Re-reading Lola Shoneyin's *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the realisation that masculinity in African literature has not yet been given the attention it deserves, especially compared to research on feminism. Little attention has been given to the analysis of women's writing with the tools that theories of masculinity provide. This study undertakes a masculine reading of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It brings to light the labyrinths of the burden of the manly character in African society. Robert Connell's (2005) perspective on masculinity provides the theoretical framework used in this work. Connell recognises that masculinity is a social construct rather than a biological state that exists only in femininity. Baba Segi's massive burden of caring for the women who were all cheating on him stops him from crumbling and screaming at his mother and the world when he discovers that he is impotent. This considerable burden also stops Baba Segi from sending away his wives for their infidelity because then he would be judged by society as a weak and infertile man. As such, the life of Baba Segi answers the question—does the role of the African male as 'the man' and the 'head' of the family place an unnecessary burden on him? Yes, it does. Baba Segi is forced to accept situations that he would not have accepted if the cultural circumstances differed. This work affirms that for the woman to be liberated from the shackles of unfair socio-cultural bondage, her male counterpart needs an equal measure of liberation.

Introduction

Over the years, literary critics in Africa and the world have been concerned with gender-related issues. Debates on female oppression, male dominance and equality of the sexes continue unabated within and outside the literary world. Feminist movements have strongly criticised men and held them responsible for the plight of women. Gary Barker and Christine Ricardo observe that "In most of such analyses, 'gender' refers specifically and often exclusively to the disadvantages that women and girls face; given the extent of gender inequalities in the region, this has been necessary. He sums up his observation by saying that a gender perspective and gender mainstreaming have too often ignored the gender of men and boys" (1).

Masculinity in Gender studies is primarily seen as an offshoot of change, a reactionary move brought about by societal dynamics and unparalleled evolution. Some of these changes are traceable to the feminist movement that seeks redress against patriarchy - a social arrangement in a society where male authority is highly praised. McKinley and Cooper, while quoting Angel Carabi, sum it up thus, "Masculinity theory is an outgrowth of the Feminist theorising that developed during the Feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They posit that the Patriarchal system allowed men to exercise power over women as a group" (106).

Patriarchy and issues of male dominance are evident in most African texts. Uchedno Egodi explains that Men in patriarchal settings were irrefutably the favoured class: an esteemed group that grew from childhood to manhood culturally imbued with notions that made them believe they were superior and had multiple privileges, including inherent rights to dominate (2008, 13)

The notion of a male breadwinner was reinforced by colonial creation achieved through a migrant labour system and cash crop production, which targeted men. The male-migrant labour system in Africa, which involved some form of cooperation between traditional authorities and

colonial administrators, forced men to enter settler employment in urban centres, South African gold mines, and farms. At the same time, women remained at home as de facto heads of households (Barnes, 1992). Male mobility was normalised, and women's mobility was considered "unrespectable." The creation of these gendered spaces meant that production and formal employment came to be gendered as male, while reproduction, conversely, became gendered as female. The notion of a male breadwinner was reinforced as many Africans converted to Christianity, which stressed monogamous marriage in which the man was the household head and breadwinner.

Within the postcolonial context characterised by weakened state governance and aggressive neo-liberal capitalism on the continent (Davies, 2007), most men find it hard to achieve what historically might have been seen as successful masculinity (Ratele, 2014). Gibbs (2014, 431) observes that "the last two decades of economic decline in Africa have drawn attention to the crisis of masculinity, to 'failed men' unable to build kinship networks and to 'violent men' who damage social networks whilst competing for scarce resources." It is within this context that "in the Pentecostal trajectory born-again masculinity is defined as a break with 'tradition' and 'African culture' since these are considered responsible for the moral and social crises in African societies" (Van Klinken, 2012, p. 235).

Chinua Achebe's characterisation of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) represents masculinity in pre-literate African society. It describes how the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria conceptualise masculinity in their social context. In African societies, the patriarchy requires that the man be head. As Uchendu points out in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a man is the head of the family. So, Okonkwo works hard to prove his masculinity as a successful farmer, warrior, and a man with a large household, and to crown it all, he has many children, especially sons, as heirs. In his comparison of Okonkwo to Unoka, his father, who is tall and thin, reveals emotions, always fearful, hating war, lazy and wasteful; Achebe reveals the emasculation and society's denigration of `weak men' in society.

Beyond these characteristics, Eustace Palmer examines an essential aspect of masculinity in Isidore Okpewho's *Last Duty*, revealing the varied dimensions of masculinity within a culture. "As there are various conceptions of duty, so are there various conceptions of manhood" (26). This begins with Chief Toje, whose definition of manhood is somewhat more conventional. For him, authentic manhood has something to do with social importance (27), and he feels his hegemonic masculinity is threatened in Urukpe. Palmer shows the relevance of manhood, social power, sexual potency and sexual prowess with "Odibo, who has now already demonstrated his superior manhood in sexual terms, proceeds to a triumphant affirmation of that manhood in physical terms, by completely subduing and fatally wounding the now completely emasculated Toje" (29). Palmer, however, commends Oshevire for disassociating manhood from crude male pride and sexual potency to something more than physical strength, male pride; he emphasises honesty and good conscience.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta measures the traditional Igbo society's masculinity by a man's ability to contribute to the family generational tree by being fertile. This is proven by bearing sons who will carry on the family name, and his masculinity is questioned when he is unable to bear children because society frowns at sterility. Amatokwu confirms that his family "looks at him with another eye" because Nnu Ego cannot bear him children (29). However, Nnaife did not fail in this much-valued task, as Ubani puts it, while consoling Nnaife: "You [as a man] are to give her children

and food" (75). Emecheta characterises Nwokocha Agbadi as the model held up for others in traditional Igbo society. Agbadi has wealth, name, charm, and charisma, which give him pride in his place in society (5). Also, Agbadi assists readers in acknowledging the differences in masculinity among young men when he discredits 'handsome men who are successful in lovemaking but are not loving'. He identified another class of men who he claims are more profound - loving and intellectually sound. Other masculine qualities Agbadi cherishes are patience, value for a wife, happiness, and understanding and loving (66).

Based on the signs above of masculinity, one can infer that Emecheta's definition of masculinity in a traditional context will include procreation (especially sons), adequate provision for family, wives (heterosexual relationship), loving, intelligent, patient, understanding, happy, and even pride.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the principles of masculinity as espoused in selected works of Robert Connell, Judith Butler and Louis Althusser. The theory was adopted to enable a broader interpretation of a masculine reading of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. In Masculinity, Robert Connell recognises that masculinity is socially constructed through performances (1995). Men construct their masculine identities through relationships with others. In this sense, domination and marginalisation of men connect with the patriarchal network as these men, who do not practice a hegemonic pattern, may be marginalised by the dominant group. This means that a patriarchal system of domination and subordination determines men's choices and performances of masculinity. Connell argues against essentialists' perception of patriarchal ideology because the construction of the male gender requires one to mould into a masculine role, which presupposes autonomy, competition, aggressiveness, and the domination of the innate human needs for connectedness, intimacy, and self-disclosure(1995). Men need to prove their manhood because they have been socialised to believe that their masculinity is biologically inherent and not ascribed and, therefore, has to be continually maintained and enhanced through the externalisation of masculine behaviour. Connell argues that those so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities are human qualities and not specific to either men or women. According to Connells's views, women, too, can possess and demonstrate the features of masculinity. Masculinity is, thus, not a natural state but a socially constructed, fluid, collective gender identity.

Analysis

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives is a fascinating story set in Ibadan about the polygamous household of Ishola Alao, aka Baba Segi. Baba Segi is respected in his home and is referred to as "my lord" by his wives. The fact that he is addressed as my lord has made many writers refer to him as arrogant and illustrative of male dominance. This interpretation is highly misleading. Baba Segi is highly respected. This respect from his wives is consequent on his care for the entire household. We should ask why it is the lot of the husband to provide for the wife. A man who provides for four wives and seven children deserves such accolades. The respect and greetings are thus an acknowledgement of his burden as a man, especially as we do not have any evidence that this greeting was forced out of the wives. This mode of greeting is the conventional cultural practice in most Yoruba homes, where men pay a heavy price for masculinity. It may not even show respect since it is merely the accepted cultural convention of greeting husbands at home. This greeting also presupposes that Baba Segi has performed all his cultural and matrimonial duties creditably to be so addressed.

Furthermore, in his performance of his fatherly role, he showered his wealth on his family. Bolanle, his fourth wife, notes, "In the two years I have been in Baba Segi's house, he makes peace his way, and it involves tattered brown envelopes bursting with 50 Naira notes, thrust beneath doors at dawn" (90). arguable that many women will prefer to live with a man who gives such money. What is true about the situation is that he did not do this to spite anybody; neither was there any occasion for any of the wives to be bitter about this. The author describes him and his marriages "as " an economic, social, reproductive, … project" (Smith 171). The fact remains that these reasons are correct and accurate for most marriages, even when seen from women's perspectives. Who on earth marries without economic, social and reproductive considerations?

Baba Segi's mother arranged his first marriage to Iya Segi. Segi's mother arranged the first wife for him. So, the man was not even allowed to choose his wife. However, some feminist critics tend to blame him for practising polygamy. What was he expected to do when his mother set the tone for the disorganisation in his house? Baba Segi became polygamous because the mother wanted it so. Baba Segi's choice to enter into more marriages is accounted for as follows:

> "I took a second wife, a peace offering from a desperate farmer. I took the third because she offered herself with humility. What kind of human being rejects the fullness of a woman? ... But I chose Bolanle, I cannot lie. I set my mind on her…" (201).

It is clear that the wives, apart from one of them, were given to Baba Segi, or he accepted the women as gifts. One of the wives was even offered to him freely. In Africa, it is unheard of for any man to refuse a woman's gift. The third wife offered herself freely to him. This must recognise his care, love, and goodwill. He married them to help them and provide for them. In this case, the polygamous nature of Baba Segi must not be seen as an attempt to promote masculine values but rather as a help to the entire society, especially the women whom he loves and shelters. The women who marry him because of their customary beliefs betray Baba Segi, while the chosen wife is loyal. The choice may be tied to the modern idea of marriage, but it is also a modern practice for wives to leave their husbands, as Bolanle does. Shoneyin has constructed a view of Baba Segi that would make him unsympathetic to undiscerning eyes. Baba Segi is portrayed as an impotent man, while Baba Segi's wives, who are engaged in degrading acts of infidelity, are protected and their conjugal crimes elevated as a virtue. The women even deceived him that his children looked like him. Bolanle remarks: "Baba Segi, they are the very image of you" (159, 20). What a word!

It is valuable to look closely at the women in Shoneyin's novel. Iya Segi is Baba Segi's first wife. She does not marry him by choice but to get his money. She reveals her motive and explains her feelings towards her husband and the other wives thus: "I will follow you anywhere, my lord; I raised my buttocks and let him fill me again. I would follow my money anywhere ... When he brought home other wives, I did not complain. I did not say a word. I did not even show that I feared for my money. I just kept quiet and watched him. Who can tell what madness makes men search for things that puncture their pockets? (Shoneyin 103-104)

The above texts clearly illustrate how women have variously victimised men and made them sample objects for their gains. Unknown to the man, even matters of conjugal intimacy are all tied to monetary gains, not an iota of love. The wives are reminiscing about Alli Baba and the forty thieves. We see here that women have become economic liabilities to men in their gender war. While acknowledging that the husband likes women to a fault, women consider him a means to an end. Iya Segi sums it up, "when boys teased me over the flap of flesh that circled my neck, I wasn't bothered.

I looked at them … knowing their father's fathers could not have a fraction of the wealth I had accumulated." (83)

We now see why it was easy for them to go against the social codes of marriage and seek men outside the boundary of marriage. Iya Segi was in love with money. This marriage cannot be considered a love marriage but one of cooperation, occasioned by the deception of Iya Segi. While her response may be considered a submission, it is only a submission to the totality of her intrigues. This may not be far from the interpretations of the words offered by Emecheta when she asserts that "some women ... make polygamy work for them" (Emecheta 176).

Furthermore, "the importance of rank among co-wives is emphasised. Feminist writers have argued that the first wife was not consulted in her husband's choice of a second, third and fourth wife. The masculine reply is, why should they be consulted when all their interests in the man's house are selfishly tied to the money and food they get from the men? Their /her answer, if consulted, would have been a straight 'no' so that they can have the monopoly of eating alone. Iya Segi came because of money and would think other women would come for the same. While Iya Segi's anxiety around sharing resources is expressed, she leaves the burden to her husband. The man can die attempting to perform a task that all would have otherwise shared. She says, "Only a foolish woman leans heavily on a man's promises" (Shoneyin 97), yet she did this. Iya Tope is the quietest of the wives and even calls herself a "coward" (56). A self–acclaimed coward marries a man. For all the love and care Baba Segi offers, he got a coward for a reward. Her role, while seemingly displaying the submissive quality of a traditional second wife, is the mother who cleverly turns her loyalty to her children and can be said to be "married to [her] children" (Smith 175). Her trust and loyalty should go first to the husband she married. Her concentration on her children is an insult to the concept of marriage. Having failed to provide love for her husband, she seeks emotional freedom by loving the children. This is unacceptable to masculine thinkers. Iya Tope, it can be argued, represents a childlike womanhood. This marriage, like Iya Segi's, was arranged; Baba Segi, once again, did not pay the price but received his wife as payment. Iya Tope, we know, grew up in a polygamous setting and can thus be said to have been trained for this arrangement. Embry and Bradley have noted that daughters who accepted polygamy had learned ways to interact as plural wives from their mothers' examples ... (101). Once again, the man is only a victim, believing he is the victor. Emecheta notes that "women are very quarrelsome and jealous" (178). This is true of Iya Femi, who offers to be Baba Segi's wife. She values herself over the other wives and is threatened when Bolanle takes her place as the newest wife. She is hostile and expects that she and her children should be favoured over others in the household. She is particularly resentful of Bolanle, who has acquired the education she craved and was robbed of in her childhood. She loves material possessions and uses them to reignite the pampering she experienced as a child. After the slavery in Grandma's house, she tells of her choice to marry Baba Segi:…I offered him Grandma's precious boiled water. He accepted it and thanked me. The next day, he brought me a basket of oranges. … I did not waste time telling Taju that I was looking for a man to marry me. … "Baba Segi is the one who has enough money to marry many women... "Then make him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt forever... (128-129)

The first thought people have about polygamy is that men marry because of their insatiable urge for women and sex. The case of Baba Segi is different and instructive. Here, women meet, conspire and plan to enter his house for the money he has. This woman even employed an agent to help her get into the loins of Baba Segi. She desperately sought a man to marry who would carry all her problems. The usual victim was Baba Segi, who, in the end, is called a polygamist in negative terms. Baba Segi's household provides luxury in comparison to her stay with Grandma. Contrary to the argument that women are objectified, women here have Baba Segi objectified. She, in a moment of truthfulness, asserts:

> Don't get me wrong. I do not hate Baba Segi; on the contrary, I have several reasons to be thankful to him. He gave me a place of refuge ... You see when the world owes you as much as it owes me, you need a base from which you can call in your debts. (132-133).

The man is only a means to an end. He exists only to provide for their welfare. No one truly loves him. This is one of the dangers of gender equality war.

Bolanle, the fourth wife of Baba, reflects on her time in the Alao household, giving us the vivid impression that all the women in the text exist to emotionally and financially defraud Baba Segi. She says: It all made sense when I met Baba Segi. At last, I would be able to empty myself of sorrow. I would be with a man who accepted me, one who didn't ask questions or find my quietness unsettling. ….I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity.(Shoneyin16-17) Baba Segi was content when I said nothing. … Not for the monthly allowance, not for the lace skirt suits, and not for the coral bracelets. …. And when you choose a family, you stay with them… even though your friends call him a polygamist ogre. ..You look at him in another light and see a large but kindly, generous soul. (Shoneyin16-17). After comparing him to an animal of the most ferocious kind and an ugly polygamist, she still goes ahead and marries him to fulfil her selfish aim of running away from her past. However, how do we describe her sleeping with a man she hated and described as an animal? How do we account for those momentary fits of passion she pretended to have with a man she never liked? This is the height of emotional deception and insincerity. We consider it worse than rape. While the rape was just one incidence, her emotional deception was continuous and endless. However, she describes the man as a polygamous ogre while she is a beautiful saint indeed! Earlier, it was mentioned that Baba Segi chose Bolanle; here, she confesses to having chosen him. Her reasons radically differ and give food for thought as we look at polygamy through the pinhole cameras provided by Baba Segi and his wives. Who would have known that women have reasons to crave polygamy and instigate it while pretending to hate it and shout out men as cheats? In consonance with this observation, Nnaemeka argues that: "African women who are in polygamous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims. Many of them are intelligent, highly educated, successful, and independent women who choose polygamous marriage as what is good for them" (13).

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's wives open a can of worms. It shows the level of deception men face when looking for the fruit of the womb. Only God knows today the number of men busy feeding and training children fathered by other men. It places men in positions worse than that of a fool. Iya Segi sums it up thus; "Men they are nothing. They are fools. The penis between their legs is all they are helpful for. Moreover, even then, if not that women needed their seed for children, it would be better to sit on a finger of green plantain." Iya segi *(82).* The underlying message in this text is the subjugation of men. While the feminist reader would want us to see the women here as victims, the events in the text show that they are villains of the highest order.

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), convincing Baba Segi to withdraw the armchair he had broken his rule to give to her, Bolanle's co-wives' children also follow the examples set by their mothers, haven been well tutored 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 often I offer them sweets, they treat me like I have a contagious disease" (23).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the predominance of polygamy in African societies has been primarily instigated and propagated by the female folk in the society and not the misleading assertion that women are maltreated and sidelined. The findings in this research show that cases of polygamy were arranged and executed by female folks. These women have provided the basis for the analysis of most feminist writers. This text shows that the protagonist had polygamy forced on him by the female characters in the text. We also take the position that most of the misunderstandings, intrigues and evils associated with the practice of polygamy are carried out by the women, even against themselves. Thus, Baba Segi's role as head of the respective families significantly burdens Baba Segi. As such, the lives of Baba Segi answer the question—does the role of the African male as 'the man' and the 'head' of the family place an unnecessary burden on him? Yes, it does. Baba Segi is forced to accept situations that he would not have accepted if their cultural circumstances differed.

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