

**CONSTRUCTION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES***

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**Abstract**

This study discusses the construction of African womanhood in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as it tends to construct women in an African patriarchal society. The study demonstrates that women are constructed as hardworking, victims of polygamy, objects; it further highlights emphasis on their thematic concerns and techniques of narration. The theory adopted for this study is womanism. This is a strand of feminism of the African brand. Ogunyemi's womanism helps the woman to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchy, oppression, subjugation and degradation caused by an individual, the family or the society, through a subtle movement, with a mutual coordination of both sexes. Thus, Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reveals the plight of women in a polygamous marriage. The study concludes that though the novel under study is contemporary, there is no significant departure from the traditional conception of womanhood in the portrayal of female characters. However, the work highlights a little departure in the area of female characters' attitude to motherhood. The study recommends a reconstruction of African womanhood that will reflect the times.

**Keywords:** African, construction, reconstruction, polygamous, womanhood

**Introduction**

The focus of feminism is to construct a new identity of the African woman. Onyemaechi Udumukwu notes that the images of African women in literature manifest as the good woman and the real woman in Africa. He argues that the good woman is the woman "who suffers the effect of oppression," and "who must maintain silence and passivity in order to remain good" no matter the circumstance. While the real woman "is that woman who even in the face of tyranny will not remain silent" (3). In this context, the woman is the subject and not the object.

Udumukwu further reveals that African feminism perceives the African woman as an essence...her essential is her existential. That is to say that the woman's existence and essence coincide (18). Therefore African female writers (feminist) "tends to replace the abstraction *woman* as created by men with another abstraction *Woman* (with the capital W) created by women" (19).

Chioma Opara examines the technique, imagery, tropes and motifs of the female writers to re-construct the African woman (8). She also critically analyzes some works by some African female writers that shows the "uniqueness of African feminism rooted in African environment" (23). She further argues that the Feminist house should be integrated, for "a well-constructed house should stand up exceptionally well to menacing, buffeting tempests in adverse climes" ("A House" 73). Insisting that "an integrated house constructed on a foundation, consisting of a myriad of African feminist thoughts, is expected to weather the raging storms... (73). In other words, feminist cause should accord well among feminist.

Flora Nwapa constructs the African woman in a positive light by highlighting that "The women's role in African is crucial for the survival and progress of the [woman] race" (526) and African writers' projection of this image of the woman in the African society cannot be overemphasized. However, some "male writers have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in subordination to men" (527). But

Nwapa contends that “the woman writer cannot fail to see the woman’s power in her home and society. She sees her economic importance both as mother, farmer and trader. She writes stories that affirm the woman, thus challenging the male writers and making them aware of inherent vitality...courage, self-confidence...” (528). Nwapa further argues that she:

Tried to recreate the experiences of women in the traditional African society- their social and economic activities and above all their pre-occupation with the problems of recreation, infertility and child-bearing. Apart from exposing the pain, misery and humiliation which childless or barren women suffer in the traditional society, the two novels (I hope) give insight into the resourcefulness and industriousness of women which often made them successful, respected and influential people in the community. (528)

Nwapa also points out that African female writers dwell too much on barrenness while revealing that “women are what they are because they can give life, they can procreate” (531). Another scholar, Chinyere Oluwa observes that the roles women play in the society and the hindrances to their development has evolved. She recalls that “feminism has recorded a bit of dramatic change in Africa in the area of empowerment, mobilization, wealth acquisitions and career promotion and realization; thereby enabling women to reach the zenith of their career pursuit” (1). However, obstacles to the social mobility of women include: poverty, violence, and illiteracy. The historical development of women uprising in Africa is traceable to the Women for Change Initiative. Presently, women are now heading political positions as “gender does not make a difference in political attitudes and in the actions of policy makers” (Oluwa, 75).

However, Chinweizu argues that women indirectly rule the world. For men may rule the world, but women rule the men that rule the world. Chinweizu believes that “if the natural goal of male power is to pay tribute to women, then male power is naturally tributary to female power. If, however powerful a man maybe, his power is used to serve the women in his life, that would make dubious the notion that men are masters over women” (12). He outlines the five pillars of female power which includes: “women’s control of the womb; women’s control of the kitchen; women’s control of the cradle; the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman; and man’s tendency to be deranged by his excited penis”(20). However, he reveals what men might do to reduce the female power. He notes that feminism is a revolt in paradise and “if a woman is indeed a man’s boss; if most women know that their lives are quite privileged compared to the lives of men, what then is one to make of feminism...” (117).

The theory adopted for this study is womanism. This is a strand of feminism of the African brand. As a concept, womanism was first used by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist prose*. Walker’s womanism supports women’s love for fellow women, thereby excluding the men. Susan Arndts observes that walker’s womanism makes the same mistake for which she accuses white feminist, by saying that “a womanist is a black or a feminist of colour and that only black woman can be womanist” (38). Chikwenye Ogunyemi comes up with her version of Womanism which is African and her theory does not include women’s sexual love for other women. She believes that, “A black (African) woman writer is likely to be a ‘womanist’. That is, she will recognize that along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy” (64). Ogunyemi argues that she “arrived at the term ‘womanism’ independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that her notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker” (72).

The renowned African literary critic, Charles Nnolim condemns the different perspectives of the African female writers in creating a name for themselves. Nnolim centers on the disagreement in the house which is African feminism where each female critic is constructing their own term to define African feminism, that the “African female writers live in a house divided” (128). He argues further that “if the female writers live in a house divided, their counterparts who are critics are much more united in a single-minded effort to carry the fight to the court of the male writers who are their *bête-noir*, their enemy, the agents of their disparaged position, their oppressors” (144). However, he posits that this could be resolved if:

The African woman, through the efforts of the female writers and critics is now much more aware of her identity and is determined not only to assert her separate personhood, but also to break away from the encircling shackles imposed by men and tradition even if, sometimes not so successfully. (146)

Notwithstanding, in Africa, women have been marginalized and oppressed by men as a result of the patriarchal ideology which places women as second-class citizens. This has greatly influenced the construction of the woman in early male and female authored works.

### **The Hardworking Woman**

The biblical perception of a hardworking woman is that “...she keeps herself busy making wool and linen cloth. She brings home food from out-of-the –way places, as merchant ships do. She gets up before daylight to prepare food for her family and to tell her servant-girls what to do...” (Proverbs 31:13-15). This construction of the woman is also depicted in the novel. For instance, Iya Segi became financially independent at an early age, and without the support of a man. She says, “by the time I was eighteen... I had become quite adept at making fufu and like my mother; I had a stash of money under my mattress” (97). This is reminiscent of Pokuwaa in Asare Konadu’s *A Woman in Her Prime* who is wealthy at a tender age, “I was rich even when I was only ten years old”(54). Iya Segi has the money to buy a house, for she always reminds her mother about getting her own house. Iya Segi reveals:

My money grew until I had to hide it in old water pots in my room. Every night... I counted the money all over again. My fingers liked the feel of money. My eyes liked to see the piles of money swell. I worshipped money. Even when boys tease me over the flap of flash that circled my neck, I was not bothered. I looked at them and sniggered, knowing their father’s father could not have a fraction of the wealth I had accumulated. (98)

From the foregoing, it is evident that Iya Segi is economically independent because she could make a lot of money of her own. But her mother uses all the money to sponsor her marriage to Baba Segi. Even as a wife to Baba Segi, she had always wanted to be industrious rather than staying at home, she convinces Baba Segi to start up a business for her. She “had shops in most of the major markets: Mokola, Dugbe, Eleyele, Sango...” (75). Iya Segi’s hard work is commendable, as she narrates:

... I tucked money into my cash bag. Now I have eight cement shops in Ibadan alone and my wealth swells by the day. Do not say I am greedy because I am not. It’s just that as my money grows, my path to freedom becomes clearer. Everybody wants to be free from whatever binds them. (104-105)

This implies that Iya Segi believes that economic empowerment enhances independent as she thinks of the amount of wealth that she will acquire, where the “heap will be as hefty as the hills of Idanre”(105).

Another character that is hardworking is Iya Tope, though she does not like planting crops, instead she prefers weeding. As she attests, “I detested the hoeing and wished away the watering cans... weeding, I loved, I love the feel of the small leaves, the strength of the stems...” (78). It is also worthy of note that Iya Tope’s father praises Iya Tope that “she is as strong as three donkeys” (81). Therefore, Iya Segi and Iya Tope are hard working in their own capacity.

### **Women as Victims of Polygamy**

The Alao family is a polygamous one. Ishola Alao, also known as Baba Segi, is married to four wives: Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Bolanle respectively, with seven children to show for it. Baba Segi’s wives are seen as victims of the polygamous family. Florence Orabueze argues that, in the past, African men had the need to have many wives, but they never married the women to discard the old wives like worn-out rags. There existed also, a form of peaceful co-existence in the polygamous homes where each wife respected the other (111). She further argues that “African men have long cheated their wives by acquiring more women on the fallacious ground that men are polygamous by nature” (111). Jonas Obonye asserts that “polygamy existed throughout Africa as an integral feature of family life...it ensures the stability and continuity of the family and clan and it provides economic and social security for women...” (143). Again, Vuyisawa Ndabayakhe believes that “polygamy is a prevailing sign of male dominance in African communities today”(4) and that “polygamy is a stumbling block in the path of female emancipation and self-expression”(120). According to Buchi Emecheta, “people think that polygamy is oppression” (553), which implies that “polygamous cultures have a history of male dominance... [which] create female oppression” (Oliver 18). According to Jonas Obonye:

The practice of Polygamy undermines the self-worth of women... because, wives have no legal power or capacity to prevent their husbands from taking a second wife... polygamy objectifies women and contravenes a women’s right to equality with men (who can us) polygamy... as a tool... to whip women into toeing their line by threatening their wives that they will marry another wife... (145-146)

In the novel, Iya Segi, the first wife of Baba Segi plays her role effectively. She says, “it is important that the wives know their place in this house. They must know what they can and cannot do. They must remember that I am the one who tells them when to eat, sleep or even work.”(72). However, Iya Segi is not happy as her husband brings in new wives as Iya Tope recalls thus, “when I arrived at Baba Segi’s house... Iya Segi smiled but I could see her chest thumping beneath her buba” (83). This means that Iya Segi is not happy because the new wife may disrupt the state of things. Iya Segi also fears that her role as the first wife might be taken away from her because of the fourth wife, Bolanle. Iya Segi puts it thus:

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...women are my husband’s weakness. He cannot resist them...I do not blame the women either. They too are weakened by the prosperity he offers. Besides, apart from Bolanle, whose nose is so high that it brushes the skies, the other wives do not offend me. (103-104)

Iya Segi is not comfortable with Bolanle’s arrival for she feels belittled and her husband’s affection towards her may be contested. And she has to bear the punishment of staying with Baba Segi once a week or nothing at all. For the narrator tells us that “later that night, Baba Segi staggered down the wide corridor that the wives’ bedroom were cut from... he caressed Iya Segi’s door, touched the knob on Iya Tope’s door... paused at the threshold of Bolanle’s room”(12-13). For Baba Segi passes the other wives’

rooms to get to that of Bolanle. Hence, Bolanle gets more days than the other wives for being the new wife and she needs to bear children as well.

Also, in the polygamous home, wives take turns in sharing their husbands which leads to non-satisfaction of the women's sexual desires. Iya Tope expresses her sadness:

My only worry was that Bolanle's arrival would disrupt the sex rotation. Baba Segi normally went from wife to wife, each week with Iya Segi. By Thursday, he'd start the cycle again, leaving him in freedom to choose whom to spend Sunday night with. Baba Segi used this night to reward whichever wife missed a night because of her menstrual flow...Now that a new wife had joined us, one of us would have only one night a week. (47-48)

In the above expression, the man may use sex rotation for his own benefits. One notices that rotation of sex in polygamy is important for the family's healthy relationship. In other words insufficient sex pleasure therefore depicts women as victims of polygamy, where the women have to share one man; as a result, some of them will not be satisfied. In fact, all the wives are worried about their sexual satisfaction as in, the number of nights they spend with their husbands is bound to be reduced.

Similarly, in *The Secret Lives...* Iya Femi, the third wife of Baba Segi, who normally gets Sundays as an extra day from her husband's affection will not be getting such because the addition of Bolanle makes her extra days impossible. She tells Iya Segi about Bolanle, "I want her gone. I want my place back and I will get" (137). For it is true that polygamy did not favor the wives of Baba Segi. Iya Femi laments, "Is it that our food wasn't tasty enough? Why would Baba Segi marry another wife? Has he condemned our breasts because they are losing their [firmness]?" (48). This is expected in a polygamous home because the wives are expected to scramble for their husband's love. This scrambling for affection leads to male oppression, with the man taking advantage to punish any of the wives that is not submissive.

Bolanle is faced with the troubles and quarrels of being in a polygamous home. She is aware that her marriage to Baba Segi would readjust the sharing of Baba Segi's affection with the other wives. She says: "With my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to spread among four instead of three" (21).

Also, Bolanle is physically and psychologically wounded as a result of the rape, her pregnancy and the abortion she had, which made her dream shattered, she marries Baba Segi and then faces humiliation. When Bolanle could not bear children for Baba Segi, she is insulted and oppressed; Baba Segi believes that Bolanle's barrenness is a fault of hers and not his. Baba Segi humiliates Bolanle thus:

A woman cannot know the weight of a child until she has carried one in her womb..., "Your barrenness brings shame upon me"..., 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...Do you want to remain a rotten maggot..., this is the wife who cannot conceive. (13, 14, 43,189)

Looking at the quotation above, proves that childlessness is a big problem, especially in the polygamous home where the man feels he already has children from his other wives, and then the wife that does not bear children is maltreated and oppressed. This reechoes the point that the purpose of women in most

African marriages is to bear children. In the same vein, Iya Segi's mother tells Iya Segi that "women don't need to marry" but, the mother replies, "you need one to bear children" (101).

Generally, Baba Segi subdues his wives, as he practically:

Banned them from leaving the house without his permission. Iya Segi was instructed to close down all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him. Iya Femi was forbidden to wear make-up and there would be no more church. God hears your heart no matter where you are, he'd said. (243)

Clearly one observes that Baba Segi's wives freedom of movement is restricted. Baba Segi's wives were placed on house arrest which they have to endure if they must stay in the marriage; therefore, women are controlled and restricted in polygamy by their husbands. This calls to mind Carole Boyce Davies view on the consequence of polygamy. She says that "the excesses of polygamy which offend women include the man's prerogative to be catered to, by several women, the fact that he usually has the choice, the rejection of women and the competition between them which his choices generate" (563).

Reflecting on Baba Segi's wives as victims of polygamy. Hence the three wives of Baba Segi are illiterate. For "all of Baba Segi's wives enter into the marriage because of societal forces which continue to marginalize and oppress women due to their gender" (203). Therefore Shoneyin, no doubt, condemns polygamy as an ideology that victimizes women as a result of male dominance through patriarchy. Shoneyin reveals her view on polygamy in an interview thus:

Many of the women in the novel go into polygamy as a way of escaping their harsh realities. Economically and financially, one is tempted to believe that these women would not have found alternative lifestyles that would have entered for their emotional need as well... As an institution, polygamy brings out the worst in the women involved... the same whip that was used in punishing the first wife will inevitably bruise the new wife. This is the true picture of polygamous homes. (African writing 6)

### **Women as Objects**

Women are portrayed as objects under the control of Baba Segi. Baba Segi is a man that boasts of his physical powers and he played the role of the subject. Looking at how the patriarchal society has conditioned the man to be at liberty to do what he likes without thinking of its effect. For Baba Segi's objectifies his wives. According to Baba Segi:

I took the 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? Would the gods themselves not have been angered if I had foregone the opportunity to show mercy to another human being? But I chose Bolanle, I cannot lie. I set my mind on her, the way a thirsty child sets his eyes on a cup filling from a spout. (201)

The above account gives insight on how the society has shaped Baba Segi's mind about women he brags about his taking of wives as if his wives are objects. He brags about his manliness thus: "it annoys him that Bolanle is the reason he had come, when just two years before, he had boasted of his conquest...how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed; and how she took the length of his manhood on her back – splayed out and submissive"(4). Baba Segi considers Iya Tope's womb a problem as she reveals to us:

“then one day... Baba Segi asked me what was wrong with my womb. ‘If your father has *sold* me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him; his words bothered me ... (84). Moreover, the word ‘sold’ reduces Iya Tope to an ordinary property which Baba Segi acquired from her father. Therefore, women are not treated with respect; instead, they are ordered around like servants, as she says:

My father told me to bring the food in and I returned with a wide tray. ... Baba Segi inspected me as I placed the plates on a low stool...he examined my face...I heard my father saying ‘but she is as strong as three donkeys and thorough too...when we arrived at Baba Segi’s house, he pushed me towards Iya Segi and warned that I should show her great respect.(81-83)

Iya tope is forced into early marriage. She is used as an exchange for her father’s bad harvest to Baba Segi. This implies that “the woman is in relation to and can only be known in terms of the *other*, the man” (Udumukwu 15). In other words, the woman does not have fullness in herself but exists and derives fullness from the other (Udumukwu 16). Hence, Iya Tope’s father and Baba Segi used Iya Tope for their business, without seeking her approval. In other words, she is exchanged from one patriarchal control to another. This shows that the ideology about the girl-child position by the patriarchal society is that, “from childhood she is conditioned into thinking that being the girl she must do all the housework...cook, clean, fetch water and look after the younger brothers and sisters” (Emecheta 556) and then married out to whom the father chooses for her. Also, in *The Secret Lives...* when Baba Segi’s sperm was needed for examination and he was given a container to get it, at first he could not do it but needed his wife, the nurse therefore wonders, “How it is that men, with all their talk of conquering women, had not mastered the art of pleasuring themselves. You’d think women were their dustbins” (191).

Another character that is constructed as an object is Bolanle. When Baba Segi is worried about Bolanle’s childlessness, Atanda advises Baba Segi: “Baba Segi, I think you should *drag* her to a medicine man if she doesn’t follow you. You are the husband and she is a mere wife, and the fourth one at that! If you drag her by the hair, she’ll follow you anywhere” (4).

One notices that the word ‘drag’ is demeaning and insulting. It is only animals that are dragged to follow the owner when called upon and not human beings, so it required Baba Segi to drag Bolanle to the hospital. In the hospital also, “the astonished doctor watched Baba Segi *drag* Bolanle off the wrong direction” (32). Baba Segi’s action of dragging Bolanle resonates with Julia Wood’s view that men tend to be physically aggressive in other “to gain or sustain self-esteem, to win the respect of others, to maintain control over people and situations” (294). Baba Segi would have talked to Bolanle about what he wanted not to drag her around. This is reminiscence of Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*, where in a patriarchal society, “every young man is entitled to his fun”( 85). Hence, men are at liberty to do with their wives as they please, as a result of Patriarchal society.

In conclusion, the characters in Shoneyin’s novel are constructed to depict their oppressed situations, the struggles women go through in polygamy and their freedom as well. As such they are constructed as victims of polygamy, hardworking and as objects. They are meant to submit totally to their husband’s demands, whether it suits them or not. In spite of Bolanle’s education, she is also confined to the house. Bolanle’s character advocates for the importance of educating the women and empowering them. She realizes that illiteracy is a major problem among her co-wives, as she reveals, “Living with them has

taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy” (22). In other words, more positive construction of women is needed.

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