

**USE OF IRONY AND FEMININE CRAFTINESS FOR SURVIVAL IN  
LOLA SHONEYIN'S, *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES***

**BY**

**Chinwe Sophia AMOLO (Miss)**

**ART1900404**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE**

**UNIVERSITY OF BENIN,**

**BENIN CITY**

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO  
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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project titled: USE OF IRONY AND FEMININE CRAFTINESS FOR SURVIVAL IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S, *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*, was undertaken by Chinwe Sophia AMOLO (Miss) of the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, with Matriculation Number ART1900404 under my supervision.

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Dr, (Mrs) A.O. Eruaga

(Supervisor)

Date

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research to God Almighty, and to my parents, Mr and (Late) Mrs AMOLO,

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge God Almighty for his mercy, love and presence in my life throughout my academic pursuit till its completion.

My deepest thanks to my project supervisor Dr Mrs Abigail Eruaga and Miss Deborah Toyin Olatunji for their guidance, patience and assistance in my undertaking of this research. To all the lecturers in the Department of English and Literature, I am grateful for your words of wisdom and the knowledge you have imparted to me.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title page.....	i
Certification .....	ii
Dedication .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
Abstract.....	vii
 <b>1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.1 Purpose of Study .....	1
1.2 Scope of Study .....	1
1.3 Methodology .....	1
1.4 Theoretical Background .....	2
1.5 Review of Related Literature .....	5
1.6 Thesis Statement .....	8
 <b>2. CHAPTER TWO: IRONY</b>	
2.1 Introduction .....	9
2.2 Social ills and Hypocrisy .....	9
2.3 Power Dynamics .....	16
2.4 Conclusion .....	18

### **3. CHAPTER THREE: FEMININE CRAFTINESS FOR SURVIVAL**

3.1 Introduction .....	19
3.2 Marital and Sexual Craftiness for Survival .....	19
3.3 Spiritual Craftiness for Survival .....	25
3.4 Physical Craftiness (Appearance) .....	26
3.5 Conception Craftiness (Childbirth) .....	28
3.6 Conclusion .....	29

### **4. CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION**

Conclusion .....	30
Works Cited .....	31

## ABSTRACT

This study explored the use of irony and feminine craftiness as survival strategies in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It analysed how wives in polygamous households utilize their cunning ways to navigate their complex personal dynamics and marital competition, thereby securing their survival.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, as Sociological and feminist theories were used to highlight the societal injustice faced by women in polygamous homes. The study also purposively sampled relevant examples from the play to determine the effective ways of addressing this social injustice in polygamous homes

The study found that irony is used to expose social ills, hypocrisy and power dynamics that characterise polygamy in Nigerian homes. It also revealed that women adopted different forms of feminine craftiness for survival in polygamous marriages including marital, sexual, physical, spiritual and conception craftiness

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine irony and feminine craftiness for survival in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Life of Baba Segi's Wives*. Through these literary strategies/techniques, the study exposes the challenges of polygamy and how women navigate their survival through these challenges. This is to capture the challenges of women in their pursuit for survival especially in Nigerian polygamous marriages.

#### 1.2 Scope of Study

The scope of this study is limited to the use of irony and feminine craftiness for survival in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Loves of Baba Segi's Wives*. The reason for selecting this text is to delve into the struggles and challenges faced by women in a contemporary Nigerian polygamous marriage and how irony and feminine craftiness are used to portray how these women navigate their challenges in a polygamous marriage challenging societal ill and ridiculing the societal norms placed on the female gender.

#### 1.3 Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative. It undertakes an in-depth textual analysis of Shoneyin's, *The Secret Life of Baba Segi's Wives*. Relevant textual data are drawn from the play to buttress the irony and feminine craftiness for survival that characterise Nigerian polygamous homes. These textual instances are analysed using sociological and feminist theories. Also, other secondary materials such as articles, reviews and commentaries are consulted to enrich the study.

## 1.4 Theoretical Background

This study adopts the sociological and feminist theories. These two theories are considered suitable in examining the issues under study as they border on women. Consequently, these two theories are deployed to expose the use of irony and feminine Craftiness for survival in the novel.

According to George B. Cunningham, “Sociological theories focus on social factors, such as structural determinants, power, politics, status, and conflict, and how these influence groups and individuals” (15). Sociological theory aims to examine and interpret the complexities of society including the relationships, structures, and institutions that shape our social world. This theory delves into crucial issues such as how power is distributed, the persistence of inequality, and the ways in which cultural norms influence our interactions and relationships with others.

There are many perspectives of sociological theory. There is the functionalist theory, conflict theory, critical theory and interactionist theory, but the major sociological theory this study will be focused on is the conflict theory. George B. Cunningham says, “Drawing heavily from the philosopher Karl Marx, conflict theory puts a primacy on power, status, and privilege, and holds that people tend toward competition, not cooperation. Consequently, the struggle for resources results in unrest in society and between groups” (17).

Arditya Prayogi says, “Conflict theory is one theory that is widely used to explain various phenomena of social change that occur in society” (37). The conflict theory emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prayogi says that the conflict theory is a theory that views that societal change does not occur through a process of adjusting values that bring about change but occurs as a result in compromises that are different from the original conditions (38). Prayogi stresses that conflict does not always bring bad things, but sometimes bring something positive. The positive aspect of a conflict is being able to clarify aspects of life that are not clear or have not been

thoroughly studied, allowing for readjustment of norms and values as well as social relations in the group concerned according to individual or group needs. (40) Some prominent figures of the conflict theory are; Karl Marx, Jessi Bernard and Max Werber.

According to Tonny Odhiambo and Faith Mbeneka Mutuku in their work, *History of Feminism*, the term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural, or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism is one of the oldest movements in global history. They note that feminism boils down to ending gender discrimination and bringing about gender equality and that the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ did not gain widespread until the 1970s. They also note that,

Feminist activists have campaigned for women’s legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women’s right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality prenatal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny; and other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women. (np)

They quote “According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements” (np).

According to Chia Martha Nguwasen and Ifeoma Mabel Onyemeluke, feminism is an intellectual, political, and ideological movement that aims principally, no matter its type, to fight

male dominance, exploitation and oppression of women so as to better her condition in the society and promote her liberation (np).

Dr Priyanka Singh in her work, *A Study of Waves of Feminism*, says feminism refers to any principle that seeks equality in rights for women, usually through improving their status. Feminism is rooted in ending men's historical supremacy over women (363). According to Ashley Crossman, feminist theory has always been about viewing the social world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and injustice, and in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice (np). Some prominent feminists are Virginia Wolf and Kate Hepburn.

From the second wave of the feminism movement birthed radical feminism which is the focus of this study.

Radical feminism is a movement that believes patriarchy is the root cause of gender inequality and it seeks to fundamentally restructure society to eliminate it (Saiman Usmani, et al np). According to Kate Millet in her book, *Theory of Sexual Politics*,

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between 'masculine' and 'feminine' subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in the lower or marginal branches) to the female- and science and technology, the profession, business and engineering to the male. Of course, the balance of employment, prestige and reward at present lie with the latter. (135-136)

According to Sara Buck Doue and Kathryn E. Tapp, radical feminism focuses on the rejection of the patriarchal ideal that the private sphere (for women) focuses on childbearing, marriage and the maintenance of the household. Due to this private sphere, the political sphere of patriarchy results in women being harmed through rape, domestic violence and prostitution (np).

### **1.5 Review of Related Literature**

Some detailed analyses of Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by some scholars include; Martha Chia Nguwasen and Ifeoma Mabel Onyemelukwe. These scholars examined the struggle for women's liberation showing eight forces of oppression against women and girls. These scholars note that,

This was a critical study of oppression and liberation of women and girls in a patriarchal African society as depicted by Lola Shoneyin in her debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Using the feminist theory. The study discovered eight factors of women's oppression in the novel, namely: rape, child abuse, forced marriage, lack of inheritance right for women/girls, polygamy/co-wives' conflicts, co-wives' deadly conspiracy against the last wife, sterility-induced oppression and assault and battering. It was found that women also experienced oppression at the hands of fellow women as a result of petty jealousies, envy, rivalry, egoism and greed. (77)

These scholars shed light on the widespread exploitation and abuse suffered by many young girls and female domestic workers in patriarchal African communities are raped by uncles, nephews, cousins, family friends and even fathers and how polygamy brings about petty jealousy, rivalries, intolerance, hostilities, complexities aggression, power tussle, intricate family politics and deadly conspiracies. These scholars also note that,

The African belief presented in the novel is that if a woman does not have children, she is not only considered sterile, but also referred to as a sub-woman...Infertility is a big source of anxiety and worry to women as every married woman's dream is to become a mother...A barren woman is an isolated woman because children are viewed in many African society as inheritance...Moreover, the inability to have children, especially in African society is blamed on the woman...This is an ignorance birthed by patriarchy, sustained by patriarchy and harnessed to hold the barren women in perpetual torture and oppression. (76)

Ethel Ngozi Okeke and Abigail Obiageli Eruaga in their paper "Dynamics of Submission in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* interrogate the interconnectedness of submission, polygamy, patriarchy and female power. They stress on how all these four concepts are intertwined in the household of Baba Segi as well as the women's resort to conniving with one another and their manipulation of the men for their survival. They argue that,

Thought a discourse on polygamy, *The Secrets Lives* is a slight departure from such 'male domination' stuff as it subtly transfers power to women. Shoneyin deliberately seeks to subvert male hegemony in a polygamous relationship by transferring power to the wives in such matrimonial spaces. (156)

They also opine that women, despite appearing submissive to their husband, actually hold the power, which ironically puts their husband in a vulnerable position, open to ridicule and exposing him as "buffoon robbed in honour" (169). They state that,

Submission does not come without some clever tricks or wisdom on the part of the wives in a bid to make their circumstances bearable. Thus, the unequal power relationship between the husband and his many wives compels the women folk to resort to pretence and wily manipulation of the man. Whereas sex with his wives is considered as a tool of conquest and domination by Baba Segi, the former converts it into a vehicle of manipulation. (167)

Noire Histoïr explores Baba Segi's troubles by exposing his insecurities and by bringing to the forefront his lack of education as shown in his behaviour in the hospital. She also examines how lack of education has limited him as he does not like nor understand things, and how this leads him to feel out of control and aggressive. She states that, "It becomes clear that when Baba Segi doesn't know something or feels out of control, he responds by becoming aggressive or shutting down. He can't bear anyone giving him advice or telling him what to do" (np). She also explores women's subjugation. She notes that women are bearers of children and if they are unable to bear, the fault is from them and not the man. She affirms that,

When we think of the pressure placed on people to get married and have children it seems to be aimed at women. And thus, we think of women, their identities, and their sense of self-worth as being tied up in marriage and having children...fertility issues are assumed to be on the part of the female. Men and women contribute to conceiving a child but an outsized proportion of responsibility for reproduction and raising children falls to women. (np)

Although some other scholars have examined this play from different perspectives, including that of feminism as a means of liberating women and the dynamics of submission, the angle and perspective examined in this study covers a different perspective in the play as it

focuses on the use of irony and feminine craftiness for survival in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

### **1.6 Thesis Statement**

The use of irony and feminine craftiness for survival in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* exposes the challenges of polygamous marriage and how women navigate their survival through these challenges.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IRONY

#### 2.1 Introduction

According to Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, “Irony is an utterance with a figurative meaning that departs from its literal meaning in one of several ways (np). Irony critiques societal norms, particularly in relation to gender roles, fertility issues, masculinity and power within marriage. Shoneyin’s, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, enhances the exploration of how appearance can be deceiving and the complexities inherent in family and personal relationships. This chapter examines how irony is used to expose social ills, hypocrisy and power dynamics in Nigerian polygamous marriages.

#### 2.2 Social ills and Hypocrisy

Through the use of irony, Shoneyin’s, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* exposes the characters who adhere to societal expectations while secretly engaging in behaviours that contradict these norms, thus bringing to the forefront the social ills and hypocrisy of the society.

Baba Segi presents himself as a devoted husband and father figure, yet his ignorance and neglect of his wives’ true feelings and desires are exposed through ironic situations. Baba Segi believes he fulfils his husbandly duties when he comes to meet his wives at night. However, he fills his wives with empty seeds. He is ignorant of the fact that his house is on fire having taken Bolanle as his new wife. He does not see his wives’ unhappiness with his decision because he feels he is man enough especially when he is the sole provider of the family. Thus, Iya Segi and Iya

Femi connive to make Bolanle look bad. They also plan to expose her as an evil person though this backfires on them. Both wives stoop so low as to plant in Bolanle's room a decomposed rodent with its mouth bound by a red thread and a four-inch nail piercing its skull. Bolanle having been accused and shocked to see such a vile and revolting thing denies every accusation pointed at her. Her reaction shows that she has no idea of such things even though Iya Segi keeps accusing her of wanting their blood and killing their husband. Their insistent accusation against her holds no water as Baba Segi begins to realize that things do not add up for someone who has been caught red-handed, her reaction proves otherwise. Her calm and insistent denial of everything pushed Baba Segi to let her go. This act infuriates Iya Femi and she threatens Baba Segi. Baba Segi visits his friend, Teacher, complaining about his predicament. "So, they want you to send her away and you think it a reaction to your annoyance. I know they do" (63). It is ironic how Baba Segi knows that his other wives do not want Bolanle in the house and yet he makes no effort to address the issues and denies the fact that he favours one over the others. He says, "I do not sleep with any one more than the others" (64).

Iya Tope recounts how she got married to Baba Segi. According to her, her brother has been declaring she was ripe for marriage so when the opportunity came, her father gave her to Baba Segi as compensation for his failed crops. She said, "I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange—a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs" (82). Shoneyin ridicules the society as she exposes the ills in the society. It is mostly perceived as a normal occurrence to give out one's child in compensation for a bad harvest in the guise of marriage.

To Baba Segi, a woman has no purpose other than to bear children. So when Iya Tope was yet to be pregnant, Baba Segi wonders what is wrong with her womb. He says, "If your father

has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (84). Again, Baba Segi exposes his typical male behaviour by blaming Iya Tope for her childlessness not considering if the childlessness could be his fault. He brings to the forefront his illiterate societal belief that he already has children from his first wife Iya Segi, and as such, the fault for their childlessness could only be because of Iya Tope. This leaves the pressure of childbearing on the shoulders of Iya Tope, who is accused of being barren. After weeks of mulling over Iya Segi’s advice, “Get pregnant quickly or he will start to force-feed you bitter concoctions from medicine men until your belly rumbles in your sleep” (83), she knew she had to take matters into her own hands to avoid going back to the village. Another subjugation of women to societal ills unfolds when women woman are forced to take unknown concoctions with no medical prescriptions, but rather with false promises of having their wombs cleaned in order to bear children. Women go through such torture that risks their health and lives to bear children and avoid being accused of barrenness. This is the lives the society has created for women. They are portrayed as the lesser gender. This unveils the unjust realities of women in the African society revealing layers of oppression as a result of the patriarchy.

In a bid to not be accused of being barren and finding an easier path to escape the harsh realities of the African women, Iya Tope found another man, a meat seller who would bring her out of her predicament. Iya Segi tells Iya Tope, “Make sure something worthwhile comes out of all this foolishness, the days are passing quickly and your village calls you” (85). Soon, Iya Tope is pregnant. Iya Tope soon begins to realize her excessive desire with the meat seller when Iya Segi comes to warn her “I will not let you destroy this home with your excess. You have allowed the concubine to become the husband” (86). With the arrival of a third wife, Iya Femi, Iya Tope begins to see Iya Segi’s hatred towards her and with all that is happening, she advises her children not to commit adultery. Someone who was unfaithful in her relationship and was consumed by her

infidelity if not for Iya Segi's intervention. "Do not commit adultery, follow the path that is good and right" (88).

Iya Segi recounts how she got married to Baba Segi. How her mother cautioned her against men as a result of her father who left her mother for another woman. She advised her saying,

Your father left me for a beautiful woman. I told him I was pregnant but he didn't want to hear it. He sliced me like okra and left. He pursued another woman's hole and died inside it...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. (96-97)

When Iya Segi's mother saw her naked with money spread around her, she knew she had to get her married. "You have made money your husband" (99). She carried all her money and gave it to her friend, Mama Alaro to give to her son, Ishola to take care of Iya Segi. On the following night of their wedding, Baba Segi after seeing the size of her breast said "They would do him for a lifetime" (103). This turns out to be untrue as the advice her mother gave her, she realizes "Men! They always try to swindle you out of what is yours" (103). Soon afterwards, he brought home other wives proving him to be a hypocrite as men are never satisfied.

Bolanle after getting her scan recounts how she had fell prey to a young man while waiting under a tree as it rained. A man in a Mercedes pulls up in front of her, offering her a ride. To her, he did not look like the thugs her mother has described. He looks respectable and clean. Her curiosity got the better of her as she let him fool her with his lies. He says,

“I just want to make a quick phone call to my sister in the U.S. She’s in the hospital. I live just round the corner. As soon as I am done, I’ll run you down to Osuntokun. I may even be able to take you home... I want to put the generator on. I can’t see a thing inside. It’s one of those cordless phones and I don’t know where it is. Why don’t you get down and help me look for it so we can be on our way? (112-113)

She soon realize what is happening when he asked her for sex. Her pleading falls on deaf ears and her attempts are futile as he puts a pillow over her face. He threatens her saying “If you don’t want to die, lie still with your legs apart!” (115), and after which, she passes out. The man splashes her water and then she realises what has happened “What I had hoped to save for my husband has been wrenched from me and all I had to show for it was an excruciating ache and dishevelled hair” (115) and he offers to drop her home. On their way, he sings and dance to his achievements of receiving and raping a fifteen-year-old while Bolanle is lost in her thoughts. He notices this and tries to convince her that what he did was good. “You should be smiling, I mean it. You should be happy. You are a woman now. You should be thanking me” (116). The irony, the vile attempt to justify his wrongdoing and actions as something positive. After preying on an innocent helpless young girl raping and taking her virginity has made her a woman and she should be happy about it. A fifteen-year-old girl is now a woman because he sexually abused her and put her in the family way. His threat of killing her although it doesn’t go as said, he killed her emotionally and mentally as a part of her died. This cruel act is what scars and hunts Bolanle making her lose herself and so was the reason she feels unworthy and marries Baba Segi. “I became Bolanle – the soiled, damaged woman” (16).

Iya Femi recounts how she got to be one of Baba Segi's wives. After the death of her parents, her uncle sent her packing to work for a woman called Grandma who tortured, abused and turned her into a house girl. She narrates thus:

If I ever overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chilli powder into the wounds. Once, when she saw me speaking to the gateman, she stripped me naked, rubbed chilli between my thighs and locked me out of the house for a whole day. She did not even remember that I was eighteen years old with a chest full of breasts and thighs full of hair. (124)

Iya Femi recounts another instance of social ills and hypocrisy when she is molested by Tunde, Grandma's only son and how she claims to be a Christian when she never embodied Christianity even though it is believed she attended church frequently. Some instances of hypocrisy can be seen when she sends Grandma to the hospital by stirring urine and toilet water into her cup, convincing herself it is the Lord's doing. Also, when Iya Femi decides to take revenge against her uncle when in the Bible, God said: 'Vengeance is mine' again taking matters into her own hands and this led to her burning down her father's house as she was of the notion that "What do you do when something that is yours is claimed by someone else? You destroy it! You take it apart so devastatingly that it can never be put together again" (134). That is what she does as she watches her uncle's wife beg for help before setting her free from the blazing house. Iya Femi does not do as the Bible says, she is a hypocrite hiding under the guise of Christianity using the Bible to cover up her evil doings. She does not embody the beliefs and doctrines of Christianity as she does according to what she wants.

Once again Lola Shoneyin exposes the societal ills portraying male dominance and female subjugation as they rape and abuse women sexually as seen through Bolanle and Iya Femi.

Another instance from the play exposing social ills and hypocrisy is when Iya Segi suggests to Iya Femi that they poison Bolanle. Iya Femi once again goes against her beliefs as a Christian praying to God to help her accomplish her mission in killing Bolanle. “The lord is going to use me to conquer my enemy. The mantle of justice has fallen on me” (139). It is obvious that Iya Femi is not a true Christian, she is not born again as she consoles herself with the image of Grandma burning in hell instead of trying to save her. She only claims the title of Christianity as a front as she goes ahead to do as she wishes doing the opposite of what is written in the Bible and claiming it is the word of God. She is blinded by hate and doesn’t realize that what she is doing is evil and wicked and claims it is of the Lord.

Iya Segi’s evil plans backfire on her as it is later revealed that the poisoned food which Iya Femi made for Bolanle was eaten by Segi. After Segi was rushed to be hospital from vomiting, Iya Segi accused Bolanle because Segi had been with Bolanle in her room which was strange, something that had never happened before. Iya Femi accused her of being an evil spirit and Satan when she is the evil one for wanting to take Bolanle’s life “You are indeed an evil spirit. Get thee behind us, Satan! Leave our home!” (162). In the heat of all these accusations, she revealed that she was happy she had not eaten the food given to her “Then it is good that I did not eat it. I’m glad it was Segi who ate it all. I am glad my lips did not touch food that was offered to me from hands that hate me”(162). The irony that the person they planned to kill was saved because of her kindness and their evil backfired on them resulting in the death of Segi.

The social ills and hypocrisy are finally exposed with Bolanle’s scan and Baba Segi’s sperm examination, Iya Segi was called in for further investigation. Iya Segi realized that it was time to let the truth out. She confesses to knowing why Bolanle could not conceive and to all of Baba Segi’s children not being his own and how she had influenced the other wives to follow in

her footsteps. This confession comes as a shock to Baba Segi leaving him embarrassed and speechless as he believes he was potent and manly enough to have fathered all seven children not realizing he was the ‘barren one’ and it was his sperm that was empty.

## 2.2 Power Dynamics

Shoneyin through the novel critiques the power dynamics within marriage and family life through the wives' subversion of Baba Segi's authority and their empowerment through secrecy and manipulation as a result of the limitations placed on women within the patriarchal structures.

Iya Tope tells us her view on Bolanle's arrival into their household and how it would disrupt the sex rotation. With Baba Segi starting each week with the eldest wife, Iya Segi, the rotation went on twice with Baba Segi spending Sunday with whoever he pleases. With Bolanle in the picture, Iya Segi would spend only one night a week with Baba Segi as she has had him for fifteen years. This does not matter to Iya Segi as “She already owned his mind and did with it as she pleased “(48). This contradicts the supreme male figure in the household, Baba Segi, he believes himself to have authority and be in control but in hindsight, he was being fooled and controlled by his wives.

Iya Segi and Iya Femi constantly use Baba Segi in their ploy to drive Bolanle away from their home. They want to take a slow approach but Iya Segi changes her plan as she cannot wait until Baba Segi forces Bolanle away from her barrenness. “When Bolanle fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out “(50). They skilfully manipulate Baba Segi making him believe he is in control when in reality they are the ones pulling his strings and making the

decisions using him as a pawn in their game of power and control. After planting a decomposed rodent in Bolanle's room to make her look bad and Baba Segi lets her go, this infuriates Iya Femi and she threatens Baba Segi "If this woman is allowed to sleep in this house, I will sleep outside with my sons. I will hold a night vigil and pray her out" (62). Baba Segi realises that his wife has now grown beyond him to threaten him diminishing his supreme power as man of the house. "Has this woman's head scattered that she now scrubs my mouth? Have my words become so insignificant that they can now be contested" (62). Baba Segi does not realise that what he said is actually true to the fact that his words does not hold that much power in his house as his wives indirectly have the power and are in control.

Iya Segi recounts how she manipulates Baba Segi to do her bidding. To her, Baba Segi was just a pun. "Men are like that. They sit in the centre and the world turns around them" (73). For a male figure in a household, Baba Segi is not in control, despite his appearance suggesting he is in charge, he is being manipulated by his wives, particularly Iya Segi who sees him as a mere tool to achieve her own goals and desires. Iya Segi cunningly persuades Baba Segi to let her work with her constantly sighing and fake crying by smearing her eyes with onion to get Baba Segi's attention. Baba Segi who was supposed to be the sole authority and power in the household was easily fooled by his wife who made mention of a "wise woman" who advised her. "Men are so simple. They will believe anything...Men are like yam. You cut them how you like" (74-75). Iya Segi uses this scheme to convince Baba Segi to allow her to switch from selling wholesale sweets and selling cement to extending her shop, that is how she started her business and learnt how to drive. She says thus;

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.

(104)

She cunningly plays with Baba Segi's mind fooling him as she pleases Iya Segi is the real mastermind in fooling Baba Segi making him believe he is the sole provider and controller of his home.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Lola Shoneyin uses irony to expose the social ills and hypocrisy in the African society through the likes of Baba Segi and his wives as they manoeuvre their way in a polygamous relationship exploring how the females are subjugated to the desires of the men and how these women manoeuvre their way out of the system.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **FEMININE CRAFTINESS FOR SURVIVAL**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Feminine craftiness is a term used to describe a stereotype regarding women being cunning or clever often in a subtle or manipulative way. Feminine craftiness is inbuilt, especially as a wife in a polygamous home such as in Baba Segi's house. It is almost impossible to not explore that part as a woman especially when dealing with other women who so happen to be one's co-wives. Everyone vying for the attention of their husband. Everyone wants to be favoured above the others to be their husband's favourite and this leads to their inner Craftiness and survival. The lengths the wives would go to achieve their desires. Every woman wants their husband for themselves even if they happen to be in a polygamous relationship. Every woman desires unending attention and love from their husband and with the husband's attention and love being shared with the other wives, the need to be at the top to be the favourite is a battle that is won by the craftiest.

#### **3.2 Marital and Sexual Craftiness for Survival**

Shoneyin exposes how women use their sexual prowess as an edge to gain the love and attention of their husband. Iya Tope recounts when Bolanle became the fourth wife of Baba Segi. The sex rotation between the wives has been with each wife having Baba Segi twice a week, leaving Saturday for Baba Segi to choose who to spend it with. Iya Tope said; “Baba Segi used this night to reward whichever wife had missed a night because of her menstrual flow. Sometimes, a wife would have Sunday night if he knew he’d been heavy-handed in scolding her” (48). Iya Tope also recounts how this had not been the case as Iya Femi had cunningly crafted a method to keep Baba Segi for herself most Sundays which should not have been the case. “Most weeks, Iya Femi got Sunday because she enticed him with her groundnut stew, her ekuru with shrimp sauce, her yam balls, her asun. Baba Segi’s belly could not resist her” (48). Things like this are what fueled the rift between the wives as Baba Segi was not giving his wives equal attention, thus favouring one over the others. With the addition of Bolanle, the sex rotation was limited with Iya Segi having him for only one night. This would not affect her as she already weaved her way into Baba Segi’s mind with her cunning and crafty ways doing as she pleased.

The wives come together to find a solution to Bolanle. They plan to keep their secret amongst themselves, leaving Bolanle in the dark as her university education would not help her solve her problems. Iya Segi said “Let Bolanle draw on every skill she learnt in her university...this is not a world she knows. When she doesn’t find what she came looking for, she will go back to wherever she came from” (49). Iya Segi further explains “When Bolanle fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out! We know she will not give him children so we should watch from a distance” (50).

The next day Bolanle offers to teach them how to read and Iya Tope is the only one who accepts her request. On the first day, Iya Tope learns how to write the Capital letter ‘A’ which

turns out to be a huge achievement for her. That night however, Iya Segi comes to threaten Iya Tope. She does not want anyone to have contact with Bolanle, thus her efforts to be wasted. She wants Bolanle to be an outcast in their family. Iya Tope knows she could not be at a crossroad between them as she could not disobey Iya Segi for she holds her and her daughter's life in her hands. On the other hand, was Bolanle who does not know the power Iya Segi wields. Iya Tope says,

That night, Iya Segi came to my bedroom and told me she would destroy my useless life if I ever sat to learn anything from Bolanle again. What could I do? On the right was the person who gave me provisions and held my life and the lives of my daughters in the middle of her palm. On my left was the wife who wanted to teach me to read and write, the wife who did not yet know that she could also be crushed by Iya Segi's powerful fist. (51)

After a few months of waiting, Iya Segi gets tired and decides to hasten the plan. With Iya Segi having control over Baba Segi, she seizes the opportunity to convince him to return the armchair he brought out for Bolanle in a bid to impress her as she has not earned that right. Without hesitation, Baba Segi returns the armchair. "Baba Segi soon started to grumble about the flatness of Bolanle's belly and Iya Segi seized this opportunity to advise him that comfort made the female form complacent" (54).

Iya Segi's crafty ways continue as she stops Bolanle's friends from visiting. Iya Segi convinces Baba Segi that Bolanle's friends are a bad influence on their daughters especially to Segi. With this, Baba Segi agrees and tells Bolanle that no unmarried person is allowed in his house. Despite this, Bolanle remains unfazed and continues to offer her assistance whenever possible.

After Iya Segi gives birth to her son, Akin, she cunningly weaves her way through Baba Segi's mind to get what she wants. She begins by sighing, then she would sit on the bed and shake her head helplessly until Baba Segi takes notice, and a few weeks later, she takes to crying and going as far as using onion to induce tears in her eyes. When she finally gets Baba Segi's attention, she convinces him to let her work by manipulating him with sweet words about what she will do for him. Iya Segi said, "I could sell sweets wholesale, interact with other women and learn of new receipts, the best household detergent on the market, better ways to please a husband... I also want to attend driving school" (74). With her cunning ways, Baba Segi allows her to work and within months, she craftily makes mention of a 'wise woman.' This 'wise woman' she uses to influence Baba Segi to get what she wants so much so that Baba Segi is so immersed in her lies he doesn't know he's being fooled and that is how Iya Segi started her business and learnt how to drive. Lola Shoneyin explores how women bring out feminine craftiness in achieving what they want. The lengths they'll go the lies the drama the process of how it all comes together to reach their aim as seen through Iya Segi.

Another instance of marital craftiness is seen in the wives' desire to get rid of Bolanle. Iya Femi who turns out to be Baba Segi's favourite as he takes her everywhere he goes. He also spends most of his nights with her before his marriage to Bolanle. Iya Femi says,

For five years, Baba Segi loved me the most. I was better than his other wives and he didn't hide this in the way he behaved toward me. He would pretend he had an evening fever so he wouldn't have to endure Iya Segi's bed. Then he would sneak into mine at night so he could be with me. He took me out to visit his friends. He liked the way I dressed so I alone accompanied him to parties. He loved the way I cooked, the way I looked...I couldn't even walk across the sitting

room without Baba Segi salivating, but everything changed the day the monkey stepped into this house. (137)

Bolanle, being Baba Segi's new favourite wife is the leading cause of Iya Femi's hatred towards her. Iya Femi confesses that Bolanle has stolen her position, her attention her care, love and desire she worked hard for from Baba Segi. The anger, the betrayal from Baba Segi. Was she not enough for him had she not given him everything he wanted, given him a son? What more did he want? Iya Femi wanted Bolanle gone. "I want her gone. I want my place back and I will get it" (137). So, when Iya Segi approached her with poison to give to Bolanle she was happy that their problems would soon be gone.

The craftiness, the evil lengths women will go to get the attention of their husband including poisoning their co-wives to get the upper hand and to be their husband's favourite. They believed Bolanle is proud using her education to gain Baba Segi's favour and they wanted to bring her down even if it means killing Bolanle. Iya Segi said, "When the poison turns her belly, Baba Segi will be forced to take her to her father's house" (138).

Iya Femi leaves Bolanle's food in her room, the food she has poisoned with the hopes of getting rid of Bolanle. Bolanle who has gone to visit her mother on her way back encounters Segi who believes Bolanle had caught her in an uncompromising situation in a palm wine joint with a boy and in a bid to make sure Bolanle doesn't spill her secret, she follows Bolanle. Segi follows Bolanle to her room where she is greeted with the food Iya Femi Left for her. Before Bolanle could take a bite, Segi made for the food, eating and tearing up the Chicken with Bolanle surrendering it to Segi as she has already eaten with her mother. Iya Segi does not realize she has used her own hands to poison her daughter until Segi starts vomiting and is rushed to the hospital. Iya Segi believes Bolanle to be responsible for this as Segi had been with her. She accuses Bolanle

of using something on Segi or telling her something. Iya Segi says, “What have you done to my daughter? Answer me, witch! What have you inflicted on my daughter...What did you say to her? What curse did you put on her?” (161). Iya Segi inflicts injury on Bolanle in a fit of anger and Bolanle confesses to not eating the food prepared for her and letting Segi have it. Bolanle says, “Then is it good I did not eat it. I’m glad it was Segi who ate it all. I’m glad my lips did not touch food that was offered to me by hands that hate me...” (162). This revelation comes as a shock to Iya Segi and Iya Femi realizing what they have done and the grave consequences of their actions. Iya Segi says, “Ah! Iya Femi, what have we done with our own hands?” (163).

With Segi back in the house looking like the shadow of herself she asks to recuperate in Bolanle’s room. When Iya Segi wanted to bathe Segi, she made sure Bolanle was not in the house and her daughter’s silence bothered her. After so many questions, she confesses to knowing what her mother had done after Iya Segi rejects wanting to mourn her child. “But other mothers can mourn their daughters. That would please you, wouldn’t it? Mama, the doctor said I was poisoned. They said I could have died. Why would I be poisoned in our house? It was the food I ate the night I went to Aunty Bolanle’s room, wasn’t it?” (205). Iya Segi realizing the extent to which her Craftiness had gotten. Having to see her child suffer and wanting to die because of what she did, Iya Segi is filled with anger regretting what she had done “It was as if I had gone mad. She watched me as I tore my dress from the neck to the hem. I slapped the walls and scratched my face; I boxed my breast and pulled my hair. I could not control myself “(206).

Iya Segi calls the other wives to tell them about her talk with Segi revealing to Iya Tope what they have done. Iya Femi only thinking of herself wonders how to avoid their secret getting to Baba Segi as he could send them packing. Iya Femi does not even feel remorseful or sad at what

she has done. Iya Femi almost kills Segi as a result of her craftiness and still, she cunningly looks for ways to prevent the evil work of her hands from coming to light

“How do we know that she will not tell her father what you said? Since she has been back from the hospital she refuses to eat unless her father is seated before her. And who knows what she may tell Bolanle? Or have you forgotten that they sleep together? I only ask this because we might as well start packing our belongings now.” (210)

Her statement riles up Iya Tope as she is shocked at what Iya Femi said. Iya Tope says, “If you had God in you, you’d be praying for the child who barely clings to life. But no, you sit here wondering how to remain in the house that you have used your hands to burn...You prefer to hide than to do a good deed that may wipe away your sins! Continue hiding” (210).

### **3.3 Spiritual Craftiness for Survival**

Iya Segi after her previous failed attempts, crafts another plan of which Iya Tope does not want to be part of. Thus, Iya Segi threatens Iya Tope saying,

It is all right for you to say you do not want to be part of us, after you have benefitted from my wisdom all these years. Now you wish to remove yourself? Well, you can’t! You are bound to us. We are all bound together! And if you dare to open that stupid mouth of yours, I will ruin you myself. I will tell my husband things that will make him wring your neck in your sleep. (56)

With Iya Tope out of the way, they plant in Bolanle’s room a decomposed rodent tied with a red thread and a nail on its head.

At the bottom of the bag...was the head of a decomposed rodent, a large bush rat perhaps...There were bits of dried flesh stuck to it. Its mouth was bound together by red thread. A four-inch nail had been knocked into its crown, shattering the skull at the point of entry, then driven all the way in until it protruded out of the rodent's throat. (59-60)

This revolting item which is planted in Bolanle's room as a charm is used to convince Baba Segi that Bolanle is into witchcraft. Iya Segi and Iya Femi play their part with their fake tears and accuse Bolanle of wanting to kill their husband to hide herself from shame as she was unable to conceive. Baba Segi who does not realize his other wives' ploy, becomes angry and almost kills Bolanle after squeezing her neck so hard. Bolanle having seen the decomposed rodent realises what is happening and denies her involvement in such act. Bolanle replies,

How can I confess to something I know nothing about? Strangle me. Kill me. But first, ask yourself if I would descend this low? Would I descend to this? Would I touch something so revolting? Do you really think I would go to a babalawo, let alone ask for something that would harm you? If I didn't want to be with you, would I not just leave? (60)

Iya Segi then decides to push further by accusing Bolanle of wanting to destroy their home. Thus, Iya Segi becomes suspicious of Bolanle for some months. Bolanle rejects ever wanting blood and Baba Segi tells her to see for herself what was found in her room. It is observed, "In a small calabash, there was a spool of once-white thread half-immersed in a pool of blood" (60). Baba Segi observes her response and realises that something is amiss, Bolanle confronts him, accusing Baba Segi of underestimating her and Iya accuses her again saying "Oh, it is unspeakable now you've been found out! Who would have known that all those times you left the house, you

were visiting a babalawo? Who would have thought that a graduate would stoop to something so unspeakable?” (61). Bolanle looks to the crowd gathered in the sitting room of having no desire to kill her husband and neither does she want to stop living with her husband nor die barren. With this Baba Segi lets her go as he realizes it was a ploy and he had fallen in it.

### **3.4 Physical Craftiness (Appearance)**

Shoneyin also examines how the wives navigate their challenges in gaining the love and attention of their husband through their physical appearance as a means of getting ahead of the other wives. Iya Femi recounts how had craftily made herself more pleasing to Baba Segi by presenting herself as more appeasing and better dressed than the other wives. Iya Femi tries to humiliate Bolanle when Baba Segi tells her to make aso ebi for the household because of their neighbour’s birthday. Baba Segi tells Iya Femi, “I want you all to look like queens” (67) and Iya Femi wandered the wives he was referring to. If Baba Segi was talking about Iya Segi who looks like a ‘toad’ or Iya Tope who looks like a ‘rabbit’ or Bolanle whose face looks “as haggard as a sack” (67). Iya Femi’s disregard and hate for her co-wives made her design her clothes more favourably and perfect for her than her co-wives making sure she stands out. “Such beautiful gold threads! Such fine sequins” Iya Segi said noticing Iya Femi made sure her dress was better than the others. Iya Femi made sure Iya Segi’s dress looked like a pillow. Iya Femi described Iya Segi’s dress saying, “Her dress resembled a pillowcase with long sleeves...” (69). Iya Tope’s dress, “I told the tailor to sew the skirt two sizes too big, and her blouse baggy and without darts. The neck gaped and slid off one of her shoulders” (69). For Bolanle, she made it herself as Iya Femi described how she did it. “I watched the tailor on a few occasions and made the skirt from the discoloured ends that he did away with. Instead of the Square metre that the rest of the wives received as headgear, Bolanle’s head was bound by a bright purple strip of cloth about eight inches wide” (69). For her dress, Iya

Femi made sure it accentuates her “My skirt was fitted and the slit ride just above my knee. My blouse was adorned with crystals and the darts shaped my figure and lifted my breast” (70). In doing this, she believes she has given Baba Segi the queen he asked for. Iya Femi stoops so low to make sure she stands out from the other wives to make herself more pleasing to Baba Segi. This demonstrates the lengths to which the wives of Baba Segi would go to get his attention. Her craftiness and cunning way not only targeted at Bolanle but even her partner in crime, Iya Segi who was pleased with what she did to Bolanle.

Iya Segi makes sure that Bolanle’s aid or help goes in vain. She does not want anyone having anything to do with her or any of the co-wives accepting her help. After Iya Tope complains of her daughter’s dandruff, Bolanle offers to help and with Iya Segi noticing this, she accuses Iya Tope of not being satisfied with what their husband gives them and threatens to report her to Baba Segi. Iya Tope realizes what Iya Segi is capable of, and indirectly rejects Bolanle’s help.

### **3.5 Conception Craftiness (Childbirth)**

Shoneyin expose how the wives survive in dealing with the challenges they face in regards to Baba Segi’s infertility. How the wives had to search for other means to provide children for Baba Segi. Iya Tope after being married to Baba Segi is unable to conceive. Thus, with Baba Segi’s threat “If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him”(84), she realises that she has to do something quickly. In other words, there is the need to please her husband and bear him children. She does not want to go back to her father’s house, considering Iya Segi’s warning. Thus, when the opportunity came, she took it like an angry bull and lost control until Iya Segi cautions her.

Iya Femi, while living as a housemaid with Grandma, was constantly abused and tortured at the slightest provocation until she got tired of such a lifestyle. So, when the idea came to her to add urine and toilet water in Grandma's cup she wasted no time. This act made Grandma to be admitted in the hospital. With this opportunity, she escapes Grandma's house to become Baba Segi's wife. Then one day she trailed Tunde to his workplace and they continued their affair. One day, Iya Segi tells Iya Femi their secret unknown to her that she is already pregnant and claims the child to be Baba Segi's.

Iya Segi finally realises the time has come to reveal her secret. The secret that had held the family together. The secret she had passed on to every other wife except from Bolanle which had led to that very moment. Iya Segi was invited to the hospital for further questioning by the doctor but without any questions, she confesses to knowing why Bolanle could not conceive and how she had passed on her crafty ways influencing the other wives to do the same. Iya Segi confesses,

I know the reason why Bolanle has not conceived...I was a young wife when I found myself in a cloud of sadness. I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itch to be suckled. My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leaped between them every time dusk descended upon us. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit. Then, I had an idea. It was a sinful idea but I knew it would bring my sadness to an end. In fact, it was more than an idea; it promised to be a solution. If my husband did not have seed, then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? So, I found seed and planted it in my belly. (215)

Baba Segi is hit with a wave of shock to realize his whole marriage has been built on lies. The crafty and manipulative ways of Iya Segi passed on to his other wives, the extent of her craftiness has led to his embarrassment to know he never fathered any child and he has been living with wives who have kept him in the dark if not for Bolanle who brought light into his life.

The wives needed to survive, with all his wives from different backgrounds and places of hardship. They all found a home in Baba Segi's house and with threats of being cast out, from not being able to bear him children, they depended on other means of survival through their craftiness.

### **3.2 Conclusion**

Lola Shoneyin through the wives of Baba Segi explores the in-depth feminine craftiness and survival showcasing the lengths women will go to survive, especially in a polygamous family and how the need for their survival brings about their feminine craftiness as they would have been pushed aside as barren and they rather live in the comfort of Baba Segi's house giving him children born from other men rather than point out his own flaws.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the use of irony and feminine craftiness for survival as depicted in Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It interrogated and exposed the challenges of women and their pursuit for survival especially in Nigerian polygamous marriages. This was achieved through the application of sociological and feminist theories.

In the second chapter, irony was used to expose the societal ills and hypocrisy, injustice and inequality that characterise polygamy. This chapter also condemned the absurdities inherent in

traditional African gender roles and the limitations placed on women within patriarchal structures. It also challenged the stereotypes about fertility, masculinity and femininity.

In the third chapter, feminine craftiness for survival, as depicted through the actions of Baba Segi's wives, exposed the lengths to which women in a polygamous relationship always go in order to have the attention of their husband to themselves, and to make sure another woman does not win him over as they compete amongst their selves.

In conclusion, Lola Shoneyin's, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* not only serves as a means of entertainment but also a satire and critique of societal norms and expectations which enables the readers to question and reflect on traditional beliefs and values as well as their conceptions about gender, marriage, challenging assumptions about women's reproductive abilities and power dynamics in Nigerian society.

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