

# The Nightmare in Polygamy: A Femino-Criminological Perspective to Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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## Abstract

Polygamy as a form of marriage is practised in many countries of the world in line with their cultural practices and religious beliefs. Having several wives is a symbol of power, prestige and influence in traditional African Societies, Nigeria inclusive. The patriarchal nature of polygamy, disempowers women individually and collectively. It promotes gender inequality and imbalance between man and his many wives, while much emphasis is laid on motherhood and male children. Gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, actions, beliefs and desires that it seems to be completely natural. This paper, therefore employs a discursive strategy that constructs gender subordination as an integral part of polygamy. It describes women experiences such as abuse, sexual and reproductive health challenges, effects and responses of abused wives in a polygamous marriage. It does this through the theoretical application of feminist criminology. Feminist analysis has been employed because feminism encourages women to examine thoughts, feelings and bodies in individuated relationships to men. The paper challenges many preconceived notions such as male dominance and female subordination and confronts the reality of women's condition by examining the experiences that are peculiar to female characters in the analysed text. It brings into focus the stifling effect of societal marital expectations on a woman's growth and development.

## Introduction

The word polygamy comes from Greek word *poly* which means many and *gamous* which means marriage (wikiquote). It is the condition of having more than one spouse; polygamous

condition could also be described as plural marriage, where a man has more than one wife. This form of marriage has never been viewed as a social problem in Africa. It is practised in many countries of the world due to cultural

patterns and religious reasons. Africa is the continent where the practice is most common. Having several wives is a symbol of power, prestige and influence in traditional African society; Nigeria is an example of where such belief thrives.

The Patriarchal nature of polygamy disempowers women, individually and collectively from being educated and making informed choices about their lives. In consequence, there is inequality and imbalance of power between a man and his many wives, and even among the wives. Gender is embedded so thoroughly in patriarchal societies (our institutions, actions, beliefs and desires) that it seems to be completely natural. Patriarchy as used in this paper reflects the historical fact that men have been dominant over women in all social spheres. It is because gender seems so natural and beliefs about gender seem to be obvious truths that we step back and examine gender from another perspective. To do this, we need to suspend what we are used to, and question some of our most fundamental beliefs.

Gender is a social construct of sex, it is the interpretation imposed upon human beings. As a result of this, certain qualities and roles are attributed to males and females, these roles and qualities over the years become internalised and manifest through beliefs and behaviour of men and women. Feminists see women as oppressed both by gender inequality (their position in sexist culture) and by class inequality (their economic condition in a capitalist society). This social construction of gender is apparent in what Althusser (1999), refers to as ideological state apparatuses, (the family and culture form part of the apparatuses) To Althusser, (1999) these apparatuses (in form

of culture) produce discourses that have power to produce and promote representations of gender. These representations are in turn accepted and internalised by subjects. Culture plays a role in many of the experiences of women, as well as the hardships they complain about. Within households, men are regarded as the heads of households while women have relevance as mothers and wives. They keep tradition and kinship alive by bearing male children, through child-bearing, she acquires prestige and ensures the stability of her marriage, and the continuity of kingship and traditions. Lola Shoneyin, Nigerian a poet and a novelist of third generation, makes allusion to the above in her novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Thus sitting on a comfortable arm-chair in Baba Segi's house is a symbol of fertility. Hence Bolanle is deprived the honour of having a personal arm-chair. Also Baba Segi's headship is signified by the big and high chair he occupies. Part of cultural expectations is the absolute control over sexuality the men enjoys. The wives submit themselves passively to Baba Segi's sexual aggressiveness without complaints.

This paper employs a discursive and theoretical strategy that constructs gender subordination as an integral part of polygamy. It describes woman's experience in a polygamous marriage, abuse, sexual and reproductive health experiences. It also examines the effects and responses of abused wives in an individuated circumstance, within a polygamous marriage. We have employed pluralism as a way of reading our chosen text drawing from various theoretical ideas to support our argument at the same time, hinging the main discourse on feminist cultural criminological theory. The aim of pluralism is

to make use of multiple critical approaches to get thorough appreciation of a variety of meanings from a single text.

Feminist critique of criminology argues that the paths to crime differ for males and female. They reflect the intersections of crime and masculinity, because theorists (males) tended to focus particularly on male offenders, due to the fact that females are less expected to commit crimes. Understanding gender perspectives in criminology thus become a crucial aspect of gender discourse. In line with this recent ongoing debate, we seek to apply a western theory (cultural criminological theory) to analyse Nigerian indigenous text *The Secret lives of Segi's Wives*.

Cultural criminology is the placement of crime and its control within the context of culture. Culture must not be seen as only a thing to be learnt and enacted, rather as lifestyles that are constantly evolving. Crime and agencies of control are creative constructs and products of particular culture. As such they must be interpreted in the terms of the meanings they carry (Hayward and Young, 2014). In its conceptual understanding, "Criminology focuses on continuous generation of meaning around interactions and the rules created and rules broken" (Hayward and Young 2014:1). This binary opposition and nature of criminology reside in its cultural generativity and creativity. The emphasis that cultural criminology lays on creativity, individualism and generations of lifestyle makes it relevant to our primary text.

Criminology studies the cause of crime while criminologists attempt to explore the conditions leading to criminal behaviour and factors that contribute to its continued existence to a number of fields including

feminism. This paper surveys the effect of criminology on feminism. Feminist proponents have engaged in debates concerning the utility of criminology and how it could be deployed to help feminists move away from the oppressing concept of women as weak and emotional. A considerable number of women have no say in their day-to-day activities and do not make decisions, the girl child is the most affected because she is compelled to live a life spelled by others. One of the objectives of this paper is to look into how practices arise, how they are sustained, their manifestations and effect on women's lives.

### Literature Review

Criminology as a field of enquiry is dominated by males, hence the field is marred by masculinist perspectives, where the rights and privileges of males are superior. As a result, female sex offenders are treated more harshly because the offense is perceived as threat to sex-role expectations. Criminology has attempted to understand and explain criminal behavior. As a field, it has generated several theories. Henderson (1985:112) argues that women are incorporated into criminology to explain their "apparent" deviant nature. Lombrosso and Ferreso in Burke (2005) explain this deviant nature as a primitive trait, driven by women's biological and physiological needs. Naffine (1996) explains that criminology has largely ignored women. Smart (1989) argues that criminology theory is lacking if it does not attempt to understand women's criminality and their vulnerability to violence and rape within the home.

A concept central to criminology is alienation (Smith and Bohm, 2008) Alienation is a condition that describes the distancing of

individuals from something. Feminist criminologists put up some agitations; one, is whether traditional male-centred theories of crime apply to women (Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2008: 839). Others argue that male centred theory of crime have limited applicability to females because they focus on male frustrations in their efforts to obtain success goals (Leonard, 1995, 2002). Others believe that no feminist. Specific general theory is possible and that they must be content to focus on crime-specific mini theories (Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988). For Max and Engels (1965) crime is simply the product of unjust and alienating social conditions, the struggle of the isolated individual against the prevailing social conditions. Conflict theory assumes that crime is a social construct without any intrinsic properties, they are acts that are intrinsically bad. Bohm (2001) in Walsh and Hemmens (2010) modernises the assertion by Max and Engels by affirming that crime in capitalist societies is often a national response to the circumstances in which people find themselves. Chambliss (1976) views some criminal behavior as rightful behavior of persons exploited by extant economic relationship, while Lam Taylor (1999:151) sees the convict (i.e. the criminal) as an additional victim of the routine operations of a capitalist system. Llyod (1995:29) opines that men are traditionally more aggressive than females, and that it is socio-cultural and environmental factors that made men to be more aggressive than females, not biological factors, Smart (1986), however, argues that feminine woman is not predisposed to criminality due to her neutral femininity, weakness and passivity in psychological terms, and as a result she is more likely to be a victim rather than a perpetrator.

Majority of people reconcile male deviance and perceive it as natural due to historical context and pathological disposition. Heidensoh (1985) argues that the increase in female crime is associated with poverty and social marginalisation. Llyod (1995) further explains that women propensity to crime is “mad” rather than bad. This concept of “madness” explains female crime not as a deliberate desire to inflict pain or damage to others, but as a way of survival in terms of money, pressure and lack of family support. She argues further that women, unlike men, commit crime because of financial insecurity and social instability.

### Analysis

In the text, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* there is the critique of binary opposition of male strong, superior and female weak and inferior, the criticism of this dichotomous thought is explicit in the activities of the wives. Significantly the first term in the binary (superior/strong) is privileged because it is from patriarchal perspective, while the second term (weak or inferior) is subordinate and represents the other (woman) and absence – though she is physically present, yet essentially absent. It is this binary opposition of weak and strong that Shoneyin (2010) sets out to challenge; this she does by putting her female characters at a privileged position. The last wife (educated Bolanle) in a subtle manner asserts herself by insisting on going for a medical checkup. It is Mama Segi's manipulative and seemingly comforting words that resolve the otherwise complicated conflict that arose from the wives' adultery. Baba Segi at the end symbolically becomes a fugitive in his own house, having realised that he is in the real sense

lower than a man. His inability to father a child reduces him to a figure head and a weakling in his own house.

Men perceived as a rational are placed at a higher position in the hierarchy of human society than emotional women. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* deconstructs this notion by depicting Baba Segi as emotional and weak; he hides his weakness in his sexual agility and his tremendous wealth. His weakness and emotions are highlighted through his act of uncontrollable bowel movement each time he is agitated. At the clinic, he actually soiled his cloths with urine and faeces. On the other hand, the wives are calm and calculating, always scheming for ways to outsmart him. Even though they are seemingly powerless they dominate and manipulate him in different ways. Bolanle is able to persuade him to visit a gynecologist; Iya Femi has a way of getting money from him for socials while Iya Segi practically runs the house. Language is not neutral, it produces effects, language is masculine and grounded in the phallus as a universal signifier (Derrida, 1981). This is why women are expected to be silent in public places. Baba Segi at the fertility centre assumes Bolanle's voice, until he is told by the doctor that Bolanle can speak for herself. The notion that women must remain silent within the symbolic order is strictly maintained in Baba Segi's house; the wives can watch television but they must not speak. Baba Segi however, expects them to react to diegetic messages through emotions (by shouting, exclaiming or weeping depending on the degree of horror depicted on the screen). Aware of this expectations, the wives tend to over react in order to court the love and affection of their husband. He dominates conversations, the

wives only respond to asked questions . They dare not initiate conversation.

Baba Segi not only desires his wives' silence, he dictates the pace at which things go; he decides who goes out and who remains indoor, the dress they wear during celebrations is chosen by him. So much is his control over the wives, that sitting on a comfortable armchair is a marker of motherhood. A yet to be mother cannot enjoy the luxury of a comfortable chair. Bolanle has to endure the pains of a wooden chair because of her inability to conceive. That a considerable number of women do not have a say in their day to day activities is explicit in Baba Segi's household.

The polygamist's (Baba Segi) dominance is made manifest through his sexual aggressiveness. The wives independently complain of frequent sexual abuse, outright rape and the violation of their privacy. This happens when Baba Segi (the polygamist) feels the wives are delaying pregnancy process. However, the wives in ways peculiar to them devise means of luring Baba Segi into their bedrooms for monetary reward and much coveted attention.

The fact that the wives are not empowered makes them more vulnerable. Housewifization is aptly deployed by Shoneyin (2010), the wives, socially defined as housewives depend for their total sustenance on their husband's income. The husband (Baba Segi) assumes the sole authority in the house. He has a full understanding of gender roles to the extent that he displays an over bloated ego. At the clinic, Baba Segi introduces Bolanle to the doctor thus:

this is the wife who cannot conceive . . . I hope you're not trying to say I might be the cause of their difficulties . . . listen doctor I have many children. I have sons, I have daughters . . . are

these tests you want to do on me not a waste of time? (189).

His world came crashing when the tests reveals he cannot impregnate a woman due to the fact that his sperm count is too low. Lloyd's opinion that the upbringing of children is heavily gendered is reflected in Baba Segi's household, where Segi, the oldest girl is trained to be a good cook and saddled with the responsibility of taking care of the other children. In the same vein, Femi is constantly reminded that he is a boy (would be a man one day) and so he must behave like a man, by exhibiting strong, powerful and masculine traits.

For Marx (1965), most individuals in capitalist societies are alienated from work; this leads to alienation from themselves and from others. In line with this view, Baba Segi's wives have suffered different alienations, for instance, Iya Segi has been alienated from work when she is forced to marry Baba Segi, while Iya Femi becomes alienated when she loses her parents to a tragic accident. As a result, she finds herself in an extremely hostile environment as a housemaid. She becomes alienated from herself and the people she lives with. She wakes up, does the normal routine house chores and lives in constant fear of molestation by the mistress and sexual abuse by her son. This singular experience deepens her sense of alienation. Iya Tope's alienation stems from the fact that she is not loved by her parents and is given out in marriage to Baba Segi as a sort of peace offering. On Bolanle's part (the educated wife) her journey towards being alienated starts the moment she is raped.

The wives have been alienated from their families, and consequently from themselves. They individually and separately seek refuge

under the roof of a man to call husband. To them, husband is a man who can meet their financial needs and provide a sort of shield and social security from the hostile world, a sort of heaven to hide from the vicious world. Alienated individuals treat others as mere objects to be exploited and victimised by the capitalist system. Central to the text is the choices women make in creating lives for themselves in why and how their choices are made, and the reasons why some abandon the responsibility to create lives for themselves. Iya Segi, Iya Femi and Iya Tope do not have special relationship with the men they sleep with. They choose to engage in the adulterous relationship for procreation purpose, hence these men are mere tools, a means to an end. As a result, these men are ignored as soon as their services are no longer needed.

The material conditions of peoples' lives determine what they will know, believe, value and how they will behave. Marx and Engels (1965:367) portrayal of crime as the product of unjust alienating social conditions is explicit in the life of Iya Femi. Her parent's death left her at the mercy of her greedy uncle, who dispossessed her of her inheritance, stopped her education and gave her out to a rich family as mere housemaid. The situation Iya Femi found herself in as a young girl turned her into a criminal, and she meticulously plotted her revenge. With enough resources and an accomplice (in Segun, her mistress' son who has raped and continue to sexually exploit her), she sets her father's house ablaze in order to forcefully eject her greedy uncle. This criminal act is her way of getting back at her uncle, who had deprived her of the much needed shelter at her parents' death (Shoneyin 2010:122 ). This act buttresses Chambliss (1976) view of

criminal behavior as “no more than the rightful” behavior of persons exploited by the extant economic relationships.

Social life is a continual struggle to maintain and improve one’s own group’s interest. In the novel, the first three wives form a group that alienates Bolanle the fourth and educated wife. The common interest of this social group is sustaining their social status and welfare in the community. To do this, they must bear children for their husband. This is what lures them into looking for men to impregnate them.

In this Shoneyin’s society, the ability to give birth is the prerequisite for staying married, living with one’s husband and children is a sign of responsibility. It is at this juncture that Shoneyin uncovers unexpected alliances among her female characters (the first three wives). They connive to seek different men to impregnate them.

To maintain this status-quo, their infidelity must be kept a secret at all cost. Bolanle, the educated wife becomes a threat to this connivance, her readiness to seek orthodox help in order to have a child threatens to expose the inability of their husband to father a child. To protect their common interest Iya Segi and Iya Femi sought to silence Bolanle through poison. Unfortunately it is Segi, the first daughter that eats the poisoned food meant for Bolanle. Lloyd’s (1995) concept of madness is brutally displayed in this monstrous act of food poisoning. The propensity for madness is also displayed by Iya Tope when she set her father’s house ablaze. Lloyd’s concept of madness is also reflected in Iya Femi’s desperately hostile behavior towards Bolanle. The wives’ livelihood depends solely on their husband, thus, remaining his wives is their main preoccupation. The implication is disruption of the family set

up, which leaves them homeless and destabilised socially and financially. The crime is committed because the wives want to remain married to Baba Segi, and live above poverty level. Lloyd’s idea that women are mad rather than bad, supported by Heidensoh (1985) that female crime is associated with poverty and social marginalisation is exemplified through the childhood experience of the wives. They came from poor families. These women, individually struggles in an individuated relationship with their husband to live a comfortable life and maintain a social status that is better than their childhood experience.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Polygamy in the text is presented as an accepted and welcomed practice by the wives. The author however, stresses the resulting dominance, especially sexual dominance and the relegation of the women to subservience, domestic and motherhood figures. Clearly, the man is the standard and the point of reference. A woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman, thus to maintain a balance between societal and marital expectations, the wives devised means of becoming pregnant. We glean from the text that it is for economic and social reasons that the women prefer to remain with Baba Segi, despite his inability to father a child. Shoneyin painfully (through the pains and eventual death of Segi) depicts the misery and pains that polygamy can bring. Polygamy is harmful to women in that it places women at an elevated risk of physical and psychological harm. This includes higher rates of domestic violence and abuse. Bolanle the last wife is battered by the husband to the extent that she faints and on another occasion, she receives a deep cut on the head. In

polygamous situations, the wives suffer from low-esteem and marital dissatisfaction. Competition and rivalry (a common feature of polygamy) among co-wives become unhealthy and often injurious to the children and wives. Segi, the first child, becomes the most affected. She loses her life after taking the poisoned food meant for the last wife. Iya Tope's children develop personality problems because they are constantly picked at by other wives and the other children. In fact, all the children in the text exhibit one behavioural problem or the other. This is in line with Mathen's (2012:361) assertion that:

polygamy places women at an elevated risk of physical and psychological harm including higher rates of domestic violence and abuse, it creates conditions of scarcity with respect to material and emotional wellbeing, it decreases autonomy and self-esteem, and increases marital dissatisfaction and it leads women to have more children, in more dangerous ways.

*The Secret lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, exemplifies the above assertions. The vulnerability of the children reflects in their awkward behaviour.

Polygamy gives the man undue advantage over his wives, it empowers the man and grants him a status polygamy denies the wives; hence there is a constant competition for his favour, the wives in our chosen text are at a constant competition to please and entice their husband.

Western education has been a powerful agency for change by offering new values and ideas about how to organise private and public lives. It leaves all ideas open to questioning. Bolanle's Western Education enables her seek orthodox solution to her inability to become pregnant. Her resort to medical assistance leads to a chain of reactions in Baba Segi's household. Bolanle's entrance into Baba Segi's household

marks the beginning of a disintegration of an old order and a beginning of reactions that will unfold dirty intricacies and manipulations that lead to agonising experiences that devastate the household. In Baba Segi, we see a typical Nigerian husband, who desires obedient wives that play subordinate domestic roles.

The elite could not fully accept all of the indigenous traditions and was therefore forced to make choices and compromises. Even though Bolanle accepts polygamy and is prepared to make a success of polygamous relationship, she refuses to accept the traditional and unorthodox way of curing infertility (she will neither take concoctions prepared by herbalists nor visit native doctors).

A major influence on Baba Segi's attitude to women is the culture into which he is born. This culture is a collective representation through the creation of homogenous social groups, and the expression of their collective character.

Feminism intervenes in the social process of gender representations to form a resistance to dominant ideological representations, thus Bolanle the educated wife in the *The Secret lives of Baba Segi's Wives* stands out from other illiterate wives by charting out a different and distinct method of solving the problem of her childlessness, her inability to give her husband a most desired child. Her resistance to dominant representation comes in form of her refusal to subject herself to local and traditional methods of curing barrenness. She would rather seek medical attention, and in doing so, her husband must also be subjected to medical examination. In doing this Shoneyin in her text challenges the myth that sexually active men are fertile. The male centred representation of women lies in the cultural construct of the

complete woman, i.e. a woman capable of carrying pregnancy and giving birth.

Shoneyin portrayed her female characters as persons with deep understanding of societal expectations on marriage as an institution that thrives on patriarchy and male supremacy. These women are ready to do whatever it takes to keep their home and ensure a reliable, steady supply of good meals and robust standard of living. To do this, they must procreate. They sacrifice their morality and commit adultery to become mothers, since, it is motherhood that secures a woman's place in her husband's house. In doing this, Shoneyin ridicules male domination, exposes the cultural myth that men are not impotent as long as they are sexually active. She does this by making Baba Segi have a big manhood, and making him very sexually active but unable to impregnate a woman. The wives are not presented as stereotypes but as individuals with distinct characters, pursuing a common goal. When at the end, Shoneyin makes Baba Segi succumb to the wives entreaties, she demystifies tradition and authority and gives the wives victory over their garrulous husband. It is in this vein that we see the wives not as criminals but heroic rebels struggling to re-humanise themselves through unethical means.

The text focuses on both the public and private spheres of women's lives. It criticises the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression. The wives are domesticated; they are not allowed to engage in any form of trade that can make them economically dependent. Iya Segi is taught by her mother that she cannot live without a man and that she needs a husband for procreation and as "coverage for her head". Iya Tope is told by her father that the only good thing that can happen to a woman

is to have a husband.

A passive recognition of polygamous unions amounts to reinforcement of the patriarchal notion that women should passively accept their partner's sexual decision making. This broadens the scope of masculine sexual freedom and reinforces patriarchy. The study reveals that the typically discordant nature of polygamous (typified by constant friction, jealousy and disagreement) co-wives aggravates domestic violence.

The text goes beyond the discussion of specificity of African feminism to discuss the notion that both African men and women suffer from sexism and patriarchal social structures. They are presented as victims of culture. In the text Baba Segi and his wives (in principle) are confronted with the same form of cultural oppression, i.e. the emphasis culture lays on children and the ability to father a child (i.e. fruitfulness in marriage). Iya Segi's appeal at the end of the text is to appeal to the men's (through Baba Segi) solidarity and sensitise them to the discrimination which women experience because of patriarchal structures of the society. She implores Baba Segi at the hospital through her confession to adultery to see himself as a product of patriarchal socialisation, that men are not only beneficiaries and co-authors of the oppression of women, but are victims of patriarchal socialisation as well.

The study highlights the reasons why some women are able to attain freedom whilst others are unable to do so. It also shows that many women are confronted with similar forms of oppression, but may choose to react to the situation differently. The paper draws attention to their different reactions to same situation.

In the text Shoneyin re-affirms Wollstonecraft's (1975:18) notions that the

“myth” that woman was created to be the toy of man must be repudiated. Baba Segi enjoys dressing his wives in beautiful cloths and displaying them before his friends and neighbours. The wives in turn take advantage of this to swindle him of good measure of money.

The text apart from being a re-reading of African culture is also a radical re-writing of culture, where the man is held captive by the wives. It inscribes the presence of different gendered social subjects, each holding her way in a seemingly male dominated household. Thus the crime committed is a survival strategy and the women as survivors.

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