

## A FEMINIST READING OF LOLA SHONEYIN'S THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES

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### ABSTRACT

Feminism is an intellectual, political and ideological movement that aims principally, no matter its type, to fight male dominance, exploitation and oppression of woman so as to better her condition in the society and promote her liberation. This struggle for women liberation has been a dominant theme in many literary works including Lola Shoneyin's novel titled *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Our present study sought to address such research questions as: What factors of oppression against women and girls has Shoneyin depicted in her debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*? Its major objective was to analyse critically women oppression and liberation as depicted by Shoneyin in the said novel using the feminist theory. Our findings showed eight forces of oppression against women and girls in a patriarchal African society namely: rape, child abuse, forced marriage, lack of inheritance rights for women/girls, polygamy/co-wives' conflict, co-wives' deadly conspiracy against the last wife, sterility-induced oppression and assault and battering. The first three wives agreed to keep Baba Segi's infertility as a secret between them and to have recourse to adulterous life so as to produce children for him. They constituted a united front against the fourth wife, not letting her into their secret and making her suffer unjustly for perceived sterility. When eventually the cat was let out of the bag, she had to quit the polygamous marriage. It would seem that Shoneyin recommends to the oppressed African woman married to a polygamist with infertility problem to produce children through illegal means or be liberated by quitting the marriage. This made us conclude that Shoneyin is a radical feminist.

**KEYWORDS:** *Feminism, Male Dominance, Oppression, Women Liberation, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, Lola Shoneyin*

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism, as a social movement, has grown and spread beyond the frontiers of the Western world. It connotes different things to different people, societies, feminist writers, and critics. But what all feminist movements have in common is how to ameliorate the condition of the woman in the society. It is important to note that as Onyemelukwe (2004:67) posited, whereas Rosemarie Tong (1993) identified seven different perspectives of feminism: liberal, Marxist, socialist, radical, postmodern, existentialist and psychoanalytical, each with its own methodological merits and demerits, the likes of Ama Ata Aidoo, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Marie Umeh and Ogini tend to perceive feminism as synonymous with radicalism when radical feminism is only one of the several perspectives of feminism. The following comment by Aidoo (1982:40-41) points clearly to the ideological misconception:

Feminism you know how we all feel about that embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women.

This helps one understand why most African feminist writers reject the feminist label. Take, for example, Buchi Emechata, Zaynab Alkali and the just cited Ama Ata Aidoo have rejected the feminist label (Onyemelukwe, 2003a:265). Interestingly, Lola Shoneyin whose novel constitutes our study text, unlike Emechata, Alkali and Aidoo, but like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is proud to be a feminist as attests the following statement she granted to an interview in the *Punch*, a Nigerian Newspaper, of June 21, 2010:

I am a feminist and it's a label that I wear with a great pride. I say this because a lot of people - both men and women - seem to be slightly intimidated by feminists because, to them, being a feminist means hating men... I have found that there's a lot to admire about womanhood, especially within African context where women are so full of love, empathy and courage (Shoneyin, 2010: 47).

One needs, however, to be mindful of the fact that for a writer to say that he or she is or is not a feminist is not conclusive. The critic who analyses the literary work of the writer is in the best position to declare her a feminist. Furthermore, equating feminism with radicalism boils down to unduly narrowing the feminist scope and Bamikunle (1994:3) has no contrary view. He added that the most valid qualification for determining feminism is the subject matter and not the methods of analysis. In actual fact, the methods of analysis will enable the critic determine the writer's brand of feminism.

At this juncture, it is important to draw our attention to strands of feminism outside those listed by Tong as well as some new trends in feminism. One can talk of cultural feminism, anarchist feminism, black feminism, eco-feminism, Christian feminism, and Muslim feminism. One can also talk of womanism, Catherine Acholonu's Motherism and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM.

The research seeks to identify the factors of female oppression in Shoneyin's debut novel. Its major objective is to analyse critically oppression and liberation of women in patriarchal African society as depicted by Lola Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It makes use of the feminist theory.

In order to do justice to this topic, we, first, define feminism, survey briefly its origin, introduce succinctly the author and her work before embarking on thorough analysis of oppression and liberation of women and girls in our study text and drawing up conclusions.

## **FEMINISM: A SUCCINCT DEFINITION**

Feminism is a word emanating from the Latin word, femina meaning woman. There is, however, no consensus regarding what feminism should signify. Thus there are diversities of perspectives of feminism and as many definitions of the term as there are feminists. The reason is not far-fetched: women all over the world belong to different races, ethnicities, cultures, social classes and religions. All these factors interplay to define the woman's experience and so define feminism to suit her peculiar circumstance. It will suffice to look at a couple of definitions. According to The *Hutchinson Encyclopedia*, feminism refers to the:

Active belief in women having equal rights and opportunities as men; Women's movement crusading for the rights of women, including social, political and economic equality with men.

Hennessey and Mohan (1994:464) define feminism as:

A discourse that critiques hegemonic constructions of woman as a social subject, advances an understanding of the historical factors that necessitate these constructions and the interests they serve, and in doing so seeks to end the self-perpetuating circuit of relations that alienate women from their labour, their sexuality, their comrades in struggle.

Hennessey and Mohan recognise, in this definition, that certain factors orchestrate oppression for women in society tending to treat them as the other. Karen Offen, in an attempt to define feminism, states that feminism:

Opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organisation, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman. However, it does not follow that it must be anti-man; indeed, in time past, some of the most important advocates of women's cause have been men (quoted by Kawther Busari, 2015:281)

Offen, for her part, does not fail to bring out male dominance and control enabling the male folks to treat the woman as an inferior being cut out for perpetual subjugation in a patriarchal society.

Significantly, she draws attention to the reality on the ground that even though feminism is all about women that feminists are found not only among women but also among men, in particular, among writers and critics. Take, for example, Mongo Beti is a feminist and has been qualified as a radical feminist by Onyemelukwe (2003a: 262, 274). The definition of the term feminist by Madunagu (2002) merits our attention: "To be a feminist is to want for all people female and male, liberations from sexist role patterns, from sexist domination and from sexist oppression." Madunagu (2002) adds that, "The goals, values and ideals of feminism remain the liberation of society from dehumanization and the loss of fundamental human rights of women." In the context of the present research, we define feminism as the attempt to expose and crusade against the sociocultural practices which favour male dominance, female subjugation, exploitation and oppression in a patriarchal hegemony; an attempt to improve the condition of the woman and promote her emancipation and liberation.

We need to define only two brands of feminism which we find pertinent to this study. They are womanism and radical feminism. Womanism, like postmodern feminism, advocates togetherness of married couples, love, tolerance, understanding and complementarity of husband and wife whereas radical feminism encourages the woman to remain single or if married to free herself through separation or divorce so as to find fulfilment in life (Onyemelukwe, 2003a: 269).

## ORIGIN OF FEMINISM

There are numerous debates about the beginnings of this movement. According to Dick (2014: 19), the first public declarations which describe 'women' as a distinct social category with unequal social status dates from Aphra Behn, followed by Mary Astell's document titled *Reflection on Marriage* in 1700. In 1792, women such as Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous in France fought for women liberation. In the 1840s, the women's rights movement had started to emerge in the United States of America owing to the rejection of women delegates at the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 (Dick, 2014: 19). The Seneca Falls Convention (convoked by powerful suffragettes like Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony) of 1848 claimed for women the principles of liberty and equality which was expanded in

the Declaration of Independence. It was this suffragist movement formed by the above mentioned women that inspired the formation of many other feminist bodies as we have them today. This was followed by Mary Wollstonecraft a British woman activist with a publication titled: *A Vindication of the Rights of women*. One of the precursors of feminist criticism worth mentioning is Virginia Woolf who wrote a great deal in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) on cultural, economic, and educational disabilities of women within what she termed 'patriarchal society'. Thus 'first wave' of Feminism refers to the late-19<sup>th</sup>-Century and early-20<sup>th</sup>-Century feminist movements that were concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right of suffrage (the right to vote).

The second-wave of feminism, according to Chukwuma (1994) was launched in France by Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex* (1949). It refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s; their own protest was not only centred around equal political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and more. De Beauvoir's famous assertion that 'one is not born a woman: one becomes one' in *the Second Sex* encapsulates an argument that women's inferior position is not a "natural or biological fact but one that is created by society. According to her, one may be born as a "female" of the human race but it is culture that defines what creates "woman", which defines what is 'feminine' and prescribes how women should behave. What is important is that this social construction of "woman" has meant a continued oppression of women. The social roles and modes of behaviour that culture has assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of man. Other French feminists include Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wright Catherine Clement, Helen Cixous, and Christiane Dellphy. These advocated gender equality, wage equality, right to divorce for women and right for secular and professional education for their female children (Dick, 2014: 21). It is very important to note that feminist movements have been more active and have recruited more members at certain historical periods, it would perhaps be more accurate to see feminism not as emerging in 'waves' but as a continuum of thoughts and actions.

The entrance of women into the African literary scene marks generally the beginning of a new era for African women. African writers and feminists have written a lot on the issue of gender inequality and misrepresentation. Flora Nwapa is acclaimed as the first African feminist writer to appear on the African literary scene with *Efuru* in 1966. Others include: Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Amma Darko, Ifeoma Mabel Onyemelukwe and Lola Shoneyin.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola Shoneyin is a pen name. Her real name is Titilola Atinuke Alexandrah. This wife of Olakun Soyinka, son of the Nobel Award winner, Wole Soyinka, who was born in Ibadan on 26th February 1974, has come out boldly to embrace the task of being a feminist and an advocate of female liberation in a patriarchal society. The Nigerian-born poet and author, of Yoruba origin, makes her debut novel with *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* published by Cassava Republic in 2010. She launched this book, initially titled "The Serpent's Tail", in the United Kingdom in May 2010. She is currently resident in Lagos where she runs the Annual Aké Arts and Book Festival. She writes for especially The Guardian and The Times (in Newspapers). At present, she is the Director of Book Buzz Foundation, Nigeria. She is the recipient of the P.E.M Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award and has twice won the Association of Nigerian Authors' Awards.

## SUMMARY OF THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* narrates, in a dramatic way, some of the causes of inter- and intra-gender conflicts that threaten the harmonious co-existence of the inmates of a polygamous home. For Mr. Alao, popularly known as Baba Segi, his collection of wives and children are signs of virility. All runs smoothly in the polygamous family until a fourth and educated wife by name Bolanle arrives. The soft-spoken and patient university graduate is quickly ostracized by her illiterate co-wives. The three wives had kept to themselves a secret regarding their husband's infertility. They entertain the fear that with the arrival of an educated wife in the same home their secret will, someday, be unravelled. Therefore, they resolve never to reveal their secret to her. She is excluded and ends up suffering traumatising consequences of a barren African woman, real or perceived. Her co-wives do not stop at only taunting her but go as far as falsely accusing her of introducing rat poison in food to kill their husband. Unfortunately, their conspiracy backfires claiming the life of the daughter of the first wife, the culprit but fails to make Mr. Alao throw the fourth wife out of the home. Finally, the first wife is compelled to disclose the truth about their marital infidelity which enables them make babies given that their husband has been found incapable of impregnating any of them. Baba Segi, who loves children and who has been totally ignorant of the secret kept by his first three wives and has been basking in the euphoria that all those are his children feels punctured but decides to keep all the wives and children but with movement restriction placed on them. The fourth wife quits the polygamous marriage.

## ANALYSIS

From our critical analysis of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* in the light of feminist theory we found eight factors of oppression of women and girls in a patriarchal African society according to Shoneyin's depiction, namely: rape, child abuse, forced marriage, lack of inheritance rights for women/girls, polygamy/co-wives' conflicts, co-wives' deadly conspiracy against the last wife, sterility-induced oppression and assault and battering. We now go ahead to discuss these factors of oppression of women and girls one after the other, concurrently examining what seems to be the author's recommendation for the affected women's liberation.

## RAPE

Two young girls are victims of rape in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. They are Bolanle and Iya Femi. Bolanle was raped when she was 15 years old by a total stranger who gave her a ride; whereas Iya Femi was raped while serving in a household by Tunde, Grandma's only son.

Rape is defined by Pittman (1990) as the penetration of the mouth, vagina or anus by any part of the attacker's body or by an object used by the attacker, without the consent of the victim. For Onyemelukwe (2004: 170): "Rape is an act of violence in which the rapist forces the individual raped (usually a woman) to have intercourse with him against her wish." Pittman argues that rape is not a sexual act as some are made to believe but an act of violence which uses sex as a weapon. Onyemelukwe has no contrary view as she considers rape as an act of violence against the weaker vessel. Rape, he says, is motivated by aggression and by the desire to humiliate. Onyemelukwe (2004:170) expatiates further on three motives of the rapist's act, viz.: "To satisfy a sudden sexual urge or pressure, to possess by force the target stimulus and to desecrate, destroy the target stimulus out of feeling of resentment, hate and disdain." The third motive, according to her, explains why rape victims are killed by some rapists after the act of rape (Onyemelukwe, 2004:170).

Rape victims encounter significant difficulties obtaining help from legal, medical, and mental health systems. Sometimes, they deliberately refuse to seek help so as to avoid being stigmatised. Survivors experience post rape distress which emanates from the way they are treated by social systems after the assault. Shoneyin seems to ruminate, via her writing, as we her critics are equally thinking, that just as wife-battering had been taken out of privacy of home and criminalized in order to effect social change, rape must be taken out of the sexual realm and placed where it rightfully belongs in the domain of violence against women. She is crusading for this, especially as women and girls have been suffering in silence under the yoke of oppression by rapists in a patriarchal system. She paints vividly the rape incidents so as to expose the in exposable and what usually goes undercover and unpunished in order to draw the attention of the public to one of the heinous crimes committed against women and young girls in patriarchal African societies which needs to be addressed urgently to save this social category from its disastrous physical and psychological impact whether the rape act is brutal as in the case of Bolanle or subtle as in the case of Iya Femi.

Needless to say, Bolanle feels recurrently the harmful psychological and physical effects of the rape on her life and this remains indelible in her memory as she recounts the story fifteen years after to her mum:

I was raped Mama! Did you know that? I was raped when I was fifteen years old... I am ruined, damaged, destroyed. My life was wrecked and I didn't know how to fix it. I still don't know (149).

Consider the terrible adjectives she uses to describe herself: "ruined, damaged, destroyed". She rates herself empty, useless and hopeless. She feels her life is messed up, is wrecked. This is in line with the third motive of the rape act propounded by Onyemelukwe which we have earlier evoked. We agree with Ogunbameru (2006: 233) that sexual assault is often violent, terrorising and humiliating. Bolanle admits that she did not know how to fix her life, for which reason she simply gets married to Baba Segi (a polygamist with three wives), because he is ready to take her as she is. She feels disgraced and so ashamed of herself that she is not predisposed to answering any questions about herself and so gets married to Baba Segi to heal in anonymity.

The brutality of the rape act is enough to render a young girl hopeless, incapacitated owing to the psychological trauma. As Bolanle narrates her horrible experience of rape:

He moved closer to me and with great accuracy, he struck both my shoulders with his knuckles. My arms fell limp to my sides and I dropped to my knees from the pain. He grabbed a handful of my hair, dragged me into his bedroom and threw me on the bed. He climbed on top on me but I clamped my legs together and pleaded for him to stop. My resistance annoyed him and he pulled a pillow over my face. I was sure I was going to die because I couldn't breathe. 'If you do not want to die, lie still with your legs apart! He barked... what I had hoped to save for my husband had been wrenched from me and all I had to show for was an excruciating aches and dishevelled hair (115).

Stories abound on social media of rape victims having life smothered out of them by the rapists who covered their faces with pillows while performing the rape act. Luckily, Bolanle does not die. But she ends up being defiled and traumatised. Sexual violence is often treated as a hyper-delicate issue that can only be addressed by trained professionals. Survivors consider themselves "damaged" as Bolanle unravels in the just cited comment.



The rape incident is somewhat subtle in the case of Iya Femi; not as brutal as that of Bolanle. She tells her story:

It was Tunde, Grandma's only son, who was the first to climb between my legs... on this particular night, he came in drunk as usual. He said he'd a bad night and I should have mercy and let him fuck me. I lay down quietly and hid the pain beneath my skin (124).

Tunde had a bad night; therefore, Iya Femi has to pay for it with her body. His motive in raping her is to satisfy a sudden sexual urge or pressure. This tallies with the first motive of rape act as promulgated by Onyemelukwe (2004: 170). Tunde is one of the male characters who symbolise male dominance and exploitation of women just like the stranger that raped Bolanle. Ogunbameru (2006: 230) has rightly associated rape with "the ties between sexuality and feelings of power and superiority". Feminists crusade against this. One may wonder why Iya Femi could not put up any form of resistance. A plausible reason is that she has been totally intimidated in that home, where she is a domestic servant, through repeated child abuse, a home where she is made to live in total subjugation and uncritical deference to authorities there one of which is her rapist. That also explains why she continues, thereafter, to suffer the pang of oppression through subjection to constant rape by Grandma's son. Fear of Tunde's wrath and accompanying ill-treatment of her compels her to show no resistance. A lot of young girls/maids in patriarchal African societies are raped by uncles, nephews, cousins, family friends and even fathers (foster or biological) and the heinous crime usually remains uncovered as in the case of Iya Femi which reminds one of the lot of the house girl in Ronke's house in Ifeoma Onyemelukwe's *Uwaoma et le beau monde*, who is raped indiscriminately and the beast of a rapist Dr. Femi Olugbenga, one night, extends his dastardly act to Bukky, his little niece under his care, leaving her terribly traumatised (Onyemelukwe, 2003b:198-199).

## CHILD ABUSE

Iya Femi suffers not only from rape but also from child abuse. Iya Femi receives an unjust treatment from her uncle after both parents died in an accident. He "sold her to the family of Adeigbe" as a house-girl, saying: "It is a month since your parents died. This is not your home and it will never be. A girl cannot inherit her father's house... "(121). Oppression can also mean denying people opportunities that may enable them become fully human in both mind and body.

She recounts her horrible experiences in this home:

I served the Adeigbe family for fifteen years. They pillaged the most fruitful years of my life, all the time treating me as if they'd found me in a pit latrine. Grandma slapped me if a drop of oil fell from the ladle to the cooker. If I didn't answer the first time she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head. If I overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chilli powder into the wounds (124).

This is a clear case of child abuse. The young girl is treated inhumanly by a woman who is supposed to be her mother. At the same time, her son ill-treats her, exploiting her sexually through constant raping

In order to escape from the violent acts in this household, she resorts to bribing her way through Taju, Baba Segi's driver. Taju succeeds in convincing his Boss to marry Iya Femi as can be gleaned from the following passage:

I divided the money I had stolen over the years into two and forced one half into Taju's hand. I don't know what he told Baba Segi but he did his job well. Less than a week later, Taju came alone in the pick-up ... I had time to pack everything I wanted (129).

This is how Iya Femi gets married to Baba Segi. She just wants to get away from the evil Grandma's house, where she is raped continually. This is in complete dissonance with the Child's right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation, all of which deprive her of human dignity and harmonious growth and development. Obviously, the author of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* condemns, in unmistakable terms, rape and child abuse and seemingly recommends to the victim of such forms of violence to get liberated from such by all means. Imagine that the young girl Iya Femi has to bribe her way to marry Baba Segi, who already has two wives. She had better put up with a polygamist than continue to suffer from child abuse and rape. Little does she know that polygamy is itself a major factor of women oppression as shall be exposed later in this work.

### **FORCED MARRIAGE**

Patriarchal hegemony is the cultural, economic and political dominance of men. It promotes the practices that maintain the dominance of men and the subordination of women (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Male dominance is clearly depicted in *The secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as reflected in the behaviours of Tope's father and Femi's Uncle. Socio cultural practices promoted in a patriarchal hegemony include forced marriage, absence of inheritance rights for girls and polygamy.

Iya Tope is used as compensation from a desperate farmer (his own father) as evident in the following narration:

I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. May be something even less, something strange - a tuber with eyes, nose, arms and two legs" (82).

Iya Tope's description here smacks of her thingification by her own father. Tope is given out in marriage without her consent. In other words, she is subjected to forced marriage. It is an unusual marriage without fanfare and elaborate farewells. Tope is powerless vis-à-vis patriarchal authority and so bows to his father's dictate. Tope's father, through this forced marriage, reduces her potentials for her to be fully human. Shoneyin seems to condemn this act of forcing a young girl into marriage; advocating that individuals should be allowed to pursue life plans in their own way to fulfil destiny. Perhaps if Iya Tope had not been forcefully married off, she might have married a man who is fertile and not one like Baba Segi who is incapable of impregnating women. Thus forced marriage is vividly exposed in the novel as a source of oppression against young girls.

In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly re-emphasized that the child has the right to be protected from violence. That right is in Article 19 of the UN Convention (1989) on the right of the Child, an agreement which most countries in the world have signed and committed themselves to fulfil. (<http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/uncorc.html>). Lola Shoneyin is using her pen to sensitise the Nigerian public to the pressing need to actualise this law so as to save young girls from all forms of violence unleashed on them in the patriarchal society.

### **LACK OF INHERITANCE RIGHTS FOR WOMEN/GIRLS**

Another source of oppression for girls in a patriarchal African society, as depicted in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, is lack of inheritance rights for women/girls. The common practice is that women have no say in the property sharing as members of the family. According to some experts on gender studies in Nigeria, the girl-child in most traditions of the world is made to internalise the notion that, she is subordinate to the male authority and subsequently cannot and



should not claim rights with the boy-child. In addition, she is taught how to be a good wife and mother. But most often the boy is not taught how to be a good husband and father. Rather, he is taught that he is superior to her female counterpart. This oppressive attitude of the male folk, their anti-feminism, is portrayed in the behaviour of Femi's uncle after the death of Iya Femi's parents in a motor accident. He addresses the young girl in these words:

This is not your home and it will never be. A girl cannot inherit her father's house because it is everyone's prayer that she will marry and make her husband's home her own. This house and everything in it belongs to your uncle. That is the way things are (121).

Iya Femi's uncle gave her out as a house girl to another family without thinking of her well-being. She, probably, would not have fallen into wicked hands that subjected her perpetually to child abuse and rape if her uncle had not enforced the retrogressive culture of reserving no inheritance right for women and girls. Interestingly, some Non-Governmental Organisations like Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence against Women (LACVAW) have fought hard to deconstruct the patriarchal system in Nigeria and see to it that Nigeria establishes a law against all forms of violence against women and children (Onyemelukwe, 2004:132-133).

### **POLYGAMY/CO-WIVES CONFLICT**

Polygamy, which is the marriage of one man to more than one wife, is a sociocultural and religious practice in Africa and has been treated in many postcolonial African literary texts as a dominant theme, for example: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Mongo Beti's *King Lazarus*. Beti has been shown to see polygamy as a retrogressive custom that promotes the thingification, enslavement, inferiorisation and exploitation of women (Onyemelukwe, 2009: 49). Polygamy is equally portrayed in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by Shoneyin as a source of women inferiorisation, thingification, enslavement, exploitation and oppression. We need recall that Iya Tope, Baba Segi's second wife is married by force to the polygamist as a compensation for failed crops., an act which goes to treat her as an object, i.e., thingify her, make her out as an inferior human. Bolanle, who finds herself in a state of disgrace and shame after unprecedented rape by a stranger, considers herself rotten, useless, inferior and only fit to marry a polygamist in the person of Mr. Alao. Thus to her mind, polygamy or sharing her husband with three co-wives favours her inferior status. Mr. Alao keeps accumulating wives who can only get pregnant through marital infidelity albeit without his knowledge of his infertility problem and his wives' adulterous lives. From the novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, one begins to understand how many women remain and suffer in their matrimonial homes for not being able to give birth to children when in actual fact it is no fault of theirs but their husbands'. The novelist appears to recommend to such women to liberate themselves by all means from oppression emanating from such intricate problems in a polygamous marriage even through illegal means.

Co-wives conflict in the polygamous setting brings to the fore frightening petty jealousies, rivalries, intolerance, hostilities, complexities, aggression, power tussle, intricate family politics and deadly conspiracies. *The secret lives of Baba Segi' Wives* and its audacious questioning of the validity of polygamy in contemporary Nigerian society, is indicative of the forthright manner with which Shoneyin tackles uneasy topics in marriage. The author is very vocal about her displeasure regarding this particular arrangement of marriage where sometimes women have to become monsters to survive or else they will be beaten down or could be overtaken by another. Iya Femi, for example, works very hard to maintain her position as the favourite wife. She works tirelessly on herself in order to look good, and her culinary skills endears her to Baba Segi and as such, she remains his favourite wife until the arrival of Bolanle, as she laments here:

“...things are different in this house now. For five years, Baba Segi loved me the most and showed it. He would pretend he had an evening fever so he wouldn't have to endure Iya Segi's bed. Then he would sneak into mine at night so he could be with me... He loved the way I cooked, the way I looked (T137).

Bolanle is envied and resented by the other wives. They are not only jealous and afraid of her because of her education; they are also worried that she will monopolise Baba Segi's already shared affection. It is important to note that of all the four wives, Bolanle is the one that Baba Segi chose for himself. The other three wives were thrust upon him by different circumstances.

Co-wives conflict is quite striking in the novel. Iya Segi, the first wife, is very powerful and vindictive; she will stop at nothing to protect her favoured position as the ruler of her husband's home:

They are like humble maidservants who live for a kind pat on the head from the mother-of-the-home. They know that I am the true provider. My husband only thinks he controls this household and I let him believe that he does. I want him to believe he does but I am the one who keeps this household together. Good things happen here because I allow them. I alone can approve vengeance and only I know how to bring calm (104).

Talking about co-wife rivalry, Ogunsina (1985) in Akorede opines: “The theme of rivalry, envy, malignity, malice, suspicion and ill-will is conspicuously present... sometimes, it is the husband's affection, partiality and or devotion to the most junior or senior wife that leads to jealousy and malignity”. This is evident in the cited passage.

The novel portrays three disparate illiterate women who will fight to death to protect their interests. The three wives keep a family secret; therefore, the arrival of an educated wife in the same home means that their secret will someday be laid bare. Bolanle is the fourth wife of Baba Segi. She is a graduate and therefore a great prize. Her arrival into Mr. Alao's household changes everything as Iya Femi her co-wife and husband's favourite prior to her arrival laments:

My stomach bears no sign of labour; my breasts are full... I couldn't even walk across the sitting room without Baba Segi salivating, but everything changed the day the monkey stepped into this house. I cannot accept it. I will not accept it! How can anyone accept being pushed aside for a woman who stores blemished bowls? (137).

One of the problems women face in a polygamous family is the arrival of a younger wife. The desire of the man changes against the older wives. Older wives feel pains and sufferings that their husband has neglected them because of his marriage to a new wife (Dodoo, 1998: 240). The arrival of the fourth wife affects the sharing of provisions and disrupts the sex rotation. Baba Segi normally goes from wife to wife at least twice a week, but now that she has joined them, each wife has only one day a week and the remaining days are spent with the youngest wife.

### **CO-WIVES' DEADLY CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE LAST WIFE**

The conflict between the co-wives is provoked by jealousy and envy as can be deciphered from Iya Segi's words: “She wants our husband to cast us aside as illiterate ones. As a wife who has recently joined the household, it is her duty to submit herself to our wishes” (52). Here we see a clash of interest; four wives struggling to have the attention and love of one man. The first three wives decide never to disclose to the fourth wife the secret they share between them concerning their husband's impotence. They form a united front just to oppress the fourth wife. The mean and nasty acts by Iya Segi and Iya Femi to Bolanle include: smearing her books with palm oil and charcoal, deliberately tearing off some pages of her

books and hiding them under the kitchen cupboard because of their deep-seated disdain for her university degree (22), banishing her friends from the house claiming “that they were bad role models for their daughters in the family, especially Segi, who was at an impressionable age” (54) and pushing her hard on one occasion till she topples over and hit her head on the hard tiles thereby sustaining a bleeding injury (161). Her co-wives’ children also follow the examples set by their mothers: “Iya Femi’s sons will not sit on a chair I have vacated. When I walk past them in the corridor, they turn to the wall and flatten themselves against it. No matter how many times I offer them sweets, they treat me as if I have a contagious disease” (23).

Despite all their wickedness, all their taunting, Bolanle still maintains self-control. Iya Tope attests to this fact that she has not seen anyone like Bolanle before:

The more those two poked Bolanle, the more mercy her eyes showed, the more her hands opened to children. I have never known anyone like Bolanle before. Even after two years of wickedness, she still greets them every morning. What more do they want? (54).

Bolanle’s behaviour shows that she has received a good education. Iya Tope continues:

Bolanle does not deserve the treatment the other wives give her. They bark at her as if she were a child: ‘Don’t sit there! And don’t touch that! All day long, they are at it, yet she does as she is told and never complains (88).

Co-wives’ deadly conspiracy receives pungent depiction from Shoneyin as a source of severe oppression for the last wife. The inspired jealousy by the first and third wives as a result of Bolanle’s education results in their connivance to make her life miserable and even to eliminate her:

Iya Segi slipped me a small plastic bag bound several times with a rubber band...’Iya Tope must not hear this. Yes, it is between us. We must settle this matter. Listen to me. Place Bolanle’s portion outside her bedroom door like we normally do, when she doesn’t join us. When she returns this evening, we will greet her as if all is well so she does not suspect anything (138).

However, their plan fails. Iya Segi’s daughter, Segi, eats the poisoned food meant for Bolanle:

Mama, the doctors said I was poisoned. They said I could have died. Why would there be poison in our house? It was the food I ate the night I went to Auntie Bolanle’s room, wasn’t it? ‘If someone in this house is serving poisonous food and my own mother will not find out who it is, how is my life worth living?’ (206).

What a tragedy! Ironically, this deadly conspiracy meant to accuse her falsely of wanting to kill their husband can only attract wife-battering for Bolanle but not ejection from the polygamous marriage to the utter amazement of her co-wives.

## **STERILITY-INDUCED OPPRESSION**

Shoneyin portrays the oppression women go through in a patriarchal society when they are unable to conceive. The issue of sterility is viewed with seriousness in most African societies for women are valued first as mothers. Therefore, sterility is considered by many as a negative thing that can happen to a woman. Mr. Alao’s wives are aware that their husband loves children and so refuse to initiate the fourth wife into the secret of getting children in Mr. Alao’s house. Bolanle’s inability to conceive gives her husband persistent bellyache:

Baba Segi awoke with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife's childlessness. He was sure the pain wasn't caused by hunger or trapped gas; it was from the build-up of months and months of worry" (1).

True to type, Mr. Alao becomes impatient with Bolanle:

Does your blood not boil when you see other women carrying babies on their backs? Do tears not fill your eyes when you see mothers suckling infants? You of all people should be willing to try anything! Offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a barren maggot? (43).

The African belief presented in this novel is that if a woman does not have children, she is not only considered sterile but also referred to as a sub-woman. Baba Segi becomes hostile to Bolanle as he confesses to Teacher his friend: "Well, in recent months, I myself have been hostile to the young woman but only because of this question of barrenness" (63). His wives notice this and encourage their husband to withdraw the armchair because of her supposed barrenness: "The tradition was that, the comfort of an armchair had to be earned, which meant that unless you were pregnant, with oedema, breast feeding or watching over toddlers, you were not entitled to one" (53). Also, they capitalise on it to accuse Bolanle of planting rat head in the house in order to kill their husband, hoping that he will send her away: "Of what use is she? She cannot have children. Her womb is dead. She wants to kill our husband to save herself from shame" (58).

This false allegation gets Baba Segi so infuriated that he beats up Bolanle to an unconscious state. This is wife battery. Iya Segi and Iya Femi are so impressed with their husband's reaction towards Bolanle, but to their utmost disappointment, he does not send her away. Thus oppression from co-wives' deadly plot and sterility-induced oppression are compounded with assault and wife-battering, another source of oppression for women and girls in a patriarchy.

Infertility is a big source of anxiety and worry to women as every married woman's dream is to become a mother. Bolanle, for her part, waits patiently for a time when she could have babies: "Only today, we went to the doctors to see how I could bear his children. I do not want to be barren" (61). A barren woman is an isolated woman because children are viewed in many African societies as inheritance. Bolanle is broken as her husband looks forward to having children from her. Moreover, inability to have children especially in the African society is blamed on the woman. The husband harnesses every possible means to remedy the situation: "Get dressed", he yelled. "God has called a prophet on the mountain-top and he will only be there for four more days. Let us go so he will lay hands on your belly and perform a miracle" (43). Bolanle's husband can only think of the prophet laying hands on her belly. He never imagines that he could be the problem. He never thinks he may be suffering from low-sperm count or infertility. Baba Segi is so confident of his libidinous abilities since he is not having erectile dysfunction. He believes that the problem is Bolanle's stomach that could not accept his seed. He fails to understand that he needs the prayer more than his wife. It is very ignorant to assume that the woman is always the one with the problem whenever a couple is finding it difficult to have a biological child. This is an ignorance birthed by patriarchy, sustained by patriarchy and harnessed to hold the barren woman in perpetual torture and oppression.

Bolanle's continuous visit to the doctors finally involves her husband, but it is not easy to convince him. When asked to go for a laboratory test his ego is punctured and he retorts arrogantly that he has children both male and female and so cannot possibly be the problem. In most cultures, whenever a man gets married to a woman and they are unable to have children, almost everyone advises him to try another woman. But the truth here remains that Baba Segi is unable to get his wives pregnant. The truth is laid bare as the first wife is also summoned to the hospital. Iya Segi exposes the hidden

secret. She does not only mastermind the conception of her two children with another man who happens to be her husband's driver, but also sells the idea to the second and third wives, who also conceive their children with other men.

The conflicts in the story are however resolved by Baba Segi's wisdom to retain the illegitimate children as his since he cannot father any child due to his impotence. With this reconsideration, they all continue to live together except for Bolanle who leaves to "rejoin her life's path" (245). She quits a ridiculous marriage that would have brought eternal stagnation to her and render her university education a waste. At twenty-five years and with her education, she is most likely to still get married to a young educated husband better than Baba Segi and also get a job in order to be empowered economically. We infer here that Shoneyin recommends that the African woman subjected to sterility-induced oppression should quit the marriage rather than continue to suffer and die in silence.

## CONCLUSIONS

This was a critical study of oppression and liberation of women and girls in a patriarchal African society as depicted by Lola Shoneyin in her debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Using the feminist theory. The study discovered eight factors of women oppression in the novel, namely: rape, child abuse, forced marriage, lack of inheritance right for women/girls, polygamy/co-wives' conflicts, co-wives' deadly conspiracy against the last wife, sterility-induced oppression and assault and battering. It was found that women also experienced oppression at the hands of fellow women as a result of petty jealousies, envy, rivalry, egoism and greed. The first three wives of Mr. Alao, incensed against his educated fourth wife, decided not to reveal to her the secret they were keeping amongst themselves regarding their husband's infertility. They had recourse to marital infidelity to make babies for their impotent husband. They constituted a solid front to fight and exclude Bolanle. The height of their callousness was exhibited in a deadly plot fomented by Iya Segi - planting poisoned food for her so as to accuse her of attempting to kill their husband with rat poison. But unfortunately, it backfired and Segi, Iya Segi's daughter ate the poisoned food and finally died. Even though Baba Segi battered Bolanle to the point of unconsciousness, he failed to throw her out of the home to the utter surprise of her co-wives. Bolanle suffered unjustly for perceived infertility. When eventually, the truth was disclosed, she had to quit the polygamous marriage. It would seem that Shoneyin recommends to the oppressed African woman married to a polygamist with infertility problem to produce children through illegal means or be liberated by quitting the marriage. This brought us to the conclusion that Shoneyin is a radical feminist.

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