CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN FLORA NWAPA'S AND LOLA SHONEYIN'S

BY

Segun Meshack BABARINDE

ART2100184

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project titled: CHALL**ENGES OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN FLORA NWAPA'S AND LOLA SHONEYIN'S**

was undertaken by **Segun Meshack BABARINDE** of the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City.

_____ _____

Prof. (Lady) E. N. Ugwu **DATE**

Project Supervisor

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all women who continue to challenge inequality and fight against oppression in the society. May your voices never be silenced.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges of women's oppression in African societies, especially Nigeria. Through the use of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the study explored how women struggle within patriarchal societies and how cultural beliefs, gender roles, and traditional expectations affect women's lives and marriages in Africa.

The study adopted qualitative research subjecting relevant instances of women oppression, discrimination, and resistance in both texts to textual analysis using feminist theory. The study revealed that both Nwapa and Shoneyin expose the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that silence women and normalize gender inequality through marriage, motherhood, and societal expectations.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the challenges of women's oppression as portrayed in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This work explores how women in both novels experience, negotiate, and respond to various forms of oppression within their cultural and social environments. This research investigates the ways in which patriarchal traditions, marital expectations, motherhood, and cultural norms shape, restrict, or influence women's identities. This study also aims to analyse the characters' strategies of resistance, survival, or conformity in the face of oppression, highlighting how social inequalities, power imbalances, domestic violence, and cultural practices operate as tools of women's subjugation. The objective of this study is to provide a more in-depth understanding of how these challenges reflect issues faced by women in Nigerian society.

1.2 Scope of Study

This work focuses on the examination of challenges of women's oppression as represented in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Flora Nwapa, often celebrated as the mother of modern African literature, focuses on portraying women's autonomy, independence, and resistance within a deeply patriarchal Igbo society. Her works foreground the strength and complexity of African womanhood against cultural expectations. Similarly, Lola Shoneyin, a contemporary Nigerian novelist, centers her narratives on the female experience within polygamous and patriarchal settings, challenging issues of sexuality,

identity, and the pressure women face in society. Both writers share a feminist concern with breaking down traditional gender hierarchies and strengthening women's voices in male-dominated societies.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using textual analysis as the primary method of data collection and interpretation. The research is content-based, focusing on the in-depth reading of the two selected novels: Flora Nwapa's *Efu*ru and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives.* These texts serve as the main sources of data for the exploration of challenges of women's oppression from a feminist perspective.

Data were collected through the study of both novels, with particular attention given to narrative elements, character development, dialogue, and thematic structure. The research also uses secondary sources such as online materials, articles, and journals that specifically deal with women's oppression and gender inequality to gather data.

The study further involved the extraction and categorisation of feminist elements according to recognized types of feminism, including liberal, radical, cultural, and African feminism. This categorisation enabled a deeper understanding of how each author presents the struggles, freedom, and resistance of women within patriarchal and culturally oppressive settings.

1.4 Theoretical Background

This study adopts feminist theory to examine gender inequality and patriarchal oppression in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This theory helps to explain how gender-based power relations shape women's lives and how literary works expose and challenge such systems of domination.

Nancy Fraser defines feminist theory as a critical framework that examines both economic and cultural dimensions of gender inequality, addressing systemic oppression while linking analysis to social transformation. It focuses on redistribution (material/economic justice) and recognition (cultural and symbolic justice), combining the critique of economic inequality with the critique of cultural norms that marginalize women (Fraser 2000).

The feminist theory emerged as a response to the marginalization and oppression of women in society. It developed as part of a larger movement for women's liberation and equality, gaining global attention after the Second World War. Feminist theory aims to question and challenge the social, cultural, political, and economic structures that favour men over women. It also examines how gender is represented in literature and how women's voices have been silenced or misrepresented in male-dominated societies.

Feminist theory has undergone several transformations termed as "waves". The first wave, represented by feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Estelle Freedman, focused on women's legal and political rights and criticized the ways male authors portrayed women in literature. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir exposes how men define women as "the Other," portraying them as inferior beings who exist in relation to men (Beauvoir 13). Similarly, Freedman describes first-wave feminism as a movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries that was mainly concerned with legal and political rights for women. She explains that these early feminists fought for things like the right to vote, owning property, and access to education (Freedman 45).

The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1970s, focusing more on women's experiences, writings, and cultural expressions. Becky Thompson argues that traditional accounts of the Second Wave of feminism often focus on white, middle-class women and

overlook the activism of women of color, who organized independently and in coalitions, addressing sexism along with racism and class oppression (Thompson 340).

The third wave of feminism, which began in the late 1980s and 1990s, expanded feminist concerns to include issues such as identity, sexuality, class, race, and culture. This wave rejects the idea of a single "female experience" and emphasizes diversity among women. Third-wave feminists such as Bell Hooks argues that gender is not only biological but also socially constructed and influenced by culture and power relations (Hooks 4). Hook seeks to expose how cultural norms, religion, and traditional beliefs reinforce women's subordination, especially in African societies.

The fourth wave of feminism, emerging around 2010, integrates digital activism and intersectionality. In *Networked Feminism*, Rosemary Clark-Parsons links fourth-wave feminism to digital activism. She explains that feminists use online platforms to build communities, amplify marginalized voices, and challenge oppression. However, she warns of issues like online harassment, exclusion, and the commercialization of feminism within social media-driven, networked movements for gender justice.

It promotes solidarity across borders, emphasizing issues such as reproductive rights, consent, and gender justice. This wave resonates with the global struggle for women's freedom and equality, especially in African societies where patriarchal oppression persists under the pretext of culture and tradition.

The various branches of feminism offer diverse perspectives for examining gender inequality. Ruth Abbey explains that liberal feminism focuses on increasing women's personal freedom and making sure they can fully enjoy their rights without unfair limits created by gender roles or social institutions. (Abbey 45). Radical feminism views patriarchy as the most

basic and deeply rooted form of domination that shapes every part of women's lives. She argues that radical feminists believe society must confront and dismantle the structures that allow men to control women's bodies, sexuality, and daily experiences (Tong 48). Marxist feminism focuses on how capitalism and patriarchy work together to exploit women's labor both at home and in the workplace (Engels 57). Cultural feminism celebrates women's unique values and experiences, promoting sisterhood and female creativity. Lastly, Nkiru Nzegwu views African feminism as a practical and culturally grounded approach to achieving gender justice, focusing on empowering women within African family, communal, and kinship structures (Nzegwu 2006).

In connection with this, patriarchal ideology also provides a useful framework for understanding how male dominance is institutionalized and sustained in social systems. Patriarchy refers to a system of social organization in which men hold primary power and dominate political, economic, and social structures, shaping both public institutions and private relationships (Hennessy 420–422). Bell hooks examines patriarchy as a social system that enforces male dominance and restricts both men's and women's emotional freedom. She argues that patriarchy harms men as much as women by compelling men to adopt rigid roles and suppress vulnerability, which in turn perpetuates cycles of oppression and emotional disconnection (hooks 17–25).

In African contexts, patriarchy is reinforced by traditional norms that define women's worth mainly through marriage and childbearing. This belief system is evident in both *Efuru* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, where female characters struggle under the pressure of societal expectations.

In African societies, culture is a double-edged sword. It is a source of identity and continuity, but also a tool for enforcing patriarchal norms. Practices such as bride price, child marriage, widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, and polygamy have been critiqued by African feminist writers as practices of gendered oppression. These practices often reduce women to their reproductive or domestic roles, limit their mobility, and subordinate them to male authority. In literature, gender inequality and patriarchal oppression are explored through characters, settings, dialogue, and narrative structure. African women writers, particularly from the post-independence period onward, have used fiction to challenge patriarchal traditions and offer alternative visions of womanhood.

Importantly, both novels engage in critical realism, a literary technique that exposes the contradictions between societal ideals and lived realities. They highlight how patriarchal culture is perpetuated through family structures, communal gossip, religious beliefs, and economic dependence.

Though feminism has European and American roots, African women have developed their own strands of feminist thought that challenge Western universality and reflect indigenous experiences. African feminism addresses the colonial legacy, economic disenfranchisement, cultural practices like polygamy and bride price, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Scholars like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Obioma Nnaemeka, and Amina have foregrounded the necessity of centering African women's voices in feminist discourse. Nnaemeka introduces the concept of "nego-feminism," a feminism of negotiation and compromise that recognizes the value of collective survival and family harmony in African societies (Nnaemeka 378). As Nnaemeka notes, "African feminists do not throw away culture; rather, they engage with it critically and strategically" (Nnaemeka 376). This engagement is

visible in the texts' complex portrayals of motherhood, tradition, and identity. The characters do not simply rebel against cultural expectations; they negotiate them, rework them, or redefine them to create space for personal autonomy.

Thus, feminist theory and patriarchal ideology complement each other in this study. While feminist theory advocates for gender equality and highlights women's voices, patriarchal ideology explains the systemic roots of gender oppression. Together, they provide a framework for analyzing how women in both novels resist and redefine their in roles patriarchal societies.

1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

Critics and scholars have commented on the two selected texts. Their scholarly works on the selected texts are listed and briefly reviewed. Starting with Nwapa's *Efuru*, the novel has been commented on by critics such as Mary D. Mears. Mary D. Mears comments on the concept of motherhood. She affirms that:

> The concept of motherhood is a major concern for Efuru, Adizua, and Adizua's mother.
>
> > According to Carole Davies, the second characteristic of African feminism is called into question. This attribute focuses on the inequities and limitations found in traditional societies, conditions that create the struggle that Efuru and her mother-in-law reflect through their speech acts. They realize God will determine when and if a woman should become a mother. However, society still ostracizes women who are not able to get pregnant and even blames the women when the men have physical medical problems. One must ask why does someone have to be responsible or made a scapegoat for a Nonhuman situation?(81)

In the above extract, Mears proposes that the concept of motherhood is presented as a culturally significant yet not an all-encompassing or definitive measure of a woman's identity or worth. Motherhood is a complex experience that can be both empowering and suffocating. It is celebrated as a vital part of womanhood, bringing immense joy and fulfillment while it can also be a source of pressure and limitation. Efuru's barrenness and her longing for motherhood highlights the value on which women are placed.

Mears further adds that:

> Only a few years after Efuru's first marriage, the concept of motherhood soars in the novel and becomes Efuru's major problem. Obligatory motherhood is the downfall for Efuru based on cultural concepts. Her traditional community expects and demands that she become a mother. Approximately two years after her marriage to Adizua, she is concerned about her state; she says to herself, "'I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood.'" Her mother-in-law believes, however, that God is in charge and "a child would come when God willed it."(80)

Efuru's struggles with motherhood reflect the crushing weight of societal expectations, where motherhood is not just a personal desire, but a defining measure of womanhood.

Florence Stratton, in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, explains that motherhood is one of the most important issues in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. In traditional Igbo culture, as Stratton notes, a woman is valued mainly because she can give birth to children. A wife who cannot bear children is treated as incomplete, no matter her other strengths. This cultural pressure is seen in Efuru's life, because her marriages fail when she does not have children who survive, and people judge her as unfortunate. Stratton asserts that:

> Efuru, herself, exhibits a healthy disregard for gossip. ‘Who can please the world?’ she asks dismissively on one occasion . But she is unable to escape indoctrination into an acceptance of the conventional definitions of womanhood that are in such wide circulation in Ugwuta. When she fails to conceive, gossip strips her of her sexual identity by defining her as ‘not a woman’. Efuru falls into gossip’s trap of objectification, for in her eyes, too, it is only motherhood that can confirm her identity as a woman. Thus, wishing desperately to experience ‘the joy of motherhood’ , she spends many sleepless nights worrying and weeping over her apparent sterility. (95)

Stratton argues that Nwapa does not simply present this as a tragic ending. Instead, she shows that motherhood should not be the only way a woman is recognized. Efuru is successful in other areas: she is beautiful, hardworking, kind, and a respected trader. Through these qualities, Nwapa suggests that women can have dignity and value even without being mothers.

A key part of Stratton’s reading is the role of Uhamiri, the lake goddess whom Efuru eventually serves. Uhamiri blesses women with beauty, prosperity, and freedom, but not with children. By connecting Efuru to this goddess, Nwapa highlights an alternative path for women, where success and fulfillment come from wealth, independence, and spirituality rather than motherhood. In this way, Stratton sees Efuru as a novel that challenges cultural oppression by questioning the overemphasis on motherhood and by celebrating other forms of female identity.

Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* has also be commented on by critics from different perspectives. Martha C. Nguwasen comments on the eight factors of oppression of women and girls in patriarchal African society according to Shoneyin’s depiction.

However, only few are reviewed. Nguwasen comments on sterility-induced. She points out that:

> Shoneyin portrays the oppression women go through in a patriarchal society when they are unable to conceive. The issue of sterility is viewed with seriousness in most African societies for women are valued first as mothers. Therefore, sterility is considered by many as a negative thing that can happen to a woman. Mr. Alao's wives are aware that their husband Loves children and so refuse to initiate the fourth wife into the secret of getting children in Mr. Alao's house. Bolanle's Inability to conceive gives her husband persistent bellyache: Baba Segi awoke with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife's childlessness. He was sure the pain wasn't caused by hunger or trapped gas; it was from the build-up of months and months of worry."(12).

Nguwasen's focus on sterility-induced oppression brings a crucial dimension to understanding gender dynamics in the novel. The way barrenness becomes a crucial point for female victimization reveals the heavy burden patriarchy places on women's bodies as symbols of worth and success. Sterility's impact on women is devastating. There is the need to challenge societal stigma and promote a more humane view of womanhood.

She also comments on polygamy/co-wives conflict. She observes that:

> Polygamy, which is the marriage of one man to more than one wife, is a sociocultural and religious practice in Africa and has been treated in many postcolonial African literary texts as a dominant theme, for example: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Mongo Beti's King

> Lazarus. Beti has been shown to see polygamy as a retrogressive custom that promotes the thingification, enslavement, inferiorisation and exploitation of women (Onyemelukwe, 2009: 49). Polygamy is equally portrayed in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by Shoneyin as a source of women inferiorisation, thingification, enslavement, exploitation and oppression. (10)

In Nguwasen's opinion, polygamy is seen as a critical practice that promote the inferiorisation, enslavement and exploitation of women. The analysis of polygamy and the resulting conflict among co-wives shines a light on the complex power struggles and emotional entanglements within polygamous households. This perspective portrays the strains inflicted by the patriarchal structure.

She further comments on forced marriage. She notes that:

> Patriarchal hegemony is the cultural, economic and political dominance of men. It promotes the practices that maintain the dominance of men and the subordination of women (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Male dominance is clearly depicted in *The secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as reflected in the behaviours of Tope's father and Femi's Uncle. Socio cultural practices promoted in a patriarchal hegemony include forced marriage, absence of inheritance rights for girls and polygamy. (9)

Martha C. Nguwasen's exploration of forced marriage in Lola Shoneyin's *"The Secret Lives* of *Baba Segi's Wives"* critically highlights the violation of women's autonomy and rights. Her analysis shows how forced marriage serves as a tool of patriarchal control, stripping women of their freedom to choose their life paths. Iya Tope forced marriage in the novel is due

to her father's inability to pay a debt through a poor harvest. Iya Tope was given to Baba Segi as compensation for the failed crops her father could not pay for. She is essentially traded like a commodity to settle the debt, highlighting her position as a victim of patriarchal rationality and economic desperation. This marriage she enters is not by choice but out of necessity and financial constraint on her father's part, making her feel like an object or "a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms, two legs," rather than a person with agency.

Florence Y. Ndiyah on her part comments on the issue of polygamy. She asserts that:

> While presenting the reader with an unusual polygamous marriage, with a sterile husband counselled by an impotent, deceitful and secretly jealous man, Shoneyin repeatedly demonstrates that polygamy is an enduring but problematic option for the contemporary Nigerian woman. First, at the beginning of the novel, polygamy appears to offer socio-economic relief to the disadvantaged first three wives, Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, and to Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, who seeks a place to heal. Next, although Ishola Alao alias Baba Segi grants them permission to go at the end, the first three wives stay in the polygamous marriage. (67)

Ndiyah presents polygamy as both a survival strategy and a trap for women. While it provides socio-economic relief and a sense of belonging for the first three wives, it also fosters jealousy, deceit, and dependence. Baba Segi's sterility further exposes the irony of patriarchal authority, showing that the supposed head of the household is deeply flawed. The fact that the wives stay even when they are free to leave shows how deeply they have learned to cling to the security polygamy offers, even at the cost of their happiness. Bolanle, however, breaks away,

symbolizing the voice of a modern woman who refuses to be trapped. In this way, Shoneyin makes polygamy feel real and complex. Polygamy is seen as a shelter and a prison.

1.6 Justification of Study

Critics have explored Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* from different perspectives. However, none has really looked closely at how these novels reveal the challenges of women's oppression. This research aims to fill that gap by focusing on how the novelists' use of characters shows the challenges women face within African societies.

1.7 Thesis Statement

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* demonstrate that women's oppression is rooted in social challenges, intensified by power imbalance and inequality, and perpetuated through violence and cultural practices.

CHAPTER TW0

SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF WOWEN'S OPPRESSION

2.1 Introduction

Women face many social challenges due to oppression, which limits their opportunities and freedoms. Literature mirrors society, and likewise, the two selected novels reflect African societies. One major challenge is lack of access to education. In many societies, girls are discouraged from going to school, which reduces their chances of getting good jobs and being independent. Another challenge is the confinement to domestic roles. Women are often expected to focus only on housework, cooking, and taking care of children, which stops them from pursuing careers or personal growth. Denial of rights to inheritance and property is also common, as women are sometimes not allowed to own land or inherit family wealth, leaving them economically dependent on men.

2.2 Data Presentation and Analysis

Nwapa's *Efuru* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's* Wives expose the challenges of women in Nigerian society. Both novels show how women face oppression and how they try to resist the oppression.

2.3 Lack of Access to Education

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, lack of access to education is one of the major issues affecting women. The novel shows how women lack formal education because society believes their main duty is to marry, bear children, and take care of the home. Efuru, the main character, is intelligent and ambitious, but her education is limited because her society does not see schooling as important for women. Instead of encouraging her to study, the people around her focus on her marriage and domestic responsibilities. This conversation portrays thus:

> 'Do you think there is a man in her life?'
>
> 'I think so, my brother. If the man wants to marry her, there is nothing wrong about that. The man should come and fulfil the customs of our people and marry her.' (Efuru 8)

This statement portrays lack of education in *Efuru* through the characters' limited understanding of a woman's autonomy and social worth. Their discussion reduces a woman's value to marriage and her fulfilment to being chosen by a man. Instead of seeing Efuru as an independent individual capable of making her own choices, they view her through the perspective of traditional customs that dictate a woman's life must revolve around a man and marriage rites.

In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, lack of access to education is clearly shown through the lives of Baba Segi's three older wives, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi. These women are uneducated and depend entirely on their husband for survival. Their ignorance makes them accept polygamy and oppression as normal parts of life. The wives cannot question their situation because they were never provided the opportunity to learn or think beyond household duties. The older wives' ignorance made them jealous and envious of Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, to the extent that they prevented their children from getting help with their academic work from her. The below narration portrays it thus:

> But it's not their fault that they are so uncouth. Living with them has taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy. So deep seated is their disdain for my university degree that they smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. I have often found missing pages from my novels in the dustbin, the words scribbled over with charcoal. It is not as if I haven't tried. I offered to teach the wives to read. Iya Tope was keen to learn but then I found Iya Femi tearing up sheets from the exercise books to line the kitchen cupboards. When I reminded her why I'd bought them. she said I could crawl into the cabinets and teach the insects if I still wanted them to serve that purpose. I have tried to help the children too. I told them to assemble in the dining room so I could read to them. Only Iya Tope's daughters turned up the first day. The next morning, Iya Segi told me not to be in a hurry, that I should wait until I have my own children if I was so eager to become a teacher. (Shoneyin 21)

The reference above shows how lack of education keeps women ignorant and trapped in backward beliefs. The three older wives reject Bolanle's books and efforts to teach them, showing how illiteracy limits their understanding and makes them resistant to change. In contrast, Bolanle, the youngest and educated wife, represents a new generation of women who use knowledge to gain confidence and challenge tradition. Her education threatens the older wives, who remain bound by ignorance and fear. Shoneyin uses this contrast to reflect real situations in many parts of Nigeria and Africa, where cultural beliefs, poverty, and early marriage still deny girls access to education. The novel strongly criticizes these practices and

promotes education as the key to women's empowerment and liberation from the traditions that keep them oppressed.

This issue reflects real situations in many parts of Nigeria and Africa, where girls still face barriers to education. Cultural beliefs, poverty, and early marriage often prevent young girls from going to school, as many families believe that girls belong in the kitchen or the husband's house.

2.4 Confinement of Women to Domestic Roles

In both Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives,* women are largely confined to domestic roles, showing how society limits their potential. In traditional African settings, a woman's worth is often measured by her ability to bear children and serve her husband. This belief system traps women within the home and denies them opportunities for personal growth and independence.

In *Efuru*, motherhood becomes a defining struggle for Efuru. In a society where a woman's worth is typically measured by her ability to bear children, her experience with child loss and eventual infertility places her at odds with communal expectations. Though she marries again, her inability to remain a mother leads to gossip and pity, showing how women's identities are often confined to reproduction roles. A clear example is the dialogue between Adizua, Efuru's husband, and her mother-in-law:

> 'What are you going to do about Efuru's state?"
>
> 'Something is being done. My mother. We shall soon know the result.'
>
> 'I am glad to hear this. I was going to suggest you marry another woman. A woman who will give you children. It is going to be with the consent of Efuru, of course.' (Efuru 26)

The dialogue above exposes how a woman's value in marriage is measured by her ability to produce children, reducing her identity to reproduction alone. Efuru's supposed barrenness immediately becomes a family and communal issue, prompting discussions of polygamy as the "solution." The mother-in-law's words "a woman who will give you children", reveal the dehumanizing perspective through which women are often viewed, as though their sole function is childbearing.

Similarly, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, the wives* are confined to domestic roles like childbearing. In the novel, Shoneyin illustrates the worth of women placed on reproduction in Nigerian society. Baba Segi's household itself is structured around fertility, with his reputation and masculinity measured by the number of children he has fathered. Each wife is valued primarily by her ability to reproduce, and their identities are reduced to childbearing roles. For instance, Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, faces shame because of her barrenness.

Bolanle's infertility makes Baba Segi restless and impatient. He remarks:

> "Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you are saddened by it as well. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them con men and rubbished their powers.
>
> Well…" He inhaled deeply and raised his eyebrows. "I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to the hospital to talk to a doctor."(Shoneyin 17)

The above excerpt reflects the deep frustration and impatience of Baba Segi toward Bolanle's barrenness, showing how infertility is seen not as a shared challenge but as a

woman's burden and a source of shame for the man. His words emphasize the patriarchal mindset that reduces a woman's value in marriage to her childbearing role in African societies.

2.5 Denial of Right to Inheritance and Property

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin exposes the unfair treatment of women through the denial of their right to inheritance and property. This is shown in the following statement:

> 'This is not your home and it will never be. A girl cannot inherit her father's house because it is everyone's prayer that she will marry and make her husband's home her own. This house and everything in it now belongs to your uncle. That is the way things are.'(Shoneyin 87)

This statement to Iya Tope clearly shows how cultural traditions favour men over women. After losing her parents, Iya Femi is not only left heartbroken but also deprived of her home and possessions. She is told that as a woman, she cannot inherit anything because she is expected to marry and move into her husband's house. This situation reflects the deep-rooted patriarchal belief that women have no ownership or independence outside marriage.

The statement, "This house and everything in it now belongs to your uncle," shows how society transfers all family wealth to male relatives, ignoring the rights of daughters. Such customs make women powerless and dependent on men for survival. Iya Femi's experience is not just personal; it represents the reality of many African women who are denied inheritance due to cultural laws that place men above women. These traditions strip women of their economic rights and make them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation.

Through this scene, Shoneyin criticizes the unfair social system that measures a woman's value only by her relationship with men, either as a daughter, wife, or mother, but never as an independent person. By denying women the right to own or inherit property, society limits their freedom and keeps them under male control.

2.6 Conclusion

The novels *Efuru* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reflect how women's oppression is deeply rooted in Nigerian society. Women's confinement to domestic roles, limited access to education, and denial of inheritance rights illustrate how their freedom and progress are limited, preventing them from realizing their full potential and keeping them dependent on men.

The two texts emphasize the importance of education and public awareness about women's rights. Government policies should ensure equal access to education for women and enforce inheritance laws that guarantee their right to own and control property. In addition, cultural beliefs that confine women to domestic roles should be questioned and transformed.

CHAPTER THREE

POWER IMBALANCE AND INEQUALITY

3.1 Introduction

This chap explores the theme of power imbalance and inequality, focusing on how women in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* face challenges due to unequal power relations. Women in these novels experience limited control over their lives, restricted economic opportunities, and social expectations shaped by gender stereotypes. They are often excluded from important decisions within their families and communities, reinforcing patriarchal dominance. This chapter examines how these inequalities affect women's status, freedom, and self-expression, highlighting the ways cultural and social systems maintain male authority while marginalizing women in Nigerian society.

Although the world has made progress, women still face many challenges, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. In Nigerian society, gender inequality shows itself in different ways that limit women's freedom and opportunities. Women often earn lower incomes than men and face significant barriers to property ownership. Girls are denied equal access to education, with some being forced into early marriage, hindering their educational and economic prospects. In politics, women remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles, perpetuating the imbalance.

3.2 Power Dimension

The concept of power is central to feminist studies because it reveals how authority, control, and influence are distributed between men and women in society. In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the power dimension is presented through gender relations, cultural expectations, and the ways women either submit to or challenge patriarchal dominance. Both novels portray societies where men hold formal authority, yet women find subtle and resilient ways to assert their own power.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa explores the complex relationship between gender and power within a traditional Igbo society. Men are culturally positioned as heads of households and decision-makers, while women's power is often confined to domestic and reproductive roles. However, Nwapa challenges this limitation by presenting Efuru as a woman who redefines power through her independence, hard work, and spiritual connection. Efuru gains economic power by engaging in successful trading, a domain typically dominated by men. Her wealth and self-sufficiency earn her respect within the community, showing that material success can grant women social influence. This novel exemplifies this issue:

> Adizua was not good at trading. It was Efuru who was the brain behind the business. (*Efuru* 36)

The excerpt vividly portrays Efuru's role in her marriage. Although society expects men to lead, Efuru becomes the real driving force behind their business success. Efuru and her husband traded in yams, then dry fish, and later crayfish, traveling long distances by canoe to buy and sell their goods for profit. They get their fortune in the crayfish trade. However, Efuru is the true brain behind the trade. She has the business sense, courage, and determination that keep their business running.

Through Efuru's success in business, Nwapa portrays power not as domination but as competence and initiative. Efuru's success in trade allows her to earn respect and independence within her community, showing that women can possess both economic and intellectual power.

Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* examines how power operates in a patriarchal society, especially within the setting of a polygamous family. The novel uses the household of Baba Segi, a wealthy and uneducated man, as a representation of Nigerian society, where men believe they hold authority, yet women often exercise quiet but significant control behind the scenes. Through the lives of Baba Segi and his four wives, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi, and Bolanle, Shoneyin exposes how power is negotiated, challenged, and redefined by women in both traditional and modern contexts.

In the novel, Baba Segi represents the ultimate symbol of male power. He is a wealthy businessman with four wives and seven children. His wealth and polygamous household make him respected in his community. Baba Segi believes that his role as husband and provider gives him total control over his wives and children. His pride in his masculinity is shown through his words and actions. He sees women as possessions and views his ability to marry many wives as proof of his success and strength. In the novel, Baba Segi asserts that:

> I took a second wife, a peace offering from a desperate farmer. I took the third because she offered herself with humility. What kind of human being rejects the fullness of a woman? Would the gods themselves not have been angered if I had forgone the opportunity to show mercy upon another human being?
>
> I chose Bolanle, I cannot lie; I set my mind on her, the way a thirsty child sets his eyes on a cup filling from a spout. (Shoneyin 140-141)

The above textual reference shows Baba Segi's belief that taking many wives proves his power and kindness. He sees marriage as an act of generosity, not partnership, showing how men in the society use polygamy to display authority. Baba Segi's words reveal his pride and sense of control over women, treating them as gifts or opportunities rather than equals. However, his reasoning also exposes his ignorance; he mistakes desire and dominance for compassion. Through this, Shoneyin exposes that male power in the novel is often based on ego and tradition, not true understanding or respect for women.

However, Lola Shoneyin uses Baba Segi's character to expose the illusion of male power. Despite his authority, Baba Segi is ignorant and easily manipulated by his wives. He makes decisions based on pride, emotion, and misinformation. His understanding of power is limited to physical strength and control, not wisdom or emotional intelligence. The irony of his situation is that although he believes he is in charge, his wives are the ones who secretly hold real power in the home.

Furthermore, in Baba Segi's household, the wives develop different methods of surviving under male authority. Since the society gives them little freedom to make choices, they turn to secrecy and manipulation as ways to exercise power. This hidden power allows them to protect themselves and control situations without direct confrontation.

Iya Segi, the first wife, is the most dominant of the women. She manages the household, influences the other wives, and controls Baba Segi. She uses her experience and knowledge of her husband's weaknesses to maintain her status as the head wife. Likewise, she is the main planner of the secret that binds the wives together: the fact that Baba Segi is infertile and that all the children in the household are fathered by other men. This secret gives the wives a shared power over Baba Segi because it protects their positions in the family and prevents them from being divorced or disgraced. This is apparent in Iya Segi's narrative:

> 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 whokeeps this household together. Good things happen here because I allow them. I alone can approve vengeance and only I know how to bring calm. (Shoneyin 76)

The preceding reference reveals that Iya Segi holds real power in the household, even though Baba Segi believes he leads. She secretly controls decisions and maintains order, using intelligence and influence instead of open authority.

3.3 Unequal Economic Opportunity

Unequal economic opportunity remains one of the most striking forms of gender inequality represented in African women's literature. In both Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, unequal economic opportunity between men and women reflects the patriarchal structure of their societies. The female characters are often denied financial independence, restricted from decision-making in economic matters, and judged by their ability to serve men's material and domestic interests.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa portrays a society where economic control largely rests in male hands, yet she gives her protagonist, Efuru, a rare sense of financial independence. Unlike most women in her community, Efuru becomes a successful trader who earns her wealth through hard work and intelligence. Her independence challenges the cultural norm that expects women to depend on their husbands for survival. Efuru's husband, Adizua, abandons her despite her contributions to his comfort, showing how economic success cannot protect a woman from male dominance. Therefore, Nwapa uses Efuru's entrepreneurial success to expose how the society limits women's access to economic equality.

Efuru's story further reveals that women's access to economic opportunity is limited by cultural expectations tied to marriage and motherhood. Despite her ability to sustain herself and others through trade, Efuru is still judged by her inability to bear children, not by her economic success. Her worth according to society depends on reproduction, not productivity.

Nwapa uses Efuru to portray how women in Nigerian society face unequal economic opportunities because of the cultural and social systems that favour men. The story shows that although some women like Efuru have the ability and intelligence to succeed, their society still limits them to domestic roles. In many Nigerian communities, economic control and ownership of resources are mostly in the hands of men, while women are expected to focus on marriage, childbearing, and caring for the family. Efuru's situation reflects this reality. Even though she becomes a successful trader through hard work and determination, her achievements are not fully recognized or respected because she cannot fulfil the cultural expectation of motherhood. This situation mirrors the condition of many Nigerian women who struggle for financial independence in a society that often ties their value to men.

In contrast, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* presents a household where economic dependence defines women's survival. Baba Segi, the patriarch, controls the financial resources and uses them to assert power over his wives. His wealth, derived from his business, gives him the authority to marry multiple women and dictate their lives. The wives, particularly the older ones, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi compete for his economic attention because their comfort and status depend on his favour. This dependence creates jealousy and manipulation among them, as economic insecurity becomes a tool of control. Only Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, challenges this pattern by valuing education and self-sufficiency over material dependence. The economic dependence of Baba Segi's Wives on him is shown in this dialogue:

> "Please, Iya Segi," I pleaded. "My daughters cannot sleep for dandruff. They scratch like lice-ridden dogs all night. Can you not spare me one more scoop?"
>
> "Who cares about your daughters? Do you hear me complain when Iya Segi takes more milk for her children when mine are younger and need vitamins?" (Shoneyin 39)

The dialogue between Baba Segi's wives in the preceding passage shows how unequal economic opportunity creates conflict and competition among women. Iya Segi and the other wives depend entirely on Baba Segi for food and money, and this dependence makes them fight over small household resources. When one wife pleads for more milk for her children and another refuses, it shows that poverty and lack of control over resources turn the women against each other instead of uniting them. Their struggle for basic needs like milk reflects the deeper problem of economic inequality within the home.

Because Baba Segi controls the finances, the wives have no freedom to make decisions or meet their children's needs without his approval. This dependence keeps them in constant rivalry, as each wife must fight to secure her share. Shoneyin uses this exchange to reveal how patriarchy and economic dependence trap women in silent suffering. The argument about milk is not only about food; it represents their lack of financial power and the unequal system that values men's authority over women's welfare.

3.4 Gender Stereotype

Gender stereotypes refer to fixed ideas about how men and women should behave in society. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "A gender

stereotype is a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. A gender stereotype becomes harmful when it limits women's and men's ability to develop their personal abilities and make life choices" (*"Gender Stereotyping"*). Both Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reveal how traditional African societies often define women through such stereotypes, placing them in subordinate roles and restricting their freedom and identity.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa portrays how gender stereotypes shape the lives of women in traditional Nigerian society. The novel reflects the Igbo culture, where women are frequently judged by their ability to marry, obey their husbands, and bear children. Society believes that a woman's success and respect come only from her role as a wife and mother. This belief limits women's freedom and prevents them from exploring their talents and ambitions.

Efuru, the main character, challenges these traditional expectations. She is hardworking, independent, and successful as a trader, something unusual for women in her community. Her success shows that women are capable of achieving greatness outside the home. This scene illustrates how women are relegated to domestic and maternal roles:

> "Did you look at her body when she was changing?" one of the women asked.
>
> "So you looked at her body. I watched her too. Nothing has happened. You can be sure of that, nothing has happened. And I am afraid, because Eneberi is the only son of his mother. His mother would love to take care of her grandchildren. Nonsense, I must see Eneberi's mother. A woman, a wife for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time, and not

> fulfil the important function she is made to fulfil." (*Efuru* 138). Iya Segi narrates that:
>
> "I misled them. Perhaps if I had not shown the second one my way, this shame would have come out sooner. But you see, they were so desperate to be fruitful. They knew that my husband valued children above all things, so when I saw their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret. They also followed the same path." (Shoneyin 153)

Iya Segi's confession shows how gender stereotypes in Nigerian society force women to prove their worth through childbirth. Because men value fertility more than love or respect, the wives deceive Baba Segi to survive. This reveals how harmful expectations push women into desperate actions just to gain acceptance.

The wives themselves also reflect the effects of gender stereotypes. The older wives, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi have accepted the belief that their worth depends on their husband's approval and their ability to bear children. They compete with one another for Baba Segi's attention, seeing one another as threats rather than allies. This rivalry shows how patriarchy turns women against each other instead of allowing them to support one another.

3.5 Exclusion of Women from Social Decision-Making

Both Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* highlight the struggles women face in societies. The novels show how women are marginalized and underrepresented in politics and social decision-making. In Nigerian society, women have historically been excluded from positions of political power and social decision-making. This imbalance is a reflection of deep-rooted patriarchal traditions that favour men as leaders and view women as followers.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa presents a society where men dominate political and community affairs. The Igbo community in the novel is guided by customs that give men the authority to make decisions. Women, no matter how educated or successful, are rarely allowed to contribute to community leadership. Efuru herself is a hardworking and intelligent woman who achieves economic success through trade, yet she is not recognized in the political structure of her society. Her achievements are limited to the private sphere, while decisions that affect the community are made by men. This reflects the gender bias in traditional Nigerian communities, where women's opinions are often undervalued, and leadership is considered as a male responsibility. This is shown in the novel through Efuru's community where the fathers choose who to marry for their daughters. Efuru defies this custom, as it is portrayed in the extract below:

> They saw each other fairly often and after a fortnight's courting she agreed to marry him. (*Efuru* 7)

Efuru's decision to marry Adizua against her father's wishes shows how women in her society have little power or support in making important life choices. Although Efuru acts out of love, her decision also reveals the absence of female voices in social and family decision-making. In traditional Nigerian society, especially during the time Nwapa writes about, men were seen as the natural leaders, while women were expected to follow and obey. Efuru's father wanted to guide her, but her choice of Adizua still reflects a system where marriage, not leadership or education, defines a woman's value.

This situation mirrors the broader problem of women's underrepresentation in politics and society. Just as Efuru has limited influence over her future, many Nigerian women are excluded from leadership roles or public decisions that affect their lives. The same cultural beliefs that silence women in their homes also keep them out of political spaces. Efuru's

experience shows how social structures reduce women's voices, leaving them with few chances to participate in shaping their communities. Nwapa uses her story to suggest that true progress in Nigerian society requires recognizing women's right to make choices and contribute to decisions beyond the domestic sphere.

Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* exposes how patriarchy controls women's roles in both family and society. The household of Baba Segi is a small version of Nigerian society, where the man holds power and makes all major decisions. Baba Segi decides how resources are shared, who gets attention, and how the household is run, while his wives have little say in these matters. He also restricts his wives from going out. The women are expected to obey and compete among themselves for his favour instead of uniting to influence decisions. This setup mirrors a political system where women are often divided or excluded from leadership roles. This scene portrays it:

> "Where have you been?"
>
> "It is not even six yet. I am here on time, like I said I would be."
>
> "The question I am asking is, where have you been?" His voice was deep and hollow, like the aftermath of a drumbeat.
>
> "So I can't even leave the house now?" (Shoneyin 45-46)

The above exchange between Baba Segi and Bolanle shows how women are excluded from making decisions, even about their movements and choices. Baba Segi's angry tone reflects the belief that a husband has authority over his wife's actions, which mirrors the larger social system in Nigerian society where men control decision-making. Bolanle's question, "So I can't even leave the house now?" shows her frustration at being treated as someone without freedom or a voice. In many traditional Nigerian homes, women are expected to obey their husbands and are not allowed to question male authority. This kind of control prevents women

from expressing their opinions or participating in decisions that affect their lives. Through this scene, Shoneyin reveals how cultural expectations silence women and deny them independence. It is a reflection of how patriarchal systems continue to exclude women from social and personal decision-making in Nigeria.

3.6 Conclusion

Both *Efuru* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* portray power imbalance and inequality as shown through men's power over women, their exclusion from decision-making, limited access to economic opportunities, and harmful gender stereotypes. These factors silence women's voices and reinforce male dominance in society.

CHAPTER FOUR

VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL PRACTICES AS TOOLS OF OPPRESSION

4.1 Introduction

This explores how violence and cultural practices are used to oppress women in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. In many societies, traditions and customs often reinforce male dominance, limiting women's freedom and opportunities. Practices such as domestic violence, female circumcision, early marriage, and the expectation that women exist mainly as mothers or weaker beings contribute to their marginalization. This chapter examines these harmful practices, showing how they shape women's lives, restrict their roles, and sustain gender inequality, while also highlighting the struggles and resilience of women within these oppressive systems.

4.2 Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is one of the most common ways women experience patriarchal domination in African societies. Both Nwapa and Shoneyin use their novels to show how culture, tradition, and unequal power between men and women lead to domestic abuse. In *Efuru*, domestic violence is not only physical but also emotional. Efuru's husband, Adizua, abandons her and their home, showing no sense of responsibility or care. His action causes Efuru deep emotional pain, yet society blames her instead of him. People expect her to be patient, submissive, and forgiving, even when she suffers. This attitude shows how domestic violence is accepted as normal and how women are forced to suffer in silence to protect their image as "good wives." This is illustrated in a dialogue between Efuru and Ajanupu. Efuru says:

> 'For months, Ajanupu, my husband came home late every night. Some nights he did not come home at all. He did not eat my food and when I stopped cooking for him, he did not notice.

> Then one night he came back earlier than usual and asked for his food. I told him I did not cook anything because for weeks he had refused to eat my food. He insisted on eating that night and went to his room. I went to the kitchen and cooked something for him. When I finished and sent Ogea to call him. He was not in his room. Ajanupu, I am fed up with this. I don't know how I can go on tolerating this. God in heaven knows that since I married Adizua I have been faithful to him. Our ancestors know that since I ran away from my father's house to Adizua's that nobody. no man has seen my nakedness. But Adizua has treated me shabbily. He has treated me the way that only slaves are treated. God in heaven will judge us.' (*Efuru* 57-58)

The above excerpt shows how domestic violence in Nigerian society can go beyond physical abuse to include emotional neglect and psychological pain. In the novel, Adizua's behaviour towards Efuru reflects a form of domestic oppression that many women face in marriage. He ignores her, stays away from home, and refuses to eat her food (actions that deeply hurt her emotionally). In traditional Nigerian society, marriage is often seen as the centre of a woman's life and identity. When a husband treats his wife with such neglect, it not only causes emotional suffering but also brings shame and loneliness to the woman.

In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, domestic violence goes beyond physical abuse; it also includes emotional, psychological, and sexual control. Through the story of Baba Segi and his wives, Shoneyin exposes how patriarchy and ignorance encourage violence and inequality in Nigerian marriages. In many Nigerian homes, men are regarded as the heads of the family and believe they have the right to control their wives through fear, sex, or punishment.

Baba Segi's polygamous household reflects this reality. He treats his wives as property, using sex as a way to show power and masculinity rather than affection. His sexual acts are selfish and done only to prove his manhood and fertility. This sexual dominance is a form of domestic violence because it denies the women emotional care and respect. The wives endure this because society expects women to obey their husbands, no matter how they are treated. This is illustrated in the below narrative:

> Things had changed. There was no pleasure in the pleasing, no sweetness in the surrender. Baba Segi only comes to deposit his seed in my womb. He doesn't smile or tickle me. He doesn't make jokes about my youth; he just rams me into the mattress. (Shoneyin 35)

The above passage reveals how Baba Segi's sexual acts are a form of domestic violence. In many Nigerian marriages, men see sex as their right, not an act of love. Baba Segi's lack of care and affection reduces his wife to an object, showing how patriarchy denies women emotional and physical respect.

Furthermore, the physical aspect of domestic violence is also shown when the older wives, out of jealousy, plant a rat's head in Baba Segi's room to turn him against Bolanle. Believing she has brought witchcraft into the house, Baba Segi angrily attacks and chokes Bolanle. This moment reveals how ignorance and insecurity lead to abuse. The scene below reflects this:

> As soon as Bolanle stepped onto the concrete floor of the veranda, the crowd went quiet. The bystanders parted and created a path for her. When she got to the sitting room, Baba Segi was in his armchair. His arms were slung over the sides, his great legs stretched out in front of him like logs.

> "Good evening, Baba Segi. Why have you not changed your clothes?" Bolanle asked.
>
> "Where have you been?"
>
> "It is not even six yet. I am here on time like I said I would be."
>
> "The question I am asking is: where have you been?" His voice was deep and hollow, like the aftermath of a drumbeat.
>
> "So I can't even leave the house now?" It was a daring response.
>
> In a flash, Baba scrambled up the back of his seat and leaped into the air like a gorilla in flight. He landed bang in front of Bolanle and gripped her throat with both hands. He squeezed hard and shook her, pressing his thumbs on her windpipe. "Who are you asking questions? Do I look like a fool? You said you were going to your father's house. Taju has just come back from there. Nobody there has seen you today! Where have you been?" (Shoneyin 45-46)

This scene clearly shows physical domestic violence in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives. Baba Segi's attack on Bolanle reflects how some Nigerian men use force to control their wives and demand obedience. His violent reaction shows insecurity and the belief that a wife must always explain herself to her husband. In many Nigerian marriages, such behaviour is often ignored or excused as discipline. Shoneyin uses this moment to expose how patriarchy allows men to abuse women without consequence. Through Bolanle's suffering, the author condemns violence in marriage and calls for mutual respect, trust, and equality between partners.

4.3 Circumcision and Early Marriage

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* both explore how women are shaped and controlled by cultural practices such as circumcision and early marriage. These practices are forms of patriarchal domination that deny women freedom over their bodies and choices. Through their female characters, both authors expose the pain, humiliation, and limitations women face in a male-dominated society that uses culture and tradition to justify oppression.

In Nwapa's Efuru, circumcision is portrayed as a cultural ritual that defines womanhood but also symbolizes the control of women's sexuality. In many African societies, circumcision is considered a necessary rite of passage into womanhood. However, it is often painful, dangerous, and unnecessary. Efuru lives in a society where women are expected to obey customs without questioning them. Although Nwapa does not describe circumcision in graphic detail, the idea of it represents how women are shaped to fit into cultural expectations. The ritual suggests that a woman's value lies in her purity and obedience, not in her individuality or freedom. It is evident in this excerpt:

> The woman went to the back of the house and there it was done. Efuru screamed and screamed. It was so painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. 'It will soon be over, my daughter don't cry'.
>
> Meanwhile Efuru's husband was in his room. He felt all the pain. It seemed as if he was the one being circumcised. (Efuru 14)

The excerpt above presents the painful experience of female circumcision as a reflection of the harsh traditions in Nigerian society. Efuru's cries during the act show how deeply women suffer under cultural practices that value obedience over their well-being. Her mother-in-law's words, meant to comfort her, instead reveal how society normalizes women's pain and passes such customs from one generation to another. The scene also shows how men,

like Efuru's husband, are emotionally detached yet still affected by these traditions, though they do not bear the physical pain. In many Nigerian communities, circumcision is regarded as a mark of purity and womanhood, but Nwapa exposes it as a form of oppression that denies women control over their bodies. Through this portrayal, Nwapa challenges readers to question harmful cultural practices that continue to silence and hurt women in the name of tradition.

Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reflects early marriage in Nigerian traditional societies. The novel presents a traditional setting where marriage is perceived as the most important goal for women, regardless of their age or readiness. Through her female characters, Shoneyin shows that early marriage is usually caused by poverty, cultural pressure, and the belief that a woman's value lies in being a wife and mother. This is shown through Iya Tope:

> Even a child would have worked out why my father was extolling qualities that had previously vexed him; 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. (Shoneyin 62)

The reference above shows the pain and lack of choice many young girls face in early marriage. Iya Tope's words reveal how her father values her more as compensation for his failed crops than as a person with feelings and dreams. She is treated like property to be exchanged, not as a human being. This reflects how, in many parts of Nigerian society, poverty, and tradition force parents to marry off their daughters at a young age. Such early marriages deny girls the chance to grow, get an education, or make their own choices. Shoneyin uses Iya Tope's experience to criticize a culture that devalues women and uses marriage as a tool of

survival rather than love. Her story shows how early marriage leads to lifelong emotional pain and loss of freedom.

4.4 Portrayal of Women as Weaker or Inferior Vessels

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* presents women as being seen by society as weaker or inferior to men. The novel shows how women are expected to obey men and accept whatever role society gives them. Efuru, the main character, is intelligent, hardworking, and independent, yet she is often judged by her ability to marry and bear children. Her worth is measured by men's approval, not by her personal achievements. For example, when she cannot have children, people pity and criticize her as if she has failed in life. This reflects how women in her community are valued only as wives and mothers.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Lola Shoneyin presents women as victims of a patriarchal society that sees them as weak and inferior to men. The women in the novel are commonly denied their own voices and choices, as they must obey the commands of their husbands and live according to society's expectations.

The actions of male characters such as Baba Segi and Taju in the novel clearly support this view. For instance, the narrator mentions that men beat their wives freely, and violence against women had become normal in society. Taju's act of beating his wife for a minor mistake and the story of a senator slapping his female colleague both show how women are treated as less valuable human beings. The narrative explains thus:

> He claimed that he had beaten his wife senseless for letting his only son suck on a coin. This happened about a week after a male senator slapped a female colleague. The slap had resonated through all the quiet meeting rooms of the senate building and into the heart of every man on the street. It seemed to awaken a loosely fettered beast. (Shoneyin 24)

This excerpt shows how women are portrayed as weaker and inferior in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Taju's act of beating his wife for a minor issue and the senator's public assault on a female colleague reveal how violence against women is normalized in society. The statement, "Men were slapping their womenfolk as if it had become a national sport"(24), shows that such abuse is accepted as part of male authority. Shoneyin uses these incidents to criticize the patriarchal system that silences women and portrays them as powerless victims in a male-dominated world.

Also, Baba Segi's behavior toward Bolanle also illustrates this belief in female inferiority. During their visit to the hospital, Baba Segi refuses to allow Bolanle to speak for herself and insists on answering questions meant for her. This is evident in Baba Segi's statement. He says:

> "PLEASE WRITE MR. ATANDA ALAO!" Baba Segi shouted now. "I am her next ofkin. You should have stayed in your father's house if you wanted your mother to be your next of kin!" (Shoneyin 30)

Baba Segi's statement shows how men control women's lives and decisions. By insisting he is Bolanle's next of kin, he denies her independence and voice. This reflects the patriarchal belief that women are weak and must depend on men for identity.

4.5 Limitation of Women's Role to Motherhood

In Efuru, the limitation of women's role to motherhood is a clear form of patriarchal domination. In Efuru's community, a woman's worth is often judged by her ability to bear children. Marriage is viewed as successful only when it produces children, and when a woman cannot conceive, she is blamed and looked down upon. Efuru faces this kind of judgment after she loses her child and cannot have more. Instead of receiving comfort, society treats her as incomplete and cursed.

This belief shows how deeply patriarchy controls women's identities and lives. It reduces women to their biological roles while ignoring their intelligence, hard work, and independence. Efuru is a successful trader, kind, and respected, yet her achievements mean little because she has no child. Her experience reflects how cultural traditions make women carry the burden of reproduction alone, while men are rarely blamed for childlessness. The narrator explains that:

> Neighbours talked as they were bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce. (Efuru 24)

The extract above depicts how society defines a woman's value by her ability to have children. The neighbours believe Efuru has failed as a woman because she cannot reproduce, showing the deep cultural belief that motherhood is a woman's main purpose. By calling her "a man," they remove her womanhood and identity, as if fertility alone makes someone female. This mindset reflects how women are often seen not as individuals with dreams or intelligence but as tools for continuing the family line. Nwapa uses this situation to expose how cultural norms oppress women by tying their worth to childbearing. Efuru's inability to have a child makes her an outcast, not because of any wrongdoing, but because she challenges a narrow social expectation. The story criticizes how such beliefs reduce women's dignity and deny them the right to be valued beyond motherhood.

This situation also manifests in Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives. In the novel, Shoneyin exposes how society usually sees women only as a tool for reproduction. The novel shows that in a patriarchal setting like Baba Segi's household, a woman's value is measured by her ability to have children, especially sons. Baba Segi marries four wives,

believing that his manhood and status depend on how many children his wives produce. This belief reflects a deep cultural bias that links a woman's worth to her fertility.

The pressure to birth children causes pain and competition among the wives. For instance, Iya Segi and the other wives hide the truth about Baba Segi's infertility just to protect their social position. Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, suffers ridicule for being childless, even though the problem is not hers. Shoneyin uses this situation to criticize how patriarchy reduces women to motherhood roles and denies them personal identity or freedom. In the novel, Bolanle assert that:

> "Just a month ago, he'd barged into my room. "Get dressed," he yelled. "God has called a prophet to the mountaintop and he will only be there for four more days. Let us go so he will lay hands on your belly and perform a miracle."(Shoneyin 35)

The above reference from the novel illustrates how women are seen mainly as tools for reproduction in a patriarchal culture. When Baba Segi tells his wife to visit a prophet to "lay hands on her belly," it reveals society's deep belief that a woman's main duty is to have children. Her worth is judged by her ability to conceive, and if she cannot, she becomes a problem that must be "fixed." Baba Segi does not consider his wife's feelings or health; instead, he treats her body as something that must produce children for him. This reflects how women are denied control over their own bodies and are made to bear the shame of infertility, even when the cause may not be theirs. The act of seeking a miracle also shows the cultural desperation to prove a woman's fertility. In this way, Shoneyin criticizes the cultural mindset that measures a woman's value through childbirth. Women as a tool for reproduction is also depicted through Iya Segi's statement to Iya Tope. Iya Segi says:

> "Get pregnant quickly or he will soon start to force-feed you bitter concoctions from medicine men until your belly rumbles in your sleep," she said". (Shoneyin 63)

The above excerpt is a warning from Iya Segi to Iya Tope illustrating how women in Nigerian society are valued mainly for their ability to give birth. Her statement reflects the pressure on women to conceive quickly, as their worth in marriage depends on reproduction. If a woman fails to become pregnant, she faces humiliation, fear, and harmful practices meant to "fix" her body. This attitude reduces women to childbearing machines rather than partners with feelings and dreams. Moreover, the desperation to have children makes Baba Segi's wives excluding Bolanle to engage in extramarital affairs. The three older wives, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi all get their children through infidelity. This happens because they want to fulfil societal expectations of motherhood. This is illustrated when Baba infertility is exposed. Iya Segi confesses that:

> "I misled them. Perhaps if I had not shown the second one my way, this shame would have come out sooner. But you see, they were so desperate to be fruitful. They knew that my husband valued children above all things, so when I saw their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret. They also followed the same path." (Shoneyin 153)

Iya Segi's confession shows how the strong desire to have children pushed the wives into infidelity. They knew Baba Segi valued women only for their ability to bear children, so they became desperate to please him and avoid shame. Iya Segi admits that their need to appear "fruitful" led them to seek children outside marriage. This act was not just betrayal but a way to survive in a culture that measures a woman's worth by motherhood. Their desperation reflects how societal pressure drives women to make painful and hidden choices.

4.6 Conclusion

In the novels, the challenges women face are also shown through domestic violence, circumcision, early marriage, and the belief that women are weak and limited to motherhood. These practices reflect a society that suppresses women's rights and reinforces male authority over female identity and freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined the multiple challenges of women's oppression in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* through feminist theory. The analysis across the chapters revealed that women in African societies encounter social, cultural, economic, and domestic forms of oppression that limit their independence, self-expression, and opportunities for empowerment.

Chapter two of this research focused on the social challenges of women's oppression. Findings showed that limited access to education, confinement to domestic roles, and denial of inheritance rights all restrict women's development. Efuru illustrates how women are judged by their ability to bear children and serve domestic obligations, while The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives portrays how women's ignorance and deprivation result from cultural expectations that prioritize men's authority over women's autonomy.

Chapter three highlighted the power imbalance and gender inequality experienced by women. Power is shown as a male-dominated structure that excludes women from influencing decisions affecting their lives. Economic inequality further deepens women's dependence, as seen in the financial struggles of the wives in Baba Segi's household. Gender stereotypes also reinforce the perception that women are naturally inferior, submissive, or incapable of leadership.

Chapter four explored violence and cultural practices that function as tools of oppression. Domestic violence, female circumcision, early marriage, and the cultural expectation that a woman's primary purpose is motherhood all contribute to the continued marginalization of women. Nwapa and Shoneyin both present female characters who suffer physically and psychologically as a result of these destructive norms.

Overall, the study concludes that women's oppression in both novels and, by extension, in many African societies results from deep-rooted cultural traditions, socioeconomic barriers, and power structures that maintain gender inequality. However, the authors also portray women as capable of resistance, courage, and self-determination, suggesting that liberation is possible through collective awareness, education, and societal reform.

This study recommends that gender equality should be actively promoted through education, policy reforms, and community awareness programs. Women should have equal access to education, economic opportunities, and leadership positions, as these are essential tools for empowerment. Traditional practices and beliefs that support women's subordination should be critically re-examined and abolished.

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