



## Unveiling the Dark Underbelly of Polygamy in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Mbu Dora Nyuykighan

Department of African Literature and Civilisations, University of Yaounde I  
[mbudora@gmail.com](mailto:mbudora@gmail.com)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i1.2009>

**APA Citation:** Nyuykighan, A. D. (2025). Unveiling the Dark Underbelly of Polygamy in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7(2), 82-98.  
<http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i2.2009>

**Received:**  
12/01/2025

**Accepted:**  
25/02/2025

**Keywords:**  
Polygamy, Power dynamics, Infertility, Objectification, Commodification.

### Abstract

*Polygamous marriages in Africa have long been a subject of fascination and curiosity, often portrayed in popular culture as exotic and romanticized. However, beneath the surface lies a complex web of power dynamics, inequalities, and hidden struggles that have far-reaching and detrimental consequences for those involved in it. Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* exposes these hidden struggles and oppressive power dynamics within the polygamous household. The paper depicts the dark underbelly of polygamy in African marriages projecting its negative effects such as oppression, emotional and physical abuse, infertility, and many more. Through the qualitative research method, the paper adopts a feminist perspective to literary criticism concerning African Feminism. By unveiling the dark aspects of polygamy, the paper challenges romanticized notions of polygamy and emphasizes the need for a critical examination of polygamous marriage systems in Africa. It recommends that marriage for women should be a thing of choice as it does not guarantee social and psychological fulfilment. Thus, understanding the dark underbelly of polygamy would pave the way for dialogue and more equitable and inclusive relationship structures.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of polygamy, while still prevalent in certain cultural and religious contexts around the world, has long been an issue of fascination and curiosity subject to intense scrutiny and debates. Although it is often portrayed in popular culture as exotic and romanticized, however, beneath the surface lies a complex web of power dynamics, inequalities, and hidden struggles that can have far-reaching and detrimental consequences such as divorce for those involved. Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* offers thought-provoking explorations of the dark underbelly of polygamous marriages, while delving into the intricate layers of oppression, victimization, and emotional turmoil experienced by the characters within this system. By examining the forces at play in this narrative such as forced and coerced marriages, emotional and physical abuse, infidelity, infertility, reproductive coercion, and mental health impacts, we gain insights into the realities that often remain concealed behind the veneer of tradition and societal norms. Shoneyin in this novel unveils the deep-seated

rivalries, resentments and secrets that simmer beneath the surface of polygamous marriages and presents a compelling exploration of the far-reaching consequences that can arise from participating in such relationships.

Polygamy as an integral part of African tradition is highly reflected in the works of many African writers. This system of marriage is portrayed in both pleasant and unpalatable aura for African women. In the African traditional setting, polygamy in some instances establishes a mutual bond among co-wives who prioritize peaceful co-existence within the family over parochial and selfish acrimony which endangers the well-being of the family. Some African male writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *Weep not Child* and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, present cordiality reminiscent of a polygamous household in a traditional African society. Though this kind of mutual cooperation among co-wives is rare nowadays, it however, does exist and it may be erroneous not to acknowledge the positive impact of polygamy. However, most African female writers like Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter*, Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, and a host of others, out rightly reiterate the negative impact of polygamy in their works as it affects marriages in African societies.

Marriage as a universal phenomenon cuts across races of all ages and cultures despite the diversity of customs, forms and functions. For a typical African, marriage is defined based on its intended purposes such as procreation, family lineage, and building of the society. In this case, it is not on how it is contracted, or on how many women are involved, but more on how the union is fulfilling its role as the main focus of the continuation of the life of the community. Traditionally, many African societies allowed a man to have more than one wife thus giving him the avenue to engage in a polygamous marriage which Jonas Obongye (2012) explains thus:

From the early years, polygamy existed throughout Africa as an integral feature of family life, with culture or religion or both as its basis ... it is widely believed that polygamy ensures the stability and continuity of the family and clan [and that] polygamy provides economic and social security for women ... polygamy is considered to be the most efficient means of producing a large family in a given time period [and] in Africa, a large family is an economic asset. (143)

To him, traditional African societies valued polygamy because of the economic and social security attached to it. However, most of the contemporary young African men are increasingly choosing their own spouses thus undermining the place of polygamy and its associated problems in the larger society.

Marriage either in one form or another has childbearing as a major binding force that seals the union. Infertility, in this case, becomes a serious issue as sterility is seldom attributed to the man and in most societies it was and still is a major cause of divorce. Most African men go into polygamy as a result of infertility since children serve as a binding force in most African marriages. Infertility in most African societies is still largely viewed as a female problem; a construction that is deeply rooted in most African cultural practices and beliefs. The desire for many children is regarded as having a compelling social force so much so that women without children are/were pitied, feared, hated, sometimes tagged as witches and even ostracized from society. According to Feldman-Savelsberg “fertility and infertility are at the centre of ritual activities that involve both men and women and ultimately the king. However, when it fails, women assume the bulk of the responsibility as her womb “fails” to bring forth a child” (qtd in Kimani and Olenja,2001:202). This is because sometimes society conditions women to believe that they are to blame as men similarly tend to relegate the problem of infertility to women and only in very rare cases do they attribute it to men. Infertility therefore becomes a yardstick for polygamous marriages in most African societies.

In order to understand the concept of polygamy from an African woman’s perspective, Embry et al., (1998) present a tale of a woman who grew up in a polygamous household. To her, “it was the only thing that she knew. Her parents had lived in polygamy and Father’s parents had lived in polygamy” (100). In many cases, people born and bred in a polygamous culture tend to accept it as the norm. Therefore, it is gainsaying that polygamy takes people’s understanding and way of life into consideration. However, polygamous cultures have a history of male dominance and female oppression. The reason Bronwyn (2018) quotes Jonas saying:

The practice of polygamy undermines the self-worth of women ... [because] usually, wives have no legal power or capacity to prevent their husbands from taking a second wife ... in addition polygamy objectifies women [and] contravenes a woman’s right to equality with men ... [who can use] polygamy ... as a tool ... to whip women into toeing their line by threatening their wives that they will marry another wife [which can have] serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependents (145-146).

From the above, one could deduce that polygamy is oppressive since women have no say when it comes to a man bringing in a second wife and many more as the case may be. Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* portrays Baba Segi as the male-dominant patriarch whose choices should not be questioned. After his first marriage to Iya Segi which was arranged by his mother, Baba Segi boasts: “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, the way a thirsty child sets his eyes on a cup spilling from a spout” (201).

From Baba Segi’s point of view, one notices that polygamy dehumanizes women in many ways and even destroys their autonomy as well as human relationships. In this case, bonding among the female gender becomes almost impossible among co-wives in a polygamous marriage as portrayed in this text. Baba Segi’s three wives only come together to conspire against Bolanle, the educated fourth wife because they see her as a threat to them. In some homes, however, women no longer see themselves as enemies or competitors; it is the man who sometimes suffers the consequences of having multiple wives. Baba Segi only realises that he has been living in a world of his own in his very household after the doctor’s revelation of his impotency and his wives confirmation that he is not the biological father of their children. Women in this sense see themselves as victims of societal structures; a product of greed on the part of the man, and a ploy by the man to destabilize their bond.

## **2. Critical reviews and theoretical framework**

A lot of literature abounds around this subject matter and many writers across the board especially female writers have attempted to pen down the effects of polygamy by exposing the sufferings of women involved in such marriages and unhealthy relationships. Most African works that revolve around this subject, frown at polygamy but encourage women’s creativity and empowerment initiatives. Some examples of literary works on the effects of polygamy are: Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, *Scarlet Song*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ousmane Sembene’s *Xala*, Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Lazarus Miti’s *The Prodigal Husband*, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*. These and a host of others show that polygamy is a continual source of female suffering and oppression in Africa. According to Akujobi Remi (2019), these texts as a result of their apparent rejection of polygamy, “have been proclaimed powerful feminist articulations of the African woman’s quest for freedom”(128). Debates on this issue of polygamy in African literature are numerous and varied but our major focus here is looking beyond the female plight and to show how polygamy also affects men negatively. In some cases, the man becomes the victim and a toy in the hands of his wives whose bonding and ploys might rather be harmful to the man in question. This is the scenario Baba Segi finds himself in. His infertile condition renders him helpless at the revelation of his plight and he is forced to accept the children gotten by his three wives from other men as his own children, for fear of societal stigmatization.

While considering marriage as a bedrock for procreation in Africa, Emelone (2020:43), points out the African notion that “a woman’s position in her matrimonial home is oftentimes

determined by her ability to procreate". While Laureta Ngcobo (2007), also reiterates the above notion stating that,

Marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group" (533).

This is the case with Baba Segi's wives whose engagement in extra marital affairs is as a result of their desire for children and the preservation of the polygamous household, which for them is "the only haven in a hopeless world" (Moola F. 2017: 84-85).

Houndjo and Akinola (2018:149) focus on the "ideology of womanism and radical feminism", so as to unfold some causes of ideological ambiguities and conflict of ideology in the representations of women in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Asare Adei's *A Beautiful Daughter*. From their point of view, women in their course for conserving their interests and secrets see their fellow woman as a threat. This is the case of Iya Segi who mobilizes the second and third wives of Baba Segi against Bolanle. In the words of Iya Segi, "That Bolanle is a trouble-maker. She will destroy our home. She will expose our private parts to the wind. She will reveal our secret. She will bring woe" (p.55). Her fear is that their secrets will be revealed if their husband takes her to the hospital for a medical check up to ascertain the cause of her inability to conceive and give birth like them. Because of this fear, Iya Segi and Iya Femi resort to psychological torture and oppression of Bolanle.

Emphasizing on Shoneyin's portrayal of the dilemma African women face in polygamous marriages besides the challenges of polygamy and the pains of infertility, Gift, Baloyi (2019) questions the idea of giving birth as a yard stick for measuring the worth of women which Widge A. (2002), as cited by Segalo P. (2013:4) argues that, "[B]ecause she is defined by her fertility, it can be assumed that a woman internalizes the motherhood role to the extent that if she is infertile or childless, she feels worthless". These arguments by Baloyi and Widge illustrate the challenges and pains Bolanle goes through in the novel just like other women in African societies who are unable to conceive and bear children.

The Theoretical framework for this paper is hinged on African feminism and various critical perspectives that portray the plight of the womenfolk in a patriarchal dominated society. Shoneyin in her novel, interrogates the patriarchal structures in her society in which the female body is subordinated and exploited to maintain male dominance, and at the same time exhibits politics of resisting these oppressive structures. Steady (1987:5), defines African Feminism as "a movement which combines racial, sexual, class and cultural dimensions of oppression to

produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which African women are viewed first and foremost as human rather than sexual beings”. African feminists believe that African men and women could have mutually transformative and progressive relationships in a complementary fashion that can ultimately achieve an egalitarian sphere. Men are, therefore, not discarded from African feminists' pursuit of equality, for African women cannot imagine a life without their menfolk. For African women, the male is not the other. Each gender constitutes the “critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own” (Steady 1987:8).

Within the framework of African Feminism, wife-hood and motherhood are highly esteemed by the African culture. This point is reiterated by Acholonu (1995) in her concept of “Motherism” in which she regards motherhood as the true expression of Africaness rather than an obstacle to women’s progress. It is an expression of mother earth which advocates for a complementarity between men and women for a balanced ecosystem. This is because feminists, share a belief that patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and hence to maintain male dominance in all aspects of life (Tyson Lois, 2006: 91-92). By appealing to men’s commonality and solidarity, African feminists seek to enlighten men about the discrimination which women have experienced due to the patriarchal structures of their societies as well as the oppressive gender practices of individual men.

Stiwanism as propounded by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) hinges on the process of social transformation in which men and women work in complementarity to have a positive transformation of the woman and the society at large. Garuba (2021:110), resonates Molaria’s assertion that: “Stiwa means social transformations including Women in Africa!... The transformation of the African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest”. In this light, Ogundipe-Leslie believes that men are not women’s enemies but “co-partners” with whom women must work in order to empower themselves and contribute to social transformation and healing. This implies that marriage and family are values appreciated because it is in these contexts that the man and woman relationship takes its roots.

Controlling and enslaving the female body and converting it to a commodity used for sexual and reproduction purposes is, in fact, a central preoccupation for African feminists. Shoneyin is one of the contemporary African feminist writers preoccupied with the female body as a violated entity. She sees the female body not as a symbol of sexual exploitation and pummeling, but rather as a home to the individual ‘self’. Shoneyin and other feminist writers express their sympathy for the commodification of the female body and the physical and

psychological pains resulting from possessing and controlling it. In the course of their emancipation process, women characters in the novel utilize their bodies and exhibit a capability of resisting gender oppression. The novel however recognizes that at different points in women's lives, alternative identities other than being simply wives or mothers might be more advantageous. Yet, this is not easy for women to attain where patriarchal societies insist on the so-called 'fundamental goals of women's existence' such as sex and reproduction.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) from her feminist stance believes that, although family, marriage, and motherhood are African values, they should not prevent women from being ambitious to pursue their dreams or job career, and that unmarried women should not be seen as failures in the African society. This is true for marriage does not guarantee happiness and social security for the African woman. To her, "feminism should negotiate inclusiveness of women in a male dominated milieu" (6). This is because, women and men have the potential to be leaders as such, there is no reason for the woman to occupy the subordinate position. This argument is perceived from her book titled *We Should All Be Feminists* where she posits that leading is not only for men and with the world progressing, "the person more qualified to lead is not the physically stronger person. It is the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more creative, and the more innovative" (qtd in Ngouozeu, 2023:9). By and large, Adichie recommends a flexible and fairer society which is interested in what women can offer for the social transformation of self and society.

From the above perspectives, it is evident that African feminism pays attention to the woman's empowerment and development beyond harmful practices of patriarchy in a society where negotiation, complementarity and inclusiveness should prevail. Capo-Chichi *et al* (2016), on women's empowerment uphold that,

"[...] women as wives and mothers can obtain freedom through solidarity, union and sisterhood if they put aside their differences and join hands together so as to share experiences, design a common objective, and harness their female power to end patriarchal violence, brutality and oppression"(1155).

From a reading of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, womanism obviously promotes mutual understanding and dialogue between men and women. The cordial understanding between Baba Segi's wives and Baba Segi in settling their problems makes the women to be more assertive and empowered in their marital home and society. Womanism and male tradition which Nubukpo K. (1995) writes about, advocates complementarity and mutual understanding which to him dialogue is central in solving family problems. "Listen, why don't you and I sit down and talk and get organized like two decent human beings, so that we can keep your best dogs and my best cars"(qtd in Houndjo and Akinola, 2018:154). This is the path

adopted by Baba Segi and his wives at then end to remain united as to preserve their secrets and their household and to prevent it from shame and mockery as Iya Segi concludes “[...], let us not allow the world to see our shame. Let us keep our secrets from those who may seek to mock us”(242).

### **3. Unveiling the elements of the dark underbelly of polygamy in the text**

#### **3.1. Power Dynamics**

Most African societies have conditioned respect and dignity for women only if they are married. What this means is that outside the institution of marriage, society has a way of looking down on single women. However, it is regrettable to note that within the marriage itself, that respect is actually conditional since it is tagged with childbirth. In the Yoruba society, a woman who has given birth to children earns the title “Iya” which symbolizes “mother of children”. In Shoneyin’s novel, Baba Segi’s first three wives are addressed after their children’s names (Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi) while Bolanle is the only one who is addressed by her name. According to Baloyi, “the use of the term Iya has power dynamics in the lives of women. It contributes in the process of dis-empowering and undermining women and the essence of their being human with full rights and dignity” (7). This therefore indicates that if a woman cannot bear children in the African society, ‘that woman ceases to exist’ in that part of the society for she is considered as ‘a nobody’ and will therefore not have a voice in any gathering most especially female gatherings.

Marriage in most African societies is one of those institutions that imposes customs and norms that enslave women. By virtue of our gender, men seem to have control over women whether married or not. The African society by nature is patriarchal as such, men regard women as occupying secondary positions notwithstanding their education, cultural affiliation, class and religion. Gender is therefore one of the most significant factors in shaping power dynamics in households. The family is structured in such a way that power is either centralized or decentralized depending on space, time and place. Power could reside with the husband or wife. Where power resides with the men, it is expected that a form of control over the family is exerted and submission to the power which tradition and culture imposed on man is superimposed. Baba Segi wields power within his polygamous household, exploiting his position as the patriarch to satisfy his desires and maintain a firm control. He uses his authority to dictate the lives of his wives, imposing strict rules and demanding unquestioning obedience.

For a polygamist like Baba Segi, having four wives and seven children points to the fact that he is prosperous, and successful. It is also a validation of his manhood and authority. Baba Segi’s manipulation of power creates an environment where his wives are left vulnerable



and emotionally dependent on him, fostering a dynamic of victimization. Marxists see this economic inequality as the cause of women's dehumanization and oppression in the society and the family. This is because Baba Segi's wives all depend upon him for survival. Seldon and Widdowson (1993), in the representation of women in fiction opine that the status quo is maintained because:

Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male, and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly in civil and domestic life to constrain women (214).

Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, portrays the misuse and abuse of patriarchal power which sometimes results to domestic violence. Baba Segi without a second thought, is quick to lay his hands upon Bolanle the love of his life after a charm conspiracy against her by her co-wives. "In a flash, Baba Segi leapt in front of Bolanle and gripped her throat with both hands. He squeezed hard and shook her, pressing his thumbs on her windpipe. Who are you asking questions? Do I look like a fool?"(58). This is a clear demonstration of patriarchal power dynamics as Baba Segi would not allow his wife to express herself and equally uses his masculine prowess against the very woman he married out of love unlike the others.

From the cultural context of African traditional marriage, a woman is regarded as a property of her husband who can do whatever pleases him with her, including returning her to her parents should she be found wanting. This way of understanding is quite misleading, as it paints women as subordinates and commodities of men. Baba Segi's first wife came in through an arranged marriage by his mother. Subsequently, he married his second wife "in form of a peace offering from a desperate farmer and the third offered herself to him with humility" except Bolanle whom he sought after (201). This way of marriage puts the women at the mercy of their husbands who could decide to throw them out whenever he wishes. Iya Tope describes herself in the following terms:

I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms, two legs. Without fanfare or elaborate farewells, I packed my bags. . . I should have known something unusual would happen that year (82).

The marriage between Iya Tope and Baba Segi is a mere recompense for a poor harvest. Iya Tope's father gives his daughter away in marriage for his own personal reasons. The bride's consent is never sought and she has to succumb to what the patriarchal system has put in place for her. Women are not seen as "human beings with a voice and choice but as commodities owned by the male world either as brides to yield money for the family in form of bride wealth;

or as child bearing commodities for the male world and as a means of satisfying male sexual urge” (Udogu, 2019:13).

Another bedrock of women dis-empowerment is evidenced from the patriarchal power control of the female psyche through the female body which is often projected as an avenue for female subordination. In this case, man’s domination over woman is based on the primacy of the male sex. To Parsons M. (2011), “man by nature of his sex is considered superior to the woman, as such the woman is expected to assume an auxiliary role in conformity with the inferiority of her body” (qtd in Baloyi, 2019:1) Women’s sexuality is viewed with a patriarchal prejudice depicting men as the agents and women as the objects in marriage. Baba Segi exercises his masculine power and control over his wife through his sexual relationship with his wives. According to Iya Femi “My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us” (215). Baba Segi and his mother’s desire for children/grandchildren accounts for his continuous sexual urge. Tunde calls himself a hedonist as he lives for worldly pleasures. He prefers to die enjoying the worldly pleasures around him as Bolanle tells us “He [Tunde] says he wants to die both under and inside a woman who is not his wife” (176). Tunde is only interested in sensual pleasures in so far as that makes him happy. Bolanle lost her virginity to Segun through rape leaving her with the trauma of an excruciating pain for fear of losing her life “Then I felt pain in my groin. There was wetness between my thighs. I burst into tears. What had he done to me?” (115). While Baba Segi on his part spends his time pummeling his wives on daily routines to satisfy his sensual pleasures and make more children by way of defining his superiority and total control over his wives, Iya Segi sees that as foolishness. To her,

Men are nothing. They are fools. The penis between their legs is all they are useful for (97)... My husband only thinks he controls the household and I let him believe 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 (104).

Ironically, it all turns out at the end that Baba Segi had no control over his household as the secrets of the household were in the palms of Iya Segi and her co-wives. This leads us to the title of the novel as Iya Segi advises her co-wives after the revelations of their secret lives and extra-marital affairs which could lead to public disgrace, disrespect and stigmatization. To her, “Let us keep our secrets from those who may seek to mock us”(242). This act by Iya Segi conforms with Nubukpo’s view of womanism whose obvious agenda promotes mutual understanding and dialogue between men and women.

“Women oppressionism” as referred to in this paper, is one of the avenues of power dynamics where women in polygamous marriages demonstrate their prowess against their fellow women. The older ones seem to dictate the type of lives which the younger ones should lead. Just like Aunty Nabou in Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Maami Broni in Darko’s *Faceless* and Tambu’s mother in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, these women in different ways, make life experiences bitter for their fellow women. Anne Tanyi-Tang in *Eneta vs Elimo* (2007), reiterates this form of oppression stating that, “women pose the greatest obstacles to the lives of their fellow women especially when they find themselves in positions of power” (qtd in Mbu & Oluwakemi, 2019:86). Iya Segi is portrayed as a domineering and oppressive character whom Emelone (2020:47) describes as “representing those African women who make life unbearable for their fellow women in their matrimonial homes”. This is because Iya Segi takes advantage of her financial stability and her position as the first wife to dictate to her co-wives and even manipulate their husband. But as soon as Bolanle the graduate joins the family, she feels that her position is under a threat. She becomes afraid and uncomfortable and fights consistently to have the new wife out of the way.

Bolanle is called names such as “witch”, “barren”, “destroyer of homes” (60) and so on by her co-wives. Iya Femi backs Iya Segi’s oppressive tendencies to throw out Bolanle as she retorts: “If this woman is allowed to sleep in this house, I will sleep outside with my sons. I will hold a night vigil and pray her out” (60). This is barely few days after Bolanle’s arrival into Baba Segi’s house. Iya Femi however continues to taunt Bolanle ensuring that she is traumatized and frustrated. “How lucky you are that Iya Segi did not decapitate you and pound your head in the mortar! You are indeed an evil spirit. Get thee behind us, Satan! Leave our home!” (162). These are various forms of oppression and torture that Bolanle undergo in the hands of her co-wives. According to Houndjo and Akinola, “woman is the cause of oppression or injustice to her fellow women in contemporary African patriarchal societies” (2018:153) as evidenced from the attitude of Baba Segi’s wives towards Bolanle.

### **3.2. The dilemma of infertility**

One of the central conflicts in the novel revolves around the dilemma of infertility which has multiple definitions that makes it difficult to stick just to one common approach. Scientifically, infertility is a disorder of the reproductive system that affects the body’s ability to perform the basic function of impregnation and/or conceiving children. However, Dicken’s article titled “Reproduction in Law and Medical Consent”, provides an often quoted summary of some of the alternative definitions of infertility as follows:

Infertility includes in-fecundity, meaning inability to conceive or impregnate, and pregnancy wastage, meaning failure to carry a pregnancy to term through spontaneous abortion and stillbirth; Infertility includes primary infertility, where a couple has never achieved conception, and secondary infertility, where at least one conception has occurred but the couple is currently unable to achieve pregnancy (1985: 255).

Douglas (1991:105) on her part, reiterates the above definition but lays emphasis on the length of time that a person is unable to conceive. According to her, “A failure to conceive within a year may therefore indicate a potential problem and we shall take infertility to mean this”. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization defines infertility as “a failure to conceive following 24 months of normally frequent unprotected sexual intercourse”(WHO, 2020). These various definitions indicate that infertility is not objectively determined since these occurrences affect both men and women but in most cases, the blame is highly attributed to women. Although it has been scientifically proven that male and female factors are implicated in the infertility problem, this situation when it occurs within and outside matrimony is usually attributed to and blamed on women in most African societies. Also, Osato Giwa-Osagie (2002:51) opines that, “the rotation of mating dates between wives in a polygamous marriage easily leads to intercourse at non-fertile times as well as infrequent individual female exposure to sexual intercourse which may be a cause of infertility”. These varied opinions and findings all transcend to the fact that infertility is both a male and female problem that should be given proper attention instead of apportioning blames only to the female folk.

Responsibility for a childless marriage in Africa is often imputed to the wife and mainly to her alone. Baba Segi’s desperation for male heirs is intensified by the stigma surrounding infertility. In his society, the inability to conceive a child, particularly a male child, can lead to social ostracization and loss of status. Baba Segi’s pursuit of multiple wives is, in part, driven by the hope of overcoming potential infertility issues by diversifying his chances of having sons and pleasing his mother. The fear of being labelled as “less of a man” propels him to seek validation through his wives’ ability to bear children, most especially sons. The novel brings to light the perception of African men regarding infertility as solely the problem of women. By performing either his manly or marital duties to his wife/wives, the man believes he is doing his “best” and the area of pregnancy and childbirth are the sole responsibility of the woman. The reason Bolanle is accused of being “barren” whereas Baba Segi is ironically the one who has zero chances of impregnating a woman according to the doctor’s revelations stating that, “as far as he (Baba Segi) is concerned, it is his wife who’s got serious problems” (194). The doctor goes ahead to confirm that, “It would have been a different matter if he had a low sperm count, but there’s nothing! Not a solitary sperm swimming around”(194). This indicates how

bad Baba Segi's situation is despite his eagerness to prove his manhood and please his sick mother who is anxious to see her grandchildren before her demise as he attests that, "he had been eager for his sick mother to see the fruit of his loins but his wife's menstruation persisted"(3). This accounts for his frequent visits to the herbalists and finally the medical doctor in search of a solution for his supposedly "barren" wives.

One of Iya Segi's major psychological struggles is her inability to conceive and bear children with Baba Segi. In a society that places immense importance on male heirs, her infertility becomes a source of shame and vulnerability. Although Iya Segi endures the stigma associated with her childlessness, facing ridicule and questioning from both her husband and society, her desire for motherhood and the societal pressure to bear children weigh heavily on her throughout the story. This situation causes her anxiety, pain and frustration and for fear of stigmatization, Iya Segi as well as her two co-wives engage in extramarital affairs to be able to bear children and secure their marriage. The African girl child is conditioned right from childhood to believe that motherhood is supreme and that no matter how successful she becomes, her life is not complete without a husband and children. Marriage here becomes a stepping stone to motherhood. The mere fact that she is married is not enough if she cannot give birth to children, preferably a male child. Driven by anxiety, fear of stigmatization, and the desire to remain in her marital home, Iya Segi goes out of her way to have children with Taju, Baba Segi's driver. In her own parlance, she says:

I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itch to be suckled. My husband and I tried everything. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruitful. Then I had an idea. It was a sinful idea but I knew it would bring my sadness to an end. 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).

Women in this context are portrayed as child bearers and homekeepers. To Baba Segi who is a representation of African society, a woman's place is in the bedroom and the kitchen. Respect is accorded to African women who can marry and bear children. It is only when a child is born, a male child for that matter, that a woman is fully respected in her matrimonial home. Laureta Ngcobo (2007:533) asserts that "marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group". Barren women's voices are silenced as Baba Segi retorts and spites Bolanle over her inability to give birth.

Listen to yourself! He shouted. 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 everything! Offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a barren maggot? (43).

It is therefore, a frightening and unpleasant experience for a childless married woman in Africa. She is branded as 'barren' even when her husband is the infertile one. Despite her unfortunate situation, Bolanle is ready to seek medical attention if that would give her inner peace as well as satisfy her husband's curiosity and anxiety. Baba Segi thinks he is the "real man" while Bolanle is "an infertile soil" that could not accept and grow his seeds. To him:

Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you, as well, are saddened by it. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them conmen and rubbished their powers... I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to the hospital to talk to a doctor (14).

Baba Segi's curiosity, and persistence led to his discovery of the secret lives of his wives from which the title of the novel is derived. The pain and trauma of his discovery made Baba Segi advise his eldest son Akin on the path to a happy married life. "When the time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone. And when she causes you pain, as all women do, remember your pain should come from one source alone... A man must always be prepared"(238). Shoneyin draws the curtain on her novel with these words of wisdom projecting her clear stand against polygamy. Through her female protagonist, Shoneyin challenges the notion that marriage and procreation should neither be burdens on women only nor serve as yardsticks for their happiness and self-fulfillment. Although Bolanle seeks to have her own child, satisfying her anxieties and equally saving her from the painful nights of sexual pummeling from Baba Segi, she however realizes that living in her husband's house has been "a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation"(244). Ultimately, Bolanle decides to quit the marriage and brace herself up to face and conquer the realities of her society. This brings to bear the point that marriage and motherhood do not always guarantee happiness and social security.

Education, however, becomes one of the powerful tools in the hands of women to liberate themselves from the shackles of polygamy. To Chukwuma (2006:10), education is "a mighty step forward for women in various nations of Africa today". This is because most women who can break free from marital/polygamous bondage are educated women. Education coupled with vigilance as Shoneyin portrays in her novel, are the means through which female liberation is achieved. Bolanle is given fair treatment because of her level of education and her exposure to a broader worldview. Florence Ndiyah (2021:13), opines that "although Bolanle's

education is empowering, it is also a stressor in an environment where it is undervalued". Education is one powerful resource that empowers Bolanle to admit her time is up in Baba Segi's household as she declares at the end of the novel "I am back now and the world is spread before me like an egg cracked open" (245). Shoneyin in her novel, highlights the transformative power of self-awareness and recognition, illustrating that even in the face of overwhelming odds, the human spirit has the capacity to rise above, break free, and forge a new path towards liberation and self-discovery.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* presents Baba Segi as a deluded patriarch whose actions and beliefs perpetuate victimization within his polygamous household. Through his character, the novel prompts important questions about power dynamics, infertility, oppression and societal norms. It serves as a reminder of the intricacies and repercussions of polygamy further highlighting marriage, and the inability to procreate as major sources of distress for both men and especially women in a patriarchal society. Through a critical examination of these concepts, Shoneyin strives to build a more equitable society that empowers family structures to prioritize the well-being and agency of all individuals involved. Women should be afforded the freedom to make independent choices regarding marriage, recognizing that marriage does not always guarantee both social and psychological healing and liberation. Ultimately, Shoneyin advocates for a universal education for women, coupled with vigilance, as foundation pillars through which female liberation can be achieved. Women should be encouraged to cooperate in the fight against marital disharmony and deprivation as she firmly rejects the notion of polygamy.

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