



BEYOND OWNERSHIP: EXPLORING THE TEXTURE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES* AND DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROXANA*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates gender gaps in relation to access to land, property ownership and inheritance in rural areas. The study argues that rural communities lack awareness about modern legal property rights, undermine the confidence of women in a myriad of ways and continue to rely on customary laws and traditional beliefs. Current inequalities are placed in the context of Africa's entrenched patriarchal system as shown in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as well as in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*. The findings bring intersectionality issues into high relief where patriarchal power agrees with women's poverty and subjugation. Bell Hooks' vision of feminism which stresses women's rights is the theoretical framework that sustains the analysis. Our findings call for a more holistic approach which combines efforts to improve legal literacy, raise awareness within gender bond and alleviate poverty as a way to boost women economic and social inclusion.

Keywords: gender, culture, inheritance, property, women's rights, equity.

RESUME

Cette étude examine les inégalités entre les sexes en matière d'accès à la terre, à la propriété et à l'héritage dans les zones rurales. L'étude montre que les sociétés rurales manquent de sensibilisation aux droits de propriété. Ce manque sape la confiance des femmes de multiples façons et elles continuent de s'appuyer sur les lois coutumières et les croyances traditionnelles qui leur sont défavorables. Les inégalités actuelles s'inscrivent dans le contexte du système patriarcal africain décrit dans *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* de Lola Shoneyin ainsi que celui de la société anglaise de Daniel Defoe à travers *Roxana*. Les résultats mettent en évidence les questions d'intersectionnalité. L'étude souligne le que quand le patriarcat se conjugue avec la pauvreté, l'inégalité entre les sexes est exacerbée. Les résultats obtenus appellent à une approche plus holistique qui combine les efforts visant à améliorer les connaissances juridiques, à sensibiliser tous les genres et à réduire la pauvreté afin de favoriser l'inclusion des femmes dans l'économie. Le féminisme, mère des droits des femmes, est le cadre théorique qui guide l'analyse. Ceci est utilisé simultanément avec le

développement des personnages, le style et la vision des crochets de cloche pour provoquer
l'inclusion économique et sociale

Mots clés: genre, culture, héritage, acquisition, droits des femmes, équité

INTRODUCTION

In the African context of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, gender bias based on land possession is pivotal. While women make critical contributions to rural development, they face constant discrimination when it comes to land inheritance and ownership (Agarwal, 2003; Deere and Doss 2006; Osome, 2014; Doss *et al.* 2014). In Daniel Defoe's eponymous novel *Roxana* the female protagonist Roxana is a daring woman who fights to free herself from the shackles of the English patriarchal society of the eighteenth century in which all women belonged to men Roxana has been betrayed by her husband and so she decides to be independent. This kind of decision by a female in full patriarchal wing connotes a feminist philosophy, a challenge to the social prescription for women to be submissive to their men whatsoever.

The gender gap in the two different cultural realities is blatant whereby the families have been undergoing changes in terms of internal composition and structure while facing external institutional transitions. Ensuring gender equality in the case of land ownership and inheritance or that of Roxana's financial freedom responds to both the feminist agenda and the increased family production and the improved food security for adults and children (FAO, 2011; World Bank, 2010). In other words, advocating women's rights to material property goes beyond the purpose of ownership; it is a matter of justice, balancing gender equality and implementing an integrative and sustainable development agenda. Across Africa, there are many differences between men and women in terms of ownership, use and control over assets and wealth. Gender gaps emerge prominently in the ownership of land and housing property, which are important assets for the poor in Africa and the primary means to store wealth in rural communities. Like the gender issue itself, the subject matter of ownership with regard to the gender difference between man and woman in Africa and in the traditional English society remains a problem to solve and is likely a taboo subject that requires that a particular attention be paid to it.

The existing literature on the issue highlights how widows and orphans and especially girl children who are particularly vulnerable and predisposed to lose their rights to access to properties they enjoyed during the lifetime of their husbands or fathers (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Agarwal (2003, 1997) has argues that women's ownership of land leads to improvements in their welfare, their productivity, their equality with men, and their empowerment, a proposition that has gained resonance in the

international development policy arena (Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). In the last two decades, almost all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been undertaking land reform in one guise or another (Toulmin & Quan, 2000) and other legal reforms to give women the right to inherit and own land and other properties. Even though policies are being voted at the international level, efforts to adjust statutory and customary laws in many countries to help women have access to land and property remains a critical issue in Africa.

In the British context of this study, it is important to back up the British critic Scheurermann who argues in support of Roxana, the female protagonist in Defoe's *Roxana* that "having money of her own is seen as virtually the only way that a woman can be both safe and independent" (Scheurermann, 1993: 311). This corroborates the malignant functionality of patriarchal practices seen from this angle across cultures. In Africa women continue to suffer all kinds of discrimination to have access to inheritance, land and property. The majority of women are constantly confronted with cultural and traditional practices that undermine their rights. This practice also prevents them from enjoying equal opportunities with men (Makhado, 2016) in the same way women in the British society did in the eighteenth century. This situation of gender discrimination gives way to inequalities that weaken women and increase poverty and violence in society. Thus, whether in the African context or in that of the English society the situation creates unvoiced hatred and a problematic situation that challenges in one way or the other social harmony and peace within and without the family. Regarding the study context, Africa and the Great Britain are closer not in terms of time frame but in terms of happenings in human experience. Patriarchy is a shared experience of the two peoples.

This study focuses on Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and on Defoe's *Roxana* in which both writers portray an array of economic hardships and the subsequent imbalances in terms of equal rights and opportunities African society and the English society are expected to secure for all their members. Data is collected from portions of the selected novels and analysed with the use of feminism which appears as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. (Hooks, 2000) Feminism is perceived in this study as a movement of many senses (Ahmed, 2017). Its usage is based on the vision of Bell Hooks which underlines that the aim of feminism is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race, or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives (Hooks, 1984), the 'our incorporating men, women and children. The work is structured around three major aspects and shows that rural women are more disadvantaged.

1. Gender Bias and the Challenges to Women's Inheritance

Inheritance, as a mode of property transfer, is a complex problem. It is highly dependent on social conventions and norms. Indeed, land and/or inheritance rights are influenced by property and family law, including both statutory and customary laws as well as the prevailing tenure system. Governments across the world endeavour to get involved as much as possible in land distribution and in the system of inheritance but they are confronted to the customary laws and the families' managerial systems of properties which count more than the statutory law. Though the southern African economies are highly dependent on agriculture (Mutangadura, 2012) with women holding an important place in agricultural sector, their land rights are still largely discriminated against. The rights of women to access and own land, property and housing on the African continent are not proportional to what men enjoy. Very often, they are systematically denied ownership of property and inheritance. Abby Morrow Richardson lets explain that,

Under customary law, when a man dies, all of his self-acquired property (which often include property acquired with the assistance of his wife) returns to his lineage and is distributed accordingly. In patrilineal societies as in most Botswana, the land will thus go to a son or a brother. In patrilineal societies as in most Zambia, the property will devolve to nephews. In both systems, the widow is usually entirely dispossessed (Richardson, 2004: 22)

The idea behind Richardson's statement is that the African woman is disadvantaged under any system, be it matriarchal or patriarchal. The quotation mentions sons, brothers and nephews (all of them males) as eligible heirs while the wife or the widow (the female) who laboured with the husband to acquire this property comes out with nothing. And this is happening in urban areas as well as in rural areas where gender discrimination is more frequent than in urban settings. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* displays a case of property inheritance after the tragic death of parents of Iya Femi's. The concerned characters express themselves about the subject in the following way:

'I don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay in Oke'gbo where my parents are buried. This is my home.'

'Wipe your eyes', she said, passing me a rage. 'It has been a month since your parent died. 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 [sic] to your uncle. That is the way things are.'

'Everything belongs to my uncle?' [...] 'Yes, your uncle. What will you do with this house anyway? You cannot live her alone. Even your grandmother has said it is better for you to go' (TSLBSW, pp.121-122)

Firstly, the interlocution between Iya Femi and the wife of her uncle informs the readership that women do not inherit their fathers' properties such as a plot of land, a house and so on. The reaction of the uncle's wife indicates that the culture of Oke'gbo favours male ownership of property while it disadvantages women's ownership by denying them the rights to the inheritance of a piece of land, a house as it is the case in the novel with Iya Femi, a female child. As the representative of human beings, the character Iya Femi's misfortune directs attentions to the fact that women are marginalised. They are "part of the whole but outside the main body;" (Hooks, 1984) This is to say that women are regarded as members of a family or a society capable of working for the advancement of the family or the society but at the same time this family or society denies them the privileges of ownership that it grants to men. Secondly, what is being said in the passage overtones that Iya Femi is not the first female child or woman to whom the right to access and inherit her parents' property is denied. The presence of three different age-groups: namely her grandmother, the wife of her uncle, and then Iya Femi herself, indicates that the denial of women's rights to land, property and house is not a recent issue.

In the English perspective of the novel *Roxana* "As Roxana's persistence to stand against marriage shows her disobedience to eighteenth century standard for women, her ideology of women's innate abilities further challenges the social system of the time" (Defoe, 1724: 24). The protagonist's narrative performance sheds light on the falsehood associated with gender as well as mental differences raised against women. The novel context in this study indicates that it is a mere creation of men to account for what they have cooked for women in the patriarchal system of England and Africa.

The power of the arguments against patriarchy in *Roxana* and in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* suggests the strong force patriarchy represents and the lack of goodwill to change the corrosive patriarchal systems which hold respectively Roxana and Iya Femi in gender slavery and material poverty. The commitment of the female protagonists to fight patriarchy has a cause. They fight because the system confines them in a precarious life. Food, economy, marriage and all the rights associated with them are factors that need care so that human dignity can be secured. That is why when marriage fails to offer the expected privileges, Roxana and Iya Femi decide to wage the feminist philosophy of granting women with their rights. In the narrative context, autonomy or selfhood offers more dignity, more freedom than shackles of marriage in the patriarchal society.

Besides, the affirmation of the uncle's wife in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* through the provocative idea 'that is the way things are in Oke'gbo village' ((TSLBSW,

pp.121-122) supports the ideology of patriarchy. The assumption suggests the fact that a girl or a woman cannot inherit the father's property is commonsensical and naturalised and as a result should not to be questioned. This is in line with Oni's claim that succession under customary law among the Yoruba in Nigeria [or in any sub-Saharan African country] is full of discrimination especially to female children (Oni, 2021). Still the character Iya Femi in the novel further indicates that the societal systems are not static, they shift and intersect in dynamic ways over time (May, 2015). So do women's own identities and perceptions around their rights (McCall, 2005; West and Fenstermaker, 1995). For example, more education can strengthen a woman's position within her family. However, the family's material poverty relative to the broader social network can serve to put that same woman 'in her place' if she demands more rights. Iya Femi's late father's intention to get his daughter into formal education is a symbol of systems and the woman's identity dynamics. The words of this contemporary African girl lamenting "I cannot believe my uncle would do this when he knows how much my father wanted me to go to school! He wanted me to be educated" (TSLBSW, p. 122). This is way the writer depicts Iya Femi's misfortune. But against this misfortune the ideas of change rise, a change marked by women's right to education and other privileges.

In Defoe's *Roxana*, marriage is portrayed as a blatant threat to women's self-fulfilment. The female protagonist argues that: "Woman feels that they are born with the intellectual capacity to manage finances and personal decisions. To defend her belief that a woman should remain single to govern her own property" (Defoe, 1724: 28). Roxana's argument in the English context sheds light on Iya Femi's claim in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* to stain in her parents' because she rightly argues it is her home by the principle of inheritance. The protagonist of *Roxana* ridicules the patriarchal denial of ownership on these notes: "while a woman was single, she was a masculine in her politics capacity; that she had then the full command of what she had, and the full direction of what she did" (Defoe, 1724: 28). If a woman as a single manages her life, where can one say she puts all her capacities upon the celebration of marriage? No answer can rightly convince here.

The place-based characteristics isolate the inhabitants from having adequate information around changes while encouraging the formal legal system to follow the beliefs, customary rights, male lineage and marriage, land tenure rights. Hence, the patriarchal pressure and male hegemony within the community of Oke'gbo and families place males as the set to inherit the parents' land. That is why in the name of Oke'gbo's tradition, belief, family land tenure, Iya Femi's uncle, the representative of male gender is entitled to inherit his brother's properties instead of the daughter of the

late. Opposed to this place, Ibadan City appears in the text referencing women with house and material ownership appearing here and there in the text through the nominations such as "Grandma's house" (TSLBSW, pp.128, 129) or the expression "the landlords" (TSLBSW, p. 115)) uses to name the owners (both husband and wife) of Bolanle's parents place, or more precisely, the expression "landlady" (TSLBSW, p.131); Iya Segi, the mother-of the home" (TSLBSW, p.83) in the Alaro's family associate more city setting women with rights to land and house ownership that women do in the rural setting such as Oke'gbo. It is thus an inference from the way these city women are associated with house ownership while Iya Femi is dispossessed from what is supposed to be hers and family attitude that, rural women lack of information about their own right to inheritance and land possession. Feminism reads here through the Iya Segi's title of Mother of the house, or Grandma's association with ownership to call attentions on the existence of women's right to land, inheritance and ownership. Above all, feminism reads here to call attentions attention to the need for social equality of the sexes (Hooks, 1984).

It is true the privilege of ownership guaranteed to men is purposeful for, it contributes to the safeguarding of family land or properties and establishment of the economic empowerment of men (for agricultural and pastoral engagements). But it can also be said to be a means to keep women in the position of "subaltern" (Gramsci, 2017: 67). The proof is that the uncle and his wife disengaged themselves from the education of Iya Femi, sent her as house girl in Ibadan where she served "the Adeigbe family for fifteen years (TSLBSW, p.123). In total she had spent fifteen years of corporal and sexual abuses in this host family. There are many Iya Femi spread all around African societies. Society lays eyes on the idea of possession instead of looking at the wholeness of ownership; wholeness in the sense that the right to ownership will contribute to women's education, prosperity, empowerment, reduction of poverty and violence. If in Nigeria [and in many other African countries], men employ their major control over economic resources, particularly land, to wield extensive social influence on woman (Chukukere, 1995) it is not only because of cultural norms which confer this right to men; women themselves victimise themselves and, in the process, give way to oppression and marginalisation. Her grandmother and the uncle's wife who were supposed to carry on the duty of her late parents denied this parental duty and had accepted to send her away from home to engage in early child labour. In the same way, many women are reluctant to advocate feminism, to use the words of Hooks (1984), the representation of the grandmother and the uncle's wife taking side with the culture and tradition of the place to disinherit Iya Femi, indicates that women in this part of the created world, are the group most victimised by sexist oppression.

Sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress, and by the victims themselves who are socialised to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo (Hooks, 1984). The lack of legal institution to defend women's right to land and inheritance in Oke'gbo has particularly overshadowed Iya Femi's chances to claim her rights. But it is the grandmother and the wife of her uncle representing the family of women which definitely knocked down Iya Femi from her community depriving her not only of the family bond but also the right to access her inheritance, and right to property. The story of this girl testifies to the fact that giving women the right to-ownership is a matter of justice for women who have for a long time been denied this privilege in order to give much more opening space to women and maintain peace within the family. Beyond this, it is a feminist act to exhort women to pick each other up (Ahmed, 2017:.1). The reading of the corpus text shows that denying Iya Femi rights and sending her away is not the end. Her life of disinherited person left at the mercy of her madam and "no relative to pay homage to" (TSLBSW, p. 129) deprives this character of many opportunities including economic ones and progressively made Iya Femi develop a hate against her family. She plans and finally takes revenge on them. Lola Shoneyin paints the situation as follows:

My uncle deprived me of opportunities. And Grandma too. Thieves - that's what they are! Filchers of fortune. I won't rest until they are punished [...], I must have revenge. Only then will I accept that there was a reason for all my suffering.
Last week, I returned to my village. [...] I barged past her and locked us both in. I put the key in my bra and poured paraffin on the clothes in the wardrobes, the baskets of food. I emptied the can onto the over-worn shoes stacked in a corner [...].
How quickly fire eats! I ran and could see that the insides of the house were half consumed. Flames burst through the windows and the bungalow looked like a blackened shell. You thought I killed her, don't you? I went seeking revenge, not death. I let her out of the front door [...] (TSLBSW, pp. 133-135)

It is worth noticing from the outset that granting women the right to own, access and inherit properties is a manifestation of social justice and peace. Iya Femi turned to revenge because of what she had gone through: the sexual and physical abuse she had experienced as a servant in the Adeigbe's family. Though the execution of her revenge did not lead to human death, it is damaging elsewhere. It had changed the situation from that of a stable family of her uncle to a state of homeless people who are exposed to poverty that will for sure impact the education of the children of her uncle.

The idea from this quotation is that, changing customs and giving women the right to ownership stands as a primordial initiative to elevate women in order to consolidate the family bond, save girl children from child trafficking, child labour, and all forms of violence in order to preserve peace. From the view of Pauline E. Peters, it is

conventional to accept that the present is produced out of the past (Peters, 2004: 272) To say that Africans' past matters is a fact, but society is not compelled to follow exactly this past to build the present relationships and the social network, especially when it does not balance the past with today's realities and endangers the lives of one particular group of people while favouring the other, especially women.

2. Women's Perception of Ownership

From the perception of the female protagonists in both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and in *Roxana*, it appears that women contest the double ownership decrees that patriarchy imposes on them in the respective novels. The first contest of ownership relates to the protagonists' rejection of the philosophy that makes of them commodities or a possessed object. The second contest is that which denies them the rights to own and manage their own affairs. Reading the two novels under study with a focus on how the titles are crystallised in the narratives, one comes across the blatant idea of a woman being possessed in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* with a slight difference in *Roxana*. While the resistance is mild in the African context, in the English society of Defoe's *Roxana*, the resistance to patriarchy is total with more articulate ideas of claiming autonomy and getting it.

To substantiate Roxana's feminist anticipation, Gardner (2017:63) has this to say:

In the eighteenth century, women were provided with new few options in leading a fulfilled existence, as laws on social conduct fought to restrain a woman's abilities in the new world. Throughout *Roxana*, Defoe presents a powerful position that is unique to its peers, a position that defends women. The character Roxana is ahead of her time in the argument for women's liberties, painting a picture of the path that a woman must take in order to find liberty in a society that rarely allows any. By upholding her stature as though life as a courtesan is not admired today, one can applaud Roxana in her efforts and her success in holding on to her sense of freedom to become more than a puppet to the male members of society (Gardner, 2017, p. 63)

Roxana is a revolutionary character, a woman that allows women of her time and others to follow in the debunking of the myth of second-class citizenship associated with female gender. Thus, the female protagonists leave the state of commodity or owned object to the state of free citizens who know and claim their rights. It is established that in the patriarchal environment in which a woman is perceived as a property, a man's property, the evidence is that she cannot own a property. In other words an object cannot become subject to own. This connotes that whether in the English context of the study or that of Africa, women have been imposed the same fate of invisibility and the denial of property rights when men are around. The research on the two perspectives, African and English, offers enough ground to reject the false belief that Africa is

patriarchal and British or Europe is not without accounting for time and circumstances of the saying.

By definition, ownership is the fact of owning something (Hornby, 2010:1052); and in real life also, ownership directs naturally to the fact of owning things such as land, property, business. To some extent owning people who are members of a family or people one employs. Women's general perception is that the formal legal framework on land ownership is not enforced in a way that guarantees equality of access to all family members. Many do not sense that they are entitled to the same land ownership rights as men. Those who are better informed about the formal legal framework tend to see themselves as more equal to men compared to women who have no legal literacy on the subject. On the contrary, women who have more knowledge about customary rules (which cast women as inferior human beings) tend to view themselves as not having the same ownership rights. Awareness and knowledge of customary rules is higher in those rural settings where women's subjugation is also higher. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the representation of ownership, in terms of housing and property is masculine in general and more sensed in the rural settings represented in the text by the villages of Oke'gbo, Omi ado and Borode.

Through the depiction of patriarchal community and the value it accords to children, especially the male children, Shoneyin portrays superiority, patriarchy and property acquisition principle to figure out that land [and property] tenure is often held by men or family groups controlled by men (FAO, 2008: 38). Patriarchal dispositions that exist in Africa confer priority to male children and these priorities include the rights to ownership. The birth right is almost not valid when a confrontation opposes a male child and a female child.

Likewise, the preference for male progeny taxes the male child of superior status vowed to wield power and control over the female child. The inferiority status of the girl-child and in so doing the whole women's folk is replicated in the utterance of Baba Segi when he states: "A daughter can never be like a son.... Only a son can become a true heir" (TSLBW, p.88). This utterance from Baba Segi displays the preference of the male child to the female child. It is re-echoing of the belief of the Yoruba people (Funke Oni & Mosuro, 2009, p. 252) and the notion of human beings rights to land and property ownership in most African countries. Sons are entitled to take over after their fathers and inherit their properties. They are also expected to become heads of families, to own properties because it is believed the material possession confers onto them authority and masculinity as well as courage, strength and virility. For example, names such as Okonkwo, Shaka Zulu or Sundiata Keita are overtones of the man's authority. The

history of cultures where courage, strength, power, material and physical strength, authority and precision of manhood are measured by wealth in people, in titles, in the possession of yams and properties.

"From generation to generation, society possesses the concept of gender roles that relate to culture [...]. The roles, men were the breadwinner of the family while women took care of the house and children are made in by the system" (Nst, Ningish & Siyafei, 2018: 237) The belief is deep rooted in the minds that everything in society is put in place or done to position men in a superior position in life. This gives men the right to inherit, to acquire and to possess properties. This instance is seen in the case of Baba Segi and Iya Segi. The belief holds that after a girl grows up she will be married off to her husband. She consequently becomes the husband's property and has nothing to do with her father's property and inheritance. Among others, this sense of superiority society attributes to men testifies to their rights to property acquisition. This constitutes an irregularity for women to acquire and own property. This is seen in the conversation between Iya Segi and her mother below:

By the time I was eighteen, Ishola, who would be my future husband, had gone to Ibadan to be a bricklayer's apprentice. I had become quiet adept at making fufu and like my mother, I had a stash of money under my mattress [...]. But I troubled Mama about getting my own quarters; I was tired to squeezing past her at every doorway. 'I have told you before that you cannot buy land and build your own house. The village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can't!' 'But it is just a house, Mama!' 'And they will tear it down and burn it, daughter!' (TSLBSW, pp. 97-98).

The above extract supports the fact that it is out of place for a woman to have land property. It indicates also that the character Iya Segi has the deep dream to have her own property and be free from whatever bounds her. The first two utterances show two persons who are fighting for a better future, one being an apprentice and the other a seller. Iya Femi's affirmation, 'and like my mother, I had a stash of money under my mattress' indicates that the setting is a rural one for, the money saving system is a rudimentary one; there are no banks around.

And this setting puts limitations for women to have property due to the patriarchal system where "men are the ones to hold all the right to possess, manage and control the property" (Ibid, p.241). Iya Segi's mother's affirmation 'I have told you before that you cannot buy land and build your own house. The village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can't!' predicts danger ahead if she insists on to set her own property. It will be the expression of her economic and material independence at the same rank with men or even better; situation that will ridicule men since they are the ones entitled to possess and control tangible things and take care of their women.

For Iya Segi, 'it is just a house,' but for the society, it is a right and privilege that go along with men not with women. Besides, Iya Segi and her mother represent the two sides of a divide: Iya Segi, the new generation while Iya Segi's mother, the old one. Iya Segi sees nothing wrong with a woman having a house as long as she has the wherewithal. But Iya Segi's mother sees it as opposed to societal norms, and symbolises the fact that, until these days, women's right to land, inheritance and property are undermined. And most of the women find themselves trapped in because they do not know much about these rights. Iya Segi's mother stands against her daughter's decision to buy land because she is not aware of women's right to property. Similarly, Iya Segi herself is not aware of that. Literate women such as Grandma, the madam of Iya Femi and Bolanle's parents' Landladies know more about these rights that is why their characters are assimilated with house possession.

Eradicating women for their economic dependence is an important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals. The society has a lot to gain in teaching people the importance of women's economic development. Obviously, "gender bias or gender discrimination is thus a fundamental cause of poverty, because in its various forms it prevents hundreds of millions of women from obtaining the education, training, health services, child care and legal status needed to escape from poverty" (Anunobi, 2002: 52). It is true that Iya Segi and the other wives of Baba Segi have a decent living, but their lives speak of an economic dependence on Baba Segi, the provider. One of the wives justifies her economic independence in the following way: "My children must eat their fill. It won't do for them to look like beggars when their father works so hard to keep the skin of their bellies taut." (TSLBSW, p.10). She further explains women's economic dependence on men to her daughter under special conditions:

When I got home that evening, I opened my bedroom door and immediately the shadows cleared from my eyes. My room had been ransacked and all my money is gone [...]. 'It is all gone,' she said [...]. 'I have given it to the man who will be your husband. He will need it to look after you.' (TSLBSW, p.101)

Iya Segi does not challenge her husband authority. She accepted the obligation to seek his permission before going out the house "An agreement was drawn up: they could stay if they promised to be the wives he wanted them to be. He promptly banned them from living the house without his permission." (TSLBSW, p.243) The circumstances of the happening that occasion these cited instances will not be discussed, the study is rather interested in their implications. Firstly, Baba Segi's expression "I won't do for them to look like beggars when their father works so hard" indicates that the economic safety of the family depends on Baba Segi, the father. Secondly, the economic independence of a woman is likely to be useless, as a matter of fact, Iya Segi's money

was given it to the man [Baba Segi] who will be her husband. He will need it to look after her. Thirdly, women's economic autonomy can be said to be a wound to male authority as it is seen here with Baba Segi's who instructed to his wife to close down all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him.

The representation of Baba Segi as the bread winner of the family is contrary to the idea that the woman does not necessarily need an economic independence or any property of her own. Baba Segi's instruction to his wife Iya Segi to close down all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him suggests that, decision-making processes regarding property ownership is ingrained in the patriarchal patterns. Patrilineage continues to be the norm in many societies, and most women are aware of this. Women's level of knowledge about the customs and traditions of their various societies is negatively associated with their perceptions of equality between men and women.

This means that in societies in which customary rules prevail, women are familiar with this patrilineal inheritance as a dominating pattern. And the opposite situation is seen as an offense to manhood. In a nutshell, in many countries of Africa and in Europe, succession and property under customary law is full of discrimination against the female folk. Even though statutory laws and international laws have affirmed women's rights to land and other properties, women are often denied access and ownership to property due to unfavourable customary practices, which need a serious re-visitation to better the life of women and the living together as a whole.

While this type of duality is common in Africa, Nigeria, through *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* may be a special case within Africa. Rural societies here lack awareness around legal property rights, do not value gender equality, and continue to rely on traditions and beliefs. Alarming, many women do not believe that they are entitled to the same land ownership rights as men. This aspect contrasts with Defoe's *Roxana* in which women are relatively more literate with a capacity to utter arguments that seem unbeatable.

Women in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* know more about customary rules than state laws, which favour men. Thus, their confidence is undermined. Less educated women, residing in more remote villages tend to be far worse. Clearly, the place-based, individual, household patterns of gendered access to inheritance, land and property ownership have deep roots in African history. In a strongly patriarchal system built over the course of centuries, poverty, sexism, and government neglect intersect with traditions and customs to impede on the progress toward gender equality and entrench male dominance even further.

Gender equality in land ownership and inheritance is not a stand-alone issue. It can only be achieved in the context of equality in other arenas, including employment and education. Consequently, the institution of community sensitisation and training will be important steps to get people informed. Duplicate institutions of women's rights especially in rural areas or invest community whistle blowers who will be untitled to report any case of non-respect of women's right to land inheritance and property. Additionally, since the issues related to women's right to land, inheritance and property engages women themselves, it will be useful if women themselves "learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood" (Hooks, 1984: 3). As the case of Iya Femi and Iya Segi has been shown, women themselves are paving the way to sexist discriminations. As a result, a women-to-women mapping will help educate women for them to achieve a global awareness raising. Society must take resolutions on how to implement the existing laws about the question of women's rights to land, ownership and inheritance to give women more chances to fulfil their emancipation in society in Africa or in Great Britain.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the situation of women with regard to their rights to inheritance, to land and to property ownership. The context is the one of engrained patriarchy, poverty, and authoritarian and uncaring government institutions. While Nigeria and other African countries systems are getting modernised, they also coexist with customary, informal laws, beliefs and traditions which disregard women's rights or treat them as second-class citizens. In the British context economic autonomy and the right for a woman to manage her business are the background against which women are cheated in the shackles of patriarchy. However, improving laws in favour of women helps but the effect is limited given the current attitudes around gender roles and other entitlements. A belief that the law alone may boost the materialisation of gender equality in Africa may be impractical. And there is no doubt that even in the British context, human factor needs for care than legal texts. Most of the institutions that govern land and property rights are likely to remain informal in the foreseeable future given the fact that culture and traditions are as important as, if not more important than, legal frameworks surrounding land ownership and inheritance in relation to women's rights.

There is evidence from the study that legal literacy clearly empowers women, especially young ones, and as such it should be supported. More information, awareness raising, and free legal assistance would help women gain the courage to claim their land rights. Since women's perceptions of equality are closely linked to family education,

awareness-raising campaigns should target men too. Pro-equality attitudes are higher in villages with better access to urban centres. While physical distances are immutable, policy interventions can focus on improving transport linkages between cities and their rural hinterland, but also on boosting digital and media access. Grassroots organisations that help build capacity, promote democratic principles in rural areas, and advocate for gender equality, are crucial and need to be championed.

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