

Co-Wives' Intra-Gender Conflict in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives Of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

*This paper critically examines the intra-gender conflict among co-wives in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* through the lens of Motherism, an African feminist theory that emphasizes motherhood, nurture, sisterhood, and cooperation among women. Many scholars have researched into the issues of women's subjugation, oppression, trauma but not many have worked on the issues of co-wives conflict in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* which is poignant presentation of the African woman's predicament in a polygamous household. The study reveals that women are as much captives of patriarchal domination as they are the class of inequality, retrogressive traditionalism, neurosis and intra-gender conflict. While the novel presents a polygynous household fraught with rivalry, deception, and emotional fragmentation, this study interrogates how such conflict disrupts the ideal of maternal solidarity and communal womanhood proposed by Motherism. The paper reveals that the competitive and often hostile relationships among the co-wives are not inherent but structurally induced by patriarchal norms that commodify women and reduce their value to reproductive utility. By foregrounding motherhood and domestic power struggles, the paper explores how the co-wives' identities are shaped and constrained by a male-dominated system that fosters jealousy, secrecy, and surveillance rather than unity. The study contends that Shoneyin both critiques and complicates the ideals of Motherism, suggesting that the promise of maternal sisterhood is undermined when women are pitted against each other for male validation and survival.*

Keywords: Motherism, Conflict, Intra-gender, Patriarchy, Subjugation

Introduction

This paper examines co-wives' intra-gender conflict in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This phenomenon (intra-gender conflict among women) is correspondingly christened "women-against-women syndrome" by Catherine Acholonu whose theory of Motherism is used in this analysis. Other gender-based theories used are womanism and liberal feminism. The analysis reveals that conflict is not a mono-gender phenomenon.

In order to understand gender perspective, the discussion of feminism as a theory is often necessary to be considered because it is the genesis of contemporary thinking of gender studies. The term 'feminism' means many things to many people. Some critics (like Catherine Acholonu, Kolawole Mary, Ogot Grace, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa and the like) see it as a verbal attack against certain social institution. Among the male folk, they regard feminists as a set of stubborn and freelance women who seek liberation from the age-long patriarchal domination which they (male) believe is impossible. Whatever opinion people might hold, feminism speaks of the exploitation of women, as well as the need for the liberation or emancipation of women. The works of female writer are therefore designed to deal with the problems confronting women. Hooks (1981) a leading feminist theorist as quoted by Akorede (2003) asserts, "Feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism ..., it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various level- sexes, race, and class" (p.194). Many women writers and critics have in desperate moves come out with several literary concepts and ideas. With the exception of few of the writers, most female writers deny the western feminist approach because they see it as a foreign ideology that is inappropriate to the yearnings and aspirations of the African women. Through the fictional character of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the social condition of African American females and the silent, most unseen violence they are expose to is portrayed by the writer.

Omolara Ogundipe Lesile is concerned with the social transformation contribution of women to the development of the society. She propounded the theory STIWANISM which is an acronym for Social Transformation including Women in Africa-ISM. Catherine Acholonu propounds "Motherism", which glorifies the concept of woman as mother. In similar direction, Ayo Kehinde (2000) in his article entitled "Sexism in African Literature: Towards Unity or Disunity?" suggests a new theory which he

terms “androgyny” which is the copulation of two words ‘andro’(male) and ‘gyny’(female). According to him ‘women’s literature should not be feminist while men’s literature should not be dominated by male chauvinism.’ (p. 109).

However, the most significant aspect of Acholonu’s alternative to feminism is the six dimensions of womanhood. She identifies these six dimensions as being: The woman as wife, The woman as daughter/sister, The woman as mother, The woman as queen/priestess, The woman as goddess, The woman as husband. These dimensions are core of the differences between African feminists and other feminists (European and other women of color). African feminists are family bound given the communal nature of most African societies. As a wife, the woman is the core of the family. An African wife is known for her strengths and ability in combining children and the extended family. The success or failure of the home rests mostly on her shoulders. According to Acholonu (1995)

It is her duty to feed her family, clothe her children and train them to respect the laws of nature and the people. Her husband participates in these but his main duty is to provide the finance for the running of the family. The wife aids him in this, for most African women are economically independent of their husbands. Financially freedom is a traditional right of women in all traditional African societies. (p. 26)

Most African women are enterprising and are even expected to be at the forefront of economic development. While men are known for their strength which they put to good use on the farm, women are known also for their powers of persuasion which they put to good use at the market places. One important role of a woman is that of a mother, irrespective of her race or socio-cultural affiliation. A universal pre-occupation of women is that task of motherhood even when it is not connected by blood. Anyalebuchi (2020) posits that “there are many obstacles and prejudices that prevents women from participating in the social activities or even owing properties, the society regards women as things to be possessed, as objects of rights rather than regards them fit” (p. 64). Women are being restricted from access to sources of power both economically, politically, socially and otherwise. Hannah (2020) asserts that “by the 11th century, opportunities for Muslim women’s education was restricted to the same level of education as men. This was partly due to patriarchy, which assumed men would take on more public roles and therefore need a higher level of education. However, privileged women

sometimes used their wealth and connections to overcome these barriers and fund women's education (p. 158).

According to Kanu (2021), there is an urgent need to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women based on their natural biological functions. Already Christianity and urbanization are changing the attitudes of many people. It is only through education, both formal and informal that the minds of people can change for the better (p. 26). Conscious and consistent educational programs mounted at all levels and on all fronts can defeat the tyranny of obnoxious customs and traditions which discriminate against women. However, the African community prioritizes the institution of motherhood and childbearing as they are central to their life of the African people. As Acholonu (1995) asserts, "it is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which all else rests in the African society and especially the family" (p. 31). In furtherance of this, Acholonu (1995) observes:

Motherhood places a woman in a position of immense and ever increasing strength. By and large all the children born to a woman are required by tradition to hold their mother in high esteem, and when she begins to age, they must nurture her and care for her in old age even as she did for them in their childhood. No matter how highly placed a man be a king, an elder, a warrior- he must respect and honour his mother. When she speaks, he must listen. Mother is supreme. There is nothing beyond her, except God. (p. 30).

The reverence which is held for motherhood is very high which permeates all facets of the African philosophy, and this is translated into all aspects of their life, both mundane and ritual. Mary Kolawole (1997) argues, that "the African women seek self-fulfilment within this plural cultural context...She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development, and dignity alongside the men". (p. 36). In the same vein, Okojo Ogunyemi (2000:65) in her essay "Women and Nigerian Literature" forges ahead and explains what is meant womanism. She submits that womanism is accommodating and believes in independence of women like feminism unlike radical feminism that is antagonism, aggressive, militancy or violent confrontation.

The need for the black variant of feminism comes into being in Alice Walker's collection of essays titled "In Search of our Mother's Garden: Womanist prose" (1983). In her essay, Walker posits her view of what a womanist should be and what she should exhibit. She asserts:

A black feminist of colour ... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's cultures, women's emotional flexibility..., and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, and or non-sexually, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male female. (p. 56)

The above obviously portrays Walker's concept of an African womanist. Hudson Weems (1991:24) as quoted in Sotunsa (2008) in explaining the term African womanism asserts, "African 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, struggle, needs and desires of African women..." (p. 79)

Womanism deals with the concept of racism, sexism and motherhood. The womanist is not a male hater and, as such, does not advocate the effacement of gender binaries like her Western feminist sister. Black womanism which encompasses African and African-American womanism moves further away from western feminism through the focus on "family relationship and the importance of motherhood".

Gender Conflict in Literature

It is obvious that conflict is rooted in the competition for the scarce resources of societies. It arises from the pursuit of disparate interests, aims and ambitions by persons and groups in specific societies. Coser (1999) defines conflict as:

A struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals. Such conflict may take place between individuals, between collectivities, or between individuals and collectivities. Intergroup as well as intra-group conflicts are perennial features of social life. (p. 2)

Conflict is often discussed within the concept of a plural society. It is characterised with co-existing but distinct cultural diversities and compulsory social institutions which determine and guide the individuals and group behaviours of the incorporated peoples. Conflict is inherent in all kinds of social, economic, families, or political settings as in business, politics, administration etc. Resources are

usually scarce in a complex society. Conflict therefore becomes a normal process of interaction. A conflict situation is created when a person or group attempts or succeed in carrying out its desire by overcoming the resistance and interests of the other in a situation of scarce resources. Elements of conflict many include struggle, contests, competition. Sandole (1993) identifies five stages of conflict. They include: initiation, escalation, controlled maintenance, abatement, and termination/resolution (p. 6). Functionalists have expressed the view that consensus was the basis for social unity. Conflict theorists believe that disorder and instability in particular and conflict in general should be seen as normal aspects of social life.

For the purpose of this paper, the main focus shall be on gender-conflict in literature. Conflict cuts across gender and it can arise between or among male-female, woman-woman, and children in a polygamous setting. The reasons for this chaos can be; co-wives conflict, choice of partner, partner seeking conflict, envy as a result of achievement, personality conflict and the like. It has been observed that competition occurs when there is an opposition of goals, aspirations, desires of different individuals in such a way that the probability of one attainment of the desired goal decreases as the chances of the other individual increases. Burgoon and Ruffer (1978) describe competition as a social situation where there is “mutual rivalry or struggle between two or more persons for the purpose of obtaining a non-divisible goal”. Competition is a form of conflict among genders (p. 485). Relationship between men and women is not always productive; conflicts between the two sexes prompt one to ask: what are the sources of the conflict? We do not refute the fact that men conflict fellow men as women conflict with fellow women, but our concern is the desire to know why the conflicts between men and women differs from the conflict of the same sex. Science has endeavoured to explain the biological reason behind the differences. McCarthy (2008) is research meant to identify whether the behavioural difference between men and women has any biological explanation. He identifies the behavioural difference is as a result of the distinct mind between the two sexes. He points out that female’s and male’s brain appear to be constructed from strikingly different blueprints. People act and react from their perception towards a given situation. This acts as a source of conflict between men and women. Violent conflicts have a fundamental impact on the life situation of the affected population. Generally speaking, men and women experience these impacts differently – according to their gender roles. At the same time, conflicts often cause a shift in the roles normally assigned within a society, and also bring about a shift in gender relations. Normally, the long-held and widespread belief that men adopt the role of active

combatants, while women remain in the “safe zone” and are affected only indirectly by a conflict, does not reflect the reality. The gender-specific impacts of conflicts are extremely complex, and are not immediately evident to many onlookers. They vary according to the point in time and the specific conflict situation. They are often of a negative nature in terms of gender equality, but may be of a positive nature in terms of the potentials they possess. The inequalities between genders have implication for stability and conflicts as they shape roles, expectations and interventions.

Moreover, violent exchanges between people of the same sex generally involve young men who are either acquaintances or strangers, and tend to occur in public places, such as a street or a bar or night club. The most extreme outcome is for one protagonist to kill the other. Daly and Wilson (1988) regard homicide figures as the most reliable source of evidence on human violence because homicide has ‘a resultant validity that all self-report lacks’ (p. 12). A meta-analysis of these (Archer, 2001a) shows that men engage in more frequent physical aggression with one another than do women, and that this difference is fairly large.

Co-Wives’ Intra-Gender Conflicts

The imaginative haunting debut novel of Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, is characterised by polygamous politics, secret bond, wonder, revelation, confession and sadness, so thought-provoking that one may be tempted to re-read severally. Published in 2010, the work revolves around Baba Segi, an Ibadan-based business mogul, dealing in building materials who gathers wives—whole four women—the same manner he accumulates wealth. Mr Alao, nicknamed Baba Segi after his first ‘assumed child’ (Segi), is caring, eager to raise children by his wives. Baba Segi’s character is sometimes absurd but he is generous. The interconnectivity of his senses is astonishing. His senses are directly connected to his gut and anything that does not agree with him has a way of accelerating his digestive system. His household becomes a shelter where women find refuge from hard background and cultivate their secret fantasises and desires. His greatest problem is lustful desire for women. Iya Segi puts it more cynically: ‘Women are my husband’s weakness. He cannot resist them, especially when they are low and downcast like puppies prematurely snatched from their mother’s breasts’ (p. 103). Of things that gladden Baba Segi’s heart, procreation comes first. He is not happy when any of his wives has procreative problem. It seems he subscribes to Acholonu’s (1995) *Motherism*

theory which upholds the opinion that ‘motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which else rests in the African society and especially the family’ (p. 31). While Baba Segi celebrates his sexual prowess and is proud of his kindness to the women he marries; he eventually becomes disillusioned by polygamy as any of his wives. Unfortunately, his semen cannot fertilise — ‘Not a solitary sperm swimming around’ (p. 194) — let alone having a low sperm count that can be medically remedied. To continue the comfort/enjoyment Baba Segi’s home offers, however, irrespective of his impotence, after years of infertility coupled with meticulous study of her husband’s priorities, Iya Segi, the first wife, takes to extra-marital affairs with Taju, Mr Alao’s chauffeur. The affair produces two children Segi (a girl) and Akin (her brother). Iya Segi usurps her position as the eldest and most revered wife, initiating the other two wives after her, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, in the course with bond of concealment. The power vested in the eldest wife in a polygamous family is explained by Catherine Acholonu (1995): ‘In polygamous homes, wives cooperate to oppose unpopular decision by their husband on domestic and other matters and often get their way. Generally speaking, older women and first wives assume a position of authority in polygamous and non-polygamous homes. They are their husbands’ advisers and are highly respected and honoured by co-wives and other members of the family’ (p. 52).

Iya Segi wields so much power that she can make or mar whoever gains her favour or falls short of her favour. She initiates Iya Tope to extra-marital affairs and also has to restrict her when she suspects that her relationship with the meat seller takes a dangerous dimension. She cautions Iya Tope. Together with Iya Femi, Iya Segi embodies evil. They want to crush Bolanle by all means. They do not want any educated woman to spoil their home for them. Iya Segi has the power to ration the provision of any erring co-wife. She could also shatter such wife’s favour before Baba Segi, their benefactor. She instigates the removal of Bolanle’s favourite chair. In her second bid, she stops all her friends, including Yemisi, from visiting on the pretence that they may have negative influence on Segi, her daughter. Baba Segi finds the idea convincing and banishes Bolanle’s friends. Despite opposition, Bolanle is not bothered with the wickedness heaped on her. To be candid, Iya Segi is a woman who can do and undo Baba Segi’s household. Iya Segi is power-drunk; she does not allow anybody to influence her role in Baba Segi’s house: ‘My husband only thinks he controls this household and I let him believe that he does but I am the one who keeps this household together. Good things happen here because I allow them. I alone can approve vengeance and only I know how to bring calm’ (p. 104). So influential is Iya

Segi in the household that she instigates enmity between Segi and Bolanle. When she discovers the possible threat Bolanle could be to the household, informs Segi to beware of Bolanle and in turn Segi tells her everything that goes on in the family behind her mother:

As a baby, Segi clung to me as if the spirit had warned that I would one day run away and leave her. She has grown to be a loyal daughter. When I knew the danger that Bolanle would do to our home, I warned her, I told her that a girl who abandons her mother's breast for another woman's will be caused. I told her that she must be my eyes, my ears, my nose and my hands when I am not in this house. She has been faithful. She tells me everything that happens in my absence. I have told her that she must cling to me until the day she leaves to rule her own home. She will not falter. I have trained her well (p. 104).

Iya Segi also exerts her influence to garner unwholesome 'cooperation' among the first three wives. Position of the first wife is so powerful in polygamous home that she is the next in command to the husband. Sometimes, the husband owes allegiance to the first wife. It is the first wife that receives other new wives first when they arrive in the household. Iya Segi is vested with this responsibility in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Iya Tope's arrival in Baba Segi's house gives clue to this: 'When we arrived at Baba Segi's house, he pushed me towards Iya Segi and warned that I should show her great respect' (p. 8). Acholonu summarises the rebellious unity of purpose among co-wives as follow: 'In polygamous families, wives cooperate to ensure peace and stability and for mutual upkeep of their children; sometimes they gang to cut their husbands to size' (p. 27). This perfectly explains the unity in Baba Segi's home; it is meant at treacherous deal among his wives, and such is how illegitimate children take occupancy of Mr Alao's home without his knowledge. For Fifteen years (1984-1999), there is absolute peace in Baba Segi's house. However, peace has a willowy body that breaks easily. Therefore, it is at the central of the narrative that Iya Segi is the brain behind the secret of the household. There is also Iya Tope, the second wife, who is kind and sincere but easily intimidated. She is raised in the village and is well versed in simple meticulous task like weeding or braiding her daughter's hair. Next is Iya Femi, a vain vindictive woman who bleaches her hands yellow and spoils her children but loves cooking and clearing. The fourth wife is Bolanle, a graduate, who is haunted by a trauma in her past. She loves children, but she is unable to conceive any of her own. Privy to the story are Baba Segi and his driver Taju. The tranquillity and virility Baba Segi together with his wives enjoys over the years

shatter when Bolanle is married into the household as the fourth wife. Although not privy to the oath, Bolanle, a soft-spoken University graduate, is quickly ostracised by her illiterate co-wives on two grounds: her education and the scepticism that she may expose their misdeeds. Nevertheless, she (Bolanle) is resolute, steadfast and ever determined to fulfil Baba Segi's 'child-production' expectancy. Her failure to conceive and search for orthodox diagnosis for the cause of her infertility exposes the family secret of child-bearing. Efforts of the illiterate co-wives to oust her from the household in a bid to conceal their secret, Bolanle's tender affection and honest-heartedness to children of the co-wives, perseverance and the eventual revelation of the family secret through test results and professional interrogation by qualified physicians have devastating consequences to the entire household. The hatred the first and the third wives of Baba Segi (Iya Segi and Iya Femi) nurture against Bolanle starts immediately she becomes the fourth co-mate. As a wealthy business man with seven children, Mr Alao marries Bolanle for two reasons. He wants to show off, 'to be envied by his peers' (p. 7) that he marries a graduate and as well aims at raising a child by a graduate. These motives that gladden Baba Segi's heart and endear Bolanle to him are the reasons the other co-wives hate her. Contrary to her mother's objection that polygamy is for 'gold-diggers and bush-dwellers, not educated children brought up in a good Christian home' (p. 17), Bolanle chooses it to empty the sorrow of rape, regain life and recover in anonymity. She wants a married man who will, unlike young man, be contented with lose of virginity without contest.

If Bolanle had known the secret lives of her co-wives before moving into Baba Segi's house, perhaps, she would have had a second thought, prepared for challenges than being caught unaware. The moment Bolanle steps into the household is when hatred for her starts. She is unaware of how much her arrival has changed the household. The very day she sets foot in the house, other wives see her as an intruder who has come to disrupt the 'sex rotation' (p. 74) arrangement the women have with their husband. Particularly, 'Iya Femi's head was hot. She wanted the blood of this new wife who had taken her place as the newest, youngest, freshest wife' (p. 47). In fact, among the first three wives, only Iya Tope is friendly and receptive to Bolanle when she later moves in. Iya Segi is described as 'the large one', who only 'rolled unto her toes' and gives her 'a hair-to shoe examination. Iya Femi, 'the wife with crimson lipstick' only hums a distant response to Bolanle's greeting. She is given a naïve welcome and considered insignificant addition to the household. What is more? The duo (Iya Segi and Iya Femi)

will sweep the floor almost always singing satirical songs to ridicule the new wife. Moreover, they also envy the affection given Bolanle as the newest wife by Baba Segi. So deep-seated in their disdain for her is the University degree which makes them smear her books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. They do not only tear and dump the torn pages in the dustbin; the words are scribbled over with charcoal. Iya Tope is quite exceptional and hospitable. Her conscience is functional, unlike Iya Segi and Iya Femi's. When Bolanle offers to render free coaching classes for the co-wives and their children, only Iya Tope together with her children is keen to learn. Iya Femi tears out sheets from the exercise book Bolanle bought for her to line the kitchen cupboard while Iya Segi tells her horridly the following day that she... 'should wait until' she has her... 'own children if' she... 'was eager to become a teacher' (p. 22). These women do not only hate Bolanle but also poison the mind of their children against her. Iya Segi and Iya Femi are wickedly conservative, hostile and uninventive. When Bolanle arrives at Baba Segi's house, she thought it polite to improve the household's domestic cores especially the table manner. She buys an orange bowl she in conjunction with the co-wives could use to serve Baba Segi's meal. She presents the bowl to Iya Femi. Rather than appreciating her innovation, Iya Femi laughs, collects the bowl and before Bolanle can read her intention, she, 'Iya Femi, deliberately knocked it to the floor, breaking it into two' (p. 45), she mockingly send a tube of *superglue*, through Akin, to Bolanle, to fasten the broken china together.

Iya Segi and Iya Femi would not have had avenue to humiliate Bolanle if she is able to conceive. They both lurk under her infertility to insult her. Their thought is to keep the secret bond from her, so that their husband will divorce her on the ground of barrenness. Iya Femi openly bears her mind: 'When Bolanle fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out! We know she will not give him children so we should watch from distance' (p. 50). The conspiracy is so tense that when Bolanle gives suggestion, Iya Segi will listen and shake her knee, and Iya Femi 'would hiss for the world to hear' (p. 52). Their intention is to make Bolanle submit to their wishes willingly. Bolanle is also envied by the co-wives because she dresses neatly. 'Envy seeped through every word that came out of Iya Femi's mouth. And look at all the lace Baba Segi buys her. What has she done to deserve it? But our husband has always bought the same for us all. I was amazed that Iya Femi was still so bitter about Bolanle's arrival. Iya Segi and I did not despise her this way when she joined us,' (p. 53), Iya Tope laments. Iya Femi does not like Iya Tope telling the truth. Rather than having a re-think about what Iya Tope said,

she picks quarrel with her. She falsely accuses her of defending Bolanle, derogatorily saying the same blood run through Bolanle and Iya Tope's veins: 'Why are you defending her? Is it the same blood that runs through your veins? Is your allegiance faltering? Or have you forgotten that we are bound by the same oath? Iya Femi asked (p. 53). However, the third wife, Iya Femi, is fond of abusive words and is always insatiable with what she is offered in Baba Segi's house. Earlier when she grumbled over her portion of the provision (Bournvita) Iya Segi shares, the latter tells her outrightly:

Iya Femi, you are in the habit of saying things that are too big for that little mouth of yours. If you are not satisfied with the way I share provisions, take your ingratitude to another man's house. Mind you, make sure you are the first wife and not a lowly third (p. 49).

Apparently, the conflict in this work is not between the literate wife and the illiterate wives of Baba Segi. As the above exert proves, squabbles exist among the first three illiterate wives of Mr Alao. This is also a pointer to the fact that there could have been disagreement among the first three wives before Bolanle moves in. Hence, it does not take long before Iya Segi gangs up against Bolanle, telling Baba Segi the comfort of the armchair she (Bolanle) enjoys is responsible for her inability to conceive. She advises Baba Segi to withdraw the chair given Bolanle because the comfort an armchair offers 'made the female form complacent' (p. 54). Nartey (2021) argues that women suffer different forms of violence, including domestic violence, rape and female genital mutilation. The notion of the African women as being voiceless, invisible, docile and confined to domestic duties distorts the criteria of judgement of women's empowerment. These women have only one job, that is to be house wives who procreate, clean up the house, wait on for the master (husband) and generally satisfy all his whims. After the beating, Baba Segi consults Teacher at Ayikara who admonishes him. Baba Segi confesses to Teacher that he too has not been treating Bolanle well in recent time because of her barrenness: 'Well, in recent months, I myself have been hostile to the young woman but only because of her barrenness' (p. 64). In the section of the narrative where Iya Femi gives account of her deeds and misdeeds, entitled 'Queen', Shoneyin presents the reader with a vivid description of the precarious and pathetic nature of the relationship among the different wives of Baba Segi. For instance, she calls Iya Segi a witch: 'The witch sniffed the air around me. She must have picked up the scent in my thighs' (p. 68). Whenever Iya Segi wears clothe that does not fit her well, Iya Femi will ridicule her physique saying: 'That tick

neck of hers is an embarrassment. If she always had to wear clothes with high collars maybe she would eat less. Maybe she'd stop grunting like pig' (p. 69). It is not Iya Femi alone that complains of Iya Segi's fatness, Iya Tope also does complain. Bolanle adjudges Iya Segi as 'the large one' (p. 20) while Iya Tope remarks on her fatness: 'She would be lucky if she could fit just one of her breast into my entire blouse' (p. 69).

In her account of her deeds and misdeeds, Iya Femi confesses how she connives with Iya Segi to implant the rat-head in Bolanle's room in order to implicate her. Iya Femi hates Bolanle with passion. In her account she says 'Baba Segi found a monkey whose teeth had been cut on sorrow and he forgot about me' (p. 137). It could be recalled that, earlier, Iya Femi agitated Bolanle's arrival because she sees her as an interloper whose presence in the home may bring doom for her and make her lose her favour of Baba Segi. Previously, the narrator has captured Iya Femi's mood as Bolanle joins the family: 'Iya Femi's head was hot. She wanted the blood of this new wife who had taken her place as the newest, youngest, freshest wife' (p. 47). It is pathetic that the rivalry in the family causes Segi's death. Segi eats the rice Iya Femi places in Bolanle's room in commemoration of Kole's birthday. Meanwhile, the cooked chicken on the rice kept for Bolanle has been poisoned. After eating, Segi begins to throw up and is instantly rushed to the hospital, accompanied by Baba Segi and Iya Tope while Iya Femi is required to look after Iya Segi. At home, the duo accuse Bolanle of plotting to kill Segi: 'what have you done to my daughter?,' Iya Segi asked. 'Iya Segi grabs Bolanle by the sleeve, knocking her to the floor too' and pushes her with all her strength in all her muscular arm so forcefully that the 'The smaller woman fell backwards and landed her head on the cold tiles.... Bolanle touched the back of her head and brought her hand within view; it was moist with blood' (p. 161-162), but denies the allegation, explaining that Segi eats the rice placed in her room by Iya Femi. Instead of restricting Iya Segi from the devilish act, Iya Femi only expresses disappointment that Iya Segi does not decapitate Bolanle and calls her evil: 'How lucky you are that Iya Segi did not decapitate you and pound your head in the mortar! You are indeed an evil spirit. Get thee behind us, Satan! Leave our home!' Iya Femi flicked her waist' (p. 162). It is this revelation that makes Iya Femi and Iya Segi know that Segi had eaten the rice they had poisoned. Taju helped the women procure the poison set for Bolanle which eventually snowballs to Segi's untimely death. In *The Secret lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin does not only reveal the uneasiness of polygamous family but exposes the damage unhealthy relationship among co-

wives could cause. When co-wives are after each other's lives, employing diabolical power to exterminate each other, the outcome may be disheartening to the person who is so bent on eliminating the other person. The evil plan Iya Segi and Iya Femi have for Bolanle manifests on Iya Segi's daughter. Eventually Bolanle is victoriously vindicated. Interestingly, Segi seeks her father's consent to convalesce in Bolanle's room to everybody's surprise in the household. Rather than blaming Bolanle for the incident before her demise, Segi blames her mother for planting the poison. She does not hesitate to accuse her mother of murder. Segi's allegation pierces her psyche so deep that she tears her dress from the neck to the beneath and 'slapped the walls' like a lunatic. She confesses: 'I boxed my breast and pulled my hair. I could not control myself' (p. 206). To compound the situation for the family, Segi's sickness later results to loggerheads among Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Iya Segi. For the first time, Iya Tope is heard in a fit of anger; she lampoons Iya Femi and rhetorically sentences her to prison. It is lucid from all indications that Baba Segi's home is not a home where peace reigns. Each of the four wives finds ways of maligning and outsmarting others. Their unhealthy rivalry shatters Mr Alao's home. Ultimately, the novel is a satire, wittily questioning the vanity of men who think they can satisfy more than one wife and on the other hand the unintelligibility of women who think they can peacefully co-share a husband. The novel implies, as might be seen, that polygamy does more harm than guarantees security, genuine love and harmony among co-wives, their husband and children. The application of the tenets of gender-based theories: Motherism, womanism and liberal feminism, has helped expose the danger inherent in polygamous family.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intra-gender conflict of co-wives in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The study focuses on the conflict between or among women and men in the texts. The text parades highly enviable characters, such as Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi, Bolanle and others in novel. They are remarkable women, strong, competent, ambitious, courageous, hardworking and successful in their various activities. They are independent and not ordinary appendages of men. Because many are economically independent, they are also self-reliant, and there is co-operation, mutual understanding among women, resistance to male subjugation and contribution to the home and the society at large. The writer uses this strategy in her fiction to show the importance of collaboration and complementarity among the sexes and to prove thus a womanist point. The study concludes that women can be the best

of friends when they do not have to share the same husband. Shoneyin is representative of younger generation of women writers who are concerned with the conditions of female subjects in male-dominated terrains. Specifically, we need to understand how intra-gender conflict is constructed and represented in texts written by women themselves. Shoneyin is an adept feminist and a defender of women's rights. In an interview in The Punch, a Nigerian Daily, of June 21, 2011, Shoneyin openly confesses that:

I am a feminist and it's a label that I wear with a great pride. I say this because a lot of people-both men and women- seem to be slightly intimidated by feminists because, to them, being a feminist means hating men.... I have found that there's a lot to admire about womanhood, especially within the African context where women are so full of love, empathy and courage. I am also fascinated by their devotion to their men-folk. Our women can love, loathe in one breath, live for and die for their men, in spite of everything. (p. 47).

From the above, it shows that Shoneyin is a womanist who believes that man and woman have complimentary role or relationship in the society. In the same vein, Motherism, according to Acholonu, should possess love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of sexes, not antagonism, aggressive, militancy or violent confrontation as being in the case of radical feminism.

Recommendations

The study has examined the intra-gender conflict of co-wives in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the study of women and intra-gender conflict establishes the presence of woman-woman oppression in the society and calls the attention of feminists and womanists to the urgent need to redefine women and men relationship have been defined with the purpose of finding a lasting solution to quarrels between and among women. This suggests the need for further literary and pedagogical attention to the impact of cultural expectation on trauma and oppression in Nigeria drama.

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