



THE DELIGHTS OF MOTHERHOOD VS. THE ANGUISH OF BARRENNESS: AN AFRICAN
WOMANIST INTERPRETATION OF *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*
BY LOLA SHONEYIN

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Abstract

Using Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as a stepping-stone, I set out in this investigation project to address women's agency in the face of the nagging spectre of infertility. The article argues that the heartache born out of the prospect of childlessness is apt to drive African women to adopt an ill-advised 'Weltanschauun' with unintended consequences. The praxis of Baba Segi's wives pitifully mediated by a view of infertility anchored in old-school patriarchal beliefs and gendered mind-set is, so the paper contends, a testament to the lengths that some women are prepared to go to eschew the stigma of barrenness. The "secret life" led by three of the four of Baba Segi's wives (unbeknownst to their husband) may be a slippery slope towards moral decline. Yet it doubtless serves as a wake-up call for a more humane and less gendered approach to dealing with the vexed issue of female infertility. Over and above this, the paper extols the redeeming powers of education as Baba Segi wraps up wising up to his wives' shenanigans thanks to Bolanle. When it comes to methodology, the author taps into perspectives drawn from the social sciences and humanities, i.e. sociology, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, and feminist critical theory, to better do justice to the topic at hand.

Keywords: infertility, weltanschauun, feminism, gender, patriarchy, motherhood, womanism.

Lola Shoneyin: A potted biography

Part Nigerian part British, Lola Shoneyin (1974 –) is a poet, short-story writer and novelist all rolled into one. Born Titilola Atinuke Alexandrah Shoneyin, Lola's fictional opus broaches themes which are carryovers from African heritage. She uses the bully pulpit of fiction to expose the multifaceted human toll of polygamy and the stubborn female yearn for motherhood in the African context.

Shoneyin's womanist bent shows in her portrayal of women who, albeit creaking under the strain of stultifying patriarchal lore and crippling gender practices, strive with every fibre of their being to pull off emancipation while remaining true to and proud of their *Africanness*. Lola Shoneyin's invaluable service to African literature has been rewarded with such literary prizes as the Pen Award in America cum the Ken Saro-Wiwa Award for prose in Nigeria. On top of her debut novel *The Secret Lives of Baba*

Segui's Wives, Lola Shoneyin has authored three volumes of poetry and a bunch of short-stories.

Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to grapple with the vexed issue of female infertility in the African context and the praxis of African women hell-bent on eschewing childlessness. It is through the prism of 'African womanism'¹ that the anguish of barrenness and its multifaceted toll will be analysed. If anything, a key tenet of 'African womanism' as propounded by the high-profile Nigerian feminist thinker Chikwenye Ogunyemi is the African women's stubborn desire to have children, and a deep-seated rejection of lesbian love anchored in time-honoured value systems that view heterosexual unions as normative sexuality (xii). Ogunyemi's vision of womanism is, arguably, redemptive in that, unlike radical feminism's hatred of men as the root cause of women's woes, it sees in men a key determinant in the drive for female emancipation from the

bondage of any form of oppression. Femaleness does not feature as the be-all-and-end-all of African womanism. Nor is male chauvinism looked on as a drag on women's progress. In Ogunyemi's estimation, the African context requires that men and women join forces with an eye towards cutting themselves loose from their predicament induced by their blackness. As she appositely writes, "*If the ultimate aim of radical feminism is a separatist, idyllic existence away from the hullabaloo of men's world, the ultimate aim of womanism is the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women*" (71). Plainly, any pushback against the straightjacket of patriarchy necessitates enlisting men's involvement and backing, or else it is doomed to failure.

I. Theoretical framework

Old-school shibboleths and other issues that African womanism highlights as being bottlenecks stymieing black Africans' strenuous

¹ The term 'womanism' is the brainchild of American writer cum civil rights advocate, Alice Walker. The latter's coinage of 'womanism' reflected her sense of unease over the praxis of white Western feminism which she deems out of whack with black women's experience. Alice Walker conceives of a womanist as a "A black feminist or feminist of color ... who loves other women, sexually and /or asexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture ... sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or sexually. Committed to survival and survival of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist" (xii). Even though this definition is all-encompassing and sort of oozes with humanity in that it concerns itself with the survival of the entire human race, irrespective of race or sex or gender, it still remains that, from an African perspective, it is found wanting. If anything, Africa's rejection of lesbian or homosexual love means that African feminists have striven flat out to find an alternative to the Walkerian concept (133). The concept of 'African womanism' arguably stands as a counter to the Afro-American term of 'womanism.' Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi lays out the case for why it is necessary to find an alternative to feminism "Since feminism and African American womanism overlook African peculiarities, there is a need to define African womanism. This is necessitated by African women's inclusive, mother-centred ideology with its focus on caring-familial, communal, national, and international" (114). White Western feminism fails to carry favour with African women due to its gender-centredness. Stalwarts for an alternative to this brand of feminism, while recognizing the strictures of patriarchy and sexism on African women, are emphatic that there are other mechanisms of oppression that represent an

albatross around women's drive towards full-emancipation, and that bear focussing on. Ogunyemi posits that: "*Not only is sexism a problem, other oppressive sites include totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post) colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism*" (114). Even though black and white women have a commonality in terms of biology, they do not share the same heritage of what the American philosopher of Indian descent Homi Bhabha calls 'the sentence of history,' to wit "*subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement*" (246). Interestingly, 'African womanism' has a bone pick up with white Western feminism and African-American womanism as well. The African womanist is at pains to criticise African-American tolerance of lesbian love. Hence its outright rejection across the Dark Continent. Ogunyemi lays out a key dividing line between African womanism and African-American womanism: "*It is necessary to reiterate that the womanist praxis in Africa has never totally identified with tall the original Walkerian concepts. An important point of departure is the African obsession to have children as well as the silence on or intolerance of lesbianism*" (133). Chatherine Acholunu sees eye to eye with Ogunyemi by pointing that the Walkerian concept of womanism, with its advocacy of lesbianism, flies in the face of African tradition and culture: "*Walker's womanist is first and foremost a lesbian. Thus black feminism has become synonymous with lesbianism. This is a negative development, especially for those for whom lesbianism is a taboo*" (90). On the strength of the foregoing, it is safe to bet that African women's stubborn desire to have children appositely fits into the concept of African womanism.

efforts to mediate a life free from the gruesome weight of history include “*extreme poverty and in-law problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men opposing their wives*” (Ogunyemi interview with Susan Ardent published in *Signs*, 714-715). It is noteworthy that the concept of African womanism came hot on the heels of another term contrived by African-American writer, Clenora-Hudson Weems, as part of an all-out drive to find a suitable alternative to Alice Walker’s womanism. That is, Africana Womanism signals a key departure point from the Walkerian concept and from white feminism. Just as African Womanism is a counter to white Western feminism due to its Eurocentrism, and downplaying of the racial determinant in black people’s history of oppression, so is Africana Womanism “*African-centred, as it places Africa at the center of this analysis as it related to Africana women*” (84). The naming of the term, in Hudson-Weem’s view, is proof positive of a desire for authenticity: “*Even in the naming, Africa is at the center, for in African cosmology, nommo is the proper naming of a thing which calls it into existence*” (85). The store set by the naming undergirds a deep-seated conviction that any analysis of black people’s experience cannot seriously paper over the singularity of blackness in terms of the intersectionality of race, class and gender. These three forms of oppression combine to make people of black heritage a nonentity. Hence Hudson-Weems’ theory that “*the terminology Africana Womanism, not black feminism, womanism or any other term, more appropriately fits the Africana woman, who is both self-namer and self-definer*” (82). People of African extraction, not least women, have a unique awful experience rooted in a history of wrongs mainly mediated by what Sir Alan Burns calls the ‘colour prejudice².’ That is, the richness of a millennia-long civilization got subsumed in the race-based ideology of slavery and colonialism. Hudson-Weems’ definition of Africana womanism captures the uniqueness of Africana

women at the same time that it foregrounds African heritage as key to uplifting women of black stock:

Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women. ... The primary goal of Africana women, then is to create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and action. (82)

The redemptive value of Africana Womanism bears stressing since its philosophy stands as a paean to African heritage. Hudson-Weems is at pains to mark Africana womanism off from Alice Walker’s womanism, Black womanism or any other term owing to their scant attention to the race dimension of the oppression of women of black heritage. The study and description of the travails of the Africana woman can only be done through the cultural and historical lens of Africa. The dyadic matrixes through which women of black descent have been held in subjection for centuries are race and patriarchy not to mention class. One of the merits of Africana womanism lies in its mooring in black heritage to address women’s issues. Hence the “*family-centredness and race empowerment agenda*” that hallmark Africana womanism, and that serve as a counter to “*any brands of feminism, which are female-centred and concerned above all else with female empowerment*” (85). Deserving elaboration is that the centrality of motherhood and the family within the African frame is not simply a distinctive feature of African womanism or Africana womanism for that matter. Indeed, an array of terms are propounded that are deeply grounded in Afrocentricity and, more to the point, bear witness to the primacy of childbearing cum the family. The dimension of motherhood cannot seriously be overlooked when it comes to describing the African women’s experience and desiderata.

Catherine Acholunu’s Motherism is a case in point. It has, indeed, a strong presence in African feminist

² Alan Burns defines “*Colour Prejudice*” as “*more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they*

consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and so frequently insulted” (Qtd. In Fanon 89).

theory. It somewhat comes hot on the heels of Ogunyemi's African womanism. As its name clearly suggests, Motherism highlights, inter alia, the unique womanly experience of pregnancy and birth giving. Speaking of the rationale behind the term, Acholonu intimates that any theory designed to describe the trials and tribulations of African women must put motherhood at its centre as it is neigh impossible to tease out African cosmology without grasping the significance of motherhood (3). She writes:

Africa's alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood. The motherist is the man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity. The weapon of motherism is love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of the sexes... . The motherist writer...is not a sexist. The motherist male writer or artist does not create his work from a patriarchal, masculinist, dominatory perspective. He does not present himself arrogant, all-knowing self-righteous before his muse. (3)

Like Ogunyemi's African womanism, Catherine Acholonu's Motherism rejects out of hand the idea that men, regarded as active agents in women's subordination, cannot be relied upon to participate in the drive for female emancipation. Rather, says Acholonu, without men's buy-in and full-blown involvement, African women's unwavering arduous efforts at 'de-subordination'³ (to borrow Ralph Miliband's term) might come to nought. Her glowing portrayal of African women as 'the spiritual base of every family, community and nation' encapsulates an indictment of a brand of feminism that views marriage and motherhood as a drag on female agency towards breaking off the shackles of sexist oppression.

The cultural roots of African womanism also shines through another alternative to white Western feminism, to wit, Stiwaniism which is the brainchild of the late Nigerian feminist activist, writer and academic Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie.

Stiwaniism, oftentimes shortened to its acronym STIWA that stands for 'Social Transformation Including African Women' is along the same lines as African womanism and Motherism, except that, in addition to espousing the female fight for freedom from bondage and regarding men as an asset rather than a liability, it strikes a blow for social transformation across the board, whose end game is the wholesale liberation of women. Stiwaniism is a holistic approach to calling time on the patriarchal lore and other institutional structures that hamper women's progress. Ogundipe-Leslie lays out the core tenets of STIWA as follows:

I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It's not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (2)

It bears stressing that such strands of African feminism as 'African womanism,' 'Motherism' and 'Stiwaniism' have a commonality which, inter alia, resides in their outright refusal to regard men as a hard-line bunch hell-bent upon the destruction of women. Even though men are part of what Ogundipe-Leslie calls the 'six mountains on the back of the African woman,' namely - "oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism), tradition, her backwardness, man, her colour and race, herself" (130)-, men, in the African context, are no foes to women.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives: a synopsis

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (which came out in 2010) is arguably a blockbuster novel; it recounts the story of paterfamilias Baba Segi along with his four wives and children. Three of the wives lead a secret life unbeknownst to the household chief until he finds out about their shenanigans thanks to the unwitting help of Bolanle, that is, his fourth wife. Indeed, the latter, unlike her co-wives

³ See my research paper entitled 'Workplace Sexual Harassment and Female Sexual Objectification: Feminist

Perspectives on Violet Barungi's *Cassandra*' in *English Language and Literature Studies* (ELLS), Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020

Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, is educated and, accordingly, has a more reasonable approach to the nagging issue of barrenness. Her background and intellectual nous quickly puts her in the crosshairs of her co-wives who regard her as a threat to the unity of the household, to the point that they are not about to let her in on their secret lives. Iya Segi, to a lesser extent Iya Tope, and Iya Femi have animus for Bolanle, which means that they try every trick in the book to drive a wedge between her and Baba Segi with the ultimate aim to get her expelled from the house. The novel is set against a background of a society conspicuous by its gender consciousness and the high expectations placed upon women.

II. The delights of motherhood

African cosmology has it that motherhood is the sole yardstick by which women can prove their worth. Social recognition gets won through child-bearing. This patriarchy-informed perspective misguidedly reduces female identity and marriage to child-bearing. The stakes of motherhood are undeniably overriding. Granted. But there are other delights associated with it that bear stressing, that is, the companionship, the love or friendship, the mutual emotional satisfaction of the couple (Ngcobo 142). Disappointingly, these facets of married life take a backseat to the preponderance of motherhood. Gloria Ogunbadejo contends that “*To the African, motherhood is synonymous with womanhood. It is expected to be part of the female instinct and the African woman’s identity*” (10). According to the late Kenyan-born sophisticated Christian thinker and writer, John Samuel Mbiti,

marriage features prominently in the wellspring of African belief systems:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized... Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life. (133)

From the perspective of African worldview, female instinct can only be won through motherhood. Lauretta Ngcobo captures the primacy of motherhood in her submission that “*African marriage is a means to an end as it is about children, so that marriage has been institutionalized*” (142). Flora Nwapa sees eye to eye with Ngcobo. Although she opines that barrenness should not pave the way for a woman’s ostracizing, Flora Nwapa acknowledges motherhood to be crucial to a woman’s identity:

My conclusion on this issue of barrenness is that women are what they are because they can give life, they can procreate. So in African societies, when this unique function is denied women, she is devastated [...] But does this handicap, this childlessness make a woman less woman [...]? I don’t think so. (97)

The transition from wifehood to motherhood⁴ betokens an uplifting change in status celebrated both in the family and the community. The preponderance of motherhood in African belief

⁴ One of the most powerful voices in feminist scholarship of all time, Adrienne Rich, in her signally ground-breaking book *Of Woman Born*, distinguishes between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. The latter “*aims at ensuring that the potential-and all women-shall remain under control*” while the former describes “*the potential relationships of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children*” (13). Of the two strands of motherhood aforementioned, the institution is the more obnoxious and inimical to women owing to how much it has reduced women to sort of nonentity status. The weight of motherhood as an institution is so huge that it has taken precedence over the experience of motherhood. Adrienne Rich laments that all the evils that women are at the receiving end of are the offshoot of the

institutionalization motherhood as it stifles women’s capability to mediate change for their own betterment and for that of society. She submits woefully that if the ‘mainstream of recorded history’ is anything to go by, “*motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities*” (13). Motherhood as institution is, as it were, the mirror image of patriarchy. Rich contends that, much as motherhood as experience is ‘part of female process,’ the institution of motherhood feeds on patriarchal discourses and practices (“*under which female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood*” (13). From this perspective, patriarchal motherhood is an impediment to women’s ‘self-actualization,’ to borrow a term from Abraham Maslow.

systems is not perfunctory. Rather, it speaks to the centrality of the mother as something of a stabilizer of the family. Once the wish for motherhood materializes, then mothering sets in with its challenges. The mother provides teaching, caring, nurturing to her offspring. The weight of the child's moral development rests with her. Witness how Iya Segi goes out of her way to ingratiate herself with her husband in order to have his buy-in for a business activity. Actually, true to form as a senior wife, she thinks nothing of indulging in sob stuff to overcome any buds of refusal (82-3). This for the sole benefit of her children: "I will be able to take my children to day care without them sweltering in the heat like poverty-stricken orphans" (83). The significance of the mother-child relationship, it bears stressing, is inscribed writ large in the tenets of African womanism. Ogunyemi posits appositely that, "To the child, the mother is the morning sun that shines on her/him specially: she is also the supreme being to be adored as a bountiful provider" (41). The mother is rightly expected to model good behaviour as well as instilling good morals and ethics into her child. At one point in the narrative, Iya Femi beats herself up for neglecting a bit her kids. Then she pulls herself:

I sat there quietly and watched Motun twitching in her sleep. She was six years old. Her mouth had abandoned my breast. She looked so small and unloved. A deep, damning shame came over me. I could not believe that I had neglected the children who bought me the easy life I lived. There and then, I decided to be a good mother to my children. (96)

In a stunning one-on-one with her daughter, Bolanle's mother gives her pep talk the gist of which is to never stoop so low as to lose one's sense of dignity:

I don't want to see you there begging for food. If your father wants to go there, lick their bottoms and beg for beer, let him. I am not bringing my children up to be beggars. I am working myself to death because I want you and that glutton sister of yours to own houses and cars. I am bringing you to be able-

bodied women who will fight for prosperity and win. No one enjoys success if they don't work hard for it. (103)

The possessive adjective 'their' in the foregoing refers to the landlords of Bolanle's parents. A mother's failure to enact agency for her child to make something of himself/herself carries far-reaching consequences from a social perspective. The matriarchal powers that are extolled in the discourse of the mother of Bolanle foreground the huge responsibilities of the woman as central to the family.

Genuine womanhood credentials hinge on procreation. Motherhood has an ennobling value which is two-pronged. Firstly, the mother can pride herself on achieving womanhood. Secondly, she registers her husband's manhood. In Loretta Ngcobo's estimation, the stubborn African desire for children reflects a (slanted) view of marriage rooted in African belief systems that treasure up the child:

As elsewhere, marriage among Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express their womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer a woman's fertility to her husband's family group. There is a high premium on children and the continuity of lineage. (141)

In the African context, the seeds of the primacy of motherhood are sown from childhood. As early as childhood, the young girl gets walked through what lies in store for her in adulthood. The young girl is subjected to a ritual of cultural practices and narratives imbued with a sexist bent, and which foster androcentric interests. A point buttressed by Iya Femi when she recalls how, in the aftermath of her parents' passing, her uncle strips her of parental inheritance on account of her being a woman (135). The African womanist construction of motherhood cum the family as key to rooting out intersecting forms of female oppressions sounds like a tribute to African mothers. As Nah Dova explains,

African womanism may be viewed as fundamental to the continuing development of Afrocentric theory. African womanism brings to the forefront the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct and create a cultural integrity that espouses the ancient Maatic principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, order and so forth. (535)

The transition from wifehood to motherhood represents a milestone in a woman's conjugal life. The crux of the matter is that the mother status confers respectability and social recognition as well as responsibility. Childbearing is a bulwark against marginalization and anxiety about old age-related troubles. This mind-set is deeply embedded in African philosophical wellspring. The child is the pride and joy of his/her mum. Also, it is a mother's place to bend over backwards to avoid shame for her son/daughter. Interestingly, motherly counselling and advice oftentimes point to the acquisition of good morals and ethics. In a rainy day, Bolanle is left stranded on the road. Just out of the blue, a man named Thomas pulls over, and asks her if she needs a ride. Bolanle displays chariness. Faced with Thomas' insistence, she lashes out a one-liner: "My mother has told me not to accept rides from people I don't know" (124). In the same vein, Iya Tope recalls her mother's advice around which her moral compass is built: "Do not commit adultery"...*Follow the path that is good and right*" (98). The eighteenth-century German thinker Immanuel Kant points out that Education rests on three pillars, to wit Discipline, Culture and Discretion. He argues that each of these components is significant in its own rights. The preponderance of culture in the child's education lies in the fact that it is made up of discipline, instruction and guidance. Speaking of Discretion, Kant About moral training he says:

Moral training must form part of education. It is not enough that a man should be fitted for any ends but his disposition must be so trained that he shall choose none but good ends – good ends being those which are necessarily approved by everyone. (19)

It's noteworthy that the three Iyas practise, to all intents and purposes, what Sharon Hays calls in the *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* 'intensive mothering.' According to this American sociologist, the challenges of childrearing are so demanding in terms of time and physical expenditure as to necessitate the wholesale involvement of the mother. So Hays posits that 'intensive mothering' is "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (8). From Hays' perspective, intensive mothering does not bear juggling with professional work in that it uses up all the mother's time and energy. Of note is the fact that, unlike what the likes of Nancy Chodorow and other like-minded feminists think of motherhood with regards to the cause of the alleged subservience of women to men, African womanism does not locate intensive mothering as a site of female oppression.

Motherhood and the family take pride of place in the African womanist philosophy wherein the mother is celebrated as a primary care giver, nurturer and crucial to the moral development of the child. Indeed, the late Nigerian academic Catherine Acholonu, whose contribution to indigenous theory respecting the way out of the unflattering plight of the African woman, makes the point that it is the mother's place to keep her child on the straight and narrow mainly by educating him/her in the values of love as opposed to hate. In thinly veiled words, she takes a swipe at those mothers cast in the mould of radical feminists whose proclivity is for poisoning women's minds against men:

We can't train daughters hating men...We just can't do that. Give them the opportunity to love, let them have their own experience. Don't tell them men are distasteful or evil; don't do that. I can't do that to my children. I want my children to know that the world is full of love, even if there is lots of hate around. The light is there and invariably, the light will overcome darkness. And if you arm your children with love, love conquers evil all the time. If you arm them with hate, you've defeated them-you destroy them. (Interview with Nduka Otiono 78)

It's noteworthy that Lauretta Ngcobo believe 'human capital' and 'social security' to factor into the premium on children. Notwithstanding, she does not paper over other reasons appertaining to metaphysics:

For a man, it has become a sacred duty towards his lineage. Failure to immortalize the ancestors is taboo and a shame that a man cannot bear. As a result, childlessness is associated with women, for the alternative is unthinkable. Central to many African beliefs is that there are three states of human existence-the land of the unborn, the land of the living and the land of the ancestors and the dead. Belief has it that the children of any given family are always there waiting for the mothers to come and rescue them from oblivion and bring to life in the land of the living. Failure to 'rescue' the children is a sorrowful capitulation and a betrayal. (142)

Fatherhood is, indeed, something of a badge of manliness. That's why Baba Segi does not feel equal to brooking barrenness as, in his mental universe, it epitomizes not so much a blush to the cheeks as a slight to his honour. And, arguably, the value of human existence hinges, to a great extent, on honour upon which the nineteenth-century sophisticated thinker Arthur Schopenhauer elaborates honor as follows:

Honor is, on the objective side, other people people's opinion of what we are worth; on its subjective side, it is the respect we pay to this opinion. From the latter point of view, to be a man of honor is to exercise what is often a very wholesome, but by no means a purely, moral influence. (54)

Harking back to the issue of motherhood, its much touted delights drive women to go to great lengths to bear children when faced with the unflattering prospect of infertility. African women are prepared to endure blood, sweat and tears to enjoy the feel of a baby in their arms. Little wonder that the first three wives of Baba Segi, privy to his infertility, goes down a treacherous path in order to bask in the joys of motherhood. Each of them, lo and behold, has a bed partner unbeknownst to the

household chief, whom they have to thank for procreating. This the secret that the wives have been living until it gets exposed.

II. The anguish of barrenness

The primacy of motherhood in the African context ramps up the heat on the woman to enter wedlock with an eye towards bearing children. One case in point is Iya Segi. She recalls how her mother falls over backwards to convince her to start a family before she reaches 'the age of shame.' Witness her one-on-one with her mother:

"My husband? Mama, women don't need husbands." I quoted 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 life 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." (113)

Iya Segi's mom is exercised about her daughter's seeming lack of interest in marriage. In a move calculated to show Iya Segi that she means business, the mother goes the extra mile, and hands all the money generated by her daughter's business activity over to Mama Alaro's son. In order for him to marry Iya Segi and look after her. Understandably, Iya Segi is baffled. This mind-blowing move speaks volumes about the lack of say that young marriageable African women have when it comes to choosing a husband. The age-old straightjacket of patriarchy renders the woman voiceless, and putty in men's hands. Allan Johnson defines patriarchy as follows:

Patriarchal societies are male-identified in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity. The simplest example of this is the still widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. When we routinely refer to human beings as "man" or "doctors" as "he" we

construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to the rule. (166)

The spirit of collaboration and compromise that hallmarks the African womanist philosophy provides the rationale for Iya Segi ending up toing her mother's line (114). Speaking of patriarchy, it is part of what the late African American scholar Bell Hooks calls 'interlocking systems of oppression,' aka 'politic of domination.' According to her, black women are on the receiving end of an array of oppressions. Bell Hooks elaborates upon 'interlocking systems of oppression,' saying that they refer to "the ideological grounds that they share, which is a belief in domination, and a belief in notions of superior and inferior, which are components of all those systems" (175). She goes on to say, "For me it's like a house, they share the foundation but the foundation is the ideological beliefs around which notions of domination are constructed" (175). In this sense, the idea of confining the suffering of African women to gender issues misses the point. Mary Becker challenges Allan Johnson's point that "The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the point of patriarchy" (51). She counters as follows:

Although the subjugation of women is not the central dynamic driving patriarchy, patriarchal culture is deeply misogynistic and valorises. In such a culture women are seen as less than fully human and as less than trustworthy, particularly when "accusing men of sexual misconduct." Aggression against women is justified by women's choices and natures. (26)

The primacy of motherhood implies that the woman who is barren through no fault of her own runs the gauntlet of bad-mouthing from fellow women and in-laws as well as co-wives. Doubtless, the childless woman is a marginal compelled to live on the fringes of the society. Marriage and motherhood stand as two of the most intractable challenges facing African women. The strong stomach for children in the African worldview has

spawned an ecosystem in which the childless woman is stigmatized, marginalized, ostracized, and dehumanized. One case in point is Bolanle. That is, the last wife of Baba Segi knows only too well what it feels like being regarded as a barren woman. Her woes at the hands of her co-wives and husband encapsulate the agony of barrenness in the African context. As the first wife of Baba Segi, Iya Segi takes the lead in trying every trick in the book with an eye to driving a wedge between the household chief and his last wife. This with the ultimate aim to get her out of the house:

The first thing Iya Segi did was to talk to Baba Segi about Bolanle's armchair. Baba Segi had broken his rule for Bolanle. The tradition was that the comfort of an armchair had to be earned, which meant that unless you were pregnant with edema, breastfeeding or watching over toddlers, you were not entitled to one. (60)

Here, Lola Shoneyin concretely emphasizes that the African woman has internalized, even normalized the shackles of her own oppression. And the uplifting value of sisterhood takes a backseat to the meanness of co-wife rivalry and the weighty pressures of motherhood. Unconsciously, women strive flat out to buttress patriarchal culture. Through their internalization and acceptance of male dominance, women are bolstering up the structure of their own oppression. This to men's advantage. Mary Becker is then right in submitting that women are not immune from reproach in their subservience to men:

Women assuage men's ego, reflecting men back at twice their size. Women assure men that they are real men by deferring to them, by allowing them to set the agenda and do most of the talking, and by stroking their ego in countless other ways. In women's eyes, men see themselves as they should be: independent, autonomous, strong, and successful. (27)

Slamming women for their hand in the working of patriarchy is a cinch. But to change this situation is a different ball game. The phrase 'Patriarchal culture' means that the system of

patriarchy is deeply ingrained in African cultural ethos. And it's a bit of a wishful thinking to hope that sheer discourse can undo what has been up and running for centuries. African women somewhat dance to men's tune not so much out of paternalistic deference but out of respect for tradition. Having said that, from an African womanist perspective, the woman is expected to ease her relationship with the man, which does not mean bootlicking. Chikenwe Okonjo Ogunyemi lays out the conciliatory hue of African womanism as follows:

It is [African womanism] accommodationist. It believes in the independence and freedom of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between the black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stance. It is also interested in communal well-being thus extending its ideology, towards a Marxist praxis. (64)

The obnoxious praxis of the likes of Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi locates motherhood as a site of identity construction for the woman. In this sense, motherhood is an enabler of femaleness, social recognition and acceptability. It's a tool that patriarchy taps into to shore up its stranglehold. Lack of procreative ability leaves the African woman in limbo and in anguish. Inside the household, she has no shoulder to cry. Indeed, the infertile woman is up against two foes that mean her harm: her co-wives and husband. The latter's rejection of his barren wife oftentimes finds expression in derogatory words and hostile attitude bordering on outright dehumanisation. For instance, Bolanle is branded as a 'rat' or the one whose 'womb is dead' (65). The non-mother's identity as an inferior being is framed in a discursive practice solely geared towards objectifying her, nay denying her any attribute of humanity.

It goes without saying that language is primarily a means of communication, and a 'cultural carrier' (Ngugi 110). By the same token, it can serve as an outlet for pent-up hate. Every step of the way, Bolanle is 'othered.' That is, she is made to feel that she does not belong. Ruth Lister describes 'othering'

as "how the 'non-poor' treat the 'poor' as different. *It is a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation, by which a line is drawn between 'us' and 'them,' between the more and the less powerful and through which social distance is established and maintained*" (142). The hallmark of 'othering' is that it frames a dividing line anchored on a Manichean notion: superior/inferior. The barren woman embodies in the eyes of the community jinx, ill-omen, lack of wholeness, or what not. From this perspective, her peer felt that she does not deserve any quarters.

The status of Iya Segi as senior wife affords her a huge sway over her co-wives. She has managed to make Iya Tope and Iya Femi (respectively the second and third wives) to share in her hatred of Bolanle. Witness how Iya Segi pigeonholes Bolanle: "Bolanle is a troublemaker," she said. "She will destroy our home. She will expose our private parts to the wind. She will reveal our secret. She will bring woe" (62). This obnoxious vocabulary elicits this comment from the narrator: "Bolanle always tied Iya Segi's tongue in a knot" (62). Self-conscious about the Bolanle's high educational attainment, and possibly fearful that she may squeal on them to Baba Segi, the three Iyas leave no stone unturned to get her booted out of the house. The three Iyas frantic move against Bolanle comes to a head with the *juju* thing. Profiting from a trip to the market, they put next to the last wife's room a rat head in a plastic bag to frame her. Strangely enough, Baba Segi gullibly buys into the scum. He throws a hissy fit and, and comes near to choking Bolanle:

Why would I want to kill my husband? If I become tired of my husband, there isn't a policeman in the world that can force me to stay with him. I am here because I want to be here! [...] I have lived in this house for two years and I want to continue to stay if my husband will have me. . . . I do not want to die barren. How is it profitable for me to become a young widow? Why would I want my child or any of these young children to be fatherless? (69)

It sucks when motherhood defines womanhood, and female infertility is weaponized.

Bolanle got an emotional gut-punch when her husband told her to her face, “*Your barrenness brings shame upon me*” (16). Gender-spiked masculinist discourses condition the man to not feel up to imagining himself infertile. Adrienne Rich appositely intimates that the term “*nonfather*” *does not exist in any realm of social categories*’ (11). In case of childlessness in a couple, the woman is always the fall guy:

When Baba Segi awoke with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife’s childlessness. He was sure the pain wasn’t caused by hunger or trapped gas; it was from the buildup of months and months of worry. (1)

The positioning of motherhood as the be-all-and-end-all of womanhood is associated with the instability of childless women in their households. Bolanle, through no fault of own, finds herself in the crosshairs of her co-wives who look down on her as a wet blanket hell-bent upon marring the so-called harmony that obtained in the household prior to her arrival. The centrality of motherhood and the spectre of barrenness account for why women who cannot bear children invariably face stigma and rejection. In an endeavour to eschew the trap of childlessness, Iya Segui, Iya Tope and Iya Femi (privy to Baba Segi’s infertility) string him along by each having an extra-marital affair, so that the kids that Baba Segi believes to be his own and, consequently, cherishes so much, and nourishes by the sweat of his brow are not in actual fact his. Quite unexpectedly, Baba Segi’s call to take Bolanle to the hospital for medical examination has blown the lid off the secret. Deserving elaboration is that, like the three Iyas, Bolanle has a skeleton in the cupboard, namely that she has her first sexual encounter at age 16 and that she has had an abortion prior to marrying Baba Segi (46). This is the reason why she flouted her mother’s advice and married Baba Segi in the first place. Fearing blood on the carpet within the household Dr. Dibia, at the urging of his colleague Dr. Usman, stops short of telling Baba Segi his results. But, in the spirit of having an accurate prognosis, he does extend an invitation to his other wives. As it happens, the

senior wife dropped a bombshell on her husband by coming clean about the so-called secret:

I was a young wife when I found myself in a cloud of sadness. I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itch to be suckled. My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leaped between them every time dusk descended upon us...Then I had an idea. It was a sinful idea but I knew it would bring my sadness to an end...If my husband did not have seed, then what harm would it do to seek it elsewhere...So I found seed and planted it in my belly. (244)

Caught off guard, Baba Segi tries to redeem himself before Dr Dibia and Dr Usman. He puts a bold face on things by waxing philosophical:

Dr, when you buy guavas in the marketplace, you cannot open every single one to check for rotteness. And where you find rotteness, you do not always throw the guava. You bite around the rot and hope that it will quench your craving. (45)

Harking back to Bolanle’s trip to the hospital, Dr. Usman requires that she take a pelvic ultrasound since “*we haven’t seen anything conclusive yet*” (46). Furthermore, the examining doctor gives her a referral letter to a gynaecologist gone by the name of Dr. Dibia. During the whole length of the consultation, it bears stressing, Baba Segi has relentlessly made derogatory remarks to his wife, and interfered with the examination, so that he comes near to incurring Dr. Dibia’s wrath: “*I am afraid I am going to invite security to-*” (44). As if pleading clemency, Bolanle says woozily, “*Please, Doctor, let’s continue*” (44). For all that, Baba Segi didn’t make him up his game. Quite the contrary. He doubles down: “*I would have had more than ten, if this woman’s womb was not hostile to my seed*” (43). Wildly baffled, Dr. Dibia tackles Bolanle about what makes her husband tick, and how she manages to cope with his obnoxious antics. Her reply is dead sobering: “*I’ll be fine. What more can he do to me? He can’t humiliate me any more than he has done already. His other wives can’t be any more hostile to me. He is my husband and I will return to his house*”

(46). She teeters on the brink of snapping through repetitive affronts. Hostility and wickedness are inscribed in the woman's failure to bear children. Therefore, she passes off as a no-hoper, nay a foe to her husband and her community. To be sure, Bolanle has had more than her fair share of raw deal from primarily her husband and the society as well.

Bolanle's sense of having been humiliated at the hands of her husband invites a philosophical reading. The Jewish philosopher Avishai Margalit views humiliation as "any sort of behaviour or condition that constitute a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured" (9). From his perspective, there is a clear attempt at reification of the other in humiliation. He elaborates upon humiliation as follows:

there are three elements that constitute humiliation, or if you will three senses of the term 'humiliation': (1) treating human beings as if they were not human – as beasts, machines, or subhumans; (2) performing action that manifest or lead to loss of basic control; and (3) rejecting human beings from the 'Family of man.'

Humiliation encapsulates a desire to make someone worthless in the public eye, strip them of their sense of dignity. When you stop enjoying the respect of the public, you feel something to have broken in you. What is excruciatingly painful in humiliation is the victim's gross inability to reply in kind. Bolanle's submission that "I will return to his house" betokens a sense of powerlessness. For her, there is nothing for it but to run the gauntlet of Baba Segi's strictures and humiliating posture. Gloria Orrigi points out that humiliation is a triangular relation made up of the following: the humiliator (aka the perpetrator), the victim and the witness of the humiliation (3). In the case of Bolanle, her husband acts the humiliator and Dr. Dibia as the witness, but a witness whose heart breaks for the victim. The Italian thinker fleshes out on the humiliator: "The humiliator possesses a form of power that permits him to deprive his victim of their prior and prized social status" (5). Baba Segi is what I would call a 'patriarchal agent' who makes no bones about displaying power on his victim in the most gruesome of manners.

The reach of patriarchal masculinity is such as to afford the man the capability of riding roughshod over his wife on grounds of infertility. Allan Johnson firmly avers in *Gender Knot* that "there is no basis for men to dominate women if we see human beings in all their forms as fundamentally the same as human. And this is what sets up a contradiction that can be sustained only through peculiar thinking" (78). Regrettably, in the African cosmos manhood is, depending upon the circumstances, enacted, inter alia, through bravery, haughtiness, defiance-you name it. In this sense, anything that might be perceived as demeaning to man's idea of manhood is anathema to him. Thus, Allan Johnson bemoans the precedence of manhood over adulthood, and, consequently, calls for a rethinking of the idea of manhood:

What it means to be an adult is fairly constant across society-the ability and willingness to take responsibility, to care for others, to be productive and contribute to family, community and society; to be courageous, to live creatively and with awareness. Under patriarchy, manhood has to amount to more than this. It has to differ from adult womanhood enough to justify organizing social life in a male-identified, male-centred way. This calls for a vision of male manhood based on a social, psychological, spiritual, and physical territory that men can identify with and defend as exclusively their own. (78)

Indeed, the vision of manhood anchored in the debasement of women is morally wrong, repeat wrong, and so deserves righting. Arguably, in no area of social life is the woman more voiceless and marginalized than in issues appertaining to infertility. Much as the African woman speaks with gravitas, her earnestness is always the butt of doubt.

As hinted at previously, Bolanle's trip to the hospital to get consulted turns out to be a game changer in the narrative: unlike what her hubby and co-wives think, she is not barren-not by a long shot. Witness Dr. Dibia's interpretation of Bolanle's test results: "From my examinations, the results of the scan and the blood tests, I cannot see any immediate reasons why you shouldn't be able to conceive. You

have had one termination?" (191). Too good to be true in the eyes of Bolanle:

I left the hospital grounds wondering if modern medicine was making a mockery of my childlessness. I didn't feel the sense of relief I should have. If there was nothing wrong with me, why was my belly not rounded and taut? Dr. Dibia must have missed something! The doctor at the ultrasound center must have missed something! (194)

Bolanle is not play acting. In the light of what she has gone through in terms of extremity due to her supposed infertility, she can't help being dubious about the accuracy of her test results which point to her procreative ability. Doubtless, cast-iron proof of her fertility makes a mockery of the unconscionably flimsy narrative around which Baba Segi and his other wives have built their hatred of her.

Bolanle's test results being negative, Dr. Dibia, understandably, tells her about his wish to see her husband take some preliminary tests as "*it takes two to make a baby*" (193). Bolanle registers her bafflement, saying "*He has seven children already*" (193). The doctor sticks to his guns, handing her an appointment card (193). Even though Baba Segi shows up for consultation, it's a tall order for Dr. Dibia to get him to buy into the soundness of his move. Baba Segi is shaped in the mould of those male chauvinist pigs for whom the woman is always the fall guy when it comes childlessness. Deeply steeped in patriarchal masculinist discourse and praxis, Baba Segi impugns the doctor's earnestness: "*Listen, Doctor, I have children. I have sons; I have daughters. The only thing God has not blessed me with is twins. Mind you, there is still time. So tell me. (...) Are the tests you want to do on me not a waste of time*" (215). The saga of the sperm count taking of Baba Segi turns out to be a real drama as brilliantly recounted by the narrator (214-218).

Childlessness for the African woman is akin to wall-to-wall suffering with, lo and behold, little hope of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Kittle wonder that she prefers the stigma of having a child out of wedlock to being childless if she knows her husband to be infertile. From a psychoanalytic

perspective, childlessness might be equated with what the prime mover of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud calls a 'danger situation' upon which Walter Hollitscher elaborates as follows:

Obviously it consists in a person's estimation of his own powers compared to the magnitude of the danger, and his admission of helplessness in the face of it. The helplessness is physical if the danger is objective, and psychological is the danger is instinctual. (59)

Helplessness attends the infertile woman's condition. In Holitscher's estimation, there exist two ways of coping with an 'Objective danger'- viz., a danger that is known- : anxiety or affective reaction, and protective action (59). In the case of the three Iyas, they resort to adultery as a protective action against a known danger that dogs them -that is, rejection.

For all that, the point needs making that adultery is a moral outrage that should be condemned lock, stock and barrel. Although it may bring solace and succour to the woman who could otherwise suffer the mental and physical toll of childlessness, adultery as a coping strategy against the grim prospect of barrenness is fraught with moral cynicism. Childlessness, albeit an experience worse than death above all in the African context, ought to be lived in dignity. Living an experience with dignity means, in the philosophy of twentieth-century sophisticated thinker Jean-Paul Sartre, being *authentic*. He writes that,

Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, and accepting it in pride or humiliation sometimes in horror or hate...There is no doubt that that authenticity demands such and more than courage. (65)

For the infertile woman, being authentic implies resigning herself to her barren condition, and living it to the full. By seeking to escape the stigma of childlessness and dishonour through extra marital sex, the woman is meting out betrayal and shame to

her husband. More to the point, sexual activity is, from the perspective of percipient nineteenth-century percipient German thinker Immanuel Kant, is permissible only in marriage, or else it debases humanity or violates morality (158). He writes:

The sole condition, under which, there is freedom to make use of one's sexual impulse, is based upon the right to dispose of the whole person. This right to dispose of the other's whole person relates to the total state of happiness, and to all circumstances bearing upon that person. But this right, that I have, so to dispose, and thus also to employ organa sexualia to satisfy the sexual impulse – how do I obtain it? In that I give the other person precisely such a right over my whole person, and this happens only in marriage. (158)

In light of the foregoing, adultery is a stab in the back of the cheated partner. Kant posits that engaging in sex outside of marriage is tantamount to negating the humanity in the other, for the adulteress uses her partner as a thing, which flies in the face of morality. The nefariousness of adultery literally hits home when it results in pregnancy. The cheated husband is then going to unconsciously support and lavish care on kids who are not in actual fact his own. Little wonder that Baba Segi raised a hue and cry upon learning about being strung along by his wives. He loses his composure as he lashes out at Iya Segi for leading the party who have done the dirty on him:

May dogs eat your mouth...What mouth do you have to tell me how to anything? You, who have brought bastard children into my home! You have used me! You have wounded me!...But let me tell you, the lion has roared, the dog has barked, the mouse has squeaked. Enough is enough! (265)

Lola Shoneyin debunks the certainties of masculinist discourse at the same time that she spotlights the agony of barrenness. Conversely, the values of patience, resilience, forbearance and rock-solid dignity are rewarded in Bolanle who, despite the odds being heavily stacked against her, manages to carry the day over her foes. The beacon of education

has triumphed over the darkness of illiteracy. Bolanle has been vindicated in her no-nonsense move to advise Baba Segi to take her to the hospital for consultation rather than to a herbalist. In this sense, the household chief's shout-out to his fourth wife is telling, and so deserves commending:

I should thank you first, because had it not been for you, I would never have discovered the deceit I have been living with all these years...It was revealed in the hospital today that none of my children are my children. I found out, just today, that the children I have nurtured and called mine were sired by men my wives lay on their backs for. (265)

Beside himself with anger, Baba Segi decides to avenge himself on his wives by booting them out of the house: "I want you to know that you can go. The door is open. I will not stop you" (275). But he thought better of it due to his unfaithful wives' melting attitude, and sense of shame. Having no home to return to, and hamstrung with kids who need an education, Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi wrap up beating their chests, and begging their husband to give them a second chance (276). Baba Segi's statement that "I will not stop you" might rightly be interpreted as play acting. If anything, the departure of his wives has the potential for leading to the exposure of his infertility in the public eye, thereby denting his manhood. At the end of the day, Baba Segi meets the women half-way: he is going to let them stay on in the house with strings attached:

An agreement was drawn: you can stay in you promise to be the wives I want you 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 makeup and there would be no more church...In return Baba Segi swore to buy them all the jewelry, all the lace, every luxury they needed and wanted, provided these were only worn within the four walls of his home. (279)

This redemptive covenant that Baba Segi has struck with his wives is in synch with the ideals of the womanist novel. The much touted spirit of

compromise and unity of the black race that hallmarks Ogunyemi's concept is writ large in the satisfactory outcomes of womanist novels. She writes that,

Its ideal is black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (72)

Indeed, there is no outright loser in Lola Shoneyin's novel. Instead, everybody is, arguably, a winner. Bolanle's no-nonsense call to opt out of the marriage (which has caught Baba Segi off guard) enables her to sort of recoup her dignity and freedom. Having drawn a line under her time in Baba Segi's household, she can pick up the pieces of her life and move on despite being fully aware of the challenges lying in store for her (280). She meekly owns up to feeling like waking up "from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation" (279), thus beating herself up on having been too naïve. Although she acknowledges that the wives will breathe a sigh of relief with her departure, she feels that she can pat herself on the back for "remembering them as inmates, because what really separates us is that I have rejoined my life's path; they are going nowhere" (280). As for the three Iyas, they too have cut their losses. They have beaten their chest, and begged Baba Segi to stay on in his house. Lastly, Baba Segi has managed to protect his manhood through a redemptive covenant with his promiscuous wives.

When all is said and done, *The Secret Lives of Baba Sgi's Wives* stands as a paean to the African womanist novel with its tenets anchored in survival, wholeness and compromise. The hollowness of patriarchal masculinity that views women as the fall guy in case of childlessness in couples is encapsulated in the weltanschauun of the three Iyas, which lays bare the fact that infertility is not solely a female preserve. The male chauvinist braggadocio whose distinctive feature lies in its gaslighting of women is shot down in flames, and exposed as sheer bluster. Lola Shoneyin rewards patience and

resilience in Bolanle while jettisoning the meanness of wickedness, jealousy and unconscionable co-wife rivalry.

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