**The Polygynous Household in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives:* A Haven in a Heartless World**

**Abstract**

Despite its author’s public condemnation of the impediments to female autonomy, equality, freedom, dignity and self-realisation inherent in polygamy, the polyvalent nature of the contemporary Nigerian novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives,* suggests the necessary material and moral complexity of any analysis of plural marriage in postcolonial Africa. Parodic play in this novel highlights the ways in which the apparently monstrous patriarch and daily perversions of traditional marriage and household ideals represent the only security for both relatively advantaged and disadvantaged women in twenty-first century Nigeria. I embed my literary analysis of the novel here within a survey of history and religion to show the ways in which monogamy was a self-reflexive, mirror-image of the colonial and Christian missionary projects. This study of the novel is also contextualised by socio-anthropological literature that underscores the ways in which the global forces which promote romantic love as the sole foundation of monogamous marriage, ironically, are part of the global flows which create the punitive economic and social conditions to which plural marriage is an entirely rational response shaped by local cultural contexts.

**Keywords**: African literature, Postcolonial literature, Nigerian novel, Lola Shoneyin, Polygamy.

Lola Shoneyin’s reputation in Nigeria, established as a poet, has grown further nationally and internationally with the success of her first novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010). The fact that her craft was honed in the genre of verse is evident in the novel from its compression and finely balanced architecture of expression, the penchant for striking images and the lyricism of some of the passages. The title of the novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, makes it clear that the main subject of the novel is the controversial and culturally contentious question of polygamy. However, even though the novel censures polygamy, it also presents a critique of distorted versions of the dominant ideal of monogamy. Despite the dual critique, the fact that the thrust of the novel is directed mainly at exposing the toxicity of polygamy in the modern world is reinforced by the central focus of most reviews of the novel, the drift of author interviews and the fact that, while the novel casts a glance at both polygamous and monogamous households, it presents in its preliminary pages a family tree only of the polygamous household that is its primary emphasis. The novel reflects its subject matter at the level of narrative structure also. The *plural* nature of the marriage of the Yoruba patriarch, Ishola Alao, is replicated in the manifold voices presented in the story. The short chapters of which the novel is comprised combine first person narration of the many household members and third person narration focalised through the same characters. Both first and third person narratives offer flashbacks allowing the reader to construct short biographies for each of the significant characters. But, despite the attempt at the level of narrative to present the more social world of the polygamous household, the novel defaults to the individuating tendency of the novel as genre to foreground the individual life. The character that emerges most clearly both through the constitution of her rich inner life and through the fact of her personal development in the novel is the character, Bolanle. who is caustically referred to by the non-literate wives as “the graduate”. Bolanle is the fourth and final wife to enter the Alao household and the one who acts as a catalyst, finally fully exposing the marital secret and the oppressiveness of polygamy.

Another striking feature of the novel is its humour. Humour is created through scenes of bawdy, naturalistic, slapstick comedy generated from the earthy expressions and actions of the characters the novel classes as traditional. On the other pole of the binary, humour is created also through satire, irony and parody of social trends and characters that the novel classes as modern. Here modern popular romance is sent up and distorted postcolonial versions of materialistic modern monogamy as well as the violence and hypocrisy of misogynistic, hedonistic contemporary relationships based upon individual freedom and pleasure are exposed. The only character to escape lampooning is the heroine, Bolanle. In her self-realisation at the end of the novel she also represents the possibility of an ideal monogamy the nature of which is not spelt out in this fairly open-ended novel. While the novel variously constructs at a surface level the familiar tradition-modernity dichotomy, a squint-eyed view of the narrative dynamics suggests the paradoxes and contradictions of this idea, as this essay will show through an analysis of the related polygamy-monogamy binary.

Thus, although the novel parodies a broad range of institutions both traditional and modern, finally, through the character of Bolanle and the recouping of the moral and civilizational superiority of monogamy, it is only polygamy that is finally presented as irredeemable. The novel’s central ideological position, which emerges most clearly in closure, is at odds with contemporary trends in marriage identified by sociologists, and certainly contradicts the economic and relationship dynamic at the heart of the novel, which reveals urban polygamy in the twenty-first century postcolony as providing wives with the social possibility for emotional and financial security, and, yes, even a limited freedom, despite its tensions and complications.

Consideration of the *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* will follow a brief social, cultural, religious and political history of polygamy that will provide a context for analysis. A literary history will also be mapped through an overview of representations of polygamy in African literature.

**A Potted History of Polygamy: Religion, Anthro-Soc, History**

Polygamy is a part of the myths of origin and the historical development of most major religions and many world cultures. Geoffrey Parrinder, in *Sexual Morality in the World’s Religions*,identifies various forms of polygamy in the major religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, the Sikh and Parsi creeds, African traditional religions and the three Abrahamic faiths. Citing the findings of Barash and Lipton in *Strange Bedfellows* and Murdock’s *Ethnographic Atlas*, Judith Stacey, the author of *Unhitched: Love, Marriage and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China* suggests, in addition, that “more than three-quarters of all human societies were polygynous. Monogamy was the preferred norm in fewer than one-quarter of human societies” (124). Since the twentieth century, however, plural marriage has come to be identified mainly with an ossified idea of African tradition and Islamic law. The shift away from formalised polygamy in most world cultures may be linked with the effects on personal relations of colonial norms of family life reinforced by Victorian cultural evolutionary hierarchies. Referring to the African experience, Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitsen highlights the fact that colonists regarded Africans, in particular, to be sub-human and that part of the humanising and civilising mission involved introducing European ways of life–“This involved among its important elements giving up polygamy” (145). Polygamy was considered a “social evil” linked with the “economic serfdom” of women and children, which “hinder[ed] the economic and intellectual advancement of the country” (145). These attitudes were supported by missionary Christianity, which Zeitsen characterises as launching a “crusade” against polygamy, foregrounding the salvation of women, captured in the idea that: “It is only by the law of the Gospel, incorporated in social life, that the Black woman will be delivered from the shame and slavery of polygamy and attain to the liberty of the children of God and to the high dignity of the Christian wife and mother” (Zeitsen, quoting Van Wing 147). To put a slightly different spin on Spivak’s dictum of the gendered moral justification for Indian colonialism presented by the outlawing of sati-suicide in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in the African colonial context, the eradication of polygamy formed the central plank of white men saving black women from black men.

Normative heterosexual monogamy in the European tradition may be linked with the rise of the companionate marriage in the 17th century, where the romantic love between two people conceived as individuals begins to become the primary foundation for marriage. The rise of the companionate marriage has been tracked by a number of scholarly works, but principally in Lawrence Stone’s monumental book, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*.

Monogamy, which structurally embodies the concept of companionate marriage, gets reinforced in the colonial cultural imaginary as a defensive response to the “backwardness” of the polygamy it encounters in the colonies. Underlining this paradox, Zeitsen, mentioned above, observes that polygamy has been tacitly accepted by various Christian denominations across its history (Lutheranism included), and that the contemporary stance that opposes plural marriage is, in part, a consequence of politically fraught colonial encounters with other religions. Zeitsen states, “Today, the Christian Church clearly condemns polygamy, not least as a result of the last 200 years of colonial history, where the intercultural confrontation between colonizer and colonized often took the form of religious confrontation. Faced with polygamous, animistic peoples, European administrators and missionaries made polygamy one of the main issues with which to force their way of life upon their new subjects” (34).

As colonialism has been superseded by globalisation, the geographically and historically localised conception of intimate relations and partnerships, crystallised in the companionate marriage, has emerged as universal and natural, particularly in the context of the ways in which urbanisation (and here one may read modernisation) has forced a reconfiguration of diverse forms of family structure. (Paradoxically, the individualising assumptions which gird the heterosexual companionate marriage provide the rationale also for homosexual companionate marriage in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.) In their introduction to the edited volume *Love in Africa*, Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas summarise the ways in which a number of the contributors draw attention to contemporary reconfigurations of conceptions of intimate relations and marriage, especially among African middle classes, as a result of urbanisation, higher levels of formal education and the influence of local and global popular culture which promote the ideal of monogamous voluntary love matches. In most world cultures, the incipient shift to heterosexual monogamy may be traced back to the nineteenth century, with polygamy becoming legally outlawed in the twentieth century. In an Asian context, Malavika Karlekar’s study of Kulin polygyny is a case in point. Kulins, as the highest ranking Brahmins of Bengal, often took numerous wives – up to a hundred – until the practice was prohibited by legislation in 1956.

Polygamy, of course, refers to multiple spouses, polygyny to many wives and polyandry to many husbands. Polygyny has been identified in colonial and missionary discourse, in the expansion of human rights imperialism and in North-Atlantic feminism as inherently barbaric and oppressive towards women.

Yet studies have shown that the converse is not true. Polyandry and matrilineality do not necessarily translate into higher female status, and continued feminist struggles in monogamous societies suggest the inscription of gender imbalances even in modern heterosexual companionate marriage.

There are three exceptions to the general legal injunction against polygyny in the twentieth century. The first challenge to the proscriptive pattern occurs in African cultures, where the power of cultural pro-life attitudes act as a dynamo for the perpetuation of polygamous relations. David Maillu suggests that childbirth is the primary purpose of marriage in Africa: “The first natural acceptance to the African, in so far as woman-to-man sexual relation in marriage is concerned, is that their coming together is primarily to procreate” (3). The response to infertility in African cultures has been creative and practical. Polygyny resolves the problem of female infertility; and a tacit polyandry, where a male relative impregnates the wife, resolves the problem of male infertility. The second variation on the trend is observed in predominantly Islamic countries where, hedged in by conditions regarding equality of spouses and adequate material means to support an extended family, religious law unambiguously permits polygyny limited to four wives. The third case of contemporary polygyny which reverses the global trend is the instance of Mormon fundamentalism which often is presented as the barbarian within; however, Mormon polygyny will not be discussed further since it is not directly relevant to the novel being analysed here.

The broader social outlooks which make polygyny in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries less easy to efface in African traditional religions and Islam are, paradoxically, reinforced by modernity. Even in parts of the Muslim world where culturally monogamy has prevailed, and even among African families which tended to monogamy, polygyny has become a marker of prestige in the formation of elites in modern nation states. Augustine Nwoye draws a distinction in an African context between interventive polygamy, which occurs in the context of and as an attempt to alleviate family stress, for example the infertility discussed above, and affluent polygamy that is a marker of social prestige and economic ambition. Affluent polygamy gets further reinforced by the ways in which “tradition” is reinvented and manipulated in the context of modern identity politics. A case that illustrates both points is South African president Jacob Zuma’s plural marriage which symbolises both his status as a “big man” and which acts as a contemporary assertion of Zulu identity.

The general popular and scholarly consensus, furthermore, is that indigenous African polygyny is reinforced in parts of Africa which have been Islamised. But, of course, polygyny is not exclusively an African and Islamic phenomenon. Depending on how the idea of marriage is conceptualised, polygyny exists in other cultures as concubinage, long-term extra-marital affairs, serial monogamy and other forms of *de facto* polygyny.

**One Man, Many Wives: African Literary Representations of Polygyny**

What then could be more apt a subject for African writing in general and the African woman writer, in particular, than polygyny, which has been globally defined as a particularly African “problem”? Quite astonishingly, however, when one looks for examples of African literature that make polygyny their major focus, coming up with titles is hard. In fact, a survey of dictionaries and encyclopaedias of African literature is quite revealing. Of the range of reference works consulted, including the various Columbia guides and Simon Gikandi’s *Encyclopaedia of African Literature*, polygamy or polygyny are not represented by full entries at all, and the few page references to polygamy or polygyny that exist in other entries are very generalised. These literary reference works suggest the following. Broadly, in African male writing, a defence of polygyny emerges in the late nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth century as a counter-discourse in non-fiction tracts to colonial marriage ordinances and missionary condemnation of the practice as anti-Christian. Here again there are overtones of Spivak’s “voiceless” subaltern since the polemic against monogamy in these letters and pamphlets comes mainly from the first generation of colonially educated male, rather than female, observers.

Considering works which have been canonised as part of the trajectory of African literature, rather than the non-fiction works discussed above, polygyny is generally addressed from a number of points of view in the works of a few male fiction writers. It forms the specific focus of the 1959 novel by T.M. Aluko titled *One Man, One Wife* and the 1970 novel, *The Victims*, by scholar of orature and fiction writer Isidore Okpweho. It is also addressed in a 1972 novel by Zimbabwean, Ndabaningi Sithole, called *The Polygamist*. While Aluko’s novel shows a polygyny so culturally entrenched that even Christianised Africans cannot abide by its monogamous ideal, Okpewho and Sithole highlight the problems of polygyny in transformed material circumstances. In this respect, both Sithole and Okpweho’s novels predate the concerns of the work of women writers like Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta and Ama Ata Aidoo. Both these male and female writers highlight the anomalies and injustices of modern forms of urban polygyny that prevail when the norms and *mores* of the countryside are transposed onto the colonial city.

Polygyny exists mainly as part of a general background in the works of most African women writers against which other issues are explored. Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* is a case in point. The focus of this novel falls squarely on the Igbo procreation imperative which drives the protagonist Nnu Ego’s life, against the backdrop of various culturally endorsed rationales for the multiple marriages of the husband. But polygyny as central exploration in works of fiction by women writers, in fact, is illustrated by extremely few examples. Polygyny provides the specific narrative impetus of a 1947 short story by Nigerian writer, Mabel Dove Danquah, titled “Anticipation”. However, it is Senegalese writer, Mariama Bâ’s 1981 novel, *So Long A Letter,* that has achieved iconic status as the African novel which addresses and critiques polygyny head-on.

But even here there is something of a conundrum as Obioma Nnaemeka, probably the most perceptive literary scholar of polygyny, has observed. Reading *So Long a Letter* in the original French, Nnaemeka points out that: “It is puzzling that a book, *Une si longue lettre*/*So Long a Letter*, in which the word “*la polygamie*/polygamy *never* appears and polygamy (the institution) *never* functions … has been debated and analyzed *ad nauseam* in literary criticism (feminist criticism, in particular) as a book *about the institution of polygamy* (derided as one of Africa’s chronic ailments)” (Nnaemeka 164, emphasis in the original). On Nnaemeka’s analysis, what Bâ explores are the “polygamous instincts” of men in the context of “cultural hemorrhage and societal rearticulations” (164) attendant upon colonial transformations of African countries and cultures.

Ama Ata Aidoo is the next African woman writer who turns her gaze directly onto polygyny in the 1993 novel, *Changes, A Love Story*. In this novel, polygyny is not forced upon the protagonist by a husband who manipulates tradition to his advantage; rather it is the lifestyle option of choice for a fully autonomous, financially independent Ghanaian woman, who nevertheless is left unfulfilled in the urban plural marriage. This novel thus contradicts the assumption that it is backward, uneducated women who enter polygynous families as victims of tradition, since in this case, polygyny seems to allow the autonomy and freedom from domestic responsibility which the protagonist, Esi, requires for personal self-fulfillment. We see a variation of this scenario in *The Secret Lives* where a formally educated woman chooses polygyny but, in this case, for traumatic personal reasons.

It might be argued that African women writers have, with the exception of the few cases above, largely strategically avoided tackling the question of polygyny directly since it is a topic that simply is too fraught. Criticism of polygyny may be construed as a rejection of African tradition in favour of an endorsement of colonial modernity. By contrast, promoting polygyny may be viewed as undermining the gains of anti-patriarchal struggles in the context of a “universal” feminist individualism. My contention is that African women writers have not been shy of controversy. Despite Bâ’s complex and nuanced treatment of the topic in *So Long a Letter*, many African male critics have read the novel as an unthinking acceptance of culturally specific Western feminism. Buchi Emecheta has quite explicitly presented polygyny as a central strength of African feminism in “Feminism with a small ‘f’” and she has not avoided the arguably more “touchy” subject of African mothering in *The Joys of Motherhood*. If African women writers have for the most part neglected to explore polygyny in their fiction it is not because of fears of being considered cultural “sell-outs”. It is more likely that the practice has been viewed as unoppressive where it has not been adulterated by fundamental social, cultural and economic shifts.

Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, published in 2010, is the most recent novel with international circulation that addresses the question of polygyny. This novel, along with the large numbers of fictional works in local languages and the popular “market” literatures in English that are not surveyed here, highlight the fact that plural marriage in Africa is an enduring social phenomenon into the twenty-first century. In the latter range of popular works, polygyny does not occur as a problem to be overcome; it is instead one of a range of personal relationships which forms an unexceptional backdrop to social equilibrium.

Thus the institution of polygyny that has come to define the patriarchal victimhood of African women by African/Islamic tradition has been directly addressed in only three novels and one short story by African women writers, and is considered only indirectly in a number of others, most notably, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*. Clearly for most African women writers polygyny has not been *the* major social challenge to be creatively explored. It is one of a range of practices, the transformation of which in the colonial world, seemed to impact differentially (and sometimes unfairly) on women. Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* again forces a reappraisal since in a globalised twenty-first century Nigeria urban polygyny becomes a refuge for women when the promises of progress and advancement of postcolonial modern nationhood, for complex reasons, are broken.

**Unruly Polygyny in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives***

What is most fascinating about *The Secret Lives* *of Baba Segi’s Wives* is the way in which the novel appears to have a boisterous and disruptive counter-life, like a wayward child who defies the dictates of Lola Shoneyin, its author-parent. In author interviews, Shoneyin comes out quite categorically on the side of the argument which suggests that polygyny is inherently morally offensive and ought to be eradicated. She declares that “Husband-sharing is ugly” in a *Guardian* author profile, titled “Polygamy? No Thanks”. She explains her position by narrating her family history where a hereditary chieftainship obliged the “modern marriage” of her grandparents to take a step backward into polygyny with her grandfather marrying four other women. The experience makes Shoneyin’s own mother wary of plural marriage against which she warns her daughter: “[polygynous wives] might be smiling on the outside, but inside they [are] sad and bitter.” Shoneyin’s parents, for whom ethnicity is not an issue, also caution her brothers against dating girls from polygynous homes since they have to be “devious” to survive. In the context of public, apparently politically motivated Nigerian plural marriages, Shoneyin concludes the article by suggesting: “The sad truth is, [sic] polygamy constitutes a national embarrassment in any country that fantasises 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.”

Even though the author reflects almost point for point the assumptions about polygyny of Christian missionaries, referred to above, Shoneyin’s novel, by contrast, presents a polygyny which defies any simple moralising and preconceptions of cultural backwardness. As far as the major characters are concerned, the secret that Baba Segi, the patriarch ostensibly at the heart of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, is infertile, is a secret only from Bolanle, the new and fourth wife, and Baba Segi himself. (The “secret” is also narratively so well managed that as sharp readers we can guess at the truth, but have it finally confirmed only when it is revealed at the end.) The “secret” is known soon after marriage to the enterprising and entrepreneurial first wife, Iya Segi, who does not conceive a child even after being taken to a medicine man by Baba Segi on the recommendation of his advisor, the unmarried shebeen owner, Teacher, who himself hides his impotence rather than infertility. Iya Segi duly informs the second and third wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, about the secret but not the fourth wife, Bolanle. (“Iya” and “Baba” are the teknonymous terms indicating “mother of” and “father of” respectively.) Bolanle enters the Alao household with some rancour from the existing wives since she is “a graduate”, young, beautiful and sophisticated, who the other wives assume, will steal Baba Segi’s favour. The first wife, Iya Segi, goes so far as to say that, with the exception of Bolanle, she does not “blame the other women” since they are “weakened” by the prosperity Baba Segi offers (104). For her they are the “humble maidservants who live for a kind pat on the head from the mother-of-the home” (104). Thus, what we see in this novel from a “third generation” Nigerian writer, is a twenty-first century perversion of the cooperation and protective hierarchies of the polygynous household of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. While in Achebe’s novel, which casts a retrospective glance at pre-colonial Nigerian society, the first wife is a genuinely motherly figure at the head of a household where childcare, household duties and husband management are a collective responsibility, in the twenty-first century urban plural marriage, the first wife is presented as a competitive, acquisitive, lustful “masculine” character who manipulates her husband and the other wives to her own advantage. The first wife, Iya Segi, develops the keen business sense she had as a single young woman further after marriage, having wheedled Baba Segi into allowing her to trade in sweets. Sweet wholesaling appears simply to be a pretext to go into a massive cement-selling venture which also necessitates that she learn to drive a car. Both the sale of building materials and driving are coded as masculine in the society described by the novel. In fact, reversing gender stereotypes more fundamentally, Iya Segi is the provider in the household since her significant wealth, acquired while still in the village, is secretly passed on through their respective mothers to the future groom, Ishola Alao. Her wealth while single was such that she, like a man, was in a position to buy land and build a house so sizeable that her objecting mother declares: “The village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can’t!” (97). As a closet lesbian, Iya Segi’s gaze is further coded as masculine both when she, together with the virile village carpenter, ogle a female tomato hawker and when she salivates over Bolanle’s female friend who visits the household. Despite the jealousies and self-interested power play at work in the household, nevertheless, the first three wives at no point jeopardise the fundamental stability of the home which, in a globalised Nigeria riven by the massive inequalities of the postcolonial nation state, represents the only security they enjoy.

In what may be a take on the idea of the entry of history into the stasis of the pre-modern, the novel begins with Bolanle’s entry into the household and ends with her departure. Bolanle, bringing with her a sophistication that the novel defines as modern and a formal western education, believes she can bring refinement to both the polygamist husband and the wives. When Baba Segi belches, Bolanle naively believes that she would “devote a few hours a night to teaching him good manners” (19). She also patronisingly takes on the duty of introducing the wives to the niceties of polite conversation. The novel, however, leaves considerable doubt around how one should read the character of Bolanle. The narrative shifts between third person omniscient and first person narration presenting the histories and points of view of all of the main characters. But the story starts and ends with Bolanle entering the household, and a significant eight of twenty-eight chapters give voice to Bolanle. Bolanle appears to be the central character, the one who shows the most development and the one with whom we, as readers, are led to sympathise. Yet the wicked, rambunctious humour with which the novel is charged tempts one to read even Bolanle’s character ironically, though she herself is never sent up the way the “traditional” characters are. Bolanle’s ingénue, almost missionary commitment to uplifting the Alao household in the ironic context of her “free” *choice* of a “primitive” polygynous union beggars belief. Bolanle defies her authoritarian and controlling mother by eloping with Baba Segi. For Bolanle’s mother, polygyny is the choice of uneducated bush-dwellers and educated gold-diggers. Bolanle is neither of these. Polygyny presents itself to her as a refuge into which she may escape her completely dysfunctional (monogamous, modern) family and her own secret. Baba Segi’s home is a troubled place within which to escape and to heal, but which is less troubled than the world outside. She needs healing from her rape and abortion that she keeps hidden from everyone. As a fifteen-year old schoolgirl, she had been duped into accepting a ride on a rainy day from a Mercedez-driving, branded polo-shirt wearing, predatory young man, part of Africa’s small, new, transnational consumerist class. Playing on the idea of conception and childbirth, which is of profound literary and cultural significance in the context, Bolanle compares her violated self with a broken egg. When finally she reveals the rape to her mother in an attempt to justify her choice to enter a polygynous household, she says: “Mama, you were living with an empty shell. Everything was scraped out of me. I was inside out” (150). In this context, and as we shall see when this imagery is repeated at the end, the Alao household seems to provide Bolanle with the comfort she needs to become whole.

Despite the fact that it is Bolanle that needs saving, as soon as she enters the polygynous household, she casts herself as saviour. When she is first introduced to the family, her rather self-righteous comment that she “will not give up on them” and “will bring light” to their “darkness” cannot but invite ironic interpretation (22). A further irony lies in the outcome where Bolanle does bring light, but not the light of the Enlightenment worldview she anticipates. Instead, she brings to light the fact of Baba Segi’s infertility and the other wives’ ambiguous betrayal of and loyalty towards the polygynous union when her own apparent barrenness is medically investigated.

All of the other wives engage in extra-marital affairs not as an implicit critique of the plural marriage, but because of their desire for children and for the preservation of the polygynous household which for them is the only haven in a hopeless world. Children are the indisputable *sine qua non* of the Yoruba cultural existence presented. Without a child one’s life has no reality and one is a ghost in the world of the living. The significance of children is artfully highlighted at the beginning of the novel, describing Bolanle’s first night in the home, and we are reminded of it again at the end. At the beginning of the novel, such is the horror of foeticide that when in family time television viewing there is a news report about serial killings of pregnant women, the family members are viscerally affected with Baba Segi actually throwing up. At the end of the novel, the illness and death of the eldest daughter, Segi, is cast as a cataclysmic event that challenges the natural order of parent pre-deceasing child. Since the birth of children ensures the survival of marriage, the wives take the initiative and stop at nothing in the new urban context to make sure they fall pregnant. All the wives, except Bolanle, in a surreptitious and daring take on the traditional practice of tacit impregnation by a male relative in the case of the infertility of the husband, are made pregnant by lovers of their choice. In what is possibly a satirical postcolonial allusion to Lady Chatterley, the apparently lesbian Iya Segi chooses the chauffeur, Taju, to impregnate her. As noted above, Iya Segi may have accumulated wealth in the village much like a man, and she may desire women much like a man, but she is obliged to marry and be impregnated by a man in order to have children. It is her own wealth that allows the marriage to Ishola Alao to take place and her own ingenuity that 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.” (101)

Once her position is secured through childbirth, the safety of the Alao household not only allows Iya Segi the urban base where her initial investment in the form of the secret dowry is safe, but also the financial freedom to multiply her returns in a flourishing cement business, alluded to above, when she theatrically, early on in the marriage, elicits her husband’s sympathy and consent to allow her to trade. The liaison with the bewildered and overwhelmed Taju is one where Iya Segi entirely controls as a consequence of his poverty and her dominance in the financial and sexual arenas. Sent home to collect a parcel, Taju is “taken”, ironically, in Baba Segi’s armchair and is “ridden like a new saddle” by Iya Segi whenever her need to conceive arises.

The second wife, Iya Tope, by contrast to the dominating, shrewd first wife is the daughter of an indigent farmer given to Baba Segi to repay a debt. She is child-like, unattractive, simple-minded and clearly unable to fend for herself either in the countryside or the city. She is quickly inducted into the “secret” of the household by the first wife, but quite unexpectedly, unlike the more practical- minded Iya Segi, takes a far more pleasurable view of the task of conceiving a child. Iya Tope takes up with a “meat-seller” who sells his flesh both literally and figuratively. Iya Tope, by far exceeding the brief of vicarious impregnation, visits the meat-seller weekly for the carnal delights he offers, each subsequent visit repeating 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.” (85)

Reversing the conventional African paradigm of the “sugar daddy” who enjoys *de facto* polygyny in an “outside marriage”, the naïve, unsophisticated Iya Tope becomes a “sugar mommy” with her own polyandrous “outside marriage”. Her amatory relationship ends only when the senior wife admonishes her for taking risks that threaten the household: “I will not let you threaten this home with your excess. You have allowed the concubine to become the husband. I have not known anyone to enjoy the penis the way you do!” (86). Iya Tope is also overcome with remorse since her sex addiction has led her to neglecting her children who have “bought [her] the easy life [she] lived” (87). Neither Iya Segi, the only character aware of these carnal trysts, nor the third person narrative voice in the novel, appear morally affronted by Iya Tope’s sex addiction. It is simply a facet of her personality as her stunted intellect is. It is condemned as a problem by Iya Segi only when Iya Tope’s absent mindedness and neglect to cover her trail threaten to expose her adultery and threatens the stability of the polygynous household that is Iya Segi’s main concern.

The third wife, Iya Femi, proposes to Baba Segi in an effort to escape her life of abjection as a house-girl in a wealthy family. She had been sold by her uncle after the death of her parents into domestic slavery, presided over by an especially tyrannical and cruel “Grandma”. Iya Femi is a kind of Pamela who gives in to the below-stairs overtures of the “hedonist” son, Tunde, who, perversely, believes that the physical relationship with the maid is an expression of his anti-establishment views and an embodiment of her potential liberation. Unlike Pamela, social barriers are such that Iya Femi cannot enter the class of the new African elite through proving her bourgeois morality, since the rules of bourgeois morality do not prevail in this context. Iya Femi marries Baba Segi to escape her daily humiliations but continues to enjoy the erotic pleasures of the liaison with her former employer’s son, Tunde, in the mistaken belief that their relationship is cemented by mutual sexual attraction. Iya Femi dreams of double revenge, in which the Alao household is the “launchpad”. In her first act of vengeance, she is successful. She returns to her village, where she burns the home stolen from her by the uncle who sold her to Grandma. Her second dream of revenge is one where she triumphantly returns to the house in which she worked, with Tunde’s children (brought up as the children of Baba Segi) in tow, for her final victory over Grandma. This ambition is foiled, however, when she discovers from a general photocopied farewell note left at his office that the cosmopolitan Tunde has very unceremoniously abandoned her for a job as a ”US Rep” after his mother’s death, requesting that acquaintances get in touch by email: “I ask you: what is email? And what is a US rep? Ha! God! Is this your face? I could not stop the tears of anger that wet my face. I cried. 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!” (167) Iya Femi is *de facto* polyandrous, then, in her long-standing extra-marital relationship, which gender reverses the well-known French convention of the long-time mistress.

Thus a novel which purportedly shows the oppression of voiceless women under the patriarchal system of traditional polygyny presents the reader with one wife who is the Nigerian equivalent of the Victorian self-made man, who dreams of one day indulging her lesbian inclinations, eyeing young women from the top of her multi-storey mansion. It presents the reader with a second wife who is a simple-minded but well-intentioned sex-addict and a third wife who, unlike Lady Macbeth, acts on her vaulting ambition herself and not by proxy. In the context of the contemporary Nigeria in which they find themselves, these are all avenues which open up from the space of the polygynous household, and the household is secured only through procreation. Paradoxically, furthermore, the wives of this formal polygynous household become informally polyandrous in order to protect the material and emotional well-being it represents despite the occasional prickles of the communal household. They also make the completely rational choice to stay in the household even when the opportunity is presented at the end to leave. Their decision is not motivated by, nor does it aspire to, any Yoruba cultural ideal or idea of Yoruba identity. Another fascinating dimension of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* is the fact that it presents the rural model of the polygynous household transposed into the city. Thus it does not represent the urban monogamised polygyny described in Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel, *Changes*. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* complicates the modern trend seen in Aidoo’s *Changes*, which presented men appealing to tradition to formalise adulterous relationships with women who then are married and kept in separate homes, jettisoning the ritual, hierarchies, sororities and sharing of responsibilities attendant upon the rural “compound” version of polygyny. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, one is presented with an urban polygyny that shares the relationship and domestic “architecture” of the rural polygyny of Achebe’s “pre-colonial” novels but which meets personal and cultural needs in a postcolonial, modernised, globalised Nigeria.

To reiterate the point made above, Shoneyin’s novel, in its Rabelaisian exuberance, sends up most of the assumptions of its author on the question of polygyny, underlining a disconnect between an “informal” theory and practice of writing. The implication of Shoneyin’s *Guardian* article is that polygyny is a traditional institution with no place in the modern world; that it inherently oppresses women; that household rivalries, jealousies and hierarchies are completely destructive of wives and children and that polygyny obstructs the progress and development narrative of the political elites of the developing world. Yet, Shoneyin’s novel, astonishingly, destabilises every one of these postulates, confirming the observations of Judith Stacey, researcher of love, marriage and family values from the USA to China 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” (144). Although Stacey’s study does not specifically focus on Nigeria, it does consider the parallel example of South Africa. Significant differences exist between the two countries, in particular, the South African experience of Apartheid. But the macro- and micro-structural transformations forced by colonialism, and the post-independence inheritance of political institutions which may not have local cultural purchase leading to corruption and mismanagement, are similar to both countries. These historical legacies have been further exacerbated by the terms on which African economies are integrated into late-capitalist global economic networks. While *The Secret Lives* *of Baba Segi’s Wives* at no point shifts its gaze from then minutiae of personal relations to larger historical, economic, political and epistemological forces, it describes a very familiar twenty-first century African world where global economics and culture enforce local shifts and, to use the terms introduced by Arjun Appadurai, “mediascapes” that project affluent Western lifestyles unsupported by African “finanscapes”. The Ibadan described by the novel is the well-known African city that projects consumerism and life as style as ideals which material conditions make it impossible for most people to achieve. Apart from the peripheral upper middle class characters like the man who rapes Bolanle and the family of Segun, her first true love, Iya Segi is the only character who uniquely is able to prosper independently. All of the other characters endure lives of inescapable poverty that drive them to act in morally and culturally reprehensible ways in order to survive. In fact, poverty and hardship are the dominant tones of the novel, foreshadowed by the lyrics of the signature song of a television soap opera, “The impoverished search for cassava flour / While the rich consume rice by the measuring bowl” (9). In this world, so engagingly presented by the novel, the market and media forces that promote monogamous romantic love also create the conditions where polygyny is the only option for both formally uneducated and educated women, as Stacey shows in the sociological study of contemporary South Africa. Stacey’s conclusion is reinforced by the studies in David Parkin and David Nyamwaya’s edited volume, *Transformations of African Marriage*, where polygyny appears to be attractive not only to men, but also to some women, to whom it gives more freedom than otherwise available. It is clear from the discussion of the backgrounds of and social possibilities for the first three wives discussed above that the polygynous household in the cultural and economic context of contemporary urban Nigeria, while not exactly utopian, offers some women far greater potential for expressing their material, personal, sexual, maternal, emotional and social desires than marriages or partnerships which conform to the hegemonic norms of acceptable monogamous intimate relationships.

*Secret Lives* tests the judgments of its author in other ways also. In the first place, it completely destabilises the familiar dichotomy that underpins analyses of intimate relations where polygyny is associated with the timeless and unchanging village and monogamy with the transforming modernity of the city. Two of the village wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, come from monogamous families, the first Yoruba and the second Muslim, where religious sanction of polygyny is supposed to reinforce indigenous African customs, but in this case does not. Iya Segi, the first wife, and the husband, Ishola Alao, come from single parent families headed by strong and successful village matriarchs. Traditional family relationships thus appear quite unproblematically to encompass monogamy and single parent families where the households sometimes suffer extreme poverty, but seem generally settled, happy and secure. In fact, Iya Femi’s parents, by inference, appear to be very much in love and inseparable even in their deaths, which occur when “a log slip[s] from a lorry and crush[es] them on a road they travelled every day” (121). By contrast, modern city monogamies are fraught relationships that are sometimes *de facto* polygynous. Bolanle’s parents are in a monogamous union where “for life” means not till they are parted by death, as is the case with Iya Femi’s “traditional” parents, but rather that the family is a prison for the emasculated (as opposed to sterile or impotent) father who escapes through drink, and a prison for the two daughters who escape through doomed relationships. The other marriage encountered in the city is that of the parents of Segun, Bolanle’s first true love. Segun’s father is the wealthy landlord of the large middle class housing estate on which Bolanle’s parents are tenants. Segun’s father is a public philanderer whose informal “polygyny” is tacitly accepted by the mother for the sake of her material well-being and social position. On one of her secret visits to Segun’s suite at the family’s lavish mansion, Segun confides his embarrassment at his nightclubbing 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” (181). This is the same occasion where the family falls victim to an armed robbery in which the father is gunned down.

The novel also clearly makes a somewhat contradictory case through Bolanle for romantic love as the sole foundation of the modern monogamous marriage endorsed by the author. Bolanle, like many an Austen heroine, is an avid reader of romance fiction, a genre which is growing apace in Africa with dedicated African romance imprints like the Nigerian Ankara Press, and even bigger digital growth with romance fiction published online, for example the *Valentine’s Day Story Anthology* available for download as a PDF document. Ironically, Bolanle pretends to go to bed early to read her Mills and Boons as a pretext to allow her to escape to her boyfriend’s home on the night Segun’s family gets robbed and his mother is killed. Bolanle’s teenage love affair has all of the hallmarks of the classic romance fiction scenario, namely, a young, attractive, intelligent, heroine of aspirant social class and a desirable, wealthy, somewhat unattainable hero. Bolanle’s dreams of romance, however, are finally shattered when, subject to the terrors and humiliations of the armed robbery, which the pair watch hidden in the en-suite bathroom roof, Segun 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. (184)

The relationship is finally brought to a close when Segun turns away from her as his father’s funeral cortège passes. When Bolanle visits the family home after the marriage to Baba Segi, that is roundly condemned by her aspirant mother in particular, Bolanle comes across her old Mills and Boons. 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 of 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.

Even though in interviews Shoneyin may paint a picture of the polygynous patriarch as a smug, self-interested hypocrite, the character of Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives* *of Baba Segi’s Wives* is a lot more complex and open-ended. Yes, he is presented as grotesque and obnoxious with gross naturalistic flourishes, but he is a completely 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 United States, or Segun, who similarly uses Bolanle. Indeed, it is Iya Femi, underlining the emotional and material securities of the home, who 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 …” (130).

**Closure: The Costs and Promises of Enlightenment**

The final chapter of the novel is titled “Bolanle” since it is the point in the narrative where the central character recognises herself and achieves self-realisation. While earlier in the novel Bolanle was the broken egg, at closure she is whole and the difficult world full of privation and challenge that lies before her is “like an egg cracked open” (245). Yet one might also read the image of the cracked egg to present the possibilities that lie before her in the world– possibilities which demand the breaking of the shell. In this case, the shell that is broken is the troubled equilibrium of the Alao household.

The arrival of Bolanle and the light of medical knowledge she brings into this dark household comes at the price of the death of the eldest daughter, Segi, killed by accident by her own mother, who intended to poison Bolanle’s food to prevent the exposure of the secret. Baba Segi, or the “father of Segi”, as a consequence, literally loses his status as father with the death of the daughter. With the revelation of his infertility, he loses the status of father of all the other children also. Throughout the novel, Baba Segi, is a presented as a benevolent, albeit gross and uncultured patriarch, who, in fact, is quite soft-hearted and whose wives have free reign provided that they meet his physical needs. Following the enlightenment of the household, Baba Segi gives the wives and their children the opportunity to leave. With the exception of Bolanle, who opts to return to her parent’s house, they all stay, recognising the reality that outside of the household, given the mercilessness of life outside, they would be lost. In the light of the contradictory modernity brought by Bolanle, Baba Segi enforces a seclusion on the wives, which is not part of African polygyny and male-female relations, stripping them of the freedoms and indulgences they had hitherto enjoyed:

An agreement was drawn up: they could stay if they promised to be the wives he wanted them to be. He promptly banned them from leaving the house without his permission. Iya Segi was instructed to close down all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him. Iya Femi was forbidden to wear make-up and there would be no more church. God hears your heart no matter where you are, he’d said. (243)

While the revelation of the secret results in the foreclosure of the lives of the other wives, it precipitates Bolanle’s epiphany that allows her to become emotionally whole. Baba Segi turns to her with renewed care and respect since she is the only wife that has not betrayed him. Although she says to him that continuing the marriage would be meaningless since there is no hope of children, in fact, she regards the household and her sojourn in it as a dark night which paradoxically “shook [her] awake” (244). The time in the house is presented as a “dream of unspeakable self-flagellation” (244). She realizes furthermore, reinforcing the tradition-modernity divide at one level endorsed by the novel, that in the household she felt she was “in the midst of strangers, people from a different time in history, a different world” (244). The polygynous household finally is presented as a prison in which the wives are the “inmates” who are “going nowhere” while Bolanle “rejoins [her] life’s path” (245).

In closure thus the novel reinforces the conventional assumptions and stereotypes of the oppression and stasis of the “traditional” institution of polygyny which the dynamic energy of the body of the narrative shows to be the deliberate and intelligent response of women whom the globalised postcolony leaves with few other choices. Bolanle, by contrast, affirmed in her conviction of the civilizational superiority and progressiveness of monogamy, rejoins her life’s path that, by implication, will ultimately lead her to final fulfillment in a future exclusive, idealised relationship for life.

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