

A New Feminist Reading of Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

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Abstract

Emancipation of women in the African male-dominated society is a goal that has not been successfully reached today as tradition and religion are still negatively used to relegate them to the background. Ever since the eighteenth century birthed the ideology of feminism and spread it to Africa in the 1980s, a crop of African female writers like Buchi Emecheta, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Zulu Sofola, and indeed very many others have emerged using it in their writings to fight this background relegation. In recent times, the African women have taken their crusade beyond the pages of books to brace the fight on the street with various associations demanding for their full emancipation. While we may say that the conditions of the African women have improved considerably at the emergence of the feminist ideology and the out-door crusade of the activists, a large number of women in the society still suffer discrimination and are violated: a painful arbitrary deprivation of their fundamental freedom. Being that as it may, there appears to be a fundamental error in women themselves and that is why the patriarchal society continues to succeed. It is this fundamental error that this paper focuses on in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and refracts as a new feminist reading away from the previous readings of either brooding in complaints or engaging in outright confrontation against patriarchy. The situation can be salvaged without brooding and without confrontation and this paper tells how.

Introduction

Feminism as an ideological concept is believed to be an offshoot of the women's rights movement, which began in Europe and America arguably in the eighteenth century. Its main objective is to see women enjoy equal rights in culture and society. Peter Barry believes that in tracing feminism back to the eighteenth century "women's movement" of the 1960s was not the start of feminism but a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action discussed in some classic books

which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society and in some cases proposed solution (121). These earlier books according to Barry include, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792; Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* published in 1911;

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929 and also Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* published in 1949 which have important intersections on the portrayal of women in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Generally, these earlier books portray the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood (121).

The major written records of history of humanity as contained in the teachings of the Biblical Paul has been argued to favour the patriarchal culture. In line with this belief which has excessively been misconstrued, women were taken as subordination to men; they could not work for a living or own property and were denied the freedom to good education. Their main focus was marriage after which they become the property of their husbands who will determine their happiness and fulfillment or sadness and failure in life as the case may be. Commenting on this, Erwin Haebale says that at the time of the American Revolution, American women just like their European sisters were generally uneducated and had no financial resources of their own. If they earned an income, they hardly had control over it and the married women were legally dominated by their husbands and completely depended on them (86).

Barry adds that a group of earlier women writers like Mary Austell and Mary Wollstonecraft considered the patriarchal maltreatment of women as evil and therefore, started using their literature to fight for increased education and equality for the women in their society. In the nineteenth century, Barry says, feminism was widely spread in Europe and the corpus now includes male contributions like John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Engel who wrote *The Subjection of Women* and *The Origin of the Family*, respectively (see, Barry 122-123).

Barry's submission can be enriched to include Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1966) and Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994) as aspects of African feminism, which we now turn attention to.

African Feminism and Patriarchy

The spread of feminism to Africa in the 1980s was greeted with a lot of arguments as to whether or not it can be applied in the criticism of the African

novel because it was perceived as a product of “decadent western capitalism” which conflicts with the historical and cultural experiences of the African communities. Olu Obafemi cited in Regina Awase Achie argues that feminism as an ideological concept does not exist in Africa and so the African female writers should not swallow hook, line and sinker the Eurocentric western view of feminism. (44) Sharing the same view, Catherine Obianuje Achonolu says the United Nations paradigms were encouraging African women to reject their traditional roles of mothering, nurturing, home-keeping, even child bearing, and opt for western feminism which is anti-mother, anti-child and anti-culture. (85) The African feminists, while denying the allegation of copying the European idea or rejecting their traditional roles as mothers say feminism is applicable to the African context and they are using it to demand for change for the African women without the guidance from the white women. Abimbola Shittu buttresses this in his forwards to Ferdinand Asoo’s *The African Novel and the Realist Tradition*,

Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, Structuralisms, Semiotics, Feminism and other theories... cannot be used in reference to any one geographical region of the world. In other words, these literary and theoretical concepts are universal. (ix-x)

Feminism, therefore, is a universal concept and a social political awareness that agitates for women’s rights and privileges. However, African female writers like Maria Ajuma and Lola Shoneyin do not want to believe that one has to use the word “feminism” or be a feminist before one struggles for the rights of women. This is in line with what Rosalind Delma says:

There are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about women, specific to or emanating from feminists. This means that it should be possible to separate out feminism and feminists from the multiplicity of those concerned with women issues. It is by no means absurd to suggest that you don’t have to be a feminist to support women’s right to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of women’s demands are feminists. In this light feminism can claim its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problem affecting women. Feminism can thus be established as a field (and this even if skepticism is still needed in the face of claims or demands for a unified feminism), but cannot claim women as its domain. (13)

Because of the different fragmentation and wrong perceptions of feminism, Delma considers it a futile effort pegging modern feminism to a simple entity of shared definition. The fight for emancipation should be a general issue and not confined by strait-jacketed tag of feminist toga. Readings of New Feminism now submit a live-and-live posture where there is no victor nor vanquished. New Feminism is certainly a postfeminist discourse which, according to Fien Adriaens, recounts “[p]ersonal female pleasure (as) a central theme within postfeminist literature.(184)In this way, Delma believes that modern feminism or new feminism as

[p]ostfeminism can be conceptualized as a new form of empowerment or subjectivity, adjusted to the actual societal context. Agency, freedom, sexual pleasure, fashion, consumer culture, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body are the elements of this new feminism. (191)

It is this hybridity power that has granted power to various models or theories of feminism. It is this strength that has granted power to the emergence of, for example, African feminism.

Trying to by-pass the combative discourses that beset previous readings of feminism in Africaas elsewhere, other names like African feminism represented in Womanism, Motherism, Stiwanism, Nego-feminism have been agreeably adopted as new terms to describe their agendas for women in Africa without raising any suspicion from the male counterpart.

The African female writers see the urgent need to seriously address questions of the discrimination and violence under which the African woman has been battling over the ages. Discrimination as used here is defined by Christiana Dupe Fisho-Oridendias an act of making distinction based on sex or gender while violence against women refers to all acts perpetrated against women causing or being capable of causing physical harm, sexual or psychological suffering. It also includes threats of constraints or arbitrary deprivation of fundamental freedom of women whether it is a public or private life in terms of peace or conflicts. (13) Feminists are of the view that the woman is the object or the target of violation. It is the woman’s rights that are often violated and the cause of the violation by her counterpart, the man, is because of discrimination and intolerance against her sex. According to Fisho-Oridendi, violence against woman can manifest in any of the following manners or the combination of them: physical, sexual, emotional, social,

economic, and domestic, among others. (13) Considering the various ways women are being painfully violated, there appears to be a fundamental error that disorganizes the woman's voice against excesses by her man. There is supposed to be an integral complementarity between man and woman, rather than the superiority of any other. The worth and dignity of both sexes are supreme. For the woman to actually negotiate her way within any given context, she must be conscious of her highly imbued level of perceptiveness, strength, and ability to make changes that will be a symbiotic favour to both sexes in society. This is done without prejudices to any of the sexes feeling slighted because s/he is adequately carried along. Showing the greatness of the power of the woman in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, Joseph Abel says the woman has an intense capacity to control man in spite of the general notion that the forces of tradition and religion have turned the woman into a naïve and passive individual. (154) In *The Last Imam*, the wives of Alhaji Usman, who is the Imam protest against what they consider inimical abuse of their matrimonial rights. Although the Imam feels humiliated by his wives questioning his rights to extra marital affair, he quickly sorts things out with them when the wives threaten to divorce him. He says,

I admire your fortitude, your nobility and forbearance. And I ask you now, as one Muslim to fellow Muslims in the name of Allah to forgive me those nights, those trespasses I committed against your rights. (183)

Since Imam considers it a bad omen for all his wives to divorce him on the eve of Ramadan, he kneels and pleads for forgiveness and promises them a change of character.

Abel, however, asserts that the implication of the oppression of women is that they draw from their inherently unique strengths to direct the social engagement and plot revenge as the case may be. It is in the way that women manipulate their sexuality that gives them the unconscious psychological edge over the man and the ability to manipulate him. (158) This shows that everybody is powerful. Even those that look weak may actually be the most powerful. This brings to mind the Faucaudian concept of power being everywhere and comes from everywhere so that in this sense, it is neither an agency nor a structure. Power is what makes man to operate on a quite different level. Power is diffused rather than concentrated, embodied, and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them. (63) This

Faucaudian power is differently demonstrated in Shoneyin's women in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

Textual Synopsis

The novel discusses a wide range of issues inherent in the African society: polygyny, love, betrayal, violence and the importance of children in African marriage. Set in Ibadan, the story centres on an African polygamous patriarch, Mr. Ishola Alao, popularly called Baba Segi, who fulfills the society's beliefs that a man's joy and fulfillment is in his numerous wives and children. He is, therefore, not discouraged to take in the fourth wife even when the latter is a graduate. Baba Segi tries to hide his own share of the trouble that an illiterate husband gets from a graduate wife until Bolanle proves not to be blessed by the fecundity hitherto manifested by other wives.

The conflict in the novel really ensues as the search to unravel Bolanle's childlessness hunts the secret upon which the household rests. The three older wives unanimously agree to drive Bolanle out before she upturns the tranquility of the home but their efforts yield no result as it leads to the death of the family first born, Segi. Since the medical tests on Bolanle confirms that she is not having any challenge and should be able to procreate, the doctors suggest a test for Baba Segi to clear their doubt. The test confirms that the liquid imprint of a man which normally contains 62 proteins which is just like a personal code for each man and therefore differs from one man to another is sterile in Baba Segi and so unable to bear children. This is further corroborated by the dangerous first wife's confession that he is not the father of his cherished children. She says that they have children for him through other men as childlessness constitutes a big threat to their stay, happiness, and fulfillment as wives in their husband's house. Since Iya Segi is the first wife and the first to have children for Baba Segi through other men before encouraging other wives to do the same, she tries to defend herself,

I was a young wife when I found myself in a cloud of sadness. I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itch to be sucked. My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us. Then, I had an idea. It was a sinful idea but I knew it would bring my sadness to an end. In fact, it was more than idea; it promised to be a solution. If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? So I found seed and planted it in my belly. (215)

Iya Segi considers it obligatory to procreate in her husband's house and she pursues this awkwardly unlike Flora Nwapa's Efuru, who, though considers it a curse and a failure not to have children, bears the resentment and pulls through and considers herself fruitful in her service to humanity.

Just like Maria Ajuma says in her conversation with Sule E. Egya that women are trying to balance things because the scale has tilted so awkwardly in favour of men, throwing the men in positive light. (55) Iya Segi sees her world crashing on her without the obligatory seed planting. Therefore, with unprecedented energy and verve, she seeks to pursue it, and is rewarded by it. Not any different from Ajuma's opinion is Muhammad Alkali's viewpoint. He similarly can be interpreted to bring out the voices of the Nigerian male writers; a situation that certainly needs improvement as women should not continue to be debased and wasted, always trailing behind her man. They have been hugely exploited not only in western literature, but also in African oral literature that has been transferred into written world by male writers (179-80). Shoneyin has taken the gauntlet to write and correct this patriarchal tradition as the portrayal of her characters shows that if the women suffer discrimination and are painfully violated, it is because they give themselves up for that.

Even the young female writers are not immune to this same web of feminine fundamental error. One of the latest works on this topic is *Bongel* by Maryam Bobi. Bobi leads her protagonist to concede from Abdul, her new fiancé, of the vicissitude of forced marriage which she faces at age twelve. The traumatic experience that leaves her with a sexual Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) after the collapse of her forced marriage poisons her life that she feels relating it with Abdul, the new lover, will aggravate the challenge. When the secret leaks, it crashes the altar-bound relationship but for the maturity with which Bobi handles her macabre, the outburst is resolved.

Perhaps, the time has come for the African woman to stop blaming her patriarchy for the mishap in the society but come out of her ignorant silence that deals with her over the ages now. Having a violence-free society depends on the mutual understanding of both African man and woman.

The issues raised by Shoneyin as ways the rights of the woman are being violated—polygyny, pornography of violence, objectification of women, forced marriage, disinheriting female children—all succeed in the society because the woman keeps silent. If the Shoneyin women had voiced out their pain like the

Tahir's women, they may not have cheated on him. Iya Segi finally accepts how deeply they have wounded their husband:

I misled them. Perhaps if I had not shown the second one my way, this shame would have come out sooner. But you see, they were so desperate to be fruitful. They knew that my husband valued children above all things so when I saw their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret they also followed the same path. (216)

This is to show that the silence of the African woman over burning issues is one of the fundamental error that negatively affects her life, and not the wickedness of patriarchy. If she is able to do the needful by intelligently voicing out her challenge, chances are that there will be a serene society and this, of course, is what informs Modupe Ogundipe-Leslie's view

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency, complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (36) In other words, Ogundipe-Leslie suggests that women are frequently plagued by themselves and made prisoners of their own conscience. This fundamental error affects most of the female characters of the gendered writings. Some of the major issues of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as they affect the lives of the African woman are discussed below.

Polygyny in New Feminism

One of the major issues raised in most feminist literatures is a man's entitlement to more than one wife. Shoneyin explores the contentious issues of this setting weaving the voices of the wealthy patriarch, Baba Segi, into a truly compelling tale. Shoneyin portrays polygyny as an age-long African custom that causes, among others, psychological trauma. In an online review, Oyebanji Ayodele says that just like the city in which the story is set, there is a link to something as ancient as the city-polygyny; the complexity of the story which is as conspicuous as a soup stain on a bridal gown. Although Ayodele seems to blame polygyny on patriarchy, one needs to consider the ground on which those women are brought into Baba Segi's house. In the case of Iya Femi, the third wife, she offers herself willingly to Baba Segi in order to benefit from his wealth. Before seeing Baba Segi she says, "... I was looking for a man to marry me. I was desperate".

(128)When she is told Baba Segi is the one who has enough money to marry many women, she continues, “[t]hen *make* him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt for ever. I have no relatives so there is no one for him to pay homage to. (129) Even Bolanle, the university graduate, does not mince words when she says, “I choose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity. I was raped, Mama! Did you know that? I was raped when I was 15 years old... My life was wrecked and I don’t know how to fix it. (149-50) Considering Bolanle’s background and education, one may ask what she is doing in a home already filled with three women. This question is also central to Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. Ramatoulaye’s daughter, Daba, the advocate of egalitarian gender relation asks, how can a woman sap the happiness of another? (Ba 71) How can Bolanle, a university graduate, sap the happiness of the illiterate women who find succour under the centrifugal arm of Baba Segi? Bolanle, herself, considers her presence as an alien in that family but she decides to willingly accept the shame of living there so as to heal in anonymity as she has been wounded by her gullibility to fall into a cheap trap set for her at her teenage years which leaves her with the guilt of not worthy of a any man except Baba Segi. But doubly, the women consider her education a big threat to their ignorance and a sap to their joy. This explains why she is being treated with disdain and her books smeared with palm oil and hidden under the kitchen cupboard.

Against Shoneyin’s assertion in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, patriarchy does not promote polygyny as shown above. The women probably choose wrongfully to stay with Baba Segi as exemplified in the first wife, “[W]hen 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... But that was the path he chooses, and I accepted it.” (103)

A way of enjoying peace, love, and harmony in a polygamous setting is for the women involved to love and accept themselves. This is given clarity in Abubakar Gimba’s *Sacred Apple* where Zahra, though, caught in the web of polygyny, asks her co-wives to regards themselves as,

federation of states, the state being equal, with the federal government in full charge of all the strings that hold the unit together. The wives are the states, and the husband the central government, the big brother. The states have no business fighting themselves over each other’s status, except to ensure that the central government plays by the rules of the federation. (176)

Gimba is of the view that women in polygamous homes should accept themselves as this Zahra character. Instead of finding fault in men or other co-wives, peaceful co-existence can be achieved to give room for development.

Pornography of Violence

Pornography of violence is described by Fisho-Oridendi as an act of forcing women to unwillingly take part in various degrading sexual activities such as, for example, penetrative rape. (20) Pornography of violence or rape is said to be one of the most feared uncertainties with which girls and women grow in every nation and culture. Since it is one of the most frequently committed crimes of humanity in many societies today, Shoneyin frowns at it through the character of Bolanle, the protagonist. Raped at the age of 15 by one Thomas who offers to give her a ride, Bolanle is gullible for allowing herself to follow a total stranger to an unknown house after he promises her a ride to her home. This evil would have been averted if Bolanle had been cautious of trusting a stranger.

There is also pornography of violence in the character of Baba Segi when his wives refer to unpleasant way he has sex with them. Sadly, this is never mentioned to Baba Segi. Every wife nurtures this pain in secret. Bolanle says Baba Segi only comes to deposit his seed in her womb “[h]e doesn’t smile or tickle me. He doesn’t make jokes of my youth: he just rams me into the mattress”. (43) Thus, the activity is only one-sided. Iya Tope, the second wife, is also not immune from this ill. She encounters several days of sexual pummeling from Baba Segi as she confesses that when they were still two wives for their husband, Baba Segi had her thrice a week and “there were weeks I ached so much that I could hardly sit”, describing Baba Segi’s penis as hitting her: „gbam-gbam-gbam like a hammer” (132) as the cause of the ache. Shoneyin uses this to educate the readership that sexual violence is not only committed against women by criminals and rapists alone but also to a larger extent, by husbands, and there is always the inability of women to voice out their pains, which perpetually keeps them in agony without the husbands knowing.

Objectification of Women in Forced Marriages

Shoneyin attacks the idea of treating women as objects to be sold or acquired by any man who is willing to pay a certain amount that is put on her head.

This system, according to her, reduces the value of woman to a commodity bought. Shoneyin reveals the psychological effect this practice has on women through the character of Iya Tope. She says, “I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. May be something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose and legs”. (82) But, in truth, is this viewpoint correct?

It is generally believed that Bride price may not necessarily reduce the quality of a woman’s worth. It is, instead, a way of showing respect to the bride’s parents. Mutada Sylvester says unlike many Western societies where a form of dowry is the custom of the bride’s family paying the wedding expenses, in most African societies, the bride’s father requests the groom to pay dowry or brideprice prior to the marriage. This is usually a kind of compensation to the family. He further proves that the institution of bride-price does not diminish the status of the African woman, nor does it mean that African wives are regarded as little better than goods and chattels. It is rather, a cultural practice supported by valid social reasons. First, a man pays bride-price as token ability to be a husband, a provider to his life partner. Second, it establishes the respect in which the husband and his family hold the wife and her people. The bride’s parents believe that without bride-price, the groom will not respect their daughter or treat her in a marital respect appropriate for recognition with which her family had officially and ceremoniously handed her over. (6)

Shoneyin also depicts objectification of women through a new view in the character of Iya Segi. At the age of 23, Iya Segi discovers while walking by a road side that she is a lesbian as she is sexually aroused by a female tomato-seller by the road-shade. She says she cannot stop looking at her, “her filthy tongue, her short cropped hair, her bare feet – everything about her fascinated me. I was awash with lust”. (98) Not being able to control how she feels for the lady she says,

[s] weat was dripping from my neck like rain from the awning. I can’t explain why but I wanted her for myself. I wanted to build a house for her and keep the key between my breasts. I wanted to dress her in the finest aso oke so she could parade herself for my delight alone. I wanted to lock her between my thighs. (101)

This essay strengthens the view of feminist thinkers that strongly believe aspects of a woman having sexual feelings for another woman tilts towards lesbianism. Lesbianism, to these thinkers, is frowned at and consequently seen as one aspect of

radical feminism. Thus, in the same circumspection, if Baba Segi could forgive the women the evil they have done against him and still take them and their children back as his, then there will be no correction he would not have taken from the women, and therefore, not impossible for Shoneyin to avert aspects of radical feminism in her craft.

Conclusion

Previous feminist readings of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba segi's Wives* have espoused approaches or methods or models or aspects of radical feminism in freeing the woman from the clutches of patriarchy. This essay has argued that the success of the patriarchy over the African woman is as a result of this latter's fundamental error of (a seeming) confrontation and/or silence over what happens to womenfolk from ages. Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba segi's Wives* reveals that polygyny, pornography of violence, objectification of women, forced marriage, and disinheriting female children succeed in the society because the woman either keeps quiet over what happens to her or uses confrontational method in righting the wrong. Thus, brooding in silence and/or attempting remediation through confrontation are both fundamental errors. The essay argues that through New Feminism, a postfeminist ideology, the world can look forward to complementarity of sexes (i.e. between man and woman). It asks for the spirit of live-and-let-live. It has, therefore, been deduced in this essay that the African woman, like the Shoneyin's women, need to be both quick and intelligent in checking the excesses of patriarchy and not waiting to explore her feminine genius of sexuality and child bearing to fight her man in order to gain her freedom. This quick and intelligent check will eliminate superiority and give room for complementarity of both sexes in the society. The singular difference between previous and new reading of feminism is in demonstrable difference between elements of confrontation versus the path of peace, which exploits negotiation; symbiosis between the sexes. There is neither winner nor vanquished when issues drum up themselves for remediation. Couples see themselves as partners in progress. Once the path of confrontation is chosen, there might be viable answers to the drummed challenge(s) but it/they does/do not go further than a winner and a loser emerging at the expense of symbiosis. The posture of "live-and-let-live" has far greater advantages in living communities. These need to be exploited further for fuller integration.

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