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Gender stereotypes in Lola Shoneyin's the secret lives of baba Segi's wives

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Abstract

This research focuses on gender stereotypes in selected African literary text. The way in which some African writers view gender inequalities and stereotypes in their characters is explored. We will also be able to see who is involved and affected by these gender inequalities and how. What determines beliefs about the ability and appropriate role of women? An overwhelming majority of men and women born early in the 20th century thought women should not work; a majority now believes that work is appropriate for both genders. Betty Friedan (1963) postulated that beliefs about gender were formed by consumer goods producers, but a simple model suggests that such firms would only have the incentive to supply error, when mass persuasion is cheap, when their products complement women's time in the household, and when individual producers have significant market power (1). Such conditions seem unlikely to be universal, or even common, but gender stereotypes have a long history.

To explain that history, we turn to a second model where parents perpetuate beliefs out of a desire to encourage the production of grandchildren. Undersupply of female education will encourage daughters' fertility, directly by reducing the opportunity cost of their time and indirectly by leading daughters to believe that they are less capable. Children will be particularly susceptible to persuasion if they overestimate their parents' altruism toward themselves. The supply of persuasion will diminish if women work before childbearing, which may explain why gender-related beliefs changed radically among generations born in the 1940s.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes; Polygamy; Nigerian literature; Women's empowerment; Social norms; Cultural critique**.**

1. Introduction

What determines beliefs about the ability and appropriate role of women? In the early 20th century, the prevailing view was that women should not work, a sentiment shared by the majority of men and women of that era. In contrast, contemporary society largely agrees that employment is suitable for both genders (2). In the 21st century, Africa has emerged as a hub for some of the most compelling literary works, many of which have been authored by women. A

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common thread among these female authors is their focus on the suffering inflicted upon the bodies of African women by societal norms and practices (3,4).

The study of gender has become a major focus of research in social psychology and in the world of literature in particular. Among early contributors to this study, (5) formulated social role theory to explain the behavior of women and men as well as the stereotypes, attitudes, and ideologies that are relevant to sex and gender. Enhanced by several extensions over the intervening years, this theory became a pre-eminent theory of gender in social psychology (6). In recent decades, social psychologists have developed numerous approaches to understanding gender, encompassing theories such as stereotype threat, status, backlash, lack of fit to occupational roles, social identity, and categorization (7,6).

The contemporary interest of gender reflects its centrality in the understanding of African literature and world literature in general. Gender remains a pivotal force in global politics and economics, evident in the ongoing efforts of women to achieve equality in political and economic institutions and the declining birthrates in many nations as women prioritize careers over large families. Additionally, traditional gender categories are being challenged as societies increasingly recognize a spectrum of gender and sexual identities. Gender stereotypes continue to shape daily life, often intersecting with other social roles. Occupational roles, in particular, may align more or less with gender roles. Eagly and Karau (2002) extended social role theory to argue that female gender stereotypes, characterized by communal traits, generally conflict with leadership roles, which are often associated with agentic traits (8). This discrepancy leads to discrimination against women in leadership positions, as they are perceived as lacking the necessary agentic qualities (8).

Manzi (9) discusses whether similar discriminatory processes affect men seeking roles with communal demands. Block et al. (10) address men's underrepresentation in healthcare, early education, and domestic (HEED) roles, attributing this to agentic values emphasizing status, competition, and wealth, which deter men from caregiving careers. However, Van Grootel et al. (11) found that men tend to underestimate other men's approval of communal traits. Olsson and Martiny (12) suggest that exposure to counter-stereotypical role models can encourage counter-stereotypical aspirations, particularly among girls and women.

Leadership is significantly influenced by gender, with culturally masculine definitions of leadership disadvantaging women. Vial and Napier (13) demonstrate that agentic traits are seen as more essential than communal traits for successful leaders, reinforcing women's disadvantage. Player et al. (14) show that male leadership candidates are valued more for their potential, while female candidates are judged more on past performance, reflecting the stereotype of women's lower agency.

Increasing gender diversity in organizations is crucial for gender equality advocates. However, merely adding women to organizations does not automatically lead to gains for other women. Sterk et al. (15) argue that some senior women may accept negative stereotypes about women's leadership capacities and distance themselves from junior women, acting as "queen bees." Van Dijk and Van Engen (16) explain that even in gender-diverse workgroups, self-reinforcing gender role expectations can perpetuate traditional practices.

In Nigeria, improving women's conditions remains challenging due to persistent socio-cultural, political, religious, and economic structures that oppress women. Nigerian women must adopt new strategies to overcome these patriarchal barriers to self-actualization and development.

Gender roles are defined as "socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behavior and emotions of men and women" (17). Many theorists, including Buss (18), Shields (19), Chodorow (20), Bem (21,22), and Eagly (5), believe that perceived gender roles form the basis for gender identity development. As Eagly suggests, gender roles are closely linked with gender stereotypes, which are "overgeneralized beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social categories" (17).

For instance, men are often perceived as aggressive and competitive, while women are viewed as passive and cooperative. Traditionally, men have been seen as financial providers and women as caretakers. Physical characteristics and occupations have also been judged as either fitting or conflicting with masculine or feminine roles (17). These traditional gender stereotypes are predominantly reflective of the dominant (white, middle-class) culture. Landrine (23) argues that while race and social class may not be explicitly mentioned when discussing gender stereotypes, assumptions about these categories are typically made. Her research indicates that specifying race and social class reveals different gender stereotypes (23).

Gender roles and stereotypes influence couple and family interactions. For example, the division of household labor often follows gender lines. Historically, white women in heterosexual couples stayed at home and handled most domestic tasks, while their male partners worked outside to provide income. Despite women's increased workforce participation over the past three decades, they still perform the majority of household labor. Kurdek (24) studied white heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples without children and found that heterosexual and gay couples were more likely than lesbian couples to allocate household labor so that one partner did most of the work. Lesbian couples were more likely to share domestic tasks or alternate them (24).

Gender roles tend to become more differentiated when men and women become parents, with women generally providing more direct child care and spending more time with their children. This includes managing the mental workload of gathering and processing information about infant care, delegating related tasks, and worrying about infant well-being (25). The unequal division of household labor and childcare is believed to contribute to lower marital satisfaction among women (25).

Gender roles and stereotypes impact men and women in other ways, particularly in how well they conform to traditional stereotypes. Pleck (26) introduced the concept of masculine gender role strain, asserting that boys and men are pressured to meet certain masculine standards. Those who do not often experience low self-worth (26,24). Men who undergo traumatic socialization practices, such as violent rites of passage, may suffer long-term psychological or emotional consequences. Even those who meet these standards may face constraints on acceptable parenting roles (26,24). Lazur and Majors (1995) argue that gender role strain is particularly pronounced among men of color, who must balance dominant and cultural standards of masculinity while overcoming prejudice and other obstacles (27).

Gender stereotypes can also affect performance. Stereotype threat is the awareness of being judged by or fulfilling negative stereotypes about one's gender or ethnic group (28). Research shows that stereotype threat can hinder performance by increasing anxiety. For example, Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (29) found that women performed worse than men on a math test when they were led to believe it would reveal gender differences. However, women and men performed equally when told the test would not produce gender differences, indicating that negative stereotypes can detrimentally affect performance (29).

Gender stereotypes are broad generalizations about men and women that tend to be widely agreed upon. According to social role theory, these stereotypes stem from the unequal distribution of men and women into different social roles at home and work (5,30,31). Historically, women have handled most routine domestic work and caregiving, while men have occupied competitive, things-oriented occupations. This division leads to stereotypical conceptions of gender roles (32,33).

Men are generally seen as more agentic, characterized by taking charge and being in control, while women are seen as more communal, attuned to others and building relationships. These concepts, introduced by Bakan (34), have been central to understanding human behavior and have consistently been the focus of research on gender stereotypes (35,36,37,38,39,40).

Stereotypes can serve an adaptive function by allowing people to categorize and simplify their observations and make predictions about others (41,38). However, stereotypes can also lead to faulty assessments based on generalizations about a group that do not align with an individual's unique qualities. These incorrect assessments can influence expectations about performance and bias decisions that affect opportunities and work outcomes for both men and women (42,43,44). Gender stereotypes are particularly influential because gender is a highly noticeable and memorable aspect of a person, making it a common cue for stereotypic thinking (45).

Gender stereotypes are used not only to characterize others but also to characterize oneself (46). The process of self-stereotyping can shape people’s identities in stereotype-consistent ways. Stereotyped characteristics can become internalized and form part of a person’s gender identity, a crucial aspect of the self-concept (47,48). Young boys and girls learn about gender stereotypes from their immediate environment and the media, and they adopt behaviors deemed appropriate for their gender (49). These socialization experiences continue to exert influence later in life, and research shows that men’s and women’s self-characterizations differ in stereotype-consistent ways (46,37).

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study undertakes a critical critique of Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* from feminist standpoint in order to:

- Reveal the perception of women in female-authored novels.
- Investigate gender stereotypes in Lola Sholeyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives.*
- Explore the thematic thrusts in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives.*
- Give readers a view about gender roles ascribe to male and female socially and culturally.
- What is the current state of gender stereotypes about men and women in Nigeria?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The significant of this research exposes the nature of gender stereotypes. There are many differences between men and women. To some extent, these are captured in the stereotypical images of these groups. Stereotypes about the way men and women think and behave are widely shared. This study will educate man and woman, husband and wife/wives, male and female, boy and girl, literates and illiterates about gender role. This study also has many thematic thrust which are reflected from the society by Lola Shoneyin.

1.3. Research Problem

Numerous scholars have analyzed Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* from various perspectives, including feminist viewpoints and other theoretical frameworks. This study aims to explore the current state of gender stereotypes about men and women using a multi-dimensional framework. Much of the foundational research on the content of gender stereotypes (49)was conducted several decades ago (50). However, more recent research findings are inconsistent, with some studies indicating changes in traditional gender stereotypes (50) and others suggesting continuity (51). Measures of stereotyping in these studies vary, each operationalizing the constructs of agency and communality, the two defining features of gender stereotypes (40) in different ways. The researcher proposes that the conflicting findings may partially stem from focusing on different facets of these constructs in different studies. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive picture of the specific content of contemporary gender stereotypes through the lens of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (52).

While existing literature has examined gender stereotypes across various domains, including media, education, and workplace dynamics, there remains a significant gap in understanding how contemporary African literature, such as Shoneyin's novel, contributes to the discourse on gender stereotypes. Specifically, few studies have comprehensively explored the nuanced portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes within the context of Nigerian society as depicted in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (52). This research aims to fill this gap by conducting a detailed analysis that integrates literary analysis with social and psychological perspectives, thereby enriching our understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary African literature.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This research work will study gender stereotypes and feminism as portray in Lola Shoneyin's *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*. This study is restricted to explore gender stereotypes from the researcher's point of view which *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives* is the main and primary source of ideas. There will be a review of other relevant related works (both drama and prose) of other African writers which have treated gender/feminism.

1.5. Research Methodology

The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives by Lola Shoneyin is the primary source of information in this work. The concept of gender stereotypes shall be critically examined with other thematic thrusts from the novel. Secondary sources of information for this work will include books consulted in the process of the study which are Editorial, Articles, past work of related topic, journals, and internet.

1.6. Biography of Lola Shoneyin

Lola Shoneyin, born Titilola Atinuke Alexandrah Shoneyin on February 26, 1974, in Ibadan, Nigeria, is a renowned Nigerian poet and author. Her debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, was launched in the UK in May 2010. Shoneyin has established a reputation as an adventurous, humorous, and outspoken poet, often categorized within the feminist genre, having published three volumes of poetry. In April 2014, she was named on the Hay Festival's Africa39 list, which features 39 Sub-Saharan African writers under the age of 40 who have the potential to shape trends in African literature. Shoneyin has received several accolades, including the PEN Award in America and the Ken Saro-Wiwa Award for prose in Nigeria. Her debut novel was also longlisted for the Orange Prize in the UK in 2010. Currently residing in Lagos, Nigeria, Shoneyin runs the annual Aké Arts and Book Festival. In 2017, she was honored as the African Literary Person of the Year by Brittle Paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Concept/nature of stereotypes

The term "stereotype" originates from the French adjective "stéréotype" and derives from the Greek words στερεός (stereos), meaning "firm, solid," and τύπος (typos), meaning "impression." This results in the notion of a "solid impression on one or more ideas/theories" (Liddell & Scott, 1940). The term was first employed in the printing industry in 1798 by Firmin Didot to describe a printing plate that duplicated any typography. This duplicate plate, or stereotype, was used for printing instead of the original (53). Outside of printing, the term "stereotype" was first referenced in 1850 as a noun meaning an image perpetuated without change (54). However, it wasn't until 1922 that "stereotype" was used in its modern psychological sense by American journalist Walter Lippmann in his work Public Opinion.

In social psychology, a stereotype is defined as an over-generalized belief about a particular category of people (55). It involves an expectation that people might have about every person belonging to a particular group, which can vary in type, such as personality, preferences, or abilities. Stereotypes are generalized because one assumes the stereotype is true for each individual in the category (56). While these generalizations can be useful for making quick decisions, they can be erroneous when applied to particular individuals (56). Stereotypes lead to social categorization, which can result in prejudiced attitudes and arise for various reasons (56).

Walter Lippmann (57) defined stereotypes as individual attitudes strongly conditioned by collective contacts, making them highly standardized and uniform within a group. He suggested that a stereotype is a composite of ideas or attitudes forming the "apperceptive mass"—the collection of past experiences that influence our perception of objects at a given moment. Consequently, one's behavior, perception, and judgment about others and oneself are determined by culturally acquired stereotypes, affecting which facts we notice and how we interpret them (57).

According to Allport (58), whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category (58). Edgar Vinacke (59) described stereotypes as "a collection of trait names upon which a large percentage of people agree as appropriate for describing certain individuals." The stereotyping process involves attributing generalized and simplified characteristics to groups of people. Lippmann noted, "We do not first see and then define; we first define and then see. In the great blooming and buzzing confusion of the outer world, we pick out what our culture has already defined for us" (57). This overgeneralization leads to people being classified into types without considering their actual characteristics.

Amaresh Sundaram Kupuswamy (60) observed that stereotypes are socially standardized concepts concerning other groups, facilitating quick and efficient communication within the in-group. Baron and Byrne (61) posited that stereotypes are negative schemata for social groups, serving as cognitive frameworks that strongly influence information processing. Information relevant to a particular stereotype is processed and accepted more quickly than information unrelated to that stereotype, making stereotypes self-confirming (62,63).

Sherif and Sherif (64) explained that group stereotypes reflect consensus among group members about another group's image, operationally defined by the proportion of group members agreeing on attributes for the out-group. Bird (65) added that stereotyped responses are primarily based on feelings and emotions rather than the characteristics of the stimuli.

The properties of stereotypes can be summarized as follows:

- Stereotypes are fixed mental pictures.
- Stereotypes may have some stimulus value but are generally unscientific generalizations.
- Stereotypes are mostly false.
- Stereotypes are overgeneralized ideas.
- Stereotypes are linked with emotional experiences.
- Stereotypes are shared by groups.
- They are mostly negative.
- Stereotypes develop like attitudes, prejudices, and other social concepts.
- Stereotypes are rigid and resistant to change.
- Stereotypes arise from in-group/out-group relationships and conflicts, often incorporating fantasy elements.

2.2. Nature of Stereotypes

When various members of society interact with material objects and each other, they develop specific ideas, attitudes, and mental pictures, collectively known as cognitive frameworks. These frameworks, which arise from past experiences, are used to process and interpret subsequent social information (66). These pre-formed ideas, also known as schemata or mental pictures, help determine present behavior and response mechanisms. However, the mental images formed about people, places, ideas, or events may not always be accurate; these are referred to as stereotypes.

In our modern world, marked by conflicts, prejudices, and interstate and international tensions, understanding the factors underlying social tensions and conflicts is crucial (67). It is important not only to have a general understanding of stereotypes but to base this understanding on scientific studies and systematic investigations (68). From this perspective, studies on national, racial, and linguistic stereotypes are of significant importance.

Sherif and Hovland point out that attitudes toward groups in acceptable categories tend to be favorable, while attitudes toward rejected groups are generally unfavorable. Therefore, the acceptance or rejection of a group is closely tied to the nature of stereotypes. Experience shows that every individual holds certain static ideas and fixed mental images about themselves and others (69).

The concept of the stereotype was introduced to modern psychology by Walter Lippmann in his seminal work, Public Opinion (57). Lippmann described stereotypes as "pictures in our heads" that filter the news and influence what we notice and how we perceive it (66). Essentially, stereotypes denote any false image of others, representing a posture or gesture that does not change. Once acquired, stereotypes become fixed concepts in the human mind (70). For instance, when one says that Americans are materialistic, Englishmen are formal and diplomatic, or Indians are superstitious, they are expressing stereotyped generalizations. These fixed ideas about categories of people may contain some truth but are often overgeneralized, applying only to a few individuals and influenced by emotional causes or in-group/out-group feelings (71).

2.3. Gender Stereotypes in Female-Authored African (Nigerian) Novel

The female character in African fiction hitherto, is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when decisions affect her directly. Docility and complete submission of will is demanded and enacted from her. This traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially, in the background of patrilineage which marked most African societies (72).

In African prose literature, male characters are frequently depicted as the main protagonists, whereas female characters are typically shown in supporting roles. This trend is particularly pronounced in the works of African male authors, who often emphasize male heroism. Kumah (73) explains this phenomenon as a consequence of the predominance of men in the literary field.

The author states that:

As a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive – perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary status – their roles often trivialized to varying degrees – and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature.

One example of male heroism is evident in Achebe's "*Things Fall Apart*," where the main character, Okonkwo, is male (74). According to Stratton (75), female characters in the novel are often mentioned alongside property, implying they are possessions of their male counterparts. For instance, Okonkwo and Nwakibie are described as having barns of yams and wives (74). Stratton (75) further notes that the low status of women in Umuofia portrays them as mere objects, comparable to property inherited or traded. Kumah (76) cites Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian female writer, who remarks that the ideal woman in Achebe's work is one who drinks the dregs after her husband.

In Eddie Iroh's "*Without a Silver Spoon*," the protagonist, Ure Chokwe, is a young man whose admirable traits are attributed mainly to his father, despite being inherited from both parents (77). This depiction suggests that positive characteristics are more influenced by the father, overshadowing the mother's role. Although fathers influence their children, mothers also play a crucial role, especially in early childcare, and should be equally acknowledged (73).

There are a few exceptions where female protagonists appear in African male authors' prose. For instance, in Cyprian Ekwensi's "Jagua Nana," the main character, Jagua, is an ageing yet beautiful prostitute (78). Kumah (73) argues that this portrayal exemplifies the degradation African women face in male-authored narratives. While Jagua is the protagonist, she lacks the traits of a conventional heroine and is depicted as dependent on male customers.

Some African women writers also follow the convention of male protagonists. For example, Mokgosi and Seboni (77) mention that Bessie Head's "When Rain Clouds Gather" centers around a male character, Makhaya. However, 20th and 21st-century African women writers have increasingly portrayed women as protagonists. Buchi Emecheta's "*The Joys of Motherhood*" features Nnu Ego as the female lead, and Nadine Gordimer's "Burger's Daughter" follows the life of Rosa Burger. These works aim to portray women realistically, reflecting their dignity, success, and power, despite cultural and educational barriers (79).

Mmushi (79) cites Sindi Zilwa, a dynamic woman and Chief Executive of Nkonki, who won the Top Women Business Award for promoting workplace equality for women. Attaliah Molokomme, Botswana's first female Attorney General, and Judge Unity Dow, Botswana's first female High Court judge and author, are other examples of powerful, educated women who have overcome gender barriers. Dow's novels, "*Far and Beyon*"" and "*The Screaming of the Innocent*," feature strong female protagonists who challenge traditional norms and abuse.

The study's premise is that literature mirrors real life. Kumah (73) quotes Ogundipe-Leslie, stating that literature, though imaginative, can systematically study society. The study argues that, beyond the challenges faced by female characters, African women authors should also depict women achieving personal success, reflecting reality. However, African women authors often portray educated women lacking self-empowerment or powerful women without substantial education, as seen in Tsitsi Dangarembga's "*Nervous Conditions*," where Tambudzai's educated aunt, Maiguru, remains a subservient wife.

In "*Woman at Point Zero*" by Nawal el Saadawi, the protagonist, Firdaus, possesses a secondary school certificate but works as a prostitute. She only realizes her power after killing a pimp, leading to her being sentenced to death (80). Studies by Kumah (73) and McEldowney (81) attribute the subservient roles of female characters in literature to adverse literary biases. McEldowney (81) notes that female writers face challenges in portraying female characters due to the expectations of male critics and the male-dominated publishing industry. Kumah (73) cites Boyce-Davies, who observes that African literature was initially critiqued by European scholars using Western, male-oriented modes of evaluation. These critics were later succeeded by African male writers who continued the phallocentric criticisms. Consequently, Kumah (73) concludes that critiques of African literature marginalize women's issues, leaving the characterization of female characters and their political significance unacknowledged.

African women authors address themes that effectively communicate their perspectives on gender disparities. Contemporary women writers, as exemplified by the primary texts in this study, focus on women's concerns. This study posits that contemporary African women writers depict female protagonists in a manner that reflects the evolving status of women in political, economic, and social spheres.

2.4. Gender Stereotypes in Male-Authored (African) Nigerian Novel: Male Writers' Representations of Women

In pre-independence African nationalist literature, two predominant models of African womanhood were depicted: woman as mother and woman as beauty. The Negritude movement, which sought to reclaim Africa's illustrious past, is replete with examples of these archetypes. This analysis will concentrate on works by Leopold Sédar Senghor, a co-founder of the Negritude movement, and Camara Laye, a subsequent writer heavily influenced by Negritude's ideals. In his poem "*Black Woman*," Senghor celebrates the African woman and the landscape she represents:

> Nude woman, black woman,
> Clothed in your color which is life, in your form
> this is beauty,
> I have grown in your shadow while the sweetness
> of your hands cradled my eyes,
> And high on the fiery pass, I find you, Earth's
> promise, in the heart of summer and noon,
> And your beauty blasts me full-heart like the
> flash of an eagle in the sun. . . (82) (In Selected Poems /Poésies Choisies, 1976:33)

The remainder of the poem portrays the African woman through a series of natural metaphors, such as "*savanna of pure horizon*" and "*ripe fruit of firm flesh*." She embodies a straightforward, natural beauty, proud of her identity, in stark contrast to the "savage" and "barbaric" perceptions held by colonizers. Senghor's idealized depiction of the African woman is paralleled by Camara Laye in his poem "*To My Mother*," which introduces his novel *The African Child*. Aduke Adebayo describes this work as "the maternal epic par excellence" (83). In this nostalgic poem, Laye underscores the cultural significance of the African woman as a nurturer. Laye hails his mother's resignation and patience:

Black woman,
woman of Africa,
my mother,
I am thinking of you . . .
Daman.
my mother,
you who bore me Upon your back,
you who gave me suck,
you who Watched over my first faltering steps,
you who were the first to open my eyes to the wonders of the earth,
I am thinking of you . . .
Woman of the fields,
woman of the rivers,
woman of the great river-banks,
you my mother,
I am thinking of you . . .
Woman of great simplicity,
woman of great Resignation,
my mother I am thinking of you (84).

In this dedicative poem, the mother represents both Laye's real mother, Daman, and the metaphorical "*Mother Africa*." These two figures nurtured him, taught him life's ways, cared for him, and loved him. Now living in Paris, the grown boy yearns to return home to his two loving mothers. Trapped in the modern, urbanized environment of Paris, he longs for the traditional ways of his homeland. Here, the woman is evaluated based on her role as a mother, which encompasses qualities such as patience, resignation, and self-denial. Although male writers often view these traits and their depictions as positive, women perceive them as problematic. Irène Assiba d'Almeida and Florence Stratton argue that these male-authored images, where the African mother represents the entire continent, are detached from the daily experiences of women.

The African novel, another literary genre, is also rife with male-authored stereotypical representations of women. In their works, African male novelists frequently restrict their female characters to traditional roles. Sonia Lee, in L'Image de la femme dans le roman francophone de l'Afrique Occidentale, notes that in Camara Laye's *The African Child*, the mother symbolizes both fertility and rich past tradition. The maternal image also represents family happiness and reassurance for children (Lee, 1974).

In *Mongo Beti's Mission to Kala*, the central theme is the bride price. The novel portrays Niam, a man who wields patriarchal power over his wife. Niam believes that, because he paid the bride price, he has the right to exploit, subordinate, and consider his wife his "property." The female character, central to the plot, is ensnared in a web of domination and submission. She is depicted in her domestic roles, working as a housewife and tending to her husband's farm, serving more as an economic asset and piece of property than as a wife. When his wife leaves him, Niam realizes his inability to manage either himself or his farm. He decides to use his masculine power to bring her back, thinking, "I am the earth she rests on. By herself, she is nothing but a dead leaf that has broken loose from the tree. For all her flutterings and gyrations, in the end, she cannot prevent herself from falling to the ground" (85). Ironically, Niam's description reveals his own helplessness, yet he views his wife as a mere piece of machinery at his service. This illustrates how patriarchy has conditioned Niam to believe in male superiority and the necessity of subduing women.

In many male-authored plays, women are portrayed either as angelically virtuous or more often as dangerous, duplicitous, and rapaciously greedy (86). Women are poorly represented in contemporary male texts. Nelly Furman highlights this issue, stating, "in a world defined by man, the trouble with woman is that she is at once an object of desire and an object of exchange, valued on the one hand as a person in her own right, and on the other considered simply as a relational sign between" (86). Nigerian male writers rarely depict positive images of women in their fiction. If women

are not portrayed as docile wives whose identities are recognized through their husbands, they gain identity through motherhood.

Adewuji in his article, “Male Involvement in Domestic Affairs: Some Reflections,” seems to corroborate this view when he says:

Among all Nigerians but to a larger extent among rural, urban, poor, illiterate and nonilliterate ones, a woman, just like a little child, should only be seen and heard. In fact, within the pervasive extended polygamous network, she is regarded as a little higher in esteem than household chattels (130) (87).

Nnolim vividly illustrates the degraded portrayal of African women by sexist writers such as Achebe and Ekwensi—depictions that render women as helpless, dependent, brutalized, and demeaned. These female characters are often shown as concubines or prostitutes, seemingly destined, as Ogunyemi puts it, "to carry foofoo and soup to men dealing with important matters" (88).

2.4.1. According to Nnolim

Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness both for themselves and for their male counterparts”. The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy (89).

This picture of women is the same in the works of male authors in other parts of Africa. Nawal El Saadawi in her article, “*The Heroine in Arab Literature*” posits that:

Among the male authors I have read, both in the West and in the Arab world; irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free him from this age-old image of women handed down to us from an ancient past no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defense of human rights, human values and justices, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form (80).

Soheir El Kalamawi provides a more illuminating portrait of the woman in phallocentric texts:

A capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she devil imbued with cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all the arts of deceit and conspiracy, a seductive mistress captivating in her passion. She is as positive and dynamic as Satan and his evil spirits, wherever matters of sex and love are concerned. Woman in all the aspects of the role she is made to play, whether it be that of a queen or a slave bought from the market, remains a slave (80).

This view coheres with Zaki Mobarak’s that “women have a greater power to destroy men than Satan and all his devils together” (80). In his novel D’a El Karawan, Taha Hussein paints a picture of woman:

As a being who, gravitates inertly within the orbit of man without weapons or power orstrength or a will to do anything, even fending for herself. She is always a victim, destroyed, annihilated. She is annihilated by man, but also by a host of other things: love, hatred and vengeance, and a total subjugation to man that extends to all aspects of her life whether material, psychological, emotional or moral (80).

A survey of these portrayals reveals how male-authored texts use phallocentric perspectives to subordinate women to men. In pre-colonial Nigeria, women held significant power in the economic sphere, influencing the distribution of resources. However, Westernization and colonialism stripped them of these rights, as Western capitalism relegated their traditional roles to social and domestic spheres, thereby increasing their dependency on husbands, fathers, and sons.

2.4.2. According to Morolake Omonubi-McDonnell:

Colonialism was a disengaging experience that obliterated and stifled the voice of women. The colonial strategy of circuitous control created a gender-oriented executive establishment that endures in spite of decolonization. The British government’s socioeconomic approaches that handicapped women and the political arrangement that empowered men to rule women are continually blamed for the current disadvantaged status of women in Nigeria. Both strategies robbed women of their traditional authority (90).

2.4.3. The above view is attested to by Okoh

It was the colonization, which to a high degree that upset the legal arrangement of Nigerian communities by the introduction of the nineteenth century European notions of patriarchy. As a result, the traditional system, which gave women the opportunity to exercise their rights in both private sphere and public domain, was disrupted (91).

Cheryle Johnson, in "*Class and Gender*," argues that both indigenous patriarchy and imposed colonial patriarchal customs and laws contribute to the oppression of women (92). Bolanle Awe notes that, during the pre-colonial period, women were active in virtually all spheres of human endeavor, including agriculture, politics, and local decision-making (93).

The incorporation of Nigeria into the international economy as a supplier of raw materials brought about new patriarchal conceptions of women's social roles, as dictated by colonial administrators and missionaries. These changes significantly altered women's positions in economic and social endeavors. Men began to dominate the international market, while women were confined to growing crops with lower returns. Efforts to improve agriculture focused on men, further encouraging the separation of economic roles that had previously complemented each other, thereby marginalizing the position of women.

Colonial administrators and Christian missionaries introduced European patriarchal assumptions into Nigerian society, which differed greatly from traditional Nigerian views. They expected African societies to regard women as subordinate to men, mirroring European norms. They believed that a financially independent woman might not give due respect to her husband and his family. However, in pre-colonial Nigerian societies, women played crucial roles in providing for their families financially, a responsibility that necessitated their financial independence. Child-rearing involved extended family members, not just the mother.

Colonial restrictions on women hindered their ability to fulfill their traditional duties towards their families. These changes led to several protests by Nigerian women throughout the colonial period against specific colonial policies and colonialism itself. The 1929 Aba Women's War challenged the British administration for excluding women from decision-making processes. The Abeokuta Women's Union, led by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, demanded the abdication of Alake Ademola II and the abolition of the sole native authority system imposed by the colonial masters, which exploited women. She argued against the flat-rate tax, asserting that women should not be taxed separately from their husbands since they did not participate in governance (91).

Colonialism disrupted traditional production systems in indigenous Nigerian societies, reinforcing existing social inequalities and introducing new forms of oppressive social stratification.

Osita C. Ezenwanebe's classification of women as represented in African dramatic literature suffices here:

The active women and the inactive women. Inactive women refer to women who are dependent on men and whose lives become conditioned by patriarchal culture. They are silent "dumb" women who have no voice and hence dare not speak out their mind or air their voices, especially if those views are in opposition to those of the society. These groups of women are completely subdued by the sanctity and supremacy of the gods or their surrogate cultural tradition, which is symbolized physically in the "man head" because they have no power to make decisions. The second group of women (active) are those who do not merely feel or express their feeling of oppression but courageously and confidently step out to act their feeling (94).

The plays written by male dramatists in Nigeria exhibit a diverse approach to depicting women, often revealing both favoritism and criticism towards strong female characters. Early playwrights predominantly portrayed female characters through the lens of traditional values that positioned women as subordinate to men. These playwrights, predominantly male, maintained traditional and cultural perspectives in their works, reflecting a phallocentric viewpoint where cultural norms, language, and writing are influenced by male dominance. Within these narratives, female characters often embody negative qualities. For instance, Wole Soyinka's Sunma in "*The Strong Breed*" and the young bride in "*Death and the King's Horseman"* are depicted as weak and passive. Rola in "*A Dance of the Forests*" is portrayed with fatal allure, leading her lovers to tragic ends. In "*Kongi's Harvest*," Segi is characterized as a devourer of men's vitality, draining them of vigor, which reinforces stereotypes that undermine efforts for female liberation and restrict women within specific cultural confines. Theresa Njoku shares similar sentiments, arguing that such stereotypes serve to uphold sexist values, bolster male pride, and reinforce sexist political ideologies, further subordinating women (95).

Male authors, including Soyinka, often assign predominantly negative attributes to their female characters, a phenomenon elucidated by Luce Irigaray in "*Speculums de L'autre Femme."* Irigaray argues that patriarchal discourse relegates women outside of positive representation, positioning them as absent, negative, or inferior to men. Despite these negative portrayals, characters like Segi also play active roles, catalyzing revolutionary social change by mobilizing dissent against dictators like Kongi. Her complex character is highlighted in her intimate scenes with Daodu, revealing her as both a catalyst for change and a figure of sensuality. Conversely, female characters like Amope in "*The Trials of Brother Jero"* are depicted negatively, characterized by their contentious nature, which significantly affects their male counterparts. Another example is the young girl who, in her interactions with the prophet, becomes a source of temptation during his moments of meditation and prayer, embodying both distraction and allure.

These portrayals reflect broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and power dynamics, influenced by historical and cultural contexts within Nigerian literature. This informs his prayers for deliverance assisted by Chume in the following dialogue:

> Jero: Tear the image from my heart.
> Tear this love for the daughters of Eve…
> Chume: Adam, help' am. Na your son, help'am. Help this your son…
> Jero: Burn this lust for the daughters of Eve (96).

Another female character depicted in the plays is the woman who pursues the beggar drummer boy after being mistreated by him. She is described as wearing a tightly cinched sash around her waist, her wrapper pulled high to reveal half of her thigh, with sleeves rolled up above her shoulders. The effect she has on the prophet is so profound that he leaves his congregation to Chume and follows her. Overall, women are portrayed as either argumentative or as temptresses of men. Wole Soyinka's plays often depict women in a negative light. For example, in "*The Lion and the Jewe*l," Sidi is portrayed as naive and easily deceived (97).

This depiction underscores a recurring theme in Soyinka's works where female characters are characterized by their contentious nature or their allure, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards women's roles and interactions with men in Nigerian literature.

2.4.4. To adumbrate her gullibility, Oyin Ogunba has this to say:

The reference to "village goddess" must conjure up in Sidi's mind a host of associations, including praise-names, tremendous annual masks, and the immortalization of her beauty. This is the thing that works the miracle, for what village girl would not yield confronted with a man who, at sixty two, is still capable not only of youthful energy, but also such a fascinating play of emotions? (98).

He further contends that "Sidi's self-esteem can be served equally well by modern means; once she has been flattered by the photographs. Most ironically, Sidi finally ends up accepting Baroka for a husband even though he seduced her, because she does not care to have her gullibility mocked at great length" (99). In the play, Sidi is depicted as a valuable object sought after and possessed by men. This portrayal of women as helpless yet highly prized possessions to be safeguarded by the stronger sex is vividly enacted in the pantomime within the play (pp. 15-17), where Lakunle assumes the role of the lost traveler.

Soyinka also portrays women who, in many instances, act altruistically and uphold Nigerian cultural traditions over their personal interests as women. For example, in "*Death and the King's Horseman,*" Iyaloja and the girls are portrayed as advocates for the propagation and preservation of their people's culture. They play a crucial cultural role in encouraging Elesin-Oba to fulfill his ritual suicide obligation. In Soyinka's works, women serve as custodians of cultural values. Iyaloja, an earth mother figure, embodies traditional wisdom that perplexes Mr. Pilkings, the white man (100).

However, Soyinka's active portrayal of women also perpetuates a culture that is often superior and oppressive towards them. They are depicted as slaves to cultural norms, unwittingly aiding in its perpetuation. This portrayal contrasts with feminist ideals aimed at dismantling oppressive aspects of culture. Soyinka rarely provides glimpses into the domestic or private lives of the women in his plays. In "*The Beatification of Area Boy*," Soyinka presents more positive depictions of female characters. Two notable examples are Mama Put and Miseye, who play significant roles in the events of the play. Mama Put, portrayed as courageous and hardworking, rebuilds her life after heavy losses during the civil war, providing for her children through street food sales and actively participating in the people's revolution against oppressors. Miseye, from the bourgeois class, undergoes a form of class renunciation by embracing the values represented by Sanda, akin to the character of Titubi in "*Morountodun*."

In his early plays, women often appear as passive bystanders. Early Nigerian fiction similarly tended to portray female characters negatively or without substantial roles (97).

2.4.5. Femi Osofisan explains this trend:

As far as the women are concerned, the bulk of our literature is secretly a weapon of male propaganda, of an agenda to keep the female under perpetual dominance… they mention works like Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel, Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Clark's Song of a Goat, Wale Ogunyemi's The Divorce and so on, as examples of this sexist agenda (101).

The negative portrayal reflects the highly patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society dictated by cultural beliefs. Ahmed Yerima explains this further:

The masculine traditional cannon has always dominated the African consciousness concerning beliefs and existence. The culture, the tradition, the languages, the names, the types of vocation, even the biological and physiological structure of human as determined by this environment and nature, have always reemphasized the dominance of the male. Man grew with such cultural beliefs, believing in it, guided through life by the society, and practicing such beliefs even in later stories he created to his death. The female counterpart was made to accept it as the only way… woman was indeed a stereotype, a symbol of life, cocooned by cultural beliefs (102).

In J.P. Clark's "*Song of a Goat*," Ebiere is depicted as a seductress who engages in a forbidden relationship with her husband's younger brother, facing punishment alongside Tonye for their adultery. In "*Ozidi*," Oreami wields supernatural powers to instill fear in her community, akin to Orukorere in "Song of a Goat," who shares similar mystical abilities. Gabriel Okara's "Woyengi" also embodies this mystical nature, portrayed as a deity involved in creation, granting children to the Izon people. The play reflects societal attitudes towards infertility, as seen through Ogboinba's self-loathing due to her barrenness, influenced by patriarchal norms (103).

In Wole Soyinka's "*Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*," women are often portrayed as naive, ordinary, and lacking in education, exemplified by characters like Mama Rashida and Sikira, who are viewed as uncivilized about societal matters. Despite these portrayals, Soyinka supports feminist ideals within the play, challenging societal perceptions that confine women to domestic roles. Sikira's pursuit of gender equality, influenced by Liza's teachings, highlights her struggle for self-identity amidst her husband Lejoka-Brown's controlling behavior. In contrast, Queen Ojuola in Ola Rotimi's "The Gods are not to Blame" is depicted as powerless against the decrees of fate, passively accepting her tragic destiny alongside her son Odewale. Conversely, Mosadiwin's role in "Kurunmi" is limited to culinary contributions, reflecting traditional gender roles (103).

In Osofisan's plays, such as "*Altine's Wrath*," female characters like Altine, initially portrayed as mute, regain their voice and freedom through self-affirmation. Osofisan's portrayal of women in "*Morountodun*" and other works highlights their strong convictions and commitment to societal causes (104). In "*Morountodun*," Titubi emerges as a bold social reformer akin to Moremi, risking her life to expose and reconcile societal injustices (104). Osofisan's depiction of women in roles like Ibidun in "*Red is the Freedom Road*," Yajin and Funlola in "*The Chattering and the Song*," and Alhaja in "*Once Upon Four Robbers"* underscores their agency in driving societal change (104). Funlola and Yajin exemplify progressive qualities, aligning themselves with Sontri and Leje's revolutionary cause (105). Osofisan's approach to female characterization diverges from earlier phallocentric depictions in Nigerian drama, presenting Titubi as a modern heroine embodying courage and solidarity in the struggle against oppression.

Again Awodiya provides a picture of her role in the play thus:

Titubi already belongs to the rich, privileged class. She is bold, courageous and undaunted. Infact she is the most daring and forceful of all the heroines in Osifisan's plays. This heroine of extraordinary qualities abandons her riches and opulent lifestyle to infiltrate the peasants' ranks… Titubi becomes the rallying point and a source of inspiration for the peasants in the play, thus she becomes the symbol of Osofisan's social justice who is fully conscious of her social status and the sordid condition which must be fought and challenged (105).

Ukaegbu's view of the roles of women in *Morountodun* can be summarized as follows:

Morountodun is not revolutionary for eulogizing women's contribution to society, it is dramaturgically significant as in it, Osofisan avoids character simpleness and tokenistic presentation of women, creating instead, strong complex women

who command similar ideological and intellectual statures as men. They fight beside men as equals and resist marginalization from decision-making on gender grounds (106).

Osofisan approaches his portrayal of women in his plays as gynocritical, highlighting their talents and potential for significant achievements without resorting to sexual objectification, a departure from earlier dramatists. Similarly, Nigerian playwrights like Olu Obafemi in "Nights of a Mystical Beast," Iyorwuese Hagher in "*Mulkin Mata,*" and Bode Sowande in "A Sanctus for Women" also adopt gynocritical perspectives in their works. Sowande, for instance, depicts revolutionary women such as Joloki in "*Farewell to Babylon*" and Ibilola in *"The Night Before*," emphasizing their roles in societal transformation.

3. Textual analysis

3.1. Synopsis of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

"*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" presents a captivating narrative set in Ibadan, delving into the polygamous household of Ishola Alao, also known as Baba Segi, his four wives, and their seven children (107). The story unfolds amidst intrigues, jealousies, rivalries, and complex family dynamics typical of polygamous settings.

Baba Segi emerges as a central figure, characterized by his corpulence, flatulence issues, and chauvinistic demeanor. His first wife, Iya Segi, boasts of being the senior and most significant, having borne him two children. Wife number two, Iya Tope, submissive by nature, finds herself dominated by Iya Segi despite having three children. Iya Femi, the third wife, known for her materialism, often teams up with Iya Segi to exert authority over Iya Tope. This unconventional equilibrium is disrupted when Bolanle, the fourth wife, enters the picture.

Bolanle stands out in this polygamous arrangement as the only educated spouse among an illiterate husband and co-wives. Her university degree sets her apart, sparking envy and resentment from the other wives, who fear she may monopolize Baba Segi's affections (107). Unlike the other wives who were thrust upon Baba Segi, Bolanle was chosen by him, a decision that adds to the household's tension.

Bolanle's uniqueness extends beyond education; she is also childless, unlike the other wives who bear the honorific "Iya," denoting motherhood (Adebayo 118). Her inability to conceive becomes a source of concern and frustration for Baba Segi, leading to revelations that shatter the household's facade. It is revealed that Baba Segi is not the biological father of all his children, a secret masterminded by Iya Segi, who conceived her two children with Baba Segi's driver (107).

"*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" employs multiple narrative perspectives, primarily Bolanle's, to unravel the complexities of each character's backstory and motivations for embracing polygamy. The novel critiques societal expectations placed on women and the patriarchal structures that perpetuate them.

Throughout the story, Bolanle struggles to integrate into Baba Segi's household and understand its dynamics. The other wives keep her at arm's length, withholding their secrets and refusing to fully accept her. Her outsider status is underscored by her lack of an armchair, symbolizing her unproven status until she bears a child. Bolanle's journey reflects her internal turmoil stemming from past trauma, which she feels defines her worthiness and limits her aspirations (107).

Similarly, the other wives in Baba Segi's household are revealed to have entered into polygamy due to past traumas and societal pressures, resigning themselves to a fate they believe they cannot escape. Their stories highlight the profound impacts of societal expectations and personal histories on their choices and identities.

The self-imprisonment of all four wives ultimately leads to their downfall, with Bolanle initiating the sequence of events. Interestingly, it is the quiet and unassuming Iya Tope who engages in an affair and cheats on Baba Segi, finding some degree of sexual fulfillment outside her marriage, although dominating the household holds little importance to her. Her marriage was more out of necessity than desire, and her true life lies elsewhere, a revelation that adds depth to her character.

As the story unfolds, Baba Segi discovers that the children in his household have different fathers, a revelation that surprises him. It is revealed that Iya Tope is not the only unfaithful wife; Baba Segi himself struggles with fertility issues, which explains Bolanle's inability to conceive despite her faithfulness. Despite these revelations, Baba Segi does not

reject or abandon the children; he embraces them as his own, showcasing a complex and compassionate side to his character.

Bolanle eventually decides to leave the household (107) once she rediscovers her personal strength and ability to heal from past traumas. While "The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives" does not overtly make political statements, it subtly conveys feminist themes, suggesting that African women, regardless of their social status, have alternatives beyond traditional confines.

3.2. Gender Norms Challenged: The Dynamics of Polygamy in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

What is most intriguing about The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives is its exuberant and disruptive nature, reminiscent of a rebellious child defying its author-parent, Shoneyin. In various interviews, Shoneyin emphatically states that polygamy is morally wrong and should be abolished (108). She vividly describes "husband-sharing" as repulsive in a Guardian profile titled "Polygamy? No thanks." Shoneyin recounts her family history, explaining that a hereditary chieftainship forced her grandparents' modern marriage back into polygamy, with her grandfather marrying four additional women (109).

This experience made Shoneyin's mother wary of plural marriage, cautioning her daughter that "polygamous wives might be smiling on the outside, but inside they are sad and bitter." Shoneyin's parents also advised her brothers against dating girls from polygamous homes, claiming such girls must be "devious" to survive. In the context of Nigerian plural marriages, Shoneyin suggests that "the sad truth is, polygamy constitutes a national embarrassment in any country that fantasizes about progress and development. Polygamy devalues women, and the only person who revels in it is the husband who gets to enjoy variety. You, poor women, will become nothing more than a dish at the buffet" (108,109). While Shoneyin's views align closely with Christian missionaries' assumptions about polygamy, her novel offers a portrayal that challenges straightforward moral judgments and stereotypes of cultural backwardness (108). In the novel, the primary characters, except for Bolanle and Baba Segi himself, know the secret that Baba Segi, the patriarch, is infertile. This secret is revealed gradually through the narrative, which cleverly hints at the truth, allowing astute readers to guess it before the final confirmation.

The infertility of Baba Segi becomes evident shortly after his marriage to his resourceful first wife, Iya Segi, who fails to conceive despite visits to a medicine man recommended by Baba Segi's advisor, Teacher. Teacher, who also hides his impotence, plays a key role in this dynamic. Iya Segi shares the secret with the second and third wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, but not with the fourth wife, Bolanle.

Bolanle, a young, beautiful, and educated woman, enters the household amid hostility from the existing wives, who fear she will usurp Baba Segi's favor. Iya Segi even remarks that, unlike Bolanle, she does not blame the other wives for being "weakened" by Baba Segi's wealth, referring to them as "humble maidservants who live for a kind pat on the head from the mother-of-the-home" (52). This contrasts sharply with Chinua Achebe's depiction of cooperative polygamy in Things Fall Apart, highlighting the competitive, acquisitive, and manipulative nature of Iya Segi in a modern urban setting (108).

Iya Segi's entrepreneurial spirit continues after marriage, evolving from trading sweets to a significant cement-selling business, activities traditionally seen as masculine in the novel's society (52). Her financial independence and ability to drive a car further challenge gender stereotypes.

Iya Segi is the primary provider in the household, with her wealth secretly passed from her mother to Baba Segi's mother. Her economic power, similar to that of a man, allowed her to buy land and build a large house, leading her mother to worry that "the village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can't" (52). Despite the internal conflicts, the first three wives never jeopardize the household's stability, which offers them the only security in a globalized Nigeria marked by postcolonial inequalities (108).

The novel starts with Bolanle's arrival in the household and concludes with her leaving. Bolanle, equipped with a formal Western education and modern sophistication, believes she can bring refinement to both the polygamist husband and his wives. When Baba Segi belches, Bolanle naively thinks she will "devote a few hours a night to teaching him good manners" (52). She also patronizingly takes on the role of introducing the wives to the niceties of polite conversation. However, the novel leaves considerable doubt about how Bolanle should be interpreted. The narrative alternates between third-person omniscient and first-person perspectives, presenting the histories and viewpoints of all the main characters (108). Despite this, the story begins and ends with Bolanle, and eight of the twenty-eight chapters focus on her. She appears to be the central character, showing the most development and gaining the most reader sympathy. Yet,

the novel's wicked, rambunctious humor tempts readers to view Bolanle's character ironically, though she is never caricatured like the "traditional" characters. Bolanle's determined, almost missionary zeal to uplift the Alao household in the context of her "free" choice of a "primitive" polygamous union strains credulity.

Bolanle defies her authoritarian and controlling mother by eloping with Baba Segi. To her mother, polygamy is the choice of uneducated bush-dwellers and educated gold-diggers, and Bolanle is neither. For Bolanle, polygamy offers refuge from her dysfunctional (monogamous, modern) family and the secret of her rape and abortion (108). At fifteen, she was duped into accepting a ride from a predatory young man, part of Africa's new transnational consumerist class. Reflecting on conception and childbirth, Bolanle compares her violated self to a broken egg. When she reveals the rape to her mother to justify entering a polygamous household, she says, "Mama, you were living with an empty shell. Everything was scraped out of me. I was inside out" (52). In this context, the Alao household provides Bolanle the comfort she needs to heal. Baba Segi's home, although troubled, is less so than the outside world. Despite needing saving herself, Bolanle casts herself as a savior upon entering the polygamous household. Her self-righteous comment that she "will not give up on them" and "will bring light" to their "darkness" invites ironic interpretation (52). Further irony lies in the outcome: Bolanle does bring light, but not the Enlightenment worldview she anticipates. Instead, she exposes Baba Segi's infertility and the other wives' ambiguous betrayal of and loyalty to the polygamous union when her apparent barrenness is investigated.

The other wives engage in extramarital affairs not as a critique of plural marriage but out of a desire for children and to preserve the polygamous household, their only haven in a hopeless world. Children are essential in Yoruba cultural existence as depicted in the novel; without a child, one's life lacks reality, making one a ghost in the world of the living (108). The novel highlights this by describing Bolanle's first night in the home: during family television time, a news report about serial killings of pregnant women deeply affects the family, and Baba Segi vomits in horror. At the novel's end, the illness and death of the eldest daughter, Segi, is a cataclysmic event that challenges the natural order. Since children ensure the survival of marriage, the wives stop at nothing to become pregnant (108). While rural polygamy allows the "open secret" of impregnation by a male relative in cases of the husband's sterility, urban polygamous families lack this recourse. Thus, all the wives, except Bolanle, become pregnant by lovers of their choice. In a satirical postcolonial allusion to Lady Chatterley, the apparently lesbian Iya Segi chooses the chauffeur, Taju, to impregnate her. Though Iya Segi accumulates wealth like a man and desires women, she must marry and be impregnated by a man to have children (108).

Her wealth allows the marriage to Ishola Alao to take place and her ingenuity allows her to be impregnated:

"My husband? Mama, women don't need husbands." I spoke her own words back to her. "You do. You need one to bear children. The world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out." "Is this all so I can bear children?"

"It is every woman's purpose to bear children. Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living? That is not how I want to leave you in this world" (52).

Despite her mother's cynicism about husbands—stemming from her own abandonment—she recognizes that Iya Segi, with money as her metaphorical husband, will not complete the Yoruba circle of life, which includes the dead, the living, and those yet to be born. Iya Segi needs to have a child to secure her place both socially and spiritually. Once Iya Segi's position is secured through childbirth, the stability of the Alao household not only protects her initial investment in the form of the secret dowry but also provides the financial freedom to expand her returns in a "nourishing cement business." This business venture is initiated early in the marriage when she theatrically gains her husband's sympathy and consent to trade. Iya Segi's control over Taju is a result of his poverty and her dominance in both financial and sexual realms. Sent to the Alao home to collect a parcel, Taju is "taken" in Baba Segi's armchair, symbolizing the patriarch's domestic power, and is "ridden like a new saddle" by Iya Segi whenever she needs to conceive (52). In contrast to the dominating and shrewd first wife, the second wife, Iya Tope, is the daughter of an indigent farmer given to Baba Segi to repay a debt. She is childlike, unattractive, simple-minded, and clearly unable to fend for herself in either the countryside or the city. Iya Segi quickly inducts her into the household's "secret." Unexpectedly, unlike the practical-minded first wife, Iya Tope finds more pleasure in the task of conceiving a child. She becomes involved with a "meat seller" who sells his "flesh both literally and figuratively" (108).

Iya Tope, by far exceeding the "brief" given by Iya Segi to get herself impregnated, visits the meat-seller weekly for the carnal delights he offers, and each subsequent visit repeats the pleasures of the first:

He led me to his home and he took me. I will never forget that day or any other that I spent with him. He made my body sing. He made me howl when he bent me over; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly. And when he took me

standing up, it was as if there was a frog inside me, puffing out its throat, blowing, blowing and blowing until whoosh—all the warm air escaped through my limbs (p. 63).

It is simply a facet of her personality, like her stunted intellect. Iya Segi condemns it as a problem only when Iya Tope's absent-mindedness and neglect to cover her trail threaten to expose her adultery and thus jeopardize the stability of the polygamous household, which is Iya Segi's main concern.

The third wife, Iya Femi, proposes to Baba Segi to escape her life of abjection as a house-girl in a wealthy family. After her parents' death, she was sold by her uncle into domestic slavery under the cruel matriarch, "Grandma." Iya Femi is akin to a Pamela figure, succumbing to the advances of the "hedonist" son, Tunde (p. 94), who perversely views their relationship as an expression of his anti-establishment views and her potential liberation. Unlike Pamela, Iya Femi cannot ascend to the new African elite through bourgeois morality, as these rules do not prevail in her context. She marries Baba Segi to escape daily humiliations but continues her liaison with Tunde, mistakenly believing their relationship is cemented by mutual sexual attraction. Iya Femi dreams of double revenge, with the Alao household as her launchpad. Her first act of vengeance is successful as she burns her uncle's stolen home. However, her second revenge—returning triumphantly to her former employer's house with Tunde's children—is thwarted when she learns from a farewell note that Tunde has abandoned her for a job as a "US rep." Devastated, she laments, "So there is no Grandma to parade my sons in front of? Ha! Coward! She saw my triumph coming and decided to deny my victory!" (p. 114). Thus, Iya Femi's long-standing extra-marital relationship makes her de facto polyandrous, reversing the French convention of the long-time mistress (52).

This novel, which ostensibly highlights the oppression of voiceless women under traditional polygamy, features a wife who is the Nigerian equivalent of a Victorian self-made man with dreams of indulging her lesbian inclinations; a second wife, Iya Tope, who is a simple-minded but well-intentioned sex addict; and a third wife who, unlike Lady Macbeth, acts on her vaulting ambition herself. These avenues open up within the polygamous household, secured through procreation, in contemporary Nigeria. Bearing children, rather than romantic love, is the foundation of African cultural approaches to marriage. Love exists but is not the primary social rationale for marriage (108).

Paradoxically, the wives in this formal polygamous household become informally polyandrous to protect the material and emotional well-being it represents, despite urban polygamy's occasional prickles. They rationally choose to stay in the household even when given the opportunity to leave at the novel's end, not out of any Yoruba cultural ideal or notion of Yoruba identity. Secret Lives presents a rural model of polygamy transposed to the city, contrasting with the urban monogamised polygamy in Aidoo's Changes. Shoneyin's novel complicates the modern trend depicted in Changes, where men formalise adulterous relationships with women kept in separate homes, bypassing the rural compound version's rituals, hierarchies, and shared responsibilities. In Secret Lives, urban polygamy retains the relationship and domestic architecture of rural polygamy from Achebe's pre-colonial novels while meeting personal and cultural needs in a postcolonial, modernised, globalised Nigeria (108).

Shoneyin's novel, in its Rabelaisian exuberance, challenges many of the author's assumptions about polygamy and highlights a disconnect between the "informal" theory and practice of writing. In a Guardian article, Shoneyin implies that polygamy is a traditional institution with no place in the modern world, inherently oppressing women, fostering destructive household rivalries, and obstructing the progress and development narrative of political elites in the developing world (109). Yet, her novel destabilizes each of these postulates, confirming Stacey's observations that, "paradoxically, the very globalizing market and media forces that disperse Western individualism, gender and sexual identity politics, and modern transformations of intimacy around the planet also exacerbate the conditions...that inspire many forms of plural marriage" (110). While Stacey's study does not specifically focus on Nigeria, it does consider the parallel example of South Africa, highlighting similarities between the two countries' experiences of colonialism and post-independence political institutions that often lead to corruption and mismanagement. These historical legacies are further exacerbated by the integration of African economies into late-capitalist global economic networks. Secret Lives never shifts its focus from personal relations to larger historical, economic, political, and epistemological forces, yet it vividly describes a twenty-first-century African world where global economics and culture enforce local shifts, creating "mediascapes" that project affluent Western lifestyles unsupported by African "finanscapes" (111).

The Ibadan described in the novel is a familiar African city projecting consumerism and affluent lifestyles, ethical horizons impossible for most people to achieve. Apart from peripheral upper-middle-class characters like the man who rapes Bolanle and Segun's family, Iya Segi is the only character who prospers financially. All other characters endure lives of inescapable poverty, driving them to act in morally and culturally reprehensible ways to survive. The novel's dominant tone is one of poverty and hardship, foreshadowed by the lyrics of a television soap opera's signature song: "The impoverished search for cassava / While the rich consume rice by the measuring bowl" (52).

Secret Lives also challenges its author's judgments in other ways. It destabilizes the familiar dichotomy associating polygamy with timeless, unchanging villages and monogamy with transforming modern cities. Two wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, come from monogamous Yoruba and Muslim families in the village, where religious sanction of polygamy supposedly reinforces indigenous African customs, but in this case, it does not. Iya Segi and Ishola Alao come from single-parent families headed by strong and successful village matriarchs. Traditional family relationships thus encompass monogamy and single-parent families, which, despite sometimes suffering extreme poverty, seem generally settled, happy, and secure (108). In contrast, modern city monogamies are fraught with relationships that are sometimes de facto polygamous. Bolanle's parents are in a monogamous union where "for life" means not till death but rather a prison for the emasculated father who escapes through drink and for the daughters who escape through doomed relationships. The other marriage encountered in the city is that of Segun's parents. Segun's father is a wealthy landlord and public philanderer whose informal polygamy his wife tacitly accepts for material well-being and social position. During a secret visit to Segun's suite the night his family is attacked by robbers, Segun confides his embarrassment about his father to Bolanle: "I could have been sitting there having a drink with my friends and we would all have seen my father walk in with a girl on each arm" (52).

Ironically, Bolanle pretends to go to bed early to read her Mills and Boon novels as a pretext to escape to her boyfriend's home on the night Segun's family is robbed and his father is killed. Bolanle's teenage love affair has all the hallmarks of classic romance fiction, featuring a young, attractive, intelligent heroine from an aspirant social class and a desirable, wealthy, somewhat unattainable hero. Bolanle's dreams of romance, however, are shattered when Segun, subject to the terrors and humiliations of the armed robbery, which the pair watch hidden in the en-suite bathroom roof, does not acknowledge Bolanle at all:

I reached out my hand to him but he pretended not to see it. He wished I wasn't there. Not to save me from the terrible things I was seeing but because he was embarrassed that I, a common tenant, was witnessing such a personal family tragedy. It was at that moment that I realised that I meant very little to him. I might have been another dusty lintel. I thought perhaps I wasn't worthy of him (p. 125).

The relationship is finally brought to a close when Segun turns away from her as his father's funeral cortège passes. When Bolanle visits her parents' home after her marriage to Baba Segi—a marriage that is roundly condemned by her aspirant mother in particular—Bolanle comes across her old Mills and Boon novels. As if to put paid to the idea of romance in the riven world in which she finds herself, Bolanle discovers that her rebellious sister, Lara, has drawn sardonic moustaches on all the heroines. Later, when she is married to Baba Segi, Bolanle burns the copy of *The Long Honeymoon* that she comes across among her mementos, finally jettisoning dreams of love as figured by popular romance novels, but not the concept of monogamy as a marriage ideal.

Even though, in interviews, Shoneyin may paint a picture of the polygamous patriarch as a smug, self-interested hypocrite, Baba Segi is much more complex and open-ended. Yes, he is presented as grotesque and obnoxious with gross naturalistic flourishes, but he is a devoted, loyal husband and father, unlike the modern, educated, libertarian Tunde, who uses Iya Femi and then abandons her to follow his career in the US, or Segun, who similarly uses Bolanle. Indeed, Iya Femi, underlining the emotional and material securities of the home, perhaps expresses the sentiment of the other wives most forcefully when she says, "Not even God Himself could have made me leave Baba Segi's house" (p. 91).

3.3. Analysis of Major Characters and their Moral Roles in the Novel from Feminist Stand Point the Costs and Promises of Enlightenment, and Other Thematic Thrusts and Tropes in the Text

Adultery is one of the main issues in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. All the women, with the exception of Bolanle, commit adultery with impunity and utmost disregard for their marital vows. Adultery, for them, becomes a tool of protest. Iya Segi, the first wife, is the secret source of Baba Segi's success, both as a businessman and as a father.

As a young girl, she made so much money trading with her mother. After her mother discovers that Iya Segi's insatiable desire for wealth was making her sacrifice marriage for the pleasure of money, she forces her to marry Baba Segi, her friend's son. Her mother gives all of Iya Segi's savings to her own friend to induce Baba Segi into marriage with her daughter. Wounded and hurt, Iya Segi could not forgive her husband, who has betrayed her by marrying other wives. After a while in Baba Segi's house and without children, Iya Segi lures Baba Segi's driver into sex and thus is able to have children. She is not ashamed to engage in illicit sexual affairs with the driver and boldly walks up to the other wives, telling them to do the same to protect her secret. She holds an unimaginable spell over both Iya Tope and Iya Femi. With her weak moral judgment and the fear of Baba Segi carrying out his threat of sending her back to the village, Iya Tope easily accepts Iya Segi's suggestion that she gets pregnant at all costs. Iya Femi, on the other hand, does not even need Iya Segi to prod her into adultery, as she is already three months pregnant by her former employer's son. Should Iya

Segi be seen as a bad role model, not to be imitated by other wives? The answer to this question, from the author's perspective, is no. A woman who has sacrificed all for a man should enjoy the union without interference from other women as bed sharers. Iya Segi receives little or no blame from the author, even for killing her own daughter through the poisoned food she prepares for Bolanle. Her husband's ridiculous forgiveness does not conform to the Yoruba moral norm.

In a radical feminist manner, Shoneyin justifies Iya Segi's moral ineptitude. To this extent, the author has impliedly sanctioned adultery in the face of domestic oppression. This justification is unacceptable, not only because of the norms that guide the society of the novel, but much more because, as Eldridge (1989) points out while commenting on the novels of Conrad and Austen and the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, literature is the most important and richest source of insight in favor of morality. As such, our capacities for acknowledging moral laws, as a formula of value, and for acting according to moral dictates are tested through the interpretation of these narratives. Moral codes should not be sacrificed on the altar of any radical ideology (112).

The second character Shoneyin uses is Iya Tope. Iya Tope, Baba Segi's second wife, has the right to be angry, brash, and unfaithful in a marriage she enters merely in exchange for the debt her poor father fails to pay Baba Segi. Despite Iya Tope's timidity, friendliness, carefulness, and godliness, adultery is a channel of escape for her bottled-up hurts, as long as her husband is not privy to it, even if the whole world is aware. She visits the meat seller at his store in the marketplace to satisfy her sexual fantasies. She neither shows any sign of regret or remorse for her adulterous escapades, especially with the meat seller, nor does she consider the views of society regarding adultery. She deliberately ignores the moral code, which frowns upon adultery, and the fact that her conduct as an individual affects her society. Her disregard for her children's welfare is the peak of her moral ineptitude. Iya Tope symbolizes the contemporary woman who confronts the perceived oppressiveness of the male gender. Why should her future be sacrificed to redeem her father's pride? Why would she be bartered for a cause she was never part of the bargain? Must she, as a sacrificial goat, languish on the bed of a man who has little or no emotional feelings for her? The author's answer to these questions is simple: her character must protest, and this protest must be an outright disregard for fidelity. Evil, in my opinion, is not the antidote for evil. The tree of morality cannot be nurtured by a barrage of acidic rain but by showers of uprightness. As argued by Doki, Ama Gowon, and Ali Sule Ako (2010), creative art, as a discipline, should be used to enforce a change of attitude among Nigerians, such that virtuous acts like honesty, integrity, accountability, and responsibility are embraced by all. Literature should be used as a tool for positive change in society (113).

Iya Femi is the third wife of the house and, in my opinion, the most incongruous. Her disregard for moral codes is unparalleled. She is portrayed as a very malicious, vengeful, and unforgiving woman, products of a terrible and bitter childhood experience at Grandma's house, where she worked as a maid. Through the flashback technique, we learn that she lost her parents early in life and subsequently was forced to leave her parents' house and work for Grandma as a house help. At Grandma's place, she was deprived of education and subjected to all sorts of inhumane experiences. These experiences molded her into the wicked and heartless character she becomes. While at Grandma's place, she has an affair with the son of the house, Tunde. Even after she runs away to marry Baba Segi, she continues her sexual adventures with Tunde. At a point in her life, she accepts Christianity, not because of its religious moral codes but because of the pleasure of hearing that her enemies, including the wicked Grandma, will burn in hell. She is the most daring wife of Baba Segi. Her level of disregard for human life is revealed in her attempt to murder Bolanle when she poisoned the latter's food. John Gardner (1978) claims that moral affirmation is the most fundamental artistic value. In his opinion, most critics, including writers, evade the real task of criticism (114). He asserts that "true art treats ideals, affirming and clarifying the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Ideals are art's ends: the rest is mere methodology."

Shoneyin's male characters are not spared in this affront to moral standards. Taju, Baba Segi's driver, is the backstabbing employee who sleeps with his boss's wife without any shame. In an ironic manner, he often refers to his boss's children as his own while casting disparaging looks at their father. The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives has its unique way of unraveling the moral issues in the story. Her use of alternating and multiple points of view aids her purpose and makes her story engaging. This technique also provides backstory for past events and gives meaning to present circumstances. For instance, in the "Rat Head" chapter, we are not given much information on how the rat head got into Bolanle's room, but in the next chapter, we are supplied with the much-needed information through Iya Femi's narration. Furthermore, the use of alternating points of view in the novel has been very useful in giving us a thorough insight into the lives of the characters. We are sometimes provided with reasons for why the characters behave the way they do, what led to their immoral behavior, and how their actions and those of others affect them.

The use of flashback is another prominent technique in the narration. We are sometimes taken back to events that happened in a previous period in the characters' lives. For instance, in the chapter titled "Iya Femi," we are given a glimpse of her growing-up years and the terrible experiences she endured. This glimpse into her past helps provide

clues as to why she is a vengeful lover and wife. This flashback technique has made it possible for the reader to understand the reasons behind the characters' immoral actions and sometimes to even sympathize with them.

Told in a light and humorous way, the novel is satiric in form and content. The tone employed by Lola Shoneyin is humorous and sometimes exaggerative. The satiric intent is pronounced through ridicule that comes alive in a subtle way. An instance is the excerpt below: “If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?” She shrugged her shoulders. “So, I found seed and planted it in my belly” (p. 215). In the above excerpt, Iya Segi explains how she cheated on her husband by committing adultery in an offhand way. The humor in her tone is an expression of the protest in her heart (52).

4. Conclusion

The primary focus of this research is to contribute to and support existing literature on gender stereotypes, which often portray females as the weaker gender in all aspects of human life. This study utilizes Shoneyin’s novel, "The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives," to examine the experiences of women and how they are perceived in African societies primarily as child-bearers and objects of sexual desire for their male counterparts. Our understanding of stereotypes and prejudices is influenced by various factors. These include interactions with parents and peers (115), media portrayals (116), and societal norms that children learn at a very young age about appropriate behaviors based on gender, age, race, and physical appearance (117).

Stereotypes are deeply ingrained because they are integral to our cultural identities, often reinforced through media, social interactions, and shared beliefs among peers (118). Consequently, stereotypes are resistant to change despite efforts to challenge them. This chapter will present recommendations and conclusions, providing readers with a concise overview of the research focus and its findings.

4.1. Recommendations

In light of the findings derived from the analysis of Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, the researcher proposes the following recommendations aimed at combating gender stereotypes and promoting public awareness:

It is essential to combat gender stereotypes across various domains, including language usage, legal frameworks, societal attitudes, judicial systems, media portrayal, and educational practices. Professor Ling White of the United States advocates for challenging the entrenched "cosmography of gender inequality," which perpetuates language habits that portray personality traits as predominantly male while relegating women to subhuman roles such as followers and consumers, reinforcing men as aggressors and women as victims.

At the national level, effective policies should include temporary special measures like quotas in political and corporate sectors, ensuring equitable representation and influence (applying principles outlined in the Women's Empowerment Principles). Media representation must accurately reflect women's roles and include proactive engagement of women in media professions to reshape societal perceptions, leveraging the power of social media and ICT.

Critical to fostering a gender-sensitive environment is the active participation of women in religious and cultural institutions, promoting interpretations that uphold gender equity in norms and practices. Educational reforms should start from early childhood, promoting gender equality through inclusive curricula and educational tools, fostering an environment where both boys and girls are empowered.

Furthermore, initiatives should encourage women's entry into traditionally male-dominated fields such as STEM, armed forces, and leadership roles. Legal frameworks must be strengthened to address gender-based violence, ensuring stringent enforcement and changing societal perceptions of masculinity and acceptable behavior.

Promoting shared domestic responsibilities, including caregiving and parenting, and securing women's rights to property, financial assets, and entrepreneurship opportunities are crucial steps. Adequate resource allocation is needed for advocacy campaigns, awareness initiatives, and curriculum development aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes.

Tax incentives and private sector engagement should further enhance women's empowerment efforts, ensuring sustainable progress towards gender equality.

Compliance with ethical standards

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