



LYING TO THE SELF: SOCIAL DRAMA IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Ayéfé Fafavi d'ALMEIDA

dacredo@yahoo.fr

Université de Lomé, Togo

ABSTRACT

Equating male erection with fertility and imputing a couple's childlessness to the wife without any further ado is a common practice in Africa, the ultimate goal of which is the protection of male ego. Despite this hasty representation of women as a dumping ground in the African mindset, a scrutiny of a couple's life reveals a traditional lie to cover male infertility, the central topic of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Informed with a womanist theory, this essay unveils that age-old secret, a social lie which has doomed Mr. Alao.

Keywords: erection, womanhood, sexuality, lie, infertility, tradition.

RESUME

Assimiler l'érection masculine à la fertilité et imputer, sans autre forme de cérémonie, l'infertilité à l'épouse est une pratique courante en Afrique, dont l'objectif ultime est la protection de l'égo masculin. Malgré ce rôle de bouc émissaire conféré aux femmes dans la tradition africaine, un examen minutieux de la vie d'un couple révèle ce mensonge traditionnel servant de couverture à l'infertilité masculine, la préoccupation majeure de Lola Shoneyin dans *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Sous le prisme de la théorie womanist, cet essai dévoile ce secret séculaire, un mensonge social qui a causé la chute de monsieur Alao.

Mots clés : érection, féminité, sexualité, mensonge, infertilité, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Lola Shoneyin, an award-winning British-Nigerian novelist and poet, was named Africa Literary Person of the Year in 2017 for her bestselling novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This acclaimed novel, which won several awards, explores womanhood, sexuality and the intricacies of domestic life in a typical Yoruba setting.

Set in a polygamous environment, Shoneyin's novel proceeds to a re-examining of barrenness in marital life, considering the husband as the main cause of infertility and thereby contrasting the traditional assumption that the wife is solely responsible for childlessness in a couple. *The Secret Life* is significant for two singular stands held by its female protagonist, Bolanle: her refusal to be possessed

by her husband, Mr. Alao (also known as Baba Segi), in the traditional sense of the term; and her resolve that ultimately uncovers the truth about her husband's infertility. Very much unheard of, then, this novel articulates its heroine's opposition to be her husband's asset, while it equally offers her an avenue to prove her "innocence," childbearing-wise. So, while the first three wives of Mr. Alao are quantified as their husband's acquisition in Shoneyin's oeuvre, crediting both Chinua Achebe's portrayal of an African household in *Things Fall Apart* and Komla M. Nubukpo's caricature of the view, Bolanle, a female graduate and the fourth wife counters it, rejecting the burden put on women's shoulders.

Indeed, while *Things Fall Apart* (1958, pp. 13-14) casts Nwakibie's wives as his possessions: "there was a wealthy man who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children," Nubukpo (1995, p. 61) illustrates this concept with a popular belief, entertaining that "no matter how rich or strong a man is, he is not a man if he cannot rule his women folk." Bolanle, going against this tide, rejects such a social expectation from women, showcasing her sense of independence. For instance, she marries Baba Segi fully knowing that he was married to three other wives without the acknowledgement and support of her mother – i.e., without the payment of the bride price, as is required by tradition. Furthermore, she opts for medical treatments to solve her "apparent" barrenness, instead of visiting herbalists as recommended by tradition. Still, her following piece of advice to Segi, her fifteen-year-old step-daughter, articulates her strong sense of independence: "A real woman must always do the things *she* wants to do, and in her own time too. You must never allow yourself to be rushed into doing things you're not ready for."¹ Although this stand delineates Bolanle's profound foothold in feminism and highlights her strong sense of an acclaimed feminist, this essay uses a womanist lens to support its claims.

Coined by the African American female novelist and critic Alice Walker, a steady number of African female critics have adopted womanism as their theoretical location, adding their particular touch to it. For Mary M. Kolawole (1997, pp. 27 & 204), womanism involves eliciting women's positive qualities, ability, self-enhancement, self-esteem, and freedom within African cultural context while they believe in dialogue to solve crises. Further, they see complementarity between the

¹ Lola Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010), 155. Italics in original Subsequent quotes are from this edition, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay, and preceded by SL.

sexes. African womanism cannot be dissociated from humanism. Rather, it seeks to enrich women through consciousness-raising while giving a human touch to the struggle for the appreciation, emancipation, elevation and total self-fulfillment of the woman. Such a concept is used as a reading grid to scrutinise, in the first place, a couple's life embedded in a traditional lie seeking to cover male infertility; it is equally deployed in debunking this social lie which has wrecked Mr. Alao's life, next.

1. Swimming in Lie with a Social Cover

Shoneyin's novel challenges social beliefs concerning manhood, virility and procreation, putting the weight of childlessness on the husband, a burden barely shouldered by men in African fiction. Patriarchy, a system governing African culture and beliefs, considers the male as an irreproachable being. Originally used to describe the power of the father as the head of the household, patriarchy carves men as the unique and sole authority within the society. Put differently, the man does not only hold the supreme authority, but he is equally the master of the house and the decision-maker. For Diane Robinson and Victoria Richardson (1993, p. 53), the term patriarchy "has been used within post-1960s feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination". Generally, African societies operate under that gendered power system based on a network of social, political, and economic relationships through which men dominate and control female labour, reproduction, and sexuality as well as define women's status, choices and rights, relegating them to the background where they are assigned the roles of wives and mothers.

Satirically told with a deep sense of humour, the story of *The Secret Lives* portrays life in an African household rife with jealousy, sexuality, greed and all the vices known to a polygamous environment. Defined as the custom of having more than one wife simultaneously, polygamy, is a plural marriage which can take two shapes: polygyny (where a man is married to several women) and polyandry (where a woman is married to several men). Typically rooted in African culture since time immemorial, this institution is thought to be the hallmark of the continent (d'Almeida, 2020, p. 17).

The novelist treks to this typical African (Yoruba) environment where sexual potency for men and childbearing for women are imperative (Mugambi & Allan, 2010, p. 179), except that sexual potency does not necessary yield pregnancy in the setting under scrutiny. In many African contexts, power, possession, strength and virility are associated with masculinity and procreation. A strong and virile man is

expected to marry many wives and bear many children, epitomising his outward success. Austin Bukanya (in Mugambi & Allan, 2010, p. 141) contends that the expected attributes of a Swahili man are power, possession, ambition, command, strength, pride and virility. No doubt, Mr. Alao shows off these benchmarks of "manliness".

Shoneyin introduces readers to a polygamous family made up of Mr. Alao and his three wives: Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi. Altogether, this family is richly blessed with seven children, an assertion derived from Kwame Gyekye's (1996, p. 84) following stance: "there is no wealth where there are no children (...) and nothing is as painful as when one dies without leaving a child behind". Since children are wealth and symbolise glory and achievement in the African concept of family, the author's presentation of the Alaos stresses these elements:

Segi and Akin, a daughter before a son, from the first wife; Tope, Afolake and Motun, three girls born eleven months apart, from the second; and Femi and Kole, sons smugly birthed by Iya Femi, his third wife. Baba Segi looked lovingly into the faces of the older children and pinched the cheeks of the younger ones. He made each child feel extraordinary (SL: 8).

The stage of a harmonious family is well set, displaying the importance of children in African marriages, before the introduction of a fourth wife in the person of the university graduate Bolanle, a supposedly barren woman. Writing about the curse of barrenness and supporting the centrality of children in African couples, Gyekye (1996, p. 83) hits the nail:

Barrenness and sterility are considered a threat to the continuity of human life and existence. Children are so important that in traditional life the inability to bear children is considered a very great calamity, and the woman who fails to bear children suffers humiliation and, sometimes, ridicule or abuse.

Baba Segi married his first wife out of maternal pressure, whereas the second and third wives crossed his path by mere luck. He has such a perfect family: a stable household with a steady rhythm. This pristine life could have lasted forever had Mr. Alao not dug his own marital grave out of greed, by tying the knot for the fourth time with the young and university graduate Bolanle, a subject of jealousy to her co-wives: except Bolanle, none of Baba Segi's wives "knew which end of a pencil to set to paper" (SL: 4). Since the first three wives of Baba Segi are complete illiterate, "he couldn't wait to have her, to show her off as his own. He wanted to be the envy of all his peers" (SL: 7). For Baba Segi, then, marrying this university graduate is an object of glory and pride, a far-fetched trophy wife who has ultimately caused his downfall.

Sixteen years back, when he was an impatient twenty-six-year-old husband, Mr. Alao, a newly married man, sat with his best friend Teacher and two other men to discuss his predicament of the time: the failure of his first wife to conceive. He had been eager for his sick mother to see “the fruit of his loins but his wife’s menstruation persisted” (SL: 13). In the agony of the expectancy to have children, he sought advice from Teacher, who pressed him to visit a herbalist. In the wake of this visit, “Iya Segi had lapped up the dark green powder her husband sprinkled on her palm” (SL: 3).

In traditional Africa, herbalists are native doctors who treat couples suffering the agony of childlessness. Besides serving as middlemen between gods, ancestors and humans when it comes to problems plaguing communities, herbalists do solve some existential hurdles, including infertility challenges. Mr. Alao thought the medicine he received from this herbalist worked swiftly, since his wife got pregnant and bore a baby girl for him and “Baba Segi cried with both grief and gladness at his mother’s burial, six weeks after the birth of his daughter, Segi” (SL: 3). The battle is won, so he thought. In their turn, Iya Femi and Iya Tope “miraculously” conceive under the careful supervision of Iya Segi, the baby-making trainer in Mr. Alao’s home: “Get pregnant quickly or he will start to force-feed you bitter concoctions from medicine men until your belly rumbles in your sleep” (SL: 83), Iya Segi urged Iya Tope, her co-wife.

No doubt, Baba Segi’s wives are fully aware of the burden on their shoulders regarding social expectations: motherhood. The fact is that pregnancy legitimises marriage in Africa, be it in the traditional or modern sense, in the eyes of humans as well as in the eyes of the gods, or the *chi*. This rationale sustains Femi’s declaring to his American wife that they will be “a real family now,” once she becomes pregnant with their first baby boy (Golden, 1983, pp. 161 & 201). In any case, many female critics concur that marriage, pregnancy, childbearing and motherhood domesticate women and make a woman a woman (Klein, 1984, p. 47; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 39). Barbara Christian (1997, p. 214) pens the following statement in backing such an assumption: “Whatever a woman’s skills, desires, or talents, she was prescribed by her ‘nature’ and her society to subordinate herself to her primary function – that of motherhood.”

In all likelihood, the above theory holds true in Africa, with due consideration to its fiction. Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* offers an apt illustration. Arguably, the quest for motherhood by all means dominates this novel where the female protagonist, Nnu Ego, is deeply aware of the burden on her shoulder: childbearing. Her childbearing attitude sustains the following statement from

Juliana M. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, p. 37): "Emecheta uses this theme of motherhood not only to construct Nnu Ego's subjectivity but also to reconstruct women's sexual identity, to move beyond gender as sexual difference."

Sadly enough, Mr. Alao's wives understand that motherhood in Africa drives social acceptance so much so that failing to meet this demand can lead to one's ostracism. Nobody questions husbands' responsibility when couples fail to procreate. Anyway, Baba Segi is a sexually redoubtable man, as he regularly lashes his wives from his penis (SL: 102). Bolanle complains that he only comes to deposit his seed in her womb; that he will "hammer" her "like never before" to finally empty "his testicles as deep into my womb as possible" (SL: 43-44). Baba Segi's sexual prowess, associated with verbs such as "hammer", "lash" and "pummel" (SL: 86), epitomises manliness, the symbol of physical strength and virility (Mugambi & Allan, 2010, p. 274). These verbs stress the intensity of his sexual intercourses with Bolanle. Iya Segi has her side of the story to tell about her husband's sexual prowess as well: "Baba Segi, whose penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed" (SL: 132), "heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts" (SL: 130).

A number of African writers – both male and female – have, in one way or another, addressed barrenness in their fiction. While almost all of them portray the trauma of childless couples, a significant proportion of them finds fault with the woman regarding the absence of a progeny within marriage, charging the wife with the cardinal sin of barrenness. Clearly, the sterility of a married couple is imputable to the wife, in the African concept. Presumably, this cultural tendency is to protect the male ego as well as the superior role of the male in society and family. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims* (1971), Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Ayòbámi Adébayò's *Stay with Me* (2017) portray the trauma of childless families, with a wife-blaming undertone.

The lack of children brings "emptiness and suffering" (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 194) within a couple and usually creates turmoil in the family but the fault of childlessness is solely heaped upon the female. No fruit was conceived after three long years of Bolanle's marriage to Baba Segi. Given the extreme importance of children to Africans, Bolanle's failure to conceive one on the onset of her marital life becomes a communal tragedy, a tradition which has ruined any barren woman's life: she stigmatised, considered a social misfit and a subject of communal wrath (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 207; Fonchigong, 2006, p. 135). Currently, the yoke of motherhood and victimhood features prominently in feminist discourse in an attempt to question this assumption (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 5).

Female novelists counter such a cheap blame which reduces women to dumping grounds, hindering their self-fulfilment. Their novels equally decry how women, despite their awareness of the plight of their barren sisters, skilfully cover their husband's nakedness. Justifying her role as a child-producing advisor, for instance, Iya Segi confesses to her seeking to "protect his manhood" (SL: 243). This situation contrasts sharply with Efuru's, the female protagonist in Nwapa's *Efuru*: she is looked down upon and solely held responsible for the childlessness in her marriage with Adizua. Though patriarchy has drummed into her mind that "the greatest test for a married woman is bearing children" (Chukwuma, 1989, p. 5), it has failed to teach her that men are not always fertile; that they can be infertile, too. As a character in Adébáyò's novel (2017, pp. 52-3) forcefully put it in her consoling words to a female character who was "delivered" from her barrenness, "Those men, they don't understand, but thanks God all your enemies have been put to shame. Every time they will be blaming the woman and sometimes it is their own body that has a problem." Blindly holding onto the old-fashioned belief that pregnancy defines women's "femininity," Efuru's in-laws amplify her pain with the insult that she is wealthy but "riches cannot go on errands for us" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 163). Bogus accusations: she gave birth to a baby-girl. These ungrounded accusations repeated themselves sequentially. For instance, while Nnu Ego was a "barren woman" in her first marriage with Amatokwu, she delivered nine kids after leaving him for Nnaife, her second husband.

Along the same lines of thought, Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* castigates the husband, Akin, for concealing his impotency from Yejide, his wife, while the poor woman is humiliated by her mother-in-law for her incapacity to procreate. When Yejide finally conceives by other means, she was delighted, confessing that she is a woman at last (pp. 53-54). The importance of having children mandates her conclusion that anyone "who has children owns the world" (p. 215). This situation validates studies that women shoulder the blame and remain silent even in cases where their husbands are infertile (Fledderjohann, 2012; Van der Geest & Nahar, 2013; Rozee & Unisa, 2016).

Likewise, to fulfill their traditional role – wifehood and motherhood – and protect their husband's infertility in line with social expectations, the first three wives of Mr. Alao use counterfeited means to be pregnant out of wedlock.

The African culture has hard times fathoming that "it takes two to tango"; that it takes two healthy persons to make a baby. So, endowing men with infallibility, this culture frequently points an accusing finger at the woman, once a child fails to come. Armed with that steadfast and old-fashioned assumption that women are

the sole source of barrenness, the said culture denigrates the latter in their different environments, be it traditional or modern, for their incapacity to procreate once married. Sadly enough, women – aunt, mother or mother-in-law – are their own grave-diggers by disseminating, promoting, and strengthening patriarchal blaming games. Pokuwaa's complaint to her daughter in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in her Prime* (1967, p. 19) serves an apt illustration: "You see my daughter, you should have children. You are my only daughter and unless you have a child, our lives will end miserably". Children guarantee lineage preservation and assume social security role for their old-aged parents.

With the above context in mind, then, a woman who fails to have children in the wake of her marriage receives the extremes of physical, psychological and social abuse from her husband and from the community at large (Elias, 2020, p. 172). Efuru's community has no mercy for barren women: "it was a curse not to have children ... It was regarded as a failure" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 165), an observation emphasising motherhood as the core of the female identity, since "the essence of being female has been characterized as a 'biological, psychological, and ethical commitment to the care of human infancy'" (Klein, 1984, p. 47).

To debunk such a supposedly infallible nature of the husband, Shoneyin has resorted to a novel strategy to identify another culprit of childlessness in a couple, a sphere barely explored in the African context relating to barrenness. Resultantly, her fiction conveys the forceful idea that men can be infertile as well, be it in fiction or in real life.

Baba Segi's presumed seven children, miraculously given to him by his three wives, empower him to continually point his accusing finger at Bolanle, labeling her a "barren maggot" (SL: 43) and showering her with hurtful words: "your barrenness brings shame upon me" (SL: 14). He complains everywhere that Bolanle's barrenness is causing him agony (SL: 4), as patriarchal standards have drummed into his mind that women are solely responsible for a couple's barrenness, his justifying behind Bolanle's difficulty in conceiving. A man, in the African mentality, cannot be the cause of barrenness in a marriage.

Subtle patriarchal oppressive practices consist in equating women with compliance, obedience, submission, dependency, acceptance, and silence. However, Bolanle, the university degree holder, interrogates these attributes, wisely deploying her education to reject them, refusing victimhood. For her, education is a light to brighten the dark side of traditional beliefs, including ungrounded theories about infertility (SL: 22). Furthermore, Nubukpo (1995, p. 64) maintains that "setting one's own standards and implementing them are powerful

political actions that more and more African female writers are carrying out". Using Bolanle as a harbinger of change, Shoneyin rejects the gender-biased ideology that oppresses women and advocates for a gender-sensitive one to the female. Bolanle's pleading with Baba Segi works, since the latter accepts to visit a doctor. So far, Baba Segi is not aware of swimming in a lie, as patriarchy blindly certifies men's fertility, without any further ado.

Baba Segi's behaviour encapsulates the will of womanists: settling family-related issues in a friendly and considerate manner – an amicable way of reaching a gentleman's agreement. Prior to their hospital visit discussions, Mr. Alao was very sure of Bolanle's barrenness and proud of his own fertility status as well. Precisely, besides his desperation for a child from Bolanle, rubber-stamping his fertility is the final argument driving his agreeing to the hospital visit, as he concludes one night: "I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to the hospital to talk to a doctor" (SL: 14). Henceforth his life began a downward spiral as the central lie of his marital life will unravel, crumbling his world.

2. Debunking Social Lie

Bolanle's introduction into the Alao's home unlocks the lies about the patriarch's virility, thanks to her education. Education brings some profound awareness to Bolanle: scoffing at traditional healers and remedies, she refuses to be taken to herbalists, qualifying them as "conmen" (SL: 14). To be sure, she uses her formal education to redefine herself and perceives society from a more critical stance. Like the early feminists who saw in education a panacea for all the ills that plagued women and relegated them to an inferior position, Bolanle locates herself as a vanguard African educated woman who resists to be curbed in Laure C. Capo Chichi's (2008, p. 133) theorizing: "Les africaines lettrées sont libres de leurs mouvements et n'ont pas de compte à rendre à leurs ascendants. Elles sont donc responsables d'elles-mêmes et s'assument pleinement. Elles évoluent presque en marge de leurs différentes familles."² Education has empowered and driven these women's life-decisions.

Marrying Bolanle, the younger and more educated than the other wives of Mr. Alao, has incited her co-wives' jealousy – who have plotted and schemed to get her out – and a subject of pride to Baba Segi. Adding this university graduate as a

² Literate African women are free to move around and are not accountable to their ancestors. They are therefore responsible for themselves and take full responsibility. They evolve almost on the margins of their different families.

trophy wife to his collection of women constitutes, in itself, a prestige to him, in the conception of male leadership. His decision boosts his masculinity. After all, he is a prosperous businessman capable of handling several women, as he convinces himself that his wives "are taken care of ... that they have no reason to trouble" him (SL: 7).

Before his deceitful adventure with his three wives, Baba Segi had a positive opinion about plural marriage. Proudly, he once advised "his son" Kole to marry many wives: "My Kole must grow big and strong so he can marry many wives and bear many children" (SL: 10). But his perilous day-dream with his three wives radically changes his mind on polygamy, prompting his wise counsel to "his son" Akin: "When time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone. And when she causes you pain, as all women do, remember it is better that your pain comes from one source alone" (SL: 238). In other words, it is advisable for a man to stick to one wife for a peaceful life's sake. A piece of advice which is reminiscent of Timothy M. Aluko's satirical novel title: *One Man, One Wife* (1959). Although this fiction delves into the disillusionment of a Yoruba community with the tenets of Christianity, its title suits well the situation herein. For a long life's sake, it is advisable for one man to marry only one wife.

Shoneyin's rejection of polygamy as a lifestyle is a personal conviction, reinforcing Aissatou's attitude towards plural marriage in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1989). The latter immediately quits her husband after he married Nabou. The setting of Bâ's oeuvre being a Muslim context, the woman has no power to leave her marriage. Aissatou's behaviour underscores the powerful impact of education on her: "A woman who decides to divorce her husband because he has a serious relationship with another woman is, therefore, considered to be over-reacting, and she cannot normally expect much sympathy from either friends or relations, especially if there are children in the marriage" (Dolphyne, 1991, p. 19). She holds, anyway, onto her decision.

Maternity, this sacred concept in traditional Africa, is not an individual matter but a collective business, for "those who could not give birth were cut off from the group of the venerated" (Fonchigong, 2006, p. 140). There is no arguing the point: Bolanle's incapacity to become pregnant - and acquire social status through childbearing - forces the couple to seek for medical consultations, as barrenness is considered a threat to the continuity of human life from an African perspective. Her incapacity to bear children creates turmoil in the couple; a tension which weighs in their final decision to seek for medical help.

Modern medical science has demythologised some hoary givens. Their hospital visits were humiliating to Bolanle. Clothed with patriarchal arrogance, Baba Segi is not only coarse toward the doctor's inquiry about the number of children he has but his answer purposefully hurts Bolanle as well: "I would have had more than ten now if this woman's womb was not hostile to my seed" (SL: 37). The preliminary tests, however, absolve Bolanle; the doctor's first sets of investigation are displayed to the couple as follows: "From my examination, the results of the scan and the blood tests, I cannot see any immediate reasons why you shouldn't be able to conceive" (SL: 170). Most feminists charge that women are oppressed and exploited in many cultures. Unfortunately, the oppression takes different forms, varying from psychological to physical ones. In this present case, Bolanle is psychologically traumatised, for every deed in this polygamous household reminds her of her incapacity to procreate.

As said earlier, Shoneyin aims at debunking that social lie which stifles women's sense of freedom, self-realisation and happiness in their marital life. Arguably, the specific of African couples in infertility-related problems is refusal of medical check-ups. In most cases, husbands categorically reject medical consultations, ignoring that a medical test is the most *reliable* method to gauge one's (in)fertility status. In the absence of a "medical check-up to identify the exact cause of a woman's sterility," Damlègue Laré (2017, p. 150) entertains, "people trust the mythical arguments against women and trace women's barrenness to their sins and to the gods' anger". Women are forced, under these conditions, to visit herbalists or *ifa* priests for sacrifices in order to appease the gods' anger. For instance, Ebiere, Zifa's wife, who has difficulties conceiving more children after her first boy in John P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat*, is compelled to visit Masseur, a traditional doctor to sort things out about her "semi-barrenness". Surely, this extra-mile seems justified in Ama Ata Aidoo's (1991, p. 69) view: having one child in Africa equals having half a child.

After the first hospital visit which cleansed Bolanle from "her sin," the couple is referred to a specialist, Dr. Dibia. This gynaecologist invites Mr. Alao to go through the traumatising process of "a sperm count" (SL: 190). Also called "fertility test" (a semen analysis often prescribed for couples having conception problems), this test will help determine a man's (in)fertility status. Baba Segi finds the process disgusting and filthy (SL: 191), for he has to deliver his semen samples via masturbation, the scientifically proven method to get a clean sample. Additionally, since sperm counts vary from day to day, he must provide more than one sample spaced out a few weeks apart.

Amid these wearisome medical visits, Bolanle thought to herself: “he has seven children already” (SL: 172), an accusing thought sustained by her internalisation of the patriarchal culture. Clearly, her self-blame replicates a social given: the woman is the only responsible for childlessness in a couple. The ensuing hospital visits wholly clear Bolanle from her apparent barrenness; the medical tests prove her right: “Not a solitary sperm swimming around!” (SL: 194). The viscid, whitish fluid of her husband’s reproductive organs contains no spermatozoa. In sum, “Baba Segi’s big testicles were empty and without seed” (SL: 242).

The test result, an embarrassing fact in itself, raises an interesting question, social responsibility-wise. If a woman is just “a carrier of man’s seed” (Ruth, 1998, p. 110), by what miracle has Baba Segi got his seven children from three wives with empty and seedless testicles?

Dumbfounded by this mysterious situation of a father of seven who has no spermatozoa in his reproductive fluid, Dr. Dibia urges Mr. Alao to invite one of his wives for some clarifying, prior to releasing the results: “It is your other wives we need to see or may be just one of them” (SL: 195). He agrees to bring in Iya Segi, his first wife who holds the verdict of everything in his house. Her confessions, which unclasp this social lie in a public place, confirm the doctor’s doubts and suspicions:

I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples will itch to be suckled. My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit. Then, I had an idea. It was a sinful idea; it promised to be a solution. If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? (...). So, I found seed and planted it in my belly (SL: 215).

The bomb is released, thereafter, for Iya Segi accepts to unroll the whole truth. “She wouldn’t wait for the long rope of truth to be pulled from her; (...) the truth, they say, cannot hide itself forever” (SL: 213), she muses. Using the preeminence of motherhood as an imperative rationale behind her deed, Iya Segi admits, at the end of the day, that Baba Segi is not the father of any of the children he proudly claims, fully accepting the responsibility for misleading her other co-wives: “I misled them. (...). 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 follow the same path” (SL: 216). The narrator henceforth releases the names of the various men who have impregnated them. While Segi and Akin, the two children of the glutton and money-lover Iya Segi, are fathered by Baba Segi’s driver, Taju, the three children of Iya Tope – Tope, Afolake and Motun – are from her lover, a

butcher. Lastly, Iya Femi's lover, Tunde, has fathered her two children: Femi and Kole.

Baba Segi's world has become a hodgepodge, for his "head was bowed, bent right over like a dying branch before it offers its leaves to the next gust of wind. His tears hit the floor with a quiet splat" (SL: 216).

Shoneyin's bringing this social lie to light vindicates women. Their useless victimisation should come to an end as her resorting to medical testing uncovers the truth to the dismay of patriarchal culture's reducing women to scapegoats, childbearing-wise. Cherishing the ideal of an equal society that will banish gender stereotypes from among its citizens such as the false notion that infertility is an exclusively feminine condition, her fiction exculpates womenfolk, clearing them from a charge of guilt or fault; she ultimately frees them from blame. The blame must be equally shared until proven otherwise, this novelist seems to suggest, thus shattering patriarchal jealously-kept secrecy.

Once again, the womanist stance prevails over radicalism; against his friend Teacher's ill-advised to chase away the deceivers ("it is time for you to let the deceivers who have brought bastards into your home return to their fathers' houses" - SL: 229), Baba Segi's sense of wisdom and love transcend cruelty. He decides to keep them in his house - under his terms - in the wake of Iya Segi's following plea (SL: 241; italics in original):

You talk of the father of our children. Who is the father of our children? Who was the father of the child who now rots below the ground? Her voice broke but she continued. There is no other but you. You named her. You named every child in this house, every one. You have nurtured them so it is your name they will bear (...) but you are the only father they know. You alone have been their father, for it takes more than shedding seed to be a father.

His decision to keep them despite their horrendous behaviour reflects the core tenet of Walker's womanist philosophy. For Walker (1984, p. xi), a womanist privileges the survival of the whole of his/her people. So, instead of radically seeking to preserve or restore his honor to the detriment of his "family", Mr. Alao prizes the well-being of the whole home.

Besides debunking that social lie, Shoneyin underscores the role of a genuine father. For her, beyond impregnating a woman, a father is a responsible breadwinner who cares for his children's welfare. Instances of irresponsible fathers abound in African fiction. While Francis in *Second Class Citizen* is a seed-giver but an irresponsible father, Jeremiah in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* makes a first-rate sample, being dubbed "a lazy, self-pitying semiliterate but also a shameless alcoholic cadger" (Ogunyemi & Allan, 2009, p. 208). Wholeheartedly

sharing a womanist vision of the world, Mr. Alao finally comes to an agreement with his wives: "they could stay if they promised to be the wives he wanted them to be. He promptly banned them from leaving the house without his permission" (SL: 243). Baba Segi's proposal suits all his wives, except Bolanle who decides to return to her parents' - her longing for motherhood demands nothing less but mandates this move.

The author's releasing Bolanle from this sterile marital environment squares with her shade of black feminism - Walker's womanism. In an interview with Wana Udobang, she declares the following:

Feminism, for me, is about creating an enabling environment for women, especially in societies like ours where the doors have been shut in their faces. It's about women regaining complete control of their bodies. It's about the luxury of having options, the value of being able to make choices.³

Many elements are weighed in Bolanle's quitting decision. Beyond regaining complete control of her life and enjoying the luxury of choice-making, she is driven by motherhood which defines womanhood. Motherhood is so crucial in most African societies that circumventing it remains a daunting challenge. A recent study by Maragane J. PHEME, Sello L. Sithole and Rambilani N. Malema comes to the same dreadful conclusion (2020). Barren women get most of the blame for the reproductive setback, and suffer personal grief and frustration, social stigma, exclusion and ostracism. Definitely, the worst misfortune that can befall on any woman is to be a barren person (Akujobi, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This essay has laid bare a social lie preciously covered by smart women in their quest for procreation. In introducing Bolanle into the Alao's home, the novelist seeks to uncover the untold story behind the tradition governing baby-making in African marriages. Bolanle's saga in this polygamous setting brings into view a socially kept secret regarding childbearing. Unknown to herself, to her husband and to the public at large, her odyssey unclothes the truth about (and the secrecy surrounding) Baba Segi's infertility. Although men and women contribute to conceiving a child, fertility issues are assumed to be on the part of the female. The novelist intends an equal share of responsibility in a couple's procreation, as this

³ See Wana Udobang, "Lola Shoneyin on Freedom, Feminism and Polygamy," at <https://wanawana.net/2012/11/26/lola-shoneyin-on-freedom-feminism-and-polygamy/> Accessed on January 10, 2023.

fiction ultimately reveals that the infertility of a couple can be a result of a medical issue with the man, or the woman, or both of them.

Destroying the harmonious bond prevailing in Alao's home is not Bolanle's goal; her sojourn therein aims at curing her wounds from an early rape. However, her being younger and more educated than the other wives complicates things for her, a position which is made even more precarious as she and the baby-obsessed Baba Segi struggle to conceive a child. Tired of humiliations and psychological abuses on the ground of an "apparent barrenness," Bolanle subjects her husband to a medical test. She discovers, in this odyssey, a timeworn secret carefully hidden in the family: Mr. Alao's infertility. These shocking family revelations have disentangled motherhood and victimhood, a strategy deployed by the novelist to unshackle Bolanle from unnecessary childlessness blame. Besides delivering her heroine from the heavy yoke of barrenness, the author has armed her with optimism, as she resolves to meet the challenges of her new, post-marital life with hope, in the closing lines of the novel: she is back "in the land of the living" after her years of depression, "and the world is spread out before [her] like an egg cracked open" (SL: 245). But one will still wonder how many "Baba Segi's kids" are out there in the world?

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