

The polygynous household in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*: a haven in a heartless world

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Abstract:

Despite Lola Shoneyin's public condemnation of the impediments to female autonomy, equality, freedom, dignity, and self-realisation inherent in polygamy, the polyvalent nature of her contemporary Nigerian novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, suggests the necessary material and moral complexity of any analysis of plural marriage in postcolonial Africa. Parodic play in this novel highlights how the apparently monstrous patriarch and the daily perversions of traditional marriage and household ideals represent the only security for both relatively advantaged and disadvantaged women in twenty-first-century Nigeria. I embed my literary analysis of the novel within a survey of history and religion to show how monogamy confirmed the moral superiority of the colonial and Christian missionary projects and justified their social interventions. To contextualise this study of the novel, I also use socio-anthropological literature that connects the global forces promoting romantic love as the sole foundation of monogamous marriage with, ironically, the global flows that create the punitive economic and social conditions to which plural marriage is an entirely rational response shaped by local cultural contexts.

Lola Shoneyin's reputation in Nigeria, where she was already established as a poet, has grown nationally and internationally with the success of her first novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010). Her background in poetry is evident in the novel's compression and finely balanced architecture of expression, penchant for striking images, and lyricism. The title of the novel clearly states that the main subject of the novel is the controversial and culturally contentious question of polygamy. While the novel censures polygamy, it also criticises distorted versions of the dominant ideal of monogamy. Despite the dual critique, most reviews of the novel and the drift of author interviews claim that the thrust of the novel is directed mainly at exposing the toxicity of polygamy in the modern world.

While the novel casts a glance at both polygamous and monogamous households, it presents in its preliminary pages a family tree only of the polygamous household that is its primary emphasis. The novel also reflects its subject matter at the level of narrative structure. The plural nature of the marriage of the Yoruba patriarch, Ishola Alao, is replicated in the manifold voices presented in the story. The novel's short chapters combine first-person narration of the many household members and third-person narration focalised through the same characters. Both first- and third-person narratives offer flashbacks, which allow the reader to construct short biographies for each of the significant characters. Despite its narrative attempt to present the

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