness symbolised either by their premature death or by their inability to realise their positive ambitions" (34). In this current, Women are subjected to psychological and physical violence and even a "partial improvement of their situation is unthinkable" (34). Sisterhood and solidarity between women are the only solutions to gender discrimination, and the authors do not draw a distinction between traditional and modern forms of oppression because they treat it as a universal phenomenon. Susan Arndt claims that works that belong to this movement are often written by younger authors who were born after the independence of most African countries (Arndt 35).

In her article, Susan Arndt states that the movements are very heterogeneous and that "the borders between them are blurred" (Arndt, "Perspective" 33). In regards to the novels discussed in this thesis, the analysis of the current provides an overview of the central feature of each movement: the happy endings of the reformist movement, the sharp criticism of men (in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fictional texts) and gender oppression that typifies the transformative movement, and the portrayal of sisterhood as a solution to oppression that is common to works that belong to the radical movement. I argue that Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* displays features associated with all three currents. Both novels end happily, a criterion of the reformist movement. After studying in London, Farida divorces Wali Al Yakub and marries her childhood sweetheart Farouk. Li becomes an influential businesswoman and decides to return to Habu. The reunion with Habu may be the author's way of showing that Habu's personality and modes of thought can be reformed with

Li's help. This reveals another essential idea of the transformative and reformist movements: the complementarity of man and woman (39). The literature from the two movements also emphasises the positive characteristics of men. At the beginning of the novel, Habu is romantic and kind. Wali Al Yakub is also represented as a caring husband at times. Arndt points out that the reformist current allows men to develop a positive mindset, "though only partially and within the boundaries offered by patriarchal society" (33). In this respect, Habu's decision to beg Li to return shows that he has changed and developed "the capability of rethinking and overcoming [his] reprehensible behaviours". However, when Li refuses, he claims that she is his wife, as if she is his possession (Alkali 92). Thus, change is constrained by patriarchal thinking (92). Finally, in the epilogue to *The Stillborn*, Awa, Li and Faku thrive together, without needing male assistance. Sisterhood and solidarity are, in a way, two of the escapes from the patriarchal society in which the novels are set. This final development corresponds to the radical African-feminist movement.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's non-fictional texts are often associated with the radical African-feminist movement, she is often accused of promoting a feminism based on 'hatred' towards men (Jali). In *We Should All Be Feminist*, Adichie gives her definition of a feminist: "a man or a woman who says, 'Yes, there is a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better" (48). This definition refutes these accusations mentioned above, Adichie includes men in the fight against gender inequality. She also responds to the accusations by describing herself as "A Happy African Feminist Who does Not Hate men" (Adichie, *We Should* 10). Her non-fictional texts are described as belonging to the reformist African-Feminist current: "A reformist-feminist employs the use of positive male characters to challenge those with discriminatory tendencies towards women. Reformist-feminism foresees a happy ending for the societal subjugation of women" (Nwosu). I argue that her works also belong to the transformative movement. In *We Should All Be Feminist* and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Manifesto in Fifteen suggestions*, Adichie sharply criticises "the still-so-insidious inequalities between men and women" (Telfer) but still believes that this inequality is surmountable if men also participate in fighting against it. Being a young African author who belong to the reformist and transformative movement, which are often associated with much older African authors, facilitates the comparison between Adichie's non-fictional books and Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa Ali's novels (Zaynab Alkali and Hauwa also belongs to the transformative and reformist currents).

3.2.2 *Marriage*

3.2.2.1 *The Stillborn*

This section focuses on analysing the gender discrimination and conflicts that the female characters encounter in marriage. Before close reading the novels, it is important to explore how marriage function in Nigeria. In West Africa, and more precisely in Nigeria, marriage is a complex institution that is influenced by two factors: the English law of marriage, which was established when Nigeria was colonized by Great Britain, and customary law, which covers the indigenous practices of marriage and religion, which are influenced by Christianity and Islam (Olomojobi 4-7). The present thesis focuses on the customary and Islamic practices that are associated with marriage, which are intertwined. From a pragmatic point of view, religious and traditional practices and the resulting perceptions of marriage are not always distinct. Among the Yoruba Muslims in Nigeria, "swearing in the name of ancestors is a common practice. It is also common for one to hear a Yoruba Muslim pleading in the name of the mother, the father, or a great ancestor" (Yusuf "Islam" 14). Strictly speaking, these practices are prohibited by Islam because belonging to another religion and swearing in the name of an entity other than Allah is a sin known as "the sin of association" (Kousar 2020). It is very important to grasp this distinction between Islam and culture in Nigeria because, when it comes to marriage, cultural restrictions on women and questionable traditional practices are often wrongfully associated with Islam (Whitsitt 121). This association yields a twisted understanding of the place of women in Islam, as can be seen from *The Stillborn* and *Destiny*. Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* provides a salient example of the coexistence of tradition and Islam.

Margaret Hunts points out that until the eighteenth century, marriage, in some part of the world, mostly functioned as the principal means of trade; women were often considered property that needed to be transferred in order to gain from the woman and her family "occupational status, personal contact, money, tools, livestock" (qtd. in Coontz 977). Hunts' statement is often used by feminist critics to support the argument that marriage was never about love or individual wishes but an element of a trade system that benefited patriarchal families who exchanged their daughters for wealth. Consequently, marriage has been defined as an "inherently un-feminist institution" (Desai) or as a patriarchal institution that equates women to property. While this approach to marriage disappeared in most countries, marriage may still engender a form of gender inequality that is caused by a limiting scheme of gender roles that is designed to benefit a particular gender, in this case males, and to restrain the other. Indeed, in a heterosexual marriage within a traditional society such as rural Northern Nigeria,

there are expectations that women must meet, such as taking charge of household chores and looking after children. The husband's role is to provide for the family financially, and his word is often authoritative and non-negotiable (Thobejane and Janet 455).

Gender roles within marriages are among the most frequently discussed themes in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists and Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Hauwa Ali's *Destiny*. The three authors are from different generations and religious backgrounds, and they have experienced marriage differently due to the differences between their cultures (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Christian and Southern Nigerian, while Hauwa Ali and Zaynab Alkali are Muslims from Northern Nigeria). However, they share an understanding of gender inequality within the marriage institution. Marriage often occupies a central position in society, and the decision to opt out of it is stigmatised. It "garners questioning, scrutiny and even shame" (Desai). Marriage is considered as an ultimate goal that defines the position of the individual, in particular that of women, in society (Adichie, *We Should*, 29). The protagonist in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* is subject to the same stereotypes and struggles as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mentions in *We Should All Be Feminists*. To give two examples among many others, Li is often confined in her house by her father because she is a woman and a woman must not go outside without a good reason (for instance, fetching water). Li, as will be further explained, was a victim of an emotionally immature husband who does not value their marriage and his partner. In addition, at the beginning of the novel, Alkali's protagonist inadvertently participates in the entrenchment of stereotypes that she later experiences as an adult, for Li is still a "virgin" to self-assertiveness and to the influence of 'feminism, and "she is still very much defined by traditional values and expectations" (Okereke 99).

From the outset, the characters, who are still very young, talk about the prospect of marriage. At the beginning of the novel, Li attempts to convince her sister to accompany her to the funeral dance by highlighting their age (Alkali 14). She tells Awa that she is now thirteen years old and must look for a husband. She warns her sister not "to put obstacles in her way" (14). She considers Awa, who is only eighteen years old, as an unmarried "old woman" (14) who will die alone. She suggests that at thirteen or eighteen years old, it is time to be married. This exchange between Li and her older sister, Awa, shows that marriage holds a very important position in the life of the characters. Li's mother was only fourteen years old when she was married, and Li, who is only thirteen, is already looking for a prospective husband. In addition, Li is always teasing her older sister for being single at eighteen (Alkali 4). In *We Should All Be Feminist,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remarks that society pressures young girls to marry at a

certain age. Adichie points out that females are "expected to aspire to marriage [and] to make [their] life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important" (Adichie, *We Should* 29). If they are unable to accomplish this supposed goal, they are considered failures. Throughout the opening parts of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn,* Li is full of ambition and dreams about a life of freedom and independence (Alkali 57). She dreams of being a lady with a "smooth body and silky long hair" (57). However, four years later, Li, now 19, is alone, and her hopes and dreams (56) are shattered when Habu, her husband, leaves her in the village and goes to the city to seek opportunities.

In Nigerian society, a woman who is unmarried is "easily dismissible" (Adichie, *We Should* 30) and unworthy of acknowledgment. By contrast, a man who is unmarried at a certain age "has not quite come around at making his pick" (30). Li, who was considered single by Alhaji Bature and the villagers just because her husband was absent, becomes a victim of male advances and harassment. Li is, therefore, ridiculed by the villagers for waiting for a husband "who is slippery as a fish, a good bait for foolish girls" (Alkali 58). As Habu fails to return after two years, "fresh suitors began to flock in" and one of them is the famous Alhaji Bature (57). He tries "many tricks" on Li in order to gain her favour, but she refuses to marry him and waits patiently for her husband (57). Alhaji Bature's behaviour shows that a woman who is single is easy prey for men. Her sister and the villagers urge Li to marry Alhaji because "he is a [capable man], son of the soil, rich and prosperous and ready to marry her" (57). Li wants to escape from the pressure at home, the constant advances of men and from the mockery of the villagers (63). In this case, Li's feelings are not taken into account. Knowing that she is already married to Habu, that she is still in love with him and that she is ready to wait for him, the villagers and her sister still try to pressure her into marrying another man.

When Li finally goes to the city to be with her husband, she discovers, to her utter disbelief, that there is "an unsmiling welcome awaiting her" (Alkali 69). Her husband regards her as a "cast off" (69) and ridicules her for being a village girl (69). When she was waiting for Habu in the village, Li "yearned to be in her husband's house. She had dreamt of the moment where she would cook for her husband and cuddle him to her breasts" (69). However, Habu transpires to be an unloving husband who is irresponsible and a drunk. Nevertheless, Li tries to look past his behaviour in order to keep "peace in her marriage" (Adichie, *We should* 31). As Adichie points out, there is a difference in the language that is used to refer to men and women in marriage. Both men and women say that they act for "peace in my marriage". When women say this, it is usually because they have given up something in return: a job, a career or an ambition (31). Women are taught to compromise and to make sacrifices to avoid ruining

relationships. Li is doubtful about Habu's faithfulness, she suspects that he has another person in his life which, according to Li, explains his behaviours. In the novel, Hajiya (the landlady) advises Li to preserve this peace by being patient when a man makes a mistake because "the first few years of marriage are often difficult" (Alkali 72), which, in reality, is a misconception that induces fear and obedience among women. Accepting that the first years of a marriage are always difficult, Li tries to compromise, to make sacrifices and to endure her mistreatment in the hope of improvement. Li is the only one who is asked to make an effort to rebuild the marriage, and she is the only one who is preoccupied with its survival. In *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions,* Adichie further emphasises the difference between girls' and boys' upbringing at a young age. She comments on the practice of treating marriage as "an achievement for women only" and on the manner in which "we condition girls to aspire to marriage and [we do not do the same for boys] […] The girls will grow up to be women preoccupied with marriage. The boys will grow up to be men who are not preoccupied with marriage. The women marry those men" (30). This behaviour creates an imbalanced relationship because one party cares about the institution of marriage (30) more than the other.

In the city, Li's confidante, the landlady Hajiya, is aware of Habu's infidelity. However, she pressures Li to consult a spiritualist in order to repair her marriage because a woman "[has] to work very hard in order to ward off the evil that hangs over [her] marriage" (Alkali 89). The spiritualist's advice shows that women are often the ones who are blamed when a marriage collapses. The woman of tradition "is an accommodationist, [she] sees patience with man as a virtue that will eventually yield fruits" (Okereke 109). Shirin Edwin views patience as a positive characteristic of the Hausa woman (Edwin, *Privately Empowered* 93). Expecting women to be patient when men make mistakes encourages men's wrong behaviours. I echo Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's reasoning about infidelity: forgiving a man who was unfaithful can be a feminist choice, however, the feeling must be reciprocated if the woman makes the same mistake (Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* 6). The landlady Hajiya relates her own experience of the benefits of patience in a woman's life. She married a polygamous man. Her inability to provide him with a child was met with disapproval and mistreatment by her co-wives and with negligence by her husband. She took care of her husband and of the house while enduring psychological abuse. When her husband died, she discovered that she had inherited most of his money and a building (Alkali 72). According to Hajiya, patience is a virtue that leads a woman to a happy ending. Adichie describes this behaviour as "Feminism Lite", which implies that "a woman's well-being depends on the benevolence of a man" (Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* 23), and points out that women must be aware of this behaviour because it reflects man's superiority and

dominance. In *The Stillborn*, Li tried to be patient by communicating with her husband but to no avail. Habu was not receptive of her attempts to rebuild their marriage. When she goes back to the village after learning about her father's death, she decides to pay visit to Faku (who after marrying Garba, lived with his three wives and ten children; Alkali 85). During her visit, she discovers that Faku, her out-going friend, is now depressed and miserable and is a victim of domestic violence (by Garba and his wives). Li then comes to the realisation that being patient and waiting for a man to change is not the best solution and cannot benefit her in any way (Alkali 85). This visit may be a turning point in Li's journey to self-acknowledgement, professional independence and self-acquired happiness.

3.2.2.2 *Destiny*

Similarly to *The Stillborn,* in *Destiny*, marital relationships are depicted as end goals for the three characters. By the end of the novel, they disabuse themselves of this assumption. Hauwa Ali presents a patriarchal society that sees marriage as a necessity and a priority, and in which marriage is presented as more valuable achievement for women. Wali and his relative come to visit Farida's guardian in order to express their desire to marry their daughter to Wali Al Yakub who will harass Farida into marrying him. In *The Stillborn*, Alhaji Bature consistently makes unwanted advances with a view to marrying Li. In *Destiny*, Farida has a similar experience with Wali Al Yakub, who is portrayed as an egotistical character. According to Farida, he is "arrogant, egocentric and inconsiderate of others" (Ali 31). Similarly to the male character in *The Stillborn*, Wali Al Yakub has no regard for the opposite gender. Knowing that Farida does not love him, he still claims her by calling her "my F.A." (Ali 12) in front of her friends and Farouk. In addition, he is not opposed to forcing Farida to marry him, instead taking "her refusal as a personal challenge" (Ali 39). He cannot imagine a word in which a girl of sixteen refuses him (Ali 39). In order to conquer her, he sends her expensive gifts. In Hausa culture, "it is a common practice […] for a man to woo a woman with gifts. This behaviour will the encourage competition among men on who is capable to send the most expensive gifts and thus the girl is usually given to the 'highest bidder'" (Kassam 122). Accordingly, Farida is given to Wali because of his wealth, and love, as a criterion, is eliminated from their marriage because "if two lovers have financial difficulties, the love soon dies under the pressure of economic survival" (Ali 44). [13] Farida's guardians expect Wali Al Yakub to support them as well as their daughter

[13] This also reflects reality in parts of Africa. Couples often choose each other for their financial status, because the economic situation does not allow them to pursue love as a motivation for marriage. Some women accept

(44). In the Northern Nigerian societies "in which the [novel is] set, women are often treated as second-rate or non-beings, rarely consulted before far-reaching decision are taken concerning their welfare" (Mojola 127). It is for this reason that Farida's feelings are not considered when she is forced into marriage and as will be explained Farida' marriage will also impede one of her dreams: pursuing a further education.

During Wali Al Yakub's visit, Farida indicates that she wishes to pursue higher education at a university. Ali describes her announcement as a "bomb-shell that landed on the occupants of the room" (Ali 32). Wali then interjects by stating that "a girl should be married before she is eighteen [and that] a further [education] is best acquired when she is married" (Ali 32). According to Margaret Hauwa Kassam, "the imposition of early marriage on girls, in rural Nigeria, is presented as a way of denying them equal opportunities with boys to realize their full potential in life" (123). Limiting women's education is a way to divert their attention to marriage and the interests of their husbands. Farida's wish is to teach at a primary school in Kaduna because if she remains at home, she will be forced into an unwanted marriage with Wali (Ali 14). However, her aunt objects to her going to live in Kaduna on her own and unmarried (Ali 14). The older woman justifies her refusal by invoking moral and cultural norms: "How on earth can a child such as you live in a large city, single and unprotected? No! No! It is not proper and we shall be the object of gossip" (Ali 15). The aunt's response shows that women are considered to be the weak gender, incapable of protecting themselves, and that a woman must be married in order to pursue a career. Farida's aunt also casts doubt over Farida's intelligence by stating that she does not know anything about life outside the walls of the boarding school (Ali 15).

The tradition of early marriages often necessitates a girl's withdrawal from school and thus prevents her from pursuing further education. In the pre-nuptial agreements, the husband often commits to ensure the continuation of the "younger bride's education", and this is the reason why women are encouraged under false hopes to pursue education after marriage (Kawarai 12). In Northern Nigeria, marriage often takes priority over education (Kawarai 12). Similarly to the villagers and Awa, who pressured Li into marrying Alhaji Bature, Farida's aunt urges her to prioritise marriage over education: she "should not last too long [because it is better for a woman] to be happily and comfortably married and settled in her own home" (Ali 15).

In *Destiny*, Hauwa Ali discusses, through the character Wali Al Yakub, another theme explored in *We Should All Be Feminists*: the consequences of men's fear of vulnerability on

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this fate not because they are submissive to patriarchy but they are oppressed by poverty, and the same goes for men (Bayu 54)

women. In a traditionalist society such as rural Northern Nigeria, men are expected to be manly, strong and emotionally unfathomable. This expectation of an unreasonable virility creates a toxic environment for relationships between men and women (Adichie, *We Should* 30). Since females are always taught to "aspire to marriage" (Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* 30) and to make it their ultimate goal, they have to be careful not to intimidate men. Otherwise, they may lose their opportunities to marry. Adichie gives the example of a Nigerian woman who sold her house because she did not want to intimidate a man "who might want to marry her" (Adichie, *We Should* 29). In men, gender expectations create brittle selves (29). Consequently, women have to endure their egotistical behaviour, "[catering] to the fragile egos of males" (27), by pretending to be ambitionless or dependent. A girl has "to be successful but not too successful" (27), lest she emasculate her man. Wali Al Yakub considers that too much education is dangerous, especially for women (Ali 56). Women are allowed to be teachers in very small rural schools. However, if they aim for better positions, they are said to have become too ambitious and to scare men off (Brescoll 416). Adichie evokes this feeling of intimidation that educated and ambitious women induce in men: "if [a woman is] the breadwinner in [the] relationship with a man, [she must] pretend that [she is not], especially in public, otherwise [she] will emasculate him" (Adichie *We Should*, 28).

Vulnerability activates a defence mechanism in many men. That mechanism takes forms such as "power and control, restricted emotionality, and homophobia and heterosexism" (O'Neil and Rodney Abstract). In *Destiny*, Wali Al Yakub represents another instance of the fear of vulnerability that society instils into men. He fears failure: "Failure [is] unmanly, his life must be one huge success and so he battled to succeed in all things. He had often prided himself with the belief that he had a hold on his destiny" (Ali 7). Wali Al Yakub thinks that displays of insecurity reflect flaws. The loss of his business and his money – the comfort blankets that he uses to gain Farida's confidence, even though Farida is not attracted to his wealth – represents to him a threat to his virility and to the role that he has to perform as a man. When "these self-protective defense mechanisms break down, men's violence can be triggered. Typical triggering situations that stimulate power conflicts and abuses of power in heterosexual relationships [include] jealousy, sexual problems, friends, career transitions, threatened or actual divorce and separation" (O'Neil and Rodney Abstract). Wali Al Yakub engages in all of the aforementioned psychologically violent behaviours. Outbursts, threats of divorce and abuses of power are used to intimidate Farida because "as long as she is [his] wife, [he] expect[s] perfect service" (Ali 67). His inferiority complex also manifests as jealousy: when he begins to wrongfully suspect that Farouk and Farida have ruined his business, he uses Farida's

friend Tinu as a spy in order to retaliate (Ali 80). He promises Farida that she can continue her education, but only on condition that she has a baby or that she goes to London to study management for it is his idea to send her there (Ali 59). As can be seen, these conditions only cater to his self. He always wants to be in control. The decision to dismiss the chef and the maid in order to force Farida to behave like a wife shows that Wali Al Yakub perceives women as possessions that must serve him. In a traditional society, "women often bear the burden of being wives, mothers and housekeepers, […] even with paid help, [they] must organize, supervise and do some work [themselves]" (Mojola 131).

Another form of gender inequality that Hauwa Ali emphasises is discrimination against women who are unable to bear children in Nigeria. She tackles this issue through Farida, a young woman of sixteen whose preconceptions reflect those of a patriarchal society. Likewise, in *The Stillborn,* Hajiya is mistreated by her husband and her co-wives because of her inability to conceive. Farida falls into the stereotype of blaming women for their inability to have children. She believes her aunt to be jealous of her accomplishments "in addition to her inability to have a child of her own" (Ali 16). The association of the inability to conceive with a flaw is evident from Farida's expression of frustration. Like Hajiya in *The Stillborn*, the infertile woman is subjected to psychological abuse. Hajiya, in *The Stillborn*, is humiliated by her co-wives and ignored by her husband. In *Destiny*, Farida's aunt is a victim of the villager's gossip, she is also often ridiculed by her niece (Ali 16) "The negative consequences of infertility are much stronger in developing countries than in the Western societies, and these are mainly characterized by personal suffering and social stigmatization" (Ahamefule 39). Even though infertility involves both partners, it is only women who are blamed.

It is important to talk about another theme briefly mentioned in *Destiny*: sexual assault or how traditional society perceive sexually assaulted women. Their perception evokes another type of gender inequality. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie discusses the sensitive theme of blaming sexual assault on women's behaviour and appearance. She gives the example of a gang rape that occurred at a university in Nigeria. The response to this incident was to blame the girl: "yes, rape is wrong, but what is a girl doing in a room with four boys ?" (33). This statement shows that men's savage behaviour is normalized. At the same time, women are forced to be careful around men because man is a "being with no self-control" (33). Women are taught to be circumspect and to refrain from attracting attention. Young girls can end up in trouble and "consequently [bring] shame to themselves and to their families" (Ali 17). Mallam Taminu, Farida's confidante, echoes Nana's view that a pretty girl in a large city can only cause problems (Ali 21). She gives the example of a girl named Gogo Zuwaira, who either had a child

outside of marriage or lost her virginity (the exact reason is left to the reader to interpret). Farida tries to justify Zuwaira's behaviour by reference to rumours about her family background. However, Malla Taminu reacts by stating that "it is not exactly one's background that counts but one's vulnerability. I have heard of daughters from good family homes raped and consequently ended up like Zuwaira" (Ali 22). According to Malla Taminu, women's vulnerability is the cause of their sexual assault. Here we have the recurrent theme of blaming the woman either for her appearances or her vulnerability. These restrictions, though they may be well intentioned, only apply to girls. Rather than educating men in order to create a safe society for women, society restricts the freedom of women like Farida and prevents them from pursuing their dreams.

3.3 The African feminist's Muslim women: The female characters' reaction to gender conflicts

3.3.1 The Stillborn

It is important to note that this thesis does not criticise the characters' choice to consider the "complementation of man and woman [as a value needed in order] to achieve harmonious existence; [that] the upholding of marriage institution [,] cherishing of family and bearing children as one of the means of social growth for the woman" (Chinade 1). In his paper "A Womanist Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman* and *Cobwebs and Other Stories*", Ibrahim Sanusi Chinade states that the heroines in the novels conform to a set of "feminine" gender roles, such as embracing complementation of man and woman, marriage and maintaining a family, they consider these roles as values that are needed in order to build a better society (2). In the novel, there is a clear distinction between female and male roles in society. There are certain sets of roles that are designed solely to women, and the female characters in the novel do not seem to be perturbed by that distribution, as is evident from Li's ambitions and dreams. She aspires to be a "city housewife" and a Grade I teacher, while she wishes for her husband Habu to become a well-known doctor (Alkali 57). Such a scenario conforms to Arndt's idea of the reformist African- feminist "[t]his liberal portrayal goes along with the fact that gender relationships in family life are not questioned [by certain groups of African feminisms]" (Arndt, "Perspective" 36). However, the inequality of these gender distribution may be Alkali's indirect way of criticising constructed gender roles. The characters may be not troubled by these distributions but, in the Nigerian novels, they are shown as

resulting to negative consequences on the female characters: confinement, normalising women's mistreating, impeding their education (as shown above).

The aim of this chapter is to show how gender discrimination and the expectations of a traditional society affect African Muslim women and how the female characters overcome discrimination by adopting African feminist behaviours which may not necessarily be perfectly aligned with those advocated by 'Western' feminists. In his paper "A Womanist Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman* and *Cobwebs and Other Stories*", Ibrahim Sanusi Chinade notes that the characters in these narratives uphold the values of womanism, such as the complimentary between men and women. Ibrahim Sanusi Chinade insists that the characters focus exclusively on attracting other men and that they have no ambitions outside marriage. He states that Li's dreams revolve around her relationship with Habu, and that, similarly, Awa's ambition depends on Dan Fiama's position as the school principal (at the beginning of the novel, Awa based her ambitions and financial security on Dan Fiama's career): "Faku is feeling a sense of psychological and financial insecurity due to the lack of a man in her life. She is assuming that a secured life for a woman is only possible through complementing with a man who would provide the woman with food, clothing and shelter" (Chinade 8). However, this analysis only revolves around the first stage in the development of the female characters, in which their dreams of independence and freedom are indeed presented as being only accessible through marriage. Their interest in marriage is one of the crucial initial stages in their coming-of-age; it is what Grace Eche Okereke calls "the adolescent stage of marital subsumption" (Okereke 98). However, as Okereke points out, the women in Alkali's novel eventually transition to "the mature stage of self-assertion and reconciliation" (Okereke 98).

Chinade claims that womanism is an ideology that "urges, specifically, the African woman to be family-centred rather than female-centred, and encourages her to assume her responsibility as a daughter, wife and mother to her family" (Chinade, 2). However, the characteristics that Chinade cites are not sufficient, they do not reflect some of the characters' ambitions to be other than wives or mothers. Faku and Li achieve their dreams and become successful career women. In *Destiny*, Li, Awa, Faku and Farida uphold Africana womanist values. In her work *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Hudson-Weems refers to eighteen descriptors that characterize the womanist woman: she is a "self-namer, a self-definer, family-centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with the Africana man in struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male compatible,

respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering and nurturing" (qtd. in Reed 168).[14] In her book, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi adds that as opposed to 'Western' feminism, African womanists are "[flexible], [mature], and [have] maternal disposition" (119). Therefore, they are "pacifist", "cunning", "firm and truculent" (119). Some of the characters, such as Awa, also embrace nego-feminist values – the African woman "challenges [patriarchal difficulties] through nego-tiation, accommodation, and compromise" (Nnaemeka 380). As will be explained later, Awa is a character who has faced repeated criticism by literary critics because she allows traditionalism to interfere with her way of life. Since she decides to stay at home, enduring her husband's drunkenness and the responsibilities of a housewife, she is considered submissive. However, these analyses ignore an important characteristic of the African woman described by Nnaemeka. As Nnaemeka explains, "African women's willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive" (380). In the novel, Li, Faku and Awa do uphold these values. They yearn for families in which the wife is career driven and financially independent while also looking after her caring husband, who provides her with financial security, as well as looking after her children and the family home. However, describing female characters who are marriage driven as ambitionless is restrictive (Chinade 8): women who deliberately choose marriage, childbirth and domesticity – and thereby exert agency – are not submissive, weak, ambitionless, and unfeminist.

Alkali provides the female characters with solutions. At the end of *The Stillborn*, Li is separated from Habu. She goes back to school to continue her education (Alkali 95). She accomplishes her ambition and becomes a successful teacher and the owner of an "huge and enviable" building (101). Even at the beginning of the novel, Li is more assertive than the other girls in the village. From the first moment of her life, she is considered to be the odd one out, a girl who does not adhere to tradition (Alkali 6), for she "did not cry at birth" (6) and had "hair as kinky as an adult" (6). Her full name, Libira means that she "can never stay in one place for long" (6). The meaning of her name predicts her future: she wanders in search of autonomy and independence until she finds them. According to Margaret Hauwa Kassam, "Li is not against 'tradition' per se, but rebels against those aspects of tradition which her father wields high-handedly in his efforts to confine her to the house and restrict her movements in the village" (119). Li describes her father's compound as a suffocating prison in which she feels trapped by

[14] Even though, Africana womanism concerns African women of the diaspora, the eighteen's characteristic cited by Hudson-weems also apply to the female characters of the novels for she also includes continental African women in her definition.

a patriarchal figure whose demands for discipline Li considers "stupid and unnecessarily rigid" (Alkali 3).

This state of mind mostly arises after she begins to attend primary school, which means that her exposure to formal education "has introduced a new awareness that will soon manifest in her revolt. Thus, education is shown, even at the primary level, to have a consciousness-raising influence on women" (Okereke 99). Li's parents can be seen as personifications of traditional norms that chain women. The words that Li uses depict her state of mind: she feels claustrophobic as a result of the restrictive rules that are imposed on her by a traditional society, which only target women. She then decides to lead an independent life without the constant control of any authority (Alkali 3). Even when Li's father forbids her from attending funeral dances because her actions run counter to his beliefs, she defies his orders and travels unaccompanied at night to participate in the dance. Regardless of whether these behaviours are considered right or wrong in Islam, it cannot be denied that Li goes against the current, as she does not submit to the rules that her father imposes.

Li, then, symbolizes the voice of revolt, and she does not quiver in front of authority. She expresses her discomfort once again when she is told to marry a man other than Habu. Deciding to elope and to marry without consulting the patriarchal figure of the house, Baba, shows that Li has broken through the patriarchal restraints and begun a new journey (Alkali 56). Alkali describes this awakening as follows: "that day was to mark an important turning point in Li's life" (56). Li breaking the rules and attending the cultural dance where she meets Habu "marks her achievement of self-assertion at the domestic level. She has symbolically emerged from the cocoon of her claustrophobic home, and like a butterfly, is ready to spread her wings and fly into autonomy" (Okereke 104). The dance becomes the context in which Li defies patriarchy and parental authority in order to claim her individuality (104).

When Li comes back to the village to visit her sick father, Habu has forgotten about her. After the death of her father, the demise of the patriarchal figure who chained her and forbade her to be "free and gay", she begins to "dress extravagantly and to frequent cultural dances and festivals. […] She had reached the peak of her womanhood and was overwhelmed by her own popularity" (Alkali 84). She becomes the common enemy of a group of women from the village who throw insults at her, such as "unsaddled horse!" (85), "the vulture that isn't anybody's chicken!" (85) and "rich man plaything!" (85). A quarrel follows, and the women remove Li's clothes. After being mistreated, she decides to flee the village and vows to go back into the world in order to make an independent life for herself. Five years later, she becomes "the most educated women in her village" by acquiring her Advanced Teachers' Certificate (85). Alkali

presents us with characters whose initial dreams were shattered and who face the harsh realities of the city and marriage.[15] These characters, Faku, Awa and Li, become strong and independent. Li wishes to accomplish ambitions in life that do not concern marriage and men; Li likens her fixation on Habu to the life of a dog: "Was she to spend the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master's plate?" (Alkali 85). She wonders why she waited for a man "who cared nothing about her" (85). She then come to the realisation that a Hausa woman will never consider a man as a guardian or a father because "A woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan" (85). By this statement, Li means that a woman should not wait for a man's financial and emotional support in order to thrive.

Then, she decides that her dreams of prospering due to a relationship with a man are delusions. Instead of waiting for a husband to provide her with security, she resolves to "assume the role of the provider in her father's compound" (85). Having yearned to obtain male protection, freedom, and autonomy through a husband as a teenage girl, Li becomes, through her hard work and struggle, a pillar of the family home and its sole provider of financial security. She accomplishes independence and autonomy. In addition, as Li pursues her dreams and thrives psychologically and professionally, she encounters Habu, who begs her to return to him. However, Li is adamant in her refusal to return to a man who has made her unhappy. Habu tells Li that she "is still [his] woman", as if she were his possession and has no right to abandon him. However, Li holds fast to her belief that and did not return to him but decides to do so on her own accord.

Throughout the end of the novel, the reader learns that Li has willingly decided to return to her husband Habu. That decision is not the result of external pressure. Li decides to re-enter the relationship on her terms. It is she who has made the decision, not "to hold the crutches and lead the way" or "to walk behind him and arrest his fall" but "to hand him the crutches and side by side, [they] will learn to walk" (Alkali 105). In *The Stillborn*, Alkali shows that it is important for the independent Li to make her marriage a success. As Okereke argues, "The inertia that had marked woman's helplessness in her early, naive relationship with man has now given way to woman's feminist determination to direct the course of her marital destiny" (Okereke 118). Li shows that she is determined to overcome any obstacles that will make her marriage fall apart. Li's decision to return to her husband Habu and the analogy of "handing [him] the

[15] Faku's dream was to marry Garba to ensure her financial security but found herself in a much more dire situation than lack of money. Li's dreams were to be Habu's wife and lives in a mansion. However, because of Habu, these dreams were shattered. Awa's dream was to marry a successful principal but ended up with a drunken husband.

crutches" used in *The Stillborn* are criticised by certain critics, such as Omolele Adele, who writes that the fact that Li returns to her husband explains why her dreams are stillborn (Adele, 330). Alkali does not provide solutions to these contradictions, "leaving the feminists reader with a sense of discomfort and ambivalence, unsure of whether to condone Li's successful negotiation of the status quo: readers might see it as a subversion or as the self-silencing of assertive womanhood" (Kassam 121). However, the analogy that Li uses indicates that she does not sacrifice herself and her ambitions in order to help Habu. She gives the crutches to him so that he can find his own path to recovery, and she walks next to him lest he needs her help. Habu and Li walk side by side, but each has a path that must be walked individually.

After being mistreated by her husband and her co-wives due to her inability to give birth to another child, Faku decides to pursue a new journey through prostitution in order to provide for herself. According to Margaret Hauwa Kassam, "Unlike some city women who go into prostitution for commercial reasons, Alkali, [using the protagonist's compassion toward Faku's decision], emphasizes [the fact] that Faku engages in the trade as a survival strategy to ease her life of misery" (120). This shows that, despite Islam's perspective on prostitution and its treatment of it as a sin for both men and women (Eris 42), Alkali is sensitive to the social position of the individual. Li tells her sister Awa (who delivered her the new of Faku's prostitution) that "like all of us, Faku has her problems and is struggling the best way she can to survive. The method she chose should not concern anybody else" (Alkali, 94). The novel suggests that women who engage in prostitution are only victims of their societies. Zaynab Alkali supplies this character with an opportunity for redemption through transcendence: after finding the courage to leave Garba (Alkali, 102), Faku, who at the beginning of the novel described the presence of a man as a condition for prosperity in her life, decides to pursue an independent life and becomes a social welfare worker (Alkali, 102).

Finally, Awa decides to leave her husband, who has become a "drunken fool who comes home from time to time to harass [her] for drink-money" (Alkali 87). Many critics read Awa as "a dull, weak and ineffective foil to her sister's vivacity, ambition, and positive qualities" (Edwin 95). Likewise, many scholars describe Awa as a submissive sister who allows tradition to dictate her fate. For example, Grace Eche Okereke describes her as a traditionalist sister whose "personality and psyche are stunted as she is socialized into accepting her limitations in the village as her destiny" (100). Even Li, at the beginning of the novel, describes her sister as "humble and submissive beyond reason" (Alkali 13). However, I argue that Awa has value as she embodies the Igbo proverb "when something stands, something stands beside it" (qtd. in Nnaemeka 376): without Awa and her help, the house would have crumbled, for she is the

foundation of the family home and the "conciliatory spirit" who "buttress the cause of peace and progress" (Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man* 106) " She embodies the nego-feminists' approach, which is to "nego-tiate, accommodate, and compromise with changing situations and people, [...] all while finding no reason to complain about the Islamic framework of their lives" (Edwin 46). She decides to be a caregiver for her children, for Shuwa (Li's child) and for the elderly of the house. Similarly, Awa's contribution to Li's professional success is often ignored by critics, who point to Li's journey to autonomy while disregarding the fact that Awa is the only one who looks after Li's child so that her younger sister can pursue further education (Edwin 97) : "Far from subordination, weakness, or ineffectiveness, it is Awa who proves to be the 'man' of the house, [...] displaying more resolve, magnanimity, and fortitude than any of her family" (Edwin 95). From a very young age, Awa completes the seventh grade of primary school. She becomes a teacher in the village. Her demeanour seems to show a "weight of responsibility that was absent in [Li]", and she "shouldered half the responsibility of the house" (Alkali 3). She is carefree and enjoys life, she even participates in Li's adventures by leaving the house to attend cultural dances. During the dances "Awa 's eyes glowed and her teeth flashed as she wriggled her hips in rhythm to the drums. She was intoxicated by the drums, the full moon and the freedom of the night" (Alkali 57). She is also full of dreams and compassion to the village. Awa noticed that teachers leave the village to pursue a career in a city, however, she wishes to be a teacher at her village to benefit her community (Alkali 62).

Edwin notes that "among the metrics used to gauge Awa's failed feminism is her refusal, or as the critics choose to call it, her inability to rebel against Baba" (96). However, this behaviour shows not only maturity and "sobriety but also a strength of character" (97), which Li lacks. Awa refuses to dwell on the feeling of hatred for their father. Edwin adds that Awa's refusal to rebel symbolises "a consciousness of an Islamic identity that keeps her from disrespecting her father" (97). She is not submissive to male authority, but she is submissive to Allah's authority, as her attitude reflects what the Quran says about parental respect: "Your Lord has decreed that you will worship none but Him, and show your parents tender kindness. Should one or both of them reach old age in your care, never say anything that shows impatience with them, never rebuke them, but [always] speak to them respectfully" (Sourah 17: verse 23; trans. Kaskas 143). Islam encourages respect and obedience to one's parents in matters that are permitted by the religion. Awa embodies Islamic feminism. The character willingly accepts the limitations of Islam, that is:

> She operates within its framework, having embraced its expectations" (96). [...] [She is] guarded, cautious, and most of all goal-oriented, but her feminism

> remains critically disparaged for she undertakes no rebellion against Islam. […] […] Indeed, a closer look at Awa and her choice reveals the import of her African-Islamic feminism as it emphasizes her engagement with Islam and with nego-feminist maturity, intelligence and foresight in managing emotionally and materially tough situation. (Edwin 96)

The characters experience the final transition in their journeys towards independence. Li, Awa and Faku undergo a rite of passage in order to achieve autonomy: "romantic ideals to shattered reality, relative passivity to revolt and self-assertion, and from the immanence of traditional norms to the transcendence of autonomy" (Okereke 98). At the end of the novel, Li comes to the realisation that "not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn" (Alkali 104). She also realises that a woman does not need to live on false hopes to be independent and complete. As Ogbu points out, "This, no doubt, is the authorial voice" (Ogbu).

3.3.2 *Destiny*

At the beginning of the novel, Hauwa Ali introduces Farida as a protagonist who dreams about marrying the man she loves: "she had been engulfed in her thought about Farouk and the day they might be married, her closeness to him at the rehearsal had aroused her affections for him" (Ali 3). Farida and Farouk, who were taught to love each other like brother and sister at school, soon realise that "what they felt for each other was more than brotherly and sisterly affection" (Ali 5). Ali presents a list of Farida's dreams and ambitions. The first one is to marry Farouk. However, the writer also clarifies that Farida dreams of pursuing higher education and becoming a secondary school teacher. In this way, Ali emphasises the fact that Farida has ambitions outside marriage (unlike Li, Faku and Awa, she does not pin all her ambitions on a man). She leads a debate team towards winning a trophy (5). Her friends describe her as a very competent actor (1) and as a bright young woman who excels at school (Ali 4). She is preparing to enter the teaching profession, and she "even got a distinction in Education and Teaching Practice during her training" (4). Farida's role model is the debating mistress, Mrs Attah, a working woman who is a wife and a mother. Mrs Attah incarnates the woman who successfully balances her career and her marriage. Not only is she charismatic with a gentle personality, but she is also not afraid to show her femininity through her fashion choices. It is clear that Mrs Attah is everything that Farida aspires to be (3). Thus, the author introduces Farida as a character who dreams of being a wife and a career woman. According to Farida, the two roles are different sides of the same coin (3). Farida thinks that "contrary to the general belief that a

woman could only keep a home. [A woman] can [demonstrate] the ability to perform both roles successfully (3). Farida even asks her mistress, Mrs Attah, about the possibility of being married and going to university. Her mistress's response might be a revelation of Ali's stance on the subject: pursuing an education in addition to marriage is "even better and healthier in co-educational institution" (Ali 6). The reader now sees Farida as a woman who is searching for autonomy and independence while yearning to start a family.

Similar to Awa, Farida lives the life of a Muslim woman who does not neglect her daily religious practices: she offers the five mandatory prayers (Ali 16-27), she invokes Allah, and she is grateful for His blessings (22), but she is also an assertive woman who follows her ambitions and defies those who come in her way. Unlike Li in *The Stillborn*, whose parents are strict and very traditional, Farida's mother is described as a "fighter" but also as a gentle woman who "demonstrated her concern for the deprived and oppressed", qualities that her father was attracted to and which prompted him to marry her (23). Farida's father supports her education and fears that she might be kidnapped and forced into marriage after his death. His relatives "[reprimand] him for wasting his money on Farida's education" (23), but he does not succumb to the pressure and encourages Farida to pursue her education. Farida's parents are called the "revolutionary pair" (23).[16] Their qualities can be found in Farida. She respects her elders and their traditions, in line with the demands of Hausa culture (28). She wishes to marry Farouk out of love (as her parents did themselves), and she refuses to enter into a forced marriage (38) because she thinks that she has the right to choose her life partner, and that love and compatibility should be the basis for all marriages (40). She would rather have a consensual relationship than "all the riches in the world" (Ali 40); she is not blinded by wealth and money (35). She is ambitious and strives to be financially independent by pursuing a career (32). Her assertiveness manifests in her defiance of her aunt, who refuses to let Farida pursue a teaching career in Kaduna, by "[swearing] to fight what she believed was a calculated attempt to infringe upon her fundamental human right to work where she pleased" (16). In the face of all these struggles, Farida stays true to herself and to her faith: as Edwin argues, "In Farida's unwillingness to be discouraged lies embedded the Qur'anic principle of hope in Allah and the consciousness of never giving up a struggle for a noble purpose" (Edwin, "Working" 537).

[16] Hauwa Ali shows through Li's father qualities that not all men exert patriarchal power in a close-minded way. This is one of the features of African feminisms: men are not the enemy. Rather, the enemy is poverty, which, in

3.4 Islamic perspectives on the gender conflicts that the female characters encounter : a brief overview

The previous section highlighted the gender conflicts and the gender discrimination that the female characters in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Hauwa Ali's *Destiny* face. In addition, it presented their African feminist response to gender inequality. In order to contextualise these responses within Islam and to explain how inequality is often a by-product of tradition, these authors had to "alter cultural interpretation of certain Qura'nic codes of behavior [and] call for social change and female empowerment […] within the sanction of Islamic doctrine" (Whitsitt 121). This section discusses the Islamic perspective on the tensions that the female characters navigate. In this way, it shows that there is a distinction between religion and culture. To counter the negative representation of Islam as a sexist and misogynistic religion, Alkali and Ali "work within Islamic codes of behaviors" (Newell 141) and write characters who are educated, virtuous, devout heroines "who enter romantic liaisons without leaving Islam behind" and who are not afraid to voice their discomfort when it comes to abusive and polygynous partners (Newell 141). Although a comprehensive account of these subjects is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief explanation is necessary to explain the Islamic perspective on the instances of gender inequality that occur in the novels under analysis. The discussion is not premised on a specific *madhhab* (school of thought) but on a global understanding of certain aspects of Islam.

3.4.1 *Forced marriage*

In Islam, marriage occupies an important position. It is described as a "solemn covenant (*meethaqan ghaleezan*), one of the most significant forms of agreement in Islam, and its purpose is to establish a successful relationship for achieving positive outcomes for all the family" (Islamic Relief 4). As the Quran says, "And among His signs is that He created spouses for you from among yourselves, so that you may find peace with them, and He has placed affection and mercy between you. In this there are signs for people who think" (Surah Al-Rum (The Byzantines) 30 :21; trans. Kaskas 240). To be a successful covenant or a sanctified contract (*meethaqan ghaleezan*, the most solemn covenant in Islam), a marriage must meet conditions such as the need to ensure that both parties consent to it (Islamic Relief 4). In Islam, forced marriage is prohibited. The Surah An-Nisa in the Quran states the following:

> "Believers, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will, nor should you treat them harshly in the hopes of re-gaining some of the bridal-gift you gave them, unless they are obviously guilty of promiscuity" (Quran 4 :19; trans. Kaskas 41).

This surah highlights the importance of consent in Islam as well as the expectation that a man will treat his wife kindly and fairly. However, it is important to make clear that there is a distinction between the Quran and social practices in the Muslim community. Men, in Muslim societies, often disregard important rules in Islam and they only interpret these rules based on what benefits their narrative: exercising control over women. However, most these practices must not be associated with Islam (Patoari 1211). Family members, especially parents, often assume primary responsibility for forced marriages. As can be seen in *Destiny*, in traditional societies, such as that of rural Northern Nigeria, parents often arrange their daughter's marriage for financial reasons. In Islam, parents are responsible for the wellbeing of their children because it will be accounted for in front of God on the day of judgement. They will be severely judged for they bend the rules of Allah that prohibit forced marriage (Islamic Relief 6) In *Destiny*, Farida's uncle is her guardian (*wali* in Arabic), that is, a man who has been granted the authority to give or withhold consent to her marriage, because her father is deceased. Guardianship is the "legal authority vested in a person who is fully competent to safeguard the interests and rights of another person who is incapable of doing so independently" (Rafiq 1255); this condition does not apply to Farida for she is fully competent to make her own decisions. Her uncle therefore has no right to force her into an unwanted marriage (this condition is not the only; see surahs and hadiths below). However, in practice, women's interests and wellbeing are not taken into consideration (Farooq 20). A *hadith* that is well known within the Muslim community posits that "a woman without a husband has more right to her person than her guardian, and a virgin's consent must be asked from her, and her silence implies her consent" (Sahih Muslim 1,421a Book 16, Hadith 78). [17] This *hadith* means that a divorced woman has every right to decide whether she consents to a marriage and a female virgin (who has never been married) can never be forced into marriage (Farooq 21).

There is some disagreement on forced marriage. For example, those who belong to the Hanafi school of thought consider it impermissible for a virgin woman to enter into a marriage without her consent (Mohd, "The Theory" 54). According to the Zahiris, the consent of the woman and that of her guardian are mandatory. If either does not consent, then the marriage is invalid (Farooq 22). In contrast, in Northern Nigeria, where the Malikit *madhab* (school of

[17] The silence as consent has been interpreted by several scholars as the silence of a shy woman. The prophet Muhammad was told that the woman in question was too shy to give her consent and this is why, he ruled that her silence can be taken as consent. However nowadays silence cannot be a form consent. It has to be either verbal or non-verbal but it has to clearly indicate consent. The term "silence" is used by many people in order to silence women into subjugation Islam Relief 5).

thought) predominates, forced marriage is permitted. They support their *fatwa* (or argument) by claiming that a father can force his daughter into marriage because Imam Malik considers "the choice of partner by a Muslim girl subject to the over-ruling power or *ijbar* of her father or guardian in the interests of the girl herself" (Doi n.d. qtd. in Canada). However, as stated by Muhammed Farooq, "for contemporary Muslim jurists, there is no ruling to support the binding authority of guardians, as advocated by the fuqaha (Muslim Jurists) in legal texts from the Qur'an and Sunna" (Farooq 22). Many critics, such as Hammuda Abd Al Ati, consider the tendency displayed by some schools of thought to permit the guardian to force a female virgin into marriage if she cannot decide wisely due to immaturity to be a simple *ijtihad* (personal reasoning) that is not supported by the canonical texts (Al Ati 83). Even though there are discrepancy between school of thoughts, most scholars agree on the fact that Islam prohibits forced marriage and this prohibition is not conditional.

As some of the above examples suggest, the Islamic prohibition on forced marriage is not respected in some traditional societies because in many Muslim countries, Quran-based Islamic practices are "crushed" by customary practices. These traditional practices are variously stem from a lack of understanding of Islam, from the ineffectiveness of the law and from the restrictive policies adopted by the state (Riaz 263). Ibiyemi Mojola writes that "justification for self-serving actions against women are sometimes anchored in the Islamic belief that whatever happens is God's will" (132). Mojola gives the example of Mariam Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, in which the imam justifies the wish of the protagonist's husband, Modou, to marry a second wife as God's will: "When almighty Allah puts two people side by side, there is nothing one can do" (Bâ 56, qtd. in 132). However, Modou does not respect the requirement set by Islam that the first wife be informed about the arrival of the second wife or the requirement that the two be treated equally. The Quran states that a man can marry multiple wives but only if they are treated equally. However, treating them equally is impossible (Surah An-Nissa, 4 :03; trans. Kaskas 40).[18] This is a surah usually ignored or taken lightly by many men, "depriving women of the rights Allah Almighty has granted" (Tawfiq). Furthermore, Margaret Hauwa Kassam, giving the example of Farida and Wali in *Destiny*, explains that individuals often use God's will to justify their wrongdoing in order to control women's decisions:

[18] "The verse allowing men to take more than one wife was revealed after the Battle of Uhud, in which 10% of the Muslim men had been killed. Now, in those days there was no kind of social security. In a society where there were not enough men to equal the number of women wanting to marry, it was revealed that a man could take more than one wife" (Tawfiq)

> There a strong connection between fate and Islam in the novel: for predicaments and misfortunes are generally attributed to Allah in the story, […]. The marriage between Wali and Farida is interpreted by [her family] as predestined by Allah, and Farida accepts the situation as her 'fate' since 'it is God's will for her' (Ali 48-9). In this way, Ali reveals the extent to which religious discourse has been used to mask the manipulation of young women to suit people's selfish interest in society. (Kassam 123)

In *Destiny*, Farida is forced into marriage by her uncle. Her friends and her family try to convince her by referring to God's will and the possibility that she may be considered unfaithful if she does not follow God's will. Farida even doubts her belief in God's will: "Her Faith in God began to falter. In despair, she wondered why the Almighty Allah was forsaking her" (Ali 23). This type of psychological manipulation is often used to justify the stubbornness of the parental authority and the inability of her female friends to comfort her; thus, they use "God's will" to avoid guilt.

<u>3.4.2</u> *Education and work*

The independent organisation Islamic Relief seeks to put an end to early forced marriage (EFM) in Nigeria. According to this organization, one of the consequences of EFM in underdeveloped countries is that "[often] girls and boys who marry early have to stop their education without adequate knowledge and skills. They are deprived of inclusive economic growth, social cohesion and the chance to escape poverty" (Pertek et al Sharifa 5). This mirrors Farida's fate. She is forced to abandon further education because, according to Wali Al Yakub and her uncle, a woman ought to marry first. There is a certain narrative that casts Islam as an obstacle to Muslim women's education and professional development: "Islam is viewed as a religion in which women are restricted from many basic rights, including education because of the persistent low girls' literacy rate among Muslim societies" (Khan 339). Shirin Edwin, in her article "'Working' And 'Studying' Muslim Women: African Feminist Theory and The African Novel", presents the works of several critics, such as Barbara Callaway and Lucy Greevy. In their book *The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion, and Politics in West Africa*, Callawy and Greeby describe Muslim women as "severely disadvantaged in both education and politics compared to their non-Islamic sisters" (15). Furthermore, they also support the idea that Muslim women do not participate in economic development (Edwin, "Working" 519).

However, other scholars, such as Polly Hill, refute the notion that Muslim women are unable to participate in economic development. In her article, "Hidden Trade in Hausaland", Hill casts doubt over the idea that the absence of Hausa Muslim women from the rural Nigerian marketplace proves that they do not contribute to Nigerian economic growth. She claims that "although each woman sells her produce within the privacy of her husband's compound, one may yet argue that the sellers as a group, together with their customers, are the equivalent of a marketplace, especially so far as grains are concerned – a market-place of incomparably greater importance than that which was established in the village" (393). As can be seen in *The Stillborn* and *Destiny*, Li's and Farida's assertiveness in their pursuit of higher education, as well as Farida's determination not to allow her pregnancy to come in the way of her education (Ali 80), Li also became a successful business woman who owns several buildings. These Muslim women participate in the economy of their own country and demand education and knowledge. In addition, even though Muslim women in Muslim countries are unlikely to be employed because of cultural pressures to remain at home in order to educate children and maintain the family home, Islam encourages every Muslim to seek knowledge. Indeed, in Surah Al-Alaq (The Clot), which forms part of the Quran, it is said:

> Recite in the name of your Lord who created, (96 :01) created the human being from a clinging substance. (96 :02) Recite, and your Lord is the most generous, (96 :03) Who taught by the pen. (96 :04) He taught the human being that which he knew not. (96 :05). (trans. Kaskas 339)

Surah al-Alaq, which describes the first revelation of the Prophet Muhammad, affords a very important position to education and knowledge. The verse "who taught by the pen" (96 :04) holds a significant meaning. Allah encourages believers to seek knowledge as follows: He made him possess knowledge and taught him the art writing by the use of pen "which became means of propagation, progress, dissemination and preservation of knowledge on a large scale" (Maududi 96). If He does not give knowledge by the use of pen, the human's intellectual faculty will slowly stagnate and he or she will lose the faculty to transmit knowledge from one generation to the next (96). Similarly, several of the Prophet Muhammed's *hadiths* indicate the necessity of education and its value. The best-known *hadiths* are "seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim..." (Saheeh al-Jaami 3914 qtd. in khan 340). The Quran also says "Are those who know equal to those who do not know? Only those who have understanding will keep this in mind" (39 :09; trans. Kaskas 233). The importance of knowledge also emerges clearly from the sunnah: "Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people" (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 107; qtd. in Akber).

In *Destiny*, Ali shows that the only obstacles to Farida's education are created by her guardian and by Wali Al Yakub, her husband: "Dear God, help me make Wali permit me to go on to a higher institution of learning. In the alternative, let him permit me take up a teaching job", she prays; "This boredom is killing me" (Ali 67). This passage shows Farida complaining to God about the injustice that she faces. This injustice is the product of a patriarchal society that silences and weakens women by prohibiting them from pursuing education. As aforementioned, Islam gives importance to knowledge and education. The verses and the hadiths explained above show that a Muslim woman/man should seek knowledge for it is a blessing that can be put in use to benefit society and human beings. It can be also transmitted to the generations that follow. Farida's perspective on education reflects these considerations. She thinks that education and knowledge "ensure better management of family affairs" (Ali 56). she also believes that transmitting knowledge to the next generation would benefit society because "the better the entire society if more individuals are well educated" (56). She thinks that denying a woman a full education is a violation of her rights (56).

3.4.3 *Gender roles within marriage*

As noted previously, gender inequality within marriage, whereby a woman is responsible for household chores and children whilst the husband is a financial provider, is not frowned upon for some people in Nigeria. According to ideologies such as womanism and nego-feminism, women and men have distinct roles. Womanists, for instance, "are not seeking to be like men, look like men, or necessarily act like men" (Kolawole 27). Some African critics of feminism, such as Oyeronké Oyěwúmí in her book *The Invention of Women*, do not dwell on gender equality because they believe that the idea of gender is a 'Western' invention (gender equality depends, as previously mentioned, on the movement in African feminism (reformism, transformative or radical) that the author or critic is defending; Arndt 32). According to Oyěwúmí, 'Westerns' adopt a one-sided perspective, in that they associate the social body (gender) with the physical body (sex). Everything depends on one's position as a leader (Yusuf, "Yoruba's" 1). Other African feminists, such as Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Manifesto of Fifteen Suggestions*, consider gender inequality in Nigeria to be a reality that should not be neglected. If Adichie's idea of gender inequality is followed, then the female characters in *The Stillborn* and *Destiny* may be said to have experienced gender discrimination in general and within their marriages, which unfold in a patriarchal and

traditional society (see the first section). This thesis has shown this idea to be more complex than what may appear about at first sight.

Abdullah ibn Umar writes that the Prophet Muhammad said the following:

> every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects. A man is the guardian of his family and he is responsible for them. A woman is the guardian of her husband's home and his children and she is responsible for them. The servant of a man is a guardian of the property of his master and he is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. (Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari 5,138, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim; qtd. in Elias)

This *hadith* can also be interpreted in the context of spousal relationships: a husband's flock is his wife, and a wife's flock is her husband. According to the stereotypes about the spousal relationship in Islam, women are considered inferior to men. This understanding may be attributed to the misinterpretation of some hadiths and surahs, such as Surah An-Nissa: "Husbands have charge[19] (*Qawwamun*) of their wives with the wealth God has given to some over others, and with what they spend out of their wealth" (4 :34; trans Kaskas 43).

The term "*Qawwamun*" has been subject to many interpretations. Its meanings have been said to include "superior" and "dominance". Vanessa Rivera de la Fuente explains the problem as follows: "The most appropriate translation of Qawwamun is not "authority", but ["] responsible for the maintenance of the family [";] [it] is a term that refers to economic matters related to a specific time and situation and not [to] moral issues nor to all the contexts" (Rivera de la Fuente 53). Some feminist hermeneutics interpret this verse as a "division of labor" (53): While women are responsible for childbirth and the difficulty that comes with it, men, on the other hand, have the responsibility to provide financial security and thus are responsible (*Qawwamun*) for women (53). Other scholars, such as Mohamed Metwali Chaârawi, add that the term "*Qawwamun*" applies not only to husbands but also to fathers and brothers. In Islam, men are obliged to provide financial security. This role is one of their religious duties. In order to be a provider, a man must acquire a strong and firm personality (not in his relationship with his wife but in relation to the external hardships of life; Chaârawi, 2011). The role of the man as a financial provider is so important in Islam that Shaikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller writes the following:

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[19] "اَلرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُوْنَ عَلَى النِّسَآءِ"

> Whenever a husband is unable to support his wife, he is no longer her caretaker: she is not obliged to remain at home [should he request it by] any school of jurisprudence, and according to the school of al-Shafi'i (Allah be well pleased with him), she is entitled to have the marriage annulled. He is no longer a caretaker or entitled to oblige her to remain at home because he has vitiated the objective of protecting her by marriage, for the aim of marriage is her security (Keller).

As far as gender roles are concerned, Juelda Lamce writes in her article "The Rights and Obligations of Spouses in Islamic Classic Law" that "The rights and obligations between spouses are considered mostly in terms of reciprocity rather than equality. They reflect sphere of action of each spouse related to their functions, separate and complementary" (185). This position is similar to the notion of the complementation of men and women, which is found in African feminisms. The Quran says, "Live with your wives in a way that is fair and kind. If you dislike them, it may well be that you dislike something which God has made a source of abundant grace" (4 :19; trans. Kaskas 41). In Islam, spouses are seen to possess rights and duties. Those rights and duties occupy a very important position, and if one violates them, one is deemed a sinner. The verses cited here describe a very important virtue that Habu, Wali Al Yakub and Fiama do not respect. As noted earlier, Habu does not treat Li with kindness or fairness. Wali Al Yakub forces himself on Farida. Even though he provides her with financial security, he fails to give her what she desires most, namely freedom and love. Fiama disregards one of the most important duties of a man in Islam, which is to provide for one's wife. He is a drunk who takes his wife's money. According to Salahi, "Under Islam, a woman has equal rights to earn, own, spend and otherwise dispose of her property as she wishes, without interference by any male relative, be he a father, husband or guardian. As long as she is an adult and of sound mind, she has the right to do what she likes with her money and property. These two conditions apply to males and females equally" (Salahi). Awa becomes a financial provider. Even though she is not obliged to do so by Islam, the role of a provider is one that women are allowed to assume: "If the wife wishes to contribute financially, she can do so, and Allah (SWT) would bless her immensely. A wife can help her husband with finances to relieve him of his burden and conceal his flaws" (Kubra). This is what Awa does, however, not to "conceal his flaw" or to "relieve him of his burden" but she had to financially participate in order to provide for her children and the "old people" in the house (Alkali 87).

Even though women, as mentioned above, act as caregivers in the family home and assume responsibility for domestic chores, that role is not criticised in *Destiny* or in *The*

Stillborn. Li's discomfort with chores has to do with boredom and routines, not with the chores that are allocated to her because of her gender. Even though, Li's boredom and discomfort with the chores might be interpreted as an indirect way of criticising gender divisions. This distribution of role is also criticised by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In *We Should All Be Feminist*, she stresses that "women in general are more likely to do housework than men – cooking and cleaning" as if it is part of their gene (35). In Muslim societies, women are expected to fill the role of the 'chef', the 'maid' and the 'teacher'. They are also expected to stay at home to take care of the children. Muslim men prefer to choose a woman without a career or ask her to put a break in her career so that she does not neglect his children. The man in this situation is only expected to provide (Abid). In his book *An Introduction to the Right and Duties of Women in Islam*, Ibrahim Amimi states that even though it is morally and ethically permissible for a woman to take charge of chores in order to maintain the family home, in Islam "housework is not the duty of a wife; even regarding fostering, tending, and nursing children, no responsibility has been placed upon a wife. She can choose to do nothing and ask for a servant or she can ask for wages for performing housework and fostering and nursing her children" (Amimi 55). However, as Adichie writes, women "have been socialized to see cooking as their role" (Adichie *We Should* 35). This is why women in Muslim countries are obliged and expected to take charge of chores, even though they do not form part of their religious duties.

Mustafa Hosny, in an important lecture on the significance of harm to women or wives in Islam, quotes the following verses from Surah al-Baqarah (The Cow): "If you divorce [your] women, and their waiting term is complete, either take them back kindly or let then go kindly. Do not take them back in order to harm them or to treat them belligerently. Anyone who does that sins against himself" (2: 231; trans. Kaskas 22). The words "Anyone who does that sins against himself" emphasise that a man who mistreats and harms a woman is akin to one who harms oneself by disobeying Allah. In the surah Al-talaq (The Divorce), the Quran describes the relationship between disobeying Allah and self-harm: "These are the limits of God and whoever oversteps God's limits wrongs his own soul" (1 :65; trans. Kaskas 298). Hosny adds that the Quran opens with a surah that is partly about the emotional and financial rights of women. The third surah, which relates the story of Mariam (mother of Jesus), describes an ideal to which Muslim women can aspire. In this surah, Maryam is described as a believing and strong woman, who preserved "her dignity and nobleness among those who were cruel to her" (Yoha). The fourth surah, An-nissa (Women), contains 167 verses about women's rights. According to Hosny, God communicates the importance of women's rights to men and to all generations through these surahs. As can be seen from the aforementioned surahs, hadiths and

their exegesis, the behaviour of the male characters, in *Destiny* and *The Stillborn,* towards their wives is not permissible in Islam. Li demands a divorce, and Faku leaves her husband. Awa decides to stay at home and to maintain the family home because of her husband's inability financially prrovide. These decisions are all permissible, as stated in the verses that were cited above, and they are also African feminist choices.

3.5 Debunking the narrative of escaping or exposing Islam through rebellion

As explained above, Muslim female characters and personalities are often presented with two representations: 1) submission, which deprives the woman of autonomy and freedom and 2) escape or rebellion, whereby Muslim women who behave in an unconventional manner or who express certain views that are contrary to Islam attempt to expose it as a cruel and patriarchal religion (Edwin 77-78). In *The Stillborn*, Li arguably engages in what Islam considers controversial behaviours, such as swearing in the name of several gods, "frequent[ing] funeral dances and festivals" (83), treating her family, including her sister, with disdain, and wishing to be a "heathen" (3). Even *Alkali* writes, in *The Stillborn*, "Everybody could see the direction Li was heading except her, in her new glory she was oblivious to everything" (3). Many critics who are cited by Shirin Edwin, such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, consider the ending of the novel, in which Li embraces Islam to be "inexplicable". Donald Wehrs explains Alkali's choice of ending with her fear of incorporating unconventional acts that are prohibited in Islam into her novel, for instance swearing in the name of other Gods and wishing to be a "heathen" (Alkali, 4). He adds that she had to conform to the norms of Nigerian Islamic society (qtd. in Edwin 87). These critics stress the fact that Li is a character who bears several burdens and is chained by religious regulations and restrictions. The patriarchal figures who personify Islam and its restrictions expect her to comply (Edwin 87). However, in the Nigerian novels under analysis, especially in *The Stillborn,* the characters' atypical behaviour and their struggles are normal transitions that many religious Muslim women undergo in the self-discovery phase of their life. Edwin notes that "the fragmented cultural composition of the village, compromising Islam, heathenism, and Christianity, bears upon Li's earliest thoughts and amplifies her noetic journey to Islam" (Edwin 88). Li, Awa and Faku from *The Stillborn* and Farida from *Destiny* are Nigerian Muslim women who fight for their rights while cherishing their religion and their beliefs. Contrary to the common trope in literature, these characters do not follow the narrative of escaping Islam to seek freedom. In this regard, I embrace the following argument from Edwin's *Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction*:

> While in the theorization of African feminism, African women are seen to holistically engage their environment, negotiate with it, harmonize its conflicts, and work cooperatively with men, infusing their feminist stance with collaborative and nurturing gestures and dispositions, the African Muslim woman is perceived as inexorably poised to subvert, oppose, and battle patriarchy, epitomized by Islam, in an effort to escape it. Zaynab Alkali's fiction has long been read in support of this claim. (77)

Edwin answers the critics by claiming that, in *The Stillborn,* Li is in no way rebelling against Islam. Instead, she is experiencing "a noetic transformation" which translates into a discovery of one's own flaws that prompts their correction (78). Edwin adds that Li's journey entails a transformation of her African Islamic feminism "through personal lessons of reverence, sensitivity, and responsibility from observing Awa" (78) in addition to the transformation of her self. Through these personal lessons, Li acquires *aqiliyyah* (mentality or intellect) and *nafsiyyah* (behavioural disposition), tools that help her to embody African Islamic feminism (78). Edwin explains that Li's engagement with Islamic feminism has its roots in a cognitive process that enables her to acquire the good virtues (*Akhlaq* in Arabic) that Islam demands. *Akhlaq* is derived from *khuluq*, which means "virtuous behaviour", that is, a disposition that a Muslim must adopt. Shirin Edwin explains it as "a desirable model to emulate, in that it directly alludes to Muhammad's personality as a model of good behaviour that Muslims must aspire to embody" (Edwin 80). A Muslim acquires *khuluq*, or "a good disposition", through the repetition of religious practices. A good disposition may be acquired for three reasons. The first is *Fitra*, or the original *state*, in which Allah created all Muslims. The hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim from Abu Hurayrah reports the following words uttered by the Prophet Muhammad: "every child is born upon the fitrah but his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian" (Mohd, "Din" 693). Second, habit is the repetitive performance of a certain act that leads to the acquisition of a good disposition. Finally, "Practice and conscious effort [, …] if continued long enough [,] will eventually lead to the formation of a disposition" (Naraqi).[20] The last reason, which translates into a cognitive process or an intellectual effort, is the basis for Edwin's analysis (Edwin 80). This cognitive process is the accomplishment of *aqqiliyyah* and *nafsiyyah* (80). *Nafsiyyah* cannot be acquired without *aqqiliyyah*. Edwin explains that being a good Muslim, if not accompanied by "accurate knowledge" (80), is not sufficient. She gives the example of fasting in forbidden days and describes this act as a result of an "incomplete

[20] This quotation was found on a website (islam.org) that condensed the translated book *Jami al-Sa'adat* ("The Collector of Felicities") of Muhammad Mahdi Naraqi into articles.

nafsiyyah" because it is followed by "the right *aqiliyyah*", which is the faculty of discerning and understanding the reason for performing the deed (80).

Edwin's statement means that faith cannot be acquired without full intellectual consciousness. A Muslim must realise the importance of a good deed, for a good deed is of no consequence if it is performed with an empty mind (80). Edwin's statement is reminiscent of a very important rule in Islam, which has been interpreted by several scholars from different schools of thought (*madhab*): "Giving a ruling on a matter is simply a branch of understanding its reality"[21] (trans. Noor) or "passing judgment on something depends on having proper conception therefore" (Bishr). Mustafa Hosny interprets this quotation by linking it to faith: a person who cannot experience, imagine, and fully comprehend an act of adoration or a religious practice cannot maintain it candidly (Hosny). According to Edwin, at the end of novel, Li experiences faith and Islamic values through her sister Awa. Li is therefore using her cognitive consciousness in order to comprehend and fully assimilate her surroundings in order to worship and to practice her religion and her Islamic feminism sincerely. Li engages in this emotional labour in order to fully accept God as unique (as evident from her utterance of the *shahada*, as will be explained later). She has to undertake a journey of self-acknowledgment, recognizing that her actions might have been wrong.

In her work, Edwin tries to debunk the narrative that Islam is exposed through the characters' rebellion. However, there is another perspective that is important to explaining the characters' arguably unconventional behaviour. That behaviour might be due to a fluctuation or a weakness of faith that is necessary to strengthen practicing Muslims' relationship with their creator. Some critics, such as Grace Eche Okereke, describe Li as "iconoclastic", that is, as "a person who strongly opposes generally accepted beliefs and traditions" (Iconoclast). However, in Islam, there is a belief that life is made of hardship. In the Quran, Allah says "indeed We have created man (to live) in hard struggle" (Quran).[22] Muslims participate in a daily struggle to fight against *fitan* (temptations) and the hardships of life, which put their faith to the test (Quran). Some do but many of them do not rebel against their religion, but they experience varying levels of faith throughout the process of self-discovery. The narrative of rebelling against Islam ignores important parts of Muslims' spiritual journey: self-discovery and repentance. Muslims who are religious go through a self-discovery phase while educating themselves about Islam. A Muslim's faith is not always linear; it fluctuates (Al-Munajjid 2). Moreover, faith is a profound sentiment that is felt in the heart. In Arabic, the heart is called

[21] الحكم على الشيء فرع عن تصوره

[22] This is Mufti Taqi Usmani's translation of verse 4 in Sourat Al-Balad (The City)

qalb, which is the origin of the word "Taqallub – alteration, variation, ups and downs" (2). Faith comes from the heart, which is in a constant state of change. The Prophet Muhammed said, "The likeness of the heart is that of a feather in an empty plot of land, being blown over and over by the wind" (2). Muslims' attachment to their religion is an everyday struggle. When worshiping Allah, an individual cannot always keep their faith in a perfect rhythm.

In *The Stillborn,* Li is not depicted as a perfect Muslim but as a character who is passing through a phase of self-acknowledgment and self-discovery that, at the end of the novel, leads her to acknowledge her faith and her religion by formulating the first of the five pillars of the *shahada* (the testimony; Edwin 80): "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is the Messenger of Allah". The *shahada* is a verbal articulation of Muslims' monotheistic belief. By saying the *shahada*, Muslims declare their faith in a unique and single God. Depicting Li as rebellious and as a character who is, at the beginning of her teenager years, not particularly attached to her religion might be Alkali's attempt to depict the everyday Muslim woman who struggles to discover herself in order to maintain her faith in Allah while preserving her feminist beliefs. Farida, despite everything that she has been through, continues to practice her daily religious routine, never missing a prayer and always invoking God. Alkali and Ali may thus be said to have depicted aspects of the experience of Muslim women which is present but rarely seen in 'Western' representations.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the representation of of West African Muslim women, with a view to offering an account of the multiple ways in which they are portrayed. In the second chapter, social media and films were used in order to provide insights on negative representations. The failure to represent Muslim women fairly, it has been suggested, has encouraged the exclusion of Muslim women from 'Western' feminist ideology. This failure has also resulted in campaigns that are tainted by neo-imperialism and 'Western'-centrism. For these reasons, it is important that a more positive representation emerge. This thesis then asked two questions. How to improve these representations? How should West African Muslim women be represented? The third chapter answered these questions by describing a nuanced depiction of African Muslim women by reference to Hausa literature, which describes the reality of West African Muslim women and is written by West African Muslim authors.

Thus, this thesis has pointed to the contrast in the representations of West African Muslim women in film, social media, and literature. Two types of media, namely the streaming platform Netflix and social media, were analysed. While the analysis of the latter circled on Internet campaigns such as "#BringBackOurGirls" and "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists", the discussion of the former revolved around the controversial film *Cuties*. My analysis of both media was based on criticisms from online users. The criticism of the "#BringBackOurGirls" campaign originated from Nigerians and was aimed at 'Western' Internet users, whose reactions were said to concern irrelevant subjects and to have diverted attention from the main issue. The analysis showed the stereotyped representation of African Muslim women as victims who need to be saved by a "white" man and liberated from their oppressive religion (Ofori-Parku and Senyo 2,490). It also demonstrated how 'Westerners' address Third World-related campaigns. Their concerns are often misplaced and self-centred (for instance the need for military interventions to rescue the kidnapped girls, which, according to Jumoke Balogun, is an unneeded and unnecessary meddling that will only strength and benefit the presence of American military in Africa (Balogun). The analysis of the "#WeShouldAllBeFeminists" campaign focused on the exclusion of African Muslim women. It presented the common narrative of 'Western' feminism, which tends to treat all women as subjects of its ideology without considering other forms of feminism, such as its African varieties (Weems 17). The section also analysed Muslim women's refusal to accept the term "feminism" because of its colonialist and imperialist connotations (Barlas 16) and because of the exclusion of Muslims who cover from the 'Western' feminists' struggle for women's right to dress as they please. In

this section I provided Muslim women's point of view on the term 'feminism' ; those who are comfortable with the term try to re-appropriate it or juggle with it, which means that they use it when it benefits them and discard it when it goes against their beliefs. Those who are uncomfortable with the term suggest other alternatives, an ideology that considers their faith and their fight as women (Carland).

In the section on the film *Cuties*, I presented two types of reactions. Non-African Muslim women discuss the stereotypical representation of Muslim females as victims who seek an escape from their religion. African Muslim women perceive the film differently. They relate to the Senegalese director Doucouré Maimouna, her story, and the protagonist of the film personally. In an interview, Doucouré Maimouna claims, "In the reality that I grew up in, women often impose upon themselves traits which they believe are in their Muslim religion. So, in the film, I actually have an Imam who comes in and talks to Amy's mother and tells her that 'No, in Islam, women do, in fact, have rights.'" (Marji). Maimouna Doucouré's representation of Islam as practiced in Africa and as a part of African reality resonates with African Internet users. The film and Doucouré's background explain her output. It is inspired by her personal story, that is, the manner in which she dealt with her polygamous father and the innacurate practice of Islam in Africa.

Few films that are directed by Muslim African women are released on popular platforms such as Netflix (Dixon). Given the common depiction of Muslim women as either oppressed or free only when they experience sex, remove their *hijabs,* and date white non-Muslim men (Qaderi), it would be naïve to expect a female Muslim director to provide a balanced representation (Dixon). Such a balanced representation would capture both the positive and the negative aspects of the religion by featuring more than a single scene showing the positive side of Islam, and also by developing a profound and relevant representation of other Muslim women. While some African Muslim women do experience oppression at the hands of male authority figures, many are strong, independent, and rely on their religion for strength, freedom, spiritual and personal awakening, and tranquillity. It follows that the representation of African Muslim women could be broadened and enhanced so as to offer a more balanced and realistic picture. As the last chapter has shown, such a picture emerges in literature written by African Muslim women about African Muslim characters.

The Nigerian Muslim women writers whose work was analysed in the third chapter created strong, independent, and assertive female Muslim characters. These characters are not represented as oppressed or as trying to escape from Islam in order to be free. They find freedom, solace, and tranquility in their religion, which they see as a source of strength. They

are depicted as rebels against a patriarchal and traditional society, and as individuals who remain attached to their faith. Their struggles serve to strengthen their faith (Farida, when she encounters hardship, prays to God for relief ; Li, after becoming detached from her religion, accepts her faith fully at the end of the novel).

More precisely, the third chapter addresses Shirin Edwin's alternative argument about the Muslim women as an escapee from Islam and the related notion of a woman who embarks on the path to self-acknowledgement by comprehending and assimilating certain Islamic practices (Edwin 78). I also add an argument that is often forgotten, whereby Muslim women in the novel are represented as engaging in controversial behaviours. Those behaviours stand for the lapse of faith that leads the characters to make mistakes. These mistakes are often presented as acts of rebellion against a sexist religion, which is untrue in most cases (Edwin 96). Li in *The Stillborn* and Farida in *Destiny* experience such lapses of faith but emerge stronger as a result. Li, who at one point wants to be a "heathen" (Alkali 4), voices her belief in a unique God at the end of the novel.

The scope of this thesis is limited. To work within a clear comparative framework, it has often compared "Western feminism" and "African feminisms" as broad categories, even though many movements exist, for example, within the 'Western' world. As explained in the introduction, the word 'Western' has been used as an umbrella term, and the focus has been on the general ideas of 'Western' feminist ideology. This choice was motivated by the thesis' emphasis on the colonialist relationship between Africa, Europe, and America in the past and on the neo-imperialist control that Europe and America exert in the present. However, also it should not be forgotten that it is not only 'Westerners' (Euro-Americans) who have developed stereotypical representations of Muslim women; East Asians and Muslims also have, and these mechanisms (which involve the 'Western' media, see Kim) might be worth investigating in more depth.

The other limitations that were encountered in the process of the composition of this thesis concern the section that covers the Islamic perspective on the tensions that the female characters in *The Stillborn* and *Destiny* experience. That section also describes the Islamic point of view on the feminist reactions of the characters to these tensions and to gender discrimination. The section addresses the interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah in respect to certain aspects of the religion, such as forced marriage, education, and gender roles. Limitations inevitably arise because Islam admits a multitude of interpretations. Certain Muslims acquire these exegeses through *ijtihad* (personal judgment). They also derive their interpretations from Sunnite schools of thoughts such as the Hanafi, the Shafi'i, the Maliki, the

Hanbali, the Zahiri, and so on, or from the Shia schools of thoughts such as the Jafarite, the Twelver Shi'ism, and others. Given the complexity of these issues, the limited space, and the relevance of the question that the section in question answers, it was difficult to cover all interpretations. I chose to address the *surah* whose interpretations are relevant to the subject matter. As for the Sunnah, the choice was based on the best-known and the most authentic *hadiths*. Authentic hadiths belong to the category of hadiths that have "a reliable and uninterrupted chain of transmission and a *matn* (text) that does not contradict orthodox belief" (Zeidan). [23]

As this thesis has shown, practitioners of feminist hermeneutics such as Asma Barlas and Abou-Bakr Omaima interpret verses and *hadiths* that concern women directly. The literature review has emphasized how, even in this field of study, there are ideological discrepancies that make it difficult to acquire certain information about specific subjects in Islam. Like feminist hermeneutics, African feminisms has its own complexities and pluralities that often generate contradictions and misunderstandings (Some 'Western' authors believe that some currents of African feminisms encourage sexism and misogyny because they do not subscribe to the notion of gender equality, rather favouring a complementary approach). The different movements identified by Susan Arndt in her analysis have been useful to explore the variety, nuance, and points of connection across the wide spectrum of African feminisms – a continuum on which, as this thesis has shown, Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie occupy different yet related positions.

[23] Hadiths are bound to a principle called *sanad* (plural isnad) which is "a chain of oral or written transmission by which the reliability of a hadith was determined" (Zeidan). All the acceptable hadiths that respect the condition of *sanad* fall into three categories: Sahih (sound or authentic), Hasan (good), ḍaʿīf (weak ; Zeidan).

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