

Gender Reversal in Contemporary Novel: A feminist Study of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* explores the complexities of polygamy in a patriarchal Nigerian society, subverts conventional gender norms by presenting female characters who challenge male authority and assert agency within the confines of a traditionally male-dominated household. Therefore, this study investigates the theme of gender reversal in contemporary African fiction through a feminist analysis of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It employs feminist literary theory to examine how Shoneyin reconstructs the dynamics of power, sexuality, and identity among women in a polygamous setting. The study foregrounds how the wives, particularly Bolanle, negotiate personal autonomy and resist socio-cultural expectations, thereby destabilizing patriarchal structures from within. Through close textual analysis, the work highlights the novel's critique of gendered

oppression and its advocacy for female empowerment. Therefore, this study positions *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as a significant contribution to contemporary African feminist literature, where gender roles are not only questioned but actively redefined.

Keywords: Gender Reversal, Gender Culture, Nego-Feminism, Literature, Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

Introduction

“Let Mary leave us because women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “Behold, I myself shall lead her so as to make her male, that she too may become a living spirit like you male. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”
– *Gospel of Thomas*.

The discourse on gender and its attendant dynamics has remained a central preoccupation in literary and

cultural studies, especially within African feminist scholarship. African societies, traditionally structured along patriarchal lines, have historically positioned women within restrictive domestic, social, and economic roles. Women are like what Kahlil Gibran called “a bird with a broken wing” in one of his texts. The phrase symbolises the plight of women and the societal constraints that limit their freedom and happiness, specifically within the context of arranged marriages and the suppression of individual desires.

Jacinta (2021) posits that:

“The biggest challenge facing women in the world today is patriarchy. This is especially obvious in the family where gender roles are spelt out. Therefore, both men and women are expected to live up to their culturally assigned roles. Any attempt by women to break out from the chrysalis of patriarchy is usually frowned upon. Regardless of a woman’s education, experience or abilities, the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. (p141)”

The above excerpt justifies the assertion regarding the plight of women and how they have been limited to men’s subjectivity. They have been manufactured and subverted under the subjugation of men's dominance, and this is a result of their social constructs which have constrained them in the society. According to Evwierhoma (2023), “gender represents the roles ascribed to females and males within sociocultural contexts.” This implies that the construct of the society that determined the interaction between male and female is considered in different ways in different cultures (p. 484). This

denotes that African societies are structured in a way that gender is not merely a biological categorisation but a social construct deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and traditional practices.

Literature, as a mirror of society, has not only reflected these patriarchal realities but also served as a platform for challenging, deconstructing, and reimagining gender relations. Das (2012) asserts that the goal of literature is to advance in tandem with a nation's, society's, and era's advancement. No work of literature can ever be truly great unless it accurately depicts society (209). In recent years, contemporary African novels have increasingly engaged with feminist ideologies, interrogating the culturally sanctioned subordination of women and offering alternative narratives that subvert traditional gender hierarchies.

One of the significant narrative strategies employed in feminist literature is gender reversal, which is a literary technique through which normative gender roles are inverted, questioned, or redefined. It is essential to note that the roles played by both men and women are designed by what is known, according to scholars such as MacKenzie (1994) and Martine Rothblatt (1995), as “gender code”, “gender ideology”, “gender dictates” or “gender culture”. To understand gender reversal, there is a need for a little clarification on gender culture, which maintains the same position with the scholars. Ramet (1996) also posits that the concept of gender culture is important to the understanding of the term gender reversal; this is because the term develops within the parameters set by gender culture, which is designed by the culture of the society which dictates to the people

their individual and collective behaviour. Thus, gender culture is meant to be a society's understanding of what is possible, proper, and perverse in gender-linked behaviour. More specifically, that set of values, mores, and assumptions which establishes which behaviours are to be seen as gender-linked, with which gender or genders they are to be seen as linked, what the society's understanding of gender is in the first place, and, consequently, how many genders there are.

This approach allows for the critical examination of the ways in which gendered power structures operate and provides imaginative spaces for envisioning female agency, autonomy, and resistance. Gender reversal narratives reveal the performative and socially constructed nature of gender roles, exposing the inherent contradictions within patriarchal systems by destabilizing conventional representations of masculinity and femininity. According to Ramet (1996: p2) "gender reversal may be understood to be any change, whether "total" or partial, in social behaviour, work, clothing, mannerisms, speech, self-designation, or ideology, which brings a person closer to other (or, in polygender systems, another) gender." It can be established that gender reversal is the rearrangement of gender position in an ideal gender culture. This could happen in all spheres of life. It is entangled in the societal structure of limiting women's roles under the leadership of men. Although Ramet (1996) argues that gender reversal is not limited to the change in physical appearance of the human body, but it also captures human attitude and ideology.

The Nigerian poet, novelist, and literary activist, Lola Shoneyin was born on February 26, 1974. She is well-known for her daring examination of gender, sexuality, and patriarchy in African cultures. Shoneyin attended boarding school in England as a teenager and received her education in Nigeria and the UK. Later, she graduated from Olabisi Onabanjo University in Ogun State, Nigeria, with a degree in English. She published poetry collections like *So All the Time I Was Sitting on an Egg* (1998), which showcased her unique feminist voice and marked the beginning of her literary career. However, her debut book, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), brought her widespread international recognition. The novel, which has been staged and continues to garner scholarly attention worldwide, is a scathing and humorous critique of polygamy and patriarchal oppression in modern-day Nigeria.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010) by Lola Shoneyin is a powerful feminist work that explores the relationship between gender, sexuality, power, and polygamy in Nigerian literature. The novel, which is set in a polygamous household, highlights the complexity of female relationships within oppressive patriarchal structures while providing a nuanced critique of male dominance and the objectification of women. The novel highlights act of female defiance, subversion, and survival in a system that marginalises women through its complex plot and vivid character development. The novel's subtle yet profound depictions of female dominance and male vulnerability dramatise gender reversal, challenging the stereotypical idea of male authority and control.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi Wives by Lola Shoneyin is a sophisticated account of gender relationships in a polygamic Nigerian family. The novel, whose setting is in Ibadan, focuses on a successful polygamist, Baba Segi and his four wives. Although at first glimpse the story seems to support the traditional gender roles, a more precise look can show that Shoneyin intentionally manipulates the traditional roles and uses the idea of gender reversal to undermine the expectations of the society and rearrange the traditional roles.

Baba Segi, the patriarch of the family, fits the stereotypical definition of a patriarch in the Alao household- he is wealthy, dominating, and in charge or so it appears. But, behind this appearance, his wives wield quiet types of power that negotiate and rearrange their expected positions. Baloyi (2019) argues that the novel struggles with the questions and the issues that women who are frequently accused of being the cause of infertility in a marriage without noting that the medical complications that cause infertility are not discriminatory. In the same way, Bolanle, the last wife, and a university graduate employs her education and intelligence to establish her independency, challenging conventional rules and requirements imposed on her.

This study aims to examine mechanisms of gender reversal in the novel by shedding light on how Shoneyin criticizes and revisits the traditional gender roles in the Nigerian polygamy setting, through the way the characters in the book apply manipulation, education, and quiet resistance as the strategies to overturn the patriarchal systems.

This analysis is done through a feminist perspective, analysing how Shoneyin is able to highlight the intricacies of female agency and resistance in a patriarchal structure. Through analysis of the interactions between the characters and their strategies, the study will enhance understanding of power and gender dynamic in modern African literature.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine how Lola Shoneyin portrays gender reversal in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The approach involves a close reading of the text to uncover how the female characters subtly resist patriarchal control through negotiation, silence, and calculated actions. Special attention is given to the character of Iya Segi, whose financial empowerment and strategic behaviour transform her from a submissive wife to the actual head of the household. The study seeks to understand how the women in the novel assert agency within the confines of societal expectations by focusing on narrative structure, character behaviour, and thematic development. This method is appropriate because it aligns with the African feminist perspective that power can be negotiated within cultural frameworks, rather than through direct confrontation.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism, as a global movement, has evolved through various waves. The first wave in the late 19th and early 20th centuries fought for women's legal rights, especially suffrage, while the second wave (1960s–1980s) focused on gender equality in social,

political, and economic spheres. The third wave (1990s onwards) challenged the universalism of earlier feminism, recognising diversity in women's experiences (Tong, 2009). However, much of Western feminist theory was criticised for ignoring non-Western cultural contexts and imposing confrontational strategies unsuitable for other societies, (Mohanty, 1988). Therefore, this critique gave rise to African feminisms, such as Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994) and Motherism (Acholonu, 1995), which emphasised culturally grounded, inclusive approaches to gender equity. These movements acknowledged colonial legacies, socio-economic realities, and the need to integrate rather than alienate men in reform processes.

Against this background, Nigerian-American scholar Obioma Nnaemeka introduced Nego-Feminism in her 2004 essay "*Nego-Feminism: Theorising, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way.*" She describes it as the "feminism of negotiation" and "no-ego feminism". Nego-feminism advocates for strategic compromise, understanding when to challenge patriarchal structures and when to avoid them. Unlike Western confrontational models, it promotes dialogue, compromise, and humility to achieve collective gender justice (Nnaemeka, 2004).

This study is anchored on Nego-Feminism, a distinctly African feminist theory propounded by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004). Nego-feminism formulated by Obioma Nnaemeka in her article entitled, "*Negofeminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning African's Way*" (1999) as "feminist of negotiation; "no ego" feminism" (360). Nego-Feminism, which translates as *the feminism of*

negotiation, offers a culturally situated and context-sensitive model for analysing African women's experiences and their methods of negotiating agency within patriarchal societies.

Alkali (2013) argues that Negofeminism is "a feminist approach for social movements and feminist communities in its power for the woman" (pp. 33–34). In a gender war, this theory can transcend the concepts of "victory" and "defeat." Therefore, it asks for negotiation and reconciliation of the disagreements between the sexes rather than a winner and a loser. Furthermore, the critic argues that conflicting parties might use the new theory to settle their differences without the involvement of a third party. It is possible for the disputing parties to sit together and discuss their rights and advantages (pp. 33–35). Nnaemeka (2004) emphasises that African women's methods of resistance are often pragmatic and situational, emerging from a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which they operate. She argues that "African feminism is about negotiation; it is about give and take; it is about cooperation; it is about balance."

According to Alkali, Talif and Jan (2013:11)

"The staple point of this spirited effort is its affinity with issues of soft-peddalling in the game of antagonism from both sides to recognise a more rewarding equal partnering. Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace or conflict management, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, collaboration, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration. Already, some novels are beginning to tow this line of argument."

Thus, the analysis of the selected text is guided by Nego-feminism, which is an African feminist theory developed by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004). It is rooted in the principles of negotiation, collaboration, and community-based resistance. It rejects aggressive confrontation and instead emphasizes how African women use indirect strategies to achieve autonomy, protect themselves and their families, while subtly challenging patriarchal dominance.

In the novel, Iya Segi embodies nego-feminism through her mastery of covert power. She sees to it that she sustains Baba Segi's illusion of male dominance, making him believe he is the lord of their home, while she quietly orchestrates major decisions, controls the household economy, and manipulate situations to favour her. Her approach aligns with Nnaemeka's assertion that "African feminism is not reactive but proactive... and deeply rooted in negotiation and compromise rather than confrontation" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 378).

Similarly, Bolanle, the educated wife, also reflects nego-feminist values. She does not directly fight the other wives or Baba Segi. Instead, she uses her intellectual authority and emotional strength to push for medical truths, self-respect, and eventually she chooses freedom without bitterness. Her calm yet firm decisions align with the Nego-feminist model of achieving empowerment through strategic and peaceful self-definition.

Thus, Nego-feminism helps frame the women's actions in the novel not as rebellion, but as culturally grounded resistance that redefines power from within.

Literature Review

The existing literature for this research highlights a strong scholarly interest in both gender and feminist studies. The feminist studies are seen as radicalised extensions of revolting against patriarchal ideology, offering important insights into the evolving philosophical framework of a gender study. These studies analyse their significance from diverse perspectives, emphasising their cultural and intellectual value through the explorations of scholarly works on gender studies and existing works on Lola Shoneyin's *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010).

Aridj (2010) examines feminism's challenge to patriarchy through Lola Shoneyin's *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010). The paper explores how the novel portrays and subverts gender roles in contemporary Nigeria, focusing on the oppression of women within patriarchal systems. Using feminist literary theory and qualitative analysis, the research investigates the contrasting depictions of Baba Segi's wives, three submissive and one assertive and how these characters reflect resistance against gendered oppression. The study contributes to feminist discourse in African literature, highlighting the importance of marginalized female voices by analysing Baba Segi as a symbol of patriarchy.

Oladimeji (2024) examines the effects of patriarchy on women in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, highlighting how patriarchal structures psychologically and physically oppress

women in marriage and society. The paper employs the use of feminism as its theoretical framework to explore female revolts and advocacy for gender liberation. It reveals how women endure trauma to preserve marriages and how societal stigma discourages divorce. However, the study argues that women can reclaim agency by choosing suitable marriages or leaving harmful ones. It recommends education, skill acquisition, and assertiveness as vital tools for women's emancipation and societal recognition.

Nguwasen, and Onyemelukwe, (2022) examines the themes of female oppression and liberation in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* through a feminist lens. It identifies eight oppressive forces against women in a patriarchal African society, including rape, child abuse, forced marriage, lack of inheritance rights, polygamy, conflict among co-wives, infertility-induced stigma, and domestic violence. The novel portrays how the first three wives conceal Baba Segi's infertility and conspire against the fourth wife, leading to her suffering and eventual departure. The study concludes that Shoneyin advocates radical feminism, urging oppressed women to either resist or leave oppressive marital structures.

From the above, it can be observed that although gender, feminism and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* have been subjected to critical studies, however, there are apparent paucity of researchable materials on the exploration of gender reversal from a nego-femists perspective. This study therefore

intends to fill the gap by examining gender reversal in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

Gender Reversal in *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Traditional gender stereotypes have long shaped societal expectations, dictating how men and women should behave, think, react and even interact. Traditionally, men are expected to be the dominant providers and principal decision-makers, while women are often expected to be submissive, nurturing, dependent and silent. However, in contemporary literature, writers often challenge these fixed roles through the concept of gender reversal, where the expected traits or behaviours of men and women are intentionally switched, toppled and redefined.

Lola Shoneyin resolutely applied the concept of gender reversal in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* joining the wagon of other contemporary writers who have done this.

Figure-Head and the True Custodian of Power

In Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Iya Segi exemplifies a strategic and subtle exercise of power within a patriarchal household, skilfully redefining traditional gender roles without Baba Segi's awareness. Despite the cultural norm that positions the husband as the absolute head of the family, Iya Segi, pretending to conform to the societal expectations, wields her power over the household effectively, reducing Baba Segi to a

'figure head'. Shoneyin presents the character of Baba Segi as one who constantly puffs up, thinking he has an unquestioned authority over his household, 'The entire household poured out of different rooms to welcome their benefactor.' (pg. 13) The entire household coming out to welcome Baba Segi asserts his clear dominance as the head of the family. Everyone's immediate response and dramatic public display of unity and obedience show the respect and authority Baba Segi holds over his wives and children. However, under this outward show of control, Iya Segi, exercise her own subtle form of power. She constantly worships him, calling him 'Lord', assuring him dramatically that, 'Where would I be if not for you?' (13), all in a bid to fool him.

Shoneyin presents Iya Segi as a woman who has been in charge from the early start of her life but due to societal expectations, she must totally submit to a man, regardless of her financial independence. It can be deduced that no respect is given to a woman who presents herself like a man and despite the fact that Iya Segi's mother brought her up detesting men, she still insists that her daughter must submit to a man to make her existence meaningful. The contrast between Mama's stance depicts how ingrained the orientation of gender roles are:

Men are nothing. They are fools. The penis between their legs is all they are useful for. And even then, if not that women needed their seed for children, it would be better to sit on a finger of green plantain. Listen to my words. Only a foolish woman leans heavily on a man's promises." (77)

After experiencing abandonment, Mama brings up her daughter with a full-blown hatred for men. Iya Segi grows up embracing independence, achieving feats men in her community struggle to attain. Shoneyin asserts that indoctrination truly limits how far a woman can truly go in life. Iya Segi grows up without the limitations and teachings of what is expected of a woman in the society so she embraces power and blossoms into what is regarded as a taboo. After Mama notices that her daughter has no place in that society, she finds Iya Segi a husband to curb her excesses, and transfers her budding wealth to Ishola to buy her daughter the society's approval and acceptance:

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?" (77)

Iya Segi's financial independence is ripped off from her after her mother gives all her savings to a man who is declared to be her husband because life is not fair to women who can attain such financial independence. Iya Segi's upbringing leaves a huge want for power in her and she carefully masks it up with submission, while dictating how she wants the Baba's Segi's household to be run.

Iya Segi determines to make her husband the symbolic patriarch while she remains the de facto head. Shoneyin states through the character of Iya Segi:

They know that I am the true provider. My husband only thinks he controls this household and I let him believe that he does. I want him to believe 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. (82-83)

Her sneaky dominance is further expressed through her manipulation of household secret. Her quick detection and cover-up of Baba Segi's infertility, her immediate solution to it as well shows how she organises the home in 'peace and order'. The moment she realises her husband's shortcomings as a 'true man', she rises promptly to fill the gap, effectively tutoring the other wives on what to do. She calls any misbehaving wife to order and they obey her as if she is the husband. Her authority and control over the household is obvious to the other wives and they strictly adhere to her, in order not to face the consequences.

Iya Segi is a silent strategist and the true custodian of power in the Alao's household. Decisions made by her husband without her consent are often rescinded. Knowing her husband's weakness has to do with women, she accommodates him until he decides to marry a graduate. Aware of the possibility that Bolanle might use her education to take away her husband's total allegiance and devotion to her, she sets out to counter any decision made in favour of Bolanle. She implores her husband to take away the armchair benefit given to Bolanle after he has taken the pain to carefully select an armchair for her, 'To impress his new wife, Baba Segi spent thirty minutes in the dimly lit storeroom dusting, slapping and

wiping before finally pushing another armchair into the living room.' (47). The armchair had to be returned because Iya Segi convinces her husband that Bolanle has not earned it. Baba Segi willingly succumbs to her desire while ignoring his desire to make his new wife very comfortable. To further show her position as the true custodian of power, she demands that Bolanle's friends should be restricted from the household and Baba Segi promptly obliges.

Financial independence plays a key role in empowering women, especially in patriarchal societies. It gives women the ability to make their own decisions and manage their lives without depending entirely on men. With financial freedom, women can take control of personal and family matters, pursue opportunities, and improve their social and economic status. Iya Segi takes on the role of a schemer, thinking of ways to gain financial independence from Baba Segi. Instead of openly challenging her husband's authority, Iya Segi uses subtle means to persuade him to start a business, one that she eventually takes charge of. Her actions of knowing how and when to come up with her business idea show a deep understanding of her husband's personality, and weaknesses. She employs the crying-without-a-cause strategy, using onions to maintain the consistent flow of tears. After weeks of ensuring her husband is frustrated by this, she lays out her problems tactfully:

I dropped to my knees and told him of my wish to have a small stall where I could sell sweets wholesale, interact with other women and learn of new recipes, the best household detergents on the market, better ways to please

a husband. I slipped it in when I noticed each blink weighed down his eyelids longer than the one before. “I also want to attend driving school.” He raised both eyebrows and widened his eyes. “I will be able to take my children to day care without them sweltering in the heat like poverty-stricken orphans. (62)

She strokes his ego and gains his consent by insisting that the reason she wants to do this is to satisfy the needs of him and the children. By starting with a small business venture, she graduates into more profitable ventures, commanding a reasonable level of wealth in Ibadan. She opens more stores across the state: Mokola, Dugbe, Eleyele, Sango and Ojoo. The statement, ‘Men are like yam. You cut them how you like’ (63) implies that **power is not always about physical strength or visible control**, women can wield power subtly, through emotional intelligence, manipulation, or calculated persuasion. Iya Segi is able to gain financial independence and secure a strong position within the household. The other wives have no choice that to accord the respect due to her.

Subverting Patriarchy: Women’s Use of other Men to Challenge Male Infertility and Redefine Gender Roles

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Lola Shoneyin presents a powerful example of gender role reversal through the wives’ decision to seek other men for conception in response to Baba Segi’s infertility. Traditionally, masculine vitality is tied to dominance and the preservation of bloodline, however, the wives concealed sexual activities

disrupt this norm, as they reclaim control over reproduction.

Women in most African societies are often blamed for a fruitless marriage. The health status of both partners is often disregarded when it comes to reproduction and the women often than not, take the blame. The wives of the Alao household, excluding Bolanle, decide to change the narrative of being called barren due to their husband’s inadequacies. This strategic move distorts the expected gender roles, shifting reproductive power away from the husband and pointing out women’s capacity to negotiate and redefine their roles within the family.

Iya Segi, the mastermind, does a quick diagnosis of her husband after failing to birth him a child, she is quick to recruit Taju, her husband’s driver for her plans. She convinces him to copulate with her and she births her first child, Segi. Shoneyin presents Iya Segi as a woman of prompt decision. She only uses Taju for his seed and not for her sexual pleasures. She dictates when the sexual activity is to take place and the power, she wields over him completely buys his secrecy. As Baba Segi marries more wives, she positions herself as their mentor, offering free guidance on curing their ‘supposed barrenness. She tells Iya Femi that seeking another man’s seed is a priority in the Alao’s household, ‘Iya Segi came to my room and told me how children were born in Baba Segi’s household. She said it as if the solution wasn’t out of choice but necessity.’ (103). She offers the same tutoring to Iya Tope. She is quick to notice that Iya Tope has been distracting from her mission, placing her sexual needs over her mission and quickly mandates that she stops child bearing:

I will not let you destroy this home with your excesses. You have allowed the concubine to become the husband. I have not known anyone to worship a penis the way you do!"... "Listen carefully to what I have to say because if I am forced to say it again, it will be wedged between curses. You will not see this man again. You are like a child who has not developed the temperament for secrets. You are lucky we have a husband who believes he is more than all women and most men. If he were more discerning, more like a woman, say, he would have seen through your madness. (71)

Iya Segi covers up her tracks neatly, reminding the others wives to do their husband's wishes. She has totally won over her husband, and Baba Segi's belief that she lives for him helps her to remain in control of the household until Bolanle's intrusion. After being discovered by the doctors, Iya Segi applies the same logic she has used on her husband for years to tactfully come out of the unpleasant paternity situation. She confesses without being prodded, and totally remains submissive during her confession. She realises that the only to stay with her wealth and still maintain her power is to carefully select her words to the dejected Baba Segi:

You talk of the father of our children. Who is the father of our children? Who was the father of the child who now rots below the ground?" Her voice broke but she continued. "There is no other but you. You named her. You named every child in this house, every one. You have nurtured them so it is your name they will bear. You may say that there are other fathers but you are the only father they know. You alone have been their father, for it takes

more than shedding seed to be a father."... "Let us not allow the world to see our shame. Let us keep our secrets from those who may seek to mock us." (186).

She controls Baba Segi to the very end without his awareness. He praises her gift of wisdom without noticing any hint of her manipulation, 'Baba Segi nodded, half in appreciation that his words were understood and half in the knowledge that he knew Iya Segi could be trusted to conjure a faultless response to his proposition.' (185).

Intellectual Power as A Channel for Gender

Reversal

Shoneyin establishes that gender roles can be redefined through education and intellectual power. In a household governed by 'perceived patriarchy', traditional norms, cunning acts, Bolanle uses her intellectual power to form resistance against the unjust use of power. Bolanle's education is not worn as pride or arrogance. She chooses to marry Baba Segi as a form of punishment for a traumatic past, but her **university education** makes her different from the other wives. She refuses to engage in gossip or rivalry. While the other wives resort to deception to protect themselves or gain favour, Bolanle uses her intellect to maintain **emotional independence**, refusing to be reduced to just another wife.

Bolanle's insistence on scientific truth, regarding her barrenness, threatens Baba Segi's traditional masculine identity, which is tied to virility and control over women. By refusing to visit herbalists, drink unprescribed concoctions, Bolanle challenges her husband's authority. She exudes confidence in her interactions with Baba Segi until he dances to her

tune of visiting the hospital and even taking a fertility test. Her actions lead to the exposure of Baba Segi's infertile condition; the truth the wives have concealed to maintain male dominance.

Bolanle firmly makes her own decisions, she pays no attention to the dictates of the society on divorce. She decides not to join the band wagon of women who would rather quench their own happiness just to be conferred the respect allotted to married women. During the infertility discovery brouhaha, her intellectual power gives her the awareness that it is her decision to make if she wants to remain in the Alao's household, not Baba Segi's. While the other wives gladly accept the position and title of 'Baba Segi's wives', Bolanle decides not to be holed up but a seedless man. Traditionally, in cases of barrenness, the husband chases the barren wife away, or marry other wives while shaming the barren women. Bolanle redefined this culture by leaving her infertile husband to rediscover herself:

Don't think I can't see the challenges ahead of me. People will say I am a secondhand 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. I am back now and the world is spread before me like an egg cracked open. (188)

Conclusion

Lola Shoneyin shows how women living in a male-dominated society can change and redefine traditional gender roles. Although the wives (Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi) in Baba Segi's household appear to be submissive and controlled by

their husband, they actually find ways to gain power and influence within the boundaries set by the society. Through their cunning acts, strategic schemes, careful strategies, and intelligence, these women redefine what it means to be a wife and a woman in a patriarchal world. Iya Segi, the first wife, is a strong example of how women can gain power through money. Instead of simply accepting her husband's authority, she subtly gains financial independence again and uses her influence to protect herself and her children. This shows that financial independence is an important way for women to gain respect and authority, even in households where men are expected to be the heads of the family. Bolanle, the youngest wife, brings a different kind of power to the household through her education. Her knowledge and confidence allow her to question the traditions and superstitions that control the other wives and Baba Segi himself. Her education gives her the strength to stand up to the fears and rules that keep women in submission. Bolanle's presence in the household defies the idea that women should be silent and obedient, showing that education can be a tool for women to gain independence and respect. The relationships between the wives also show how women create their own power. They sometimes compete with each other but also work together to protect their interests. Through these stories, Shoneyin suggests that gender roles are not fixed but can be changed by those who live within them. The wives' ability to take control of money, use their intelligence, and form alliances proves that women can find ways to resist and redefine the rules that limit them. Their experiences show that power does

not only come from being loud or physically strong but can come from being smart, patient, and strategic.

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