



To Be Happy Under My own Terms: Rethinking Polygamy in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract - To most African female writers, polygamy is oppressive to the African woman. Therefore, the quest for happiness through monogamy has become the central preoccupation of female-authored novels. However, although polygamy has a negative rating among educated African women who shun it, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* goes beyond this cliché to present it as an encounter with the self, an individualistic choice toward self-healing and self-reconstruction. Consequently, this essay deconstructs polygamy as women's sexual degradation, countering its label of badge of dishonour for women, on the one hand, and argues a modern African woman's right to happiness in her own terms through a polygamous marriage.

Key words: polygamy, self-fulfillment, happiness, education, African society.

Résumé - Pour la plupart des écrivaines africaines, la polygamie est oppressante pour la femme africaine. Par conséquent, la recherche du bonheur à travers la monogamie est devenue la préoccupation centrale des romans d'auteurs féminins. Cependant, bien que la polygamie ait une cote négative parmi les femmes africaines instruites qui la fuient, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* de Lola Shoneyin va au-delà de ce cliché pour la présenter comme une rencontre avec soi-même, un choix individualiste vers l'auto-guérison et l'auto-reconstruction. Par conséquent, cet essai déconstruit la polygamie en tant que dégradation sexuelle des femmes, réfutant son étiquette d'insigne de déshonneur pour les femmes, d'une part, et défend le droit d'une femme africaine moderne au bonheur dans ses propres termes grâce à un mariage polygame.

Key words: polygamie, épanouissement personnel, bonheur, éducation, société africaine.

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy, the custom of having more than one wife simultaneously, is a plural marriage which can take two shapes: polygyny (where a man is married to several women) and polyandry (where a woman is married to several men). Typically rooted in African culture, polygamy is still widely practiced therein in spite of “the encroachment of Western culture and the great strides towards gender equity in many parts of this continent,” where its survival is perceived as a “fiercely protected symbol of African identity.”¹

A widespread form of marriage in African and in Muslim communities, plural marriage “is an enduring social phenomenon into the twenty-first century, despite the cultural dominance of monogamy in colonial and then global culture” (Moolla, 2017: 7). The practice has its anthropological implications as well. Traditionally explained in terms of status, resources, and sex, polygamy generates status through power and prestige, besides creating strategic alliances and providing economic advantages, when it connects influential families. Moreover, polygamy secures resources through production and reproduction – a man with many wives can potentially produce many children and possess enough human resources in subsistence systems where he can appropriate both several women and children’s labor.² In sum, marrying several wives and having a large number of children symbolise prosperity, power, prestige and authority for polygamists. Backing the foregoing view of polygamy, Catherine O. Williams and Simeon O. Sonde (2015: 97) argue having several wives as “a symbol of power, prestige and influence in traditional African society.”

A central topic discussed from gender standpoint in African literature, polygamy is depicted in male-authored novels as a normal trend, with polygamous marriage being presented as beneficial to women – Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Onuora Nzekwu’s *Highlife for Lizards* come to mind – while many female writers consider it as a source of female suffering and oppression, indicting the institution as dashing any hope of female happiness or self-expression. Examples include, among others, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*, Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Rebecca H. Reyher’s *Zulu Woman*. Until recently, women in some African societies have been forced into polygamy. A crucial problem confronting African women in general, polygamy is factored in the

¹ Vuyiswa Ndabayakhe and Catherine Addison, “Polygamy in African Fiction.” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* Vol 20, No1. 89-104. DOI: [10.1080/1013929X.2008.9678291](https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2008.9678291). Retrieved on 5th October 2020.

² Miriam Kocktvedgaard Zeitzén, “Polygamy (Polygyny, Polyandry)”. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1377>. Retrieved on 5th October 2020.



definition of women's place and condition in patriarchal society with its old-fashioned social practices as well as its outdated religious and cultural traditions that need to be revisited (d'Almeida, 2011: 5).

But the wind of modernisation has propelled a rethinking of polygamy in West African female-authored novels, making polygamous marriage a preferred choice for some female characters in the said novels. Bolanle, the prime example and the main character of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, contradicts the assumption that only uneducated women enter polygamous marriages as victims of tradition, since polygamy grants her freedom and healing.

Women's quest for free choices concerning their lives drives Shoneyin, a Nigerian female writer, to burst into the literary scene with her *The Secret Lives*, a novel reflecting her feminist location as she admits in an interview: "Feminism, for me, is about creating an enabling environment for women, especially in societies like ours where the doors have been shut in their faces. It's about women regaining complete control of their bodies. It's about the luxury of having options, the value of being able to make choices."³ As a global trend, feminism is being personalised by every woman around the world. The interesting matter with feminism is that it helps women make choices. This essay revisits, on the one hand, the condescending and social indictment of polygamous practice as stifling African women's self-realisation/happiness and, on the other hand, presents an educated woman's right to happiness in a modern African society by welcoming polygamy to suit her needs.

1. Molding Women in Patriarchal Culture: Virginity, Barrenness and Polygamy

The Secret Lives relates the traumatising experience of a young college graduate: Bolanle. A wife of a polygamous husband and a former rape victim who was abused in her early sixteen and who found herself ravaged by this rape event, Bolanle, is brought up in the Yoruba culture which values early marriage of women, expecting its females to enter the marital covenant as virgin. Generally, marrying a non-virgin woman in some African cultures shines humiliation and shame on one's family, bringing opprobrium on one's community at large. Accordingly, custom requires the presentation of a blood-stained cloth to a bride's parents as evidence of virginity after the celebration of the marriage. To avoid the

³ Interview by Wana Odobang "Lola Shoneyin on Freedom, Feminism and Polygamy." Available at <https://wanawana.net/2012/11/26/lola-shoneyin-on-freedom-feminism-and-polygamy/>. Accessed on 20th September 2020.

accusing finger of a strict and severe mother, Bolanle chooses to marry Alao – also known as Baba Segi – a polygamist husband. In her quest for cure, the rape victim found herself entangled in the trap of jealousy perpetrated by Alao's three wives: Iya Segi, Iya Femi and Iya Tope. Blessed with seven children together, each of them is named after their first born, a practice which jumpstarts Bolanle's frustration for not having a single child after two years of marriage.

Bolanle's incapacity to become pregnant – and acquire social status through childbearing – forces the couple to seek medical consultation, as barrenness and sterility are considered a threat to the continuity of human life and existence in many African traditional societies. For Kwame Gyekye (1996: 83), children are so important that one's inability to bear them is tantamount to a great calamity in the traditional community: particularly, the woman who fails to procreate suffers "humiliation and, sometimes, ridicule or abuse." In the Alao's house, for instance, every fertile woman is honoured with a special armchair in the sitting room. On the ground of her incapacity to procreate, Bolanle is denied such an honour: "The tradition was that the comfort of an armchair had to be earned, which meant that unless you were pregnant, with oedema, breastfeeding or watching over toddlers, you were not entitled to one."⁴

Conference of the above honour on fertile women seems a widespread practice in Africa, a way of rewarding fertility and new life. Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* barely considers herself a woman until she had her children. Her burning desire to bear children forces her to marry Nnaife, despite his ugliness. Likewise, Efuru – in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* – is frustrated by her incapacity to procreate. Alao's utmost concern about the matter drives his frank discussion with his fourth wife, Bolanle, about the issue: "Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you, as well, are saddened by it. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them conmen and rubbished their powers. Well... I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to hospital to talk to a doctor" (SL: 14).

Childlessness in a couple is often the woman's "fault" in African marriages. Sadly, the society accuses the woman when such a situation occurs. Alao's accusing voice to Bolanle serves an ample illustration: "Does your blood not boil when you see other women carrying babies on their backs? Do tears not fill your eyes when you

⁴ Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010), 53. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay, and preceded by SL.



see mothers suckling infants? You of all people should be willing to try everything! Offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a barren maggot?" (SL: 43). Barren women are, in this African vision of things, "incomplete" women. Visualise an instant the wretched condition of this young married woman hearing and swallowing this venom coming from the mouth of the one whose main role is to protect her. Husbands are supposed to shield their wives against outside ravages and psychological devastations. In sum, this husband's blaming game – by calling his wife names – says volumes about the pitiful shape of barren women in African communities, a by-product of patriarchy.

Most feminists argue that motherhood should be a choice, not an imposition. Bolanle willingly accepts medical consultation to remedy the problem and goes through a series of tests that ultimately vindicates her. However, during the consultation, Alao complains to the doctor, directing another accusing finger at Bolanle: "Doctor, when you buy guavas in the marketplace, you cannot open every single one to check for rottenness. And where you find rottenness, you do not always throw away the guava. You bite around the rot and hope that it will quench your craving" (SL: 39).

The delivery of Bolanle's medical test result happens to be a real bomb thrown at Alao: "From my examination, the results of the scan and the blood tests, I cannot see any immediate reasons why you shouldn't be able to conceive." (SL: 170). This unexpected result has some surprise in store for her husband, as Alao is equally required to go through some preliminary tests (SL: 171). After all, Bolanle's apparent barrenness leads to the discovery of Alao's infertility, since the test result reveals that Alao is medically infertile: "Not a solitary sperm swimming around" (SL: 194). Clearly, Alao's big testicles are empty and seedless. Thus began the unraveling of the secret lives of his three wives. From a proud and happy father, Alao discovers, to his dismay and to everybody's surprise, the bare truth: he has not fathered one single baby among the seven children he proudly claims as genitor. Due to patriarchal constraints on motherhood, each one of Alao's wives manages hard to have her own children, with Iya Segi being the initiator of the tricky and wicked game which consists in having other men impregnate them.

In traditional African societies, children prove womanhood and failing to have one is never attributed to the man. Ify Achufusi (1994: 105) contends that "A grown up woman earns the respect of her people if she is married. She becomes fully integrated into her husband's family if she bears children." A view supported by Remi Akujobi's following claims (2011: 3): "Patriarchal societies present a woman's

central purpose to be her reproductive function and so motherhood and mothering become intertwined with issues of a woman's identity." Bolanle credits the above assertions when she confesses to herself: "One day, they will all accept me as a member of this family. One day, I will have a child of my own and everything will fall into its place. My husband will delight in me again, the way he did before my barrenness ate away at his affection" (SL: 23). Iya Segi's own mother once told her the depth of the said tradition: "It is every woman's life purpose to bear children. Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living? [...] You need ... to bear children" (SL: 101). As the foregoing hints at it, Shoneyin's novel re-examines the problematic of barrenness in a couple with the forceful idea that men can equally be the cause of childlessness in the marriage.

If Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a strong protest against polygamy, Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives* condones it, and even lauds it as its practice paves the way for psychological cure in this fiction. Long considered as a groundbreaking novel when it comes to denouncing polygamy as a daunting challenge for women in both traditional and modern societies, Bâ's novel has triggered a staggering number of studies that have interrogated polygamy regarding its social values. Some critics blame the institution for its weight on womanhood, with women oppressing their fellow women, whereas others represent polygamy as profitable to women. In any case, African men have, until recently, married more than one woman in order to secure more hands to help them work on their farms. Even if the usefulness of wives as free labour is considerably reduced, the practice of polygamy still persists, given the cultural understanding attached to it (Dolphyne, 1991: 15-16, Boukari, 2012: 66). As a number of contributors to Helen Nabasuta Mugambi and Tuzyline Jita Allan's *Masculinities in African Literary and Cultural Texts* (2010: 43; 181 & 275) have noted, a polygamous husband is regarded as more masculine than a monogamous one; the practice being seen as upgrading one's public standing as a virile man. The institution of polygamy, to be sure, is a celebration of superior masculinity. In sum, marrying many wives is equated with accomplishing acts of valour.

Having more wives supposedly entails more courage, physical strength and sexual potency. Physically, Alao is a strong and virile person; his marrying four women attests to his virility. Bolanle, the fourth wife, comments about his sexual prowess: "It must have been my vulnerability that aroused him because he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible. It was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn't make light of his husbandly duties. He wanted to fuck me pregnant" (SL: 43-44).



Iya Tope, his second wife, is in full agreement with the above view expressed by Bolanle: Baba Segi's "penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed" (SL: 132). Nonetheless, Shoneyin ridicules the extraordinary strength Alao uses during the coitus with his wives: despite the energy he invests in his sexual prowess, not a single child comes out of it.

Alao marries his three wives under strange circumstances. He marries his first wife, Iya Segi, out of the conspiracy between his mother and Iya Segi's mother (SL: 100). Iya Tope, the second one, was married off to him by her father as a "compensation for the failed crops" (SL: 82). The third wife, Iya Femi, was introduced to him by Taju, his driver (SL: 128-129). As is the rule, these co-wives are placed in antagonistic position with each fighting to prove she is worthy of her dowry (Akung, 2012: 118). So, upon her arrival in Alao's house, the highly educated Bolanle receives a cold welcome from the three uneducated co-wives who are full of complexes: "To ease the uncomfortable silence, I told the wife with two-tone skin how gorgeous her skirt and blouse were." She answered: "Uneducated women wear good things too" (SL: 20-21). Despite these petty quarrels and against arguments that polygamy is oppressive to women, a plural marriage is actually empowering in this tale. If polygamy is envisioned as a means of oppression in most traditional settings, Williams and Sonde (2015: 102 & 105) picture the institution as an "accepted and welcomed practice by the wives" in Shoneyin's novel, "where the man is held captive by the wives."

Of course, like in all other types of marriage, polygamy can be good or bad. But the polygamous marriage in the novel under study mirrors, in essence, the following attributes: harmony, responsibility, fairness, honesty, equity, order, friendship, respect, satisfaction, sharing and bonding (Nnaemeka, 1997: 174). These positive notions are proven right in Alao's home prior to Bolanle's arrival, a strong counter to Vuyiswa Ndabayakhe and Catherine Addison's central thesis that sisterhood among women portrayed in many of the female-authored texts is "impossible among co-wives in a polygamous marriage" (2011: 89).

The harmonious bond and secrecy linking Alao's wives will be shattered with the introduction of a willful young Bolanle whose unquenchable quest of self-healing drives her to this harmonious polygamous setting. Because the three women developed a strong sense of female bond tied with a common secret, Bolanle's arrival becomes a threat to their devilish plot. Iya Segi, the senior wife, is well controlling the house before the introduction of the educated woman. As a trailblazer, Iya Segi advises Iya Tope to manage hard to get pregnant before long:



“get pregnant quickly or he will start to force-feed you bitter concoctions from medicine men until your belly rumbles in your sleep” (SL: 83). Iya Tope understood the coded language and selected a meat-seller as her children’s genitor. In the like manner, Iya Segi trains Iya Femi in the art of deceiving, to trust the latter’s confession: “One night when Baba Segi was busy pummelling Iya Tope, Iya Segi came to my room and told me how children were born in Baba Segi’s household” (SL: 132).

If some women have been forced to integrate polygamous marriages in the past, women themselves are choosing to be second, third or fourth wife nowadays. As can be sociologically observed, polygamy is taking another form in modern African societies. Exception made of Iya Segi and Iya Tope, the third (Iya Femi) and the fourth (Bolanle) wives marry Alao by their own free choice, fully knowing that they are marrying a polygamous husband. Bolanle, the college graduate, is well aware of Alao’s marital status but willingly accepts to marry him anyway. When they first met, Alao’s attempt to woo her receives the following reaction from the young graduate: “And will your wives not come and drive me out with a broom?” Alao gives this straightforward answer to such an inquiry: “My wives do not visit my work place. Your friend should have told you that. Why would they? They are taken care of; they have no reason to trouble me” (SL: 7). This reassuring response by Alao is enough security clearance for Bolanle to move in with him.

2. Being Happy Under One’s Own Terms

The notion of happiness varies from one individual to another. Any common English dictionary provides a simple definition of “happiness”: the state of being happy. Dennis Kim-Prieto and his associates have theorized the three main ways that happiness has been approached in positive psychology: “Firstly, happiness is considered as a global assessment of life and all its facets; secondly, happiness is viewed as a recollection of past emotional experiences; finally, happiness is seen as an aggregation of multiple emotional reactions across time.” Although “self-happiness” is not used very often, the term refers to “a sense of happiness or satisfaction with one’s self. It is often associated with self-confidence, self-esteem, and other concepts that marry ‘the self’ with feeling content and happy. In general, it means that you are pleased with yourself and your choices, and with the person that you are.”⁵

⁵ Dennis Kim-Prieto et al. “What is Happiness and Why is it Important.” Available at <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-happiness/> Consulted on 12th January 2020.



The foregoing mandates every individual to seek his/her own personal happiness. Women and men alike have their ways to feel and express their state of happiness. Hence, what matters most is no longer what the community or the group feels but what the individual feels. In any case, one's personal feeling remains the central preoccupation when one's happiness is at stake. It is my considered opinion that every individual is longing for self-satisfaction in a suffocating environment where tradition and its weight rank high.

On the road to her self-happiness and anticipating the community's judgmental attitude toward her, Bolanle's inner thoughts are forceful: "Don't think I can't see the challenges ahead of me. People will say I am a second-hand woman. Men will hurt and ridicule me, but I won't let them hold me back. I will remain in the land of the living" (SL: 245). Shoneyin ends her novel with the above blissful and hopeful notes from Bolanle. The heroine utters those words at the end of her emotional cure trip in the Alao's family. After escaping a mortal coup plotted by her co-wives, she realises the tremendous risk she has taken in her self-healing process. One night, Segi eats a poisonous food intended for Bolanle and becomes sick. Iya Segi automatically attacks Bolanle, accusing her of bewitching her daughter:

Iya Segi pushed Bolanle with all the strength in her muscular arms. The smaller woman fell backwards and landed bottom-first on a stool before toppling over and knocking her head on the cold tiles, just missing the edge of the rug. Although Bolanle heard the sound of bone grazing stone, she jumped to her feet in case Iya Segi decided to pounce. Unstable on her feet, Bolanle touched the back of her head and brought her hand within view; it was moist with blood (SL: 161-162).

All the same, she comes out from the experience more empowered and self-confident than ever. Her education serves her well in the hostile environment stained by envy and jealousy. Thinking of the whole situation, she confesses to herself: "Living with them has taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy" (SL: 22).

As is said earlier, the African culture – the society in general and the family in particular – looks down upon a girl who has lost her virginity before marriage. It is still a mother's honour to marry off her daughter virgin. Above all, Bolanle, a "booklong,"⁶ must deserve a decent and respectful marriage, in accordance with the Yoruba tradition where "no girl marries without the consent of her parents,"

⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo uses the term "booklong" in her *Changes: A Love Story* to qualify Esi's high level of education.

according to Oladele Taiwo (1967: 30-31) whose findings are authoritative marriage custom-wise among the said ethnic group: "All the important members of the family on both sides are expected to be present as well as their intimate friends. After this comes the giving of the bride price [...]. This bride price legitimises marriage; no marriage contract is valid without it." This prescribed rite uncovers social conditioning of its females into accepting its norms. However, Bolanle disregards these socially and culturally sanctioned rules by circumventing them, guided by her fear for humiliation after her rape episode. She marries without her mother's blessings and lives her house as an orphan: "It didn't bother me that I wouldn't have a tiered wedding cake, confetti, a veil or a highfalutin sermon from a practiced priest. I didn't expect any nuggets of wisdom from my mother, no echoes of 'look after our daughter' from my father and certainly no mad dash for a final car-side embrace from Lara" (SL: 18).

Seeking to hide her "defiled" status landed her in a marital arrangement with a polygamous husband. This parade remains the driving force behind her risky polygamous marriage which nearly costs her life:

Somehow, it all made perfect sense when I met Baba Segi. At last, I would be able to empty myself of my sorrow. I would be with a man who accepted me, one who didn't ask questions or find my quietness unsettling. I knew Baba Segi wouldn't be like younger men who demanded explanations for the faraway look in my eye. Baba Segi was content when I said something (SL: 16).

More importantly for her, the freedom of movement inherent in a polygamous marriage could help her reconstruct her shattered life. In the process of reshaping her own story, she challenges the society in carving her own space where she can cure herself. Bolanle solely prizes the comfort and protection of a man capable of restoring the beauty of her womanhood which had been defiled through rape.

Shoneyin's heroine finds it difficult to explain to her mother that she was raped in her early sixteen because society does not provide avenues for rape victims to trade their frustrations. Sexual violence is still a tragedy occurring here and there with the rapid urbanisation of African countries due to lack of security and the loss of moral values which are rampant phenomena everywhere. Immorality, for instance, ranks prominent in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* as a major problem in African cities, with Lagos, Bolanle's rape scene, as a prime example. The rape happens so quickly in the said city of Lagos that this young victim concludes in a painful way:

I felt pain deep in my groin. There was wetness between my tights. I burst into tears. What had he done to me? [...] What I had hoped to save for my husband had been



wrenched from me and all I had to show for it was an excruciating ache and disheveled hair. When I rested my arms on my breasts to button up my blouse, I felt how tender they were. I took a peek and found fading teeth marks all over them. (SL: 115)

Sheila Minkah-Premo (2001: 9) defines sexual violence as violent acts of sexual nature that include rape, with the latter being “the carnal knowledge of a female aged 16 years and above.” Like Sheri in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*, Bolanle felt ruined: she was robbed of her humanity and pride after her rape, a rape episode which drastically altered and destroyed her life altogether. As is the case with Sheri whose best friend Enitan laments that “there was blood on her pubic hairs, thick spit running down her legs” (Atta, 2006: 66), Bolanle has gone through hell: like her shadow, the feeling of filth of that horrendous and traumatic experience literally follows her everywhere (SL: 16).

A devilish phenomenon that has drawn attention from female novelists, rape features prominently in Amma Darko’s fictional writing, an author who blasts this heinous practice in two of her novels: *Faceless* and *Beyond the Horizon*. More importantly, “rape is fast becoming a global trend which,” if not curbed, “will do greater harm to the feminine psyche” (Akung, 2012: 117). In order to keep her sanity, Bolanle chooses Alao’s family to heal herself:

So, yes. I choose this home. Not for the monthly allowance, not for the lace skirt suits, and not for the coral bracelets. Those things mean nothing to me. I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity. And when you choose a family, you stay with them. You stay with your husband even when your friends call him a polygamist ogre. You stay with him even when your mother says he’s an overfed orang-utan. (SL: 16).

Victims of sexual abuse face many drawbacks, varying from psychological destruction taking the form of depression to unwanted pregnancies with the risk of HIV contamination, or suicide: “Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t only come here to get away from my mother,” Bolanle confesses, “I came to escape the feeling of filth that followed me. If I stayed at home, I knew the day would come when mama would open my bedroom door and find pools of blood at my wrists” (SL: 16). Obviously, Bolanle becomes pregnant after her rape and has no other option than aborting. Hailing from a broken home, the then teenager silently faced this dreadful situation solely with the support of Segun, her boyfriend of the time (SL: 116-118).

Broken homes inflict deep psychological wounds on teenagers, as is the case of Richard Wright’s narrator in *Black Boy*. As a matter of fact, they become bitter and are exposed to life hardships. Bolanle’s father is never at home, a situation which



triggers her mother's anger to be alone in educating the children. In line with Leonard A. Koussouhon and his team's argument that Darko projects negative portrayals on her male characters, painting them as exploitative, eccentric, materialistic, brutish, greedy, reckless, deceitful, and heartless (2015: 314-322), Shoneyin mirrors the usual and everlasting image of the African man in fiction (weak, eternal absentee, irresponsible, drunk etc...): "Gin had stolen Baba from our childhood and when there wasn't any, he did what he did best: he escaped" (SL: 174). The father resigns from his paternal duties, deserting the house altogether. Although Bolanle could have faced her mother and the society's accusing eyes, she opts to create her space where she can cure and reconstruct herself. At times, polygamy can become a pathway towards self-healing. As Juliana D. Ofosu (2013: 179) has it, "polygamy is not entirely disadvantageous to women; it is within the powers of women to make it beneficial to themselves: for emotional support, financial support and motherhood."

Before choosing such a direction for her life, Bolanle ponders over the situation over and over again, wondering whether she could tell her mother how she had failed to preserve her dignity. Too ashamed to let her mother see the "fickle shell" she had become (SL: 16), Bolanle keeps that terrifying secret to herself. The heroine was raped as a result of her naivety (SL: 111). Nobody chooses to be raped but the girl is always blamed when this unfortunate event happens, a tacit endorsement of a rape culture. United Nations Women working to end violence against women cast this culture as follow:

Rape culture is pervasive. It's embedded in the way we think, speak, and move in the world. While the contexts may differ, rape culture is always rooted in patriarchal beliefs, power, and control. Rape culture is the social environment that allows sexual violence to be normalized and justified, fueled by the persistent gender inequalities and attitudes about gender and sexuality.⁷

According to the above source, fighters against this rape culture prescribe naming the ill as the first step to dismantle it: "Every day we have the opportunity to examine our behaviours and beliefs for biases that permit rape culture to continue. From the attitudes we have about gender identities to the policies we support in our communities, we can all take action to stand against rape culture."

Things have changed significantly in Africa since the introduction of formal education therein. African women are now looking for their own room where they

⁷ See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/compilation-ways-you-can-stand-against-rape-culture> 16 ways you can stand against rape culture. Consulted on 21st January 2020.



can be fulfilled. They desire to take decisions they think to be good to them. For Jonas Akung (2012: 114), “the feminist novel has continued to educate, inform and enlighten the woman to rise and fight for her rights,” a critic who further maintains that “the woman cannot continue in the space defined for her by the society; she must fight for the space both in the home and in the larger society.” Bolanle, falling in the category of fighters, stands for women who refuse victimisation and self-pity. She realises that the woman cannot continue in the space defined for her by the society at large. Her challenging feminist thinking – which tags polygamy with women’s sexual degradation and labels it as a negative badge of dishonour for women – cements the novelist’s brand of feminism quoted in the opening statement of this essay: “Feminism... is about women regaining complete control of their bodies. It’s about the luxury of having options, the value of being able to make choices.”⁸ Clearly, Shoneyin’s heroine conforms to the novelist’s personal vision of feminism through choosing an uncommon alternative which happens to be an empowering and redemptive choice, ultimately.

CONCLUSION

To paraphrase the book title by Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, one may wonder what women do really want, for it is quite puzzling that this young intelligent and a BA holder marries a polygamous husband with three wives.⁹ Equal to herself (i.e. privileging her own experience) and rejecting social conformism, Bolanle adopts the attitude of a liberated woman who knows what is good for her life: she undoes polygamy as oppressive to women and makes it a powerful tool for self-salvation.

Although the image of an emancipated African woman is differently cast, Shoneyin’s vision of the liberated African woman is the one who can make her own choice devoid of any societal pressure. In sum, Shoneyin allows Bolanle to reshape her shattered life by means of polygamy, illustrating the popular saying that “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Even though she is exposed to psychological violence due to barrenness, to physical violence from her co-wives, her choice ultimately locates happiness as a personal pursuit, an individual journey: there is no collective happiness. Salvation is rather individual than collective. At the end of the day, it is every woman’s decision to be happy under her own terms, depending on the personal trial she is facing in life.

⁸ Interview by Wana Odobang, “Lola Shoneyin on Freedom, Feminism and Polygamy,” op.cit.

⁹ Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *What Do Women Really Want* (New York: Berkley Book, 1983)



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