

The Fallacy of a New Woman in Lola Shoneyi's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of “new woman” as conceived by Nigerian women writers through the lens of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism. Most feminists believe that a woman should be sophisticated, educated, and intelligent, and that she should be able to endure whatever tasks assigned to her at home and in her day-to-day activities, among other things. This idea stemmed from a desire to demonstrate to the world that a woman’s biological make-up should not be the sole criterion used to discriminate against other women in society. To demonstrate to readers that the entire notion of a “new woman” is nothing more than self-deception and a distorted version of the feminist struggle, the article examines Lola Shoneyi’s novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2015). Shoneyi portrays Baba Segi’s four wives as clever and smart, even though the first three women, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi, had no formal education. The novelty of this study is that it examines the concept of a new woman as a means of striking back at men who believe they are intellectually superior to women. Despite this, the author has been successful in ridiculing such egos by portraying the female characters as being smarter and more intelligent than the male characters. The finding of this research is that it demonstrates to readers that the issue of the “new woman” is to encourage escapades, as proclaimed by some feminists in most developing countries like Nigeria.

Key words: Feminism, Snail-sense, New Woman, Patriarchy, Baba Segi

INTRODUCTION

Since the post-colonial period, the predominant topic of discussion in African literature has been issues that are still prevalent on the continent. These issues range from corruption and maladministration to military interference in politics, poverty, and a host of other issues that African writers believe it is their responsibility to write about. The discourse in the works centres on issues that the writers have been grappling with to find solutions to the problems that beset society and bring about its ruin. Many writers who see themselves as moral artists with the responsibility of educating their readers also act as moral educators who have the responsibility of instilling moral values in their works. This is because they see themselves as having the duty of educating their readers. According to (Achebe, 1975), African writers write in the style of functional art. To put it another way, they do not write “art for art’s sake.” They write to re-evaluate, reconstruct, and re-educate the African psyche, which has been so traumatically shattered by the system.

Atanga (2013) argues that feminism in Africa may be understood to emerge from a variety of sources in addition to the “European” women’s movement. She added that the

history of colonialism and postcolonialism in Africa, including the continent’s own nationalist struggles, together with historical and sociopolitical aspects, are included in this category. The concept of feminism as a form of struggle against male dominance has been prevalent in Africa as early as the beginning of the twentieth century; nevertheless, it did not obtain popular recognition in literature until the middle of the twentieth century and beyond. Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, and a few other male writers have championed the cause of feminist writing in Nigeria. Their goal is to free the Nigerian woman from the shackles of male dominance in society, which is one of the many objectives of feminist writing. It is necessary to magnify this enormous responsibility in order for every woman to become aware of herself and begin the process of liberation. Since they are aware of the huge burden, they bear in liberating African women from toxic masculinity, and it is also necessary that they bear this responsibility.

Shoneyin, in her novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, sets out to tell a story of patriarchal dominance over women in the same way that earlier feminist women writers have done, but she ends up satirising African women in par-

ticular and women in general. The new woman, according to what we were made to believe, is one who is clever and intelligent to the point of being able to fight for her rights and who is often seen outsmarting the man in her life. It does not matter how foolish Baba Segi's actions are; the three women end up destroying their own lives. The idea of a new woman is seen as a sort of illusion in which women are urged to "avenge" long-standing male highhandedness by becoming a "new woman." The whole idea is based on deception or self-destruction in a certain way. Shoneyin tells the story of a new woman's attempt to get vengeance for the men's long-standing dominance, which ultimately leads to her destroying her life.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of snail-sense feminism developed by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is used in this research. Ezeigbo (2013) argues that snail-sense feminism is her own brand of feminism. She asserts that the theory was first presented at a roundtable discussion on feminism in Africa in the International Conference "Versions and Subversions in African Literature," which took place in Berlin, Germany, in May 2003. Akanmode (2015) postulates that Ezeigbo clarified her own model of feminism is the "result of an in-depth research or investigation into the condition of Nigerian women and their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives in the past and in contemporary times" in a 2012 lecture series. According to Nkealah (2016), "snail-sense feminism" is a type of feminism that is designed exclusively for Nigerian women. The snail, a species whose behaviours and techniques for survival are well known to the women of Nigeria and West Africa, serves as the model for this concept. He argues that a feminist with "snail sense" negotiates her way around patriarchy, tolerates sexist men, collaborates with non-sexist ones, avoids confrontation with patriarchs, and uses diplomacy in her dealings with society as a whole. Much like a snail, which traverses harsh terrain with caution, flexibility, foresight, alertness to danger, and the sensibility to bypass obstacles, a feminist with snail-sense approaches difficult terrain with caution, flexibility, foresight, and alertness.

Snail-sense feminism is a concept that addresses the issue of male domination that exists in most African societies. It stresses the need for dialogue between the genders on matters such as women's access to education, freedom from violence, and all kinds of toxic masculinity, among others. In the traditional African context, women have little or no influence over family matters, even when they are directly affected by them. They demand to be treated with dignity by men and to be allowed the freedom to experience human emotions as well. Snail-Sense Feminism, according to Akanmode Olushola Ayodeji (2015), adopts the habit of the snail to "negotiate" or "dialogue" with its environment in order to be able to get around obstacles in its path with a "well-lubricated tongue," regardless of whether the obstacles are rocks, thorns, or boulders. Nigeria, as a country with a variety of cultural traditions that are unfavourable to women, makes it critical for Nigerian women to learn and put into practise

strategies that will assist them in overcoming patriarchal obstacles to self-actualization and self-development.

Snail-Sense Feminism, according to Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2019), is one of the Afro-centric feminist ideologies aimed at ending male dominance and female oppression in Nigeria and Africa in general. This African indigenous paradigm contends, among other things, that women should negotiate their way around and over "boulders, roosts, and other obstacles" with the patience and efficiency of a snail. He goes on to describe how the idea is applied to attain liberation from men's dominance and subordination, as well as the socio-political experiences of our foremothers, who, according to Adimora-Ezeigbo, were successful in using this model in their relationships with their communities. Nwiyi & Edache (2021) claim that the African woman maintains a diversity of identities. They argue about how Adimora-Ezeigbo often portrays the African woman, her responsibilities, her status, and the cultural prejudice seen in social and cultural systems that stifle the woman in her writings.

As Anne (2020) discusses the relevance of the concept of snail-sense feminism in contemporary Nigerian literary debates, she argues that Adimora-Ezeigbo's literary oeuvre contributes to the Nigerian womanist literary debates, particularly in terms of the concentrated attention she devotes to furthering the trajectory of an alternative feminist alternative. In a similar vein, Ezenwa-ohaeto (2020) highlights the significance of the idea of "snail-sense feminism" as she explains how it has become established over the years that women have long conquered in their search for self-identification. Even in this arena, which is controlled by men, they have made their presence known. She goes on to explain why it is essential to take into account the mental status of women during the conflict. Because of this, the desire to comprehend how women might thrive while being repressed and mistreated has served as the motivation for this study. In addition to that, it intends to direct women in the management of their houses.

Ezeigbo uses a snail, which is a slow-moving animal that is renowned for being smart and deliberate in its approach to its goal. It is not done on the spur of the moment to make choices; the process may be long, but it achieves the goals that it sets out to do. The personalities of Baba Segi's four wives, Mama Segi, Mama Tope, Mama Femi, and Bolanle, each displaying one or more of these traits. Baba Segi is portrayed as a typical patriarch who takes pleasure in giving orders to his wives and other female members of his household. Although he is a male and a wealthy one at that, he believes that his wealth entitles him to have his way in any situation, even with women. The women in his life view him as a fool who is unaware of what is going on in his home. He believes that this entitles him to have his way in any situation, including with women. Their sexual adventure is a sign that they want to get revenge on him for his excesses and the ego he has placed on them in the past. This is a hint that they want to seek revenge on him for their sexual encounter. They slowly, but in a planned way, make their husband look like a fool, and in the end, they have gotten back at him.

In a similar study, Olatunji (2020) concludes that Adimora-Ezeigbo advises a deliberately slow pace of social and political emancipation for women in Nigeria using the snail-sense feminist model; the model's subtle idiosyncrasies express the scope of the liberatory duty that Nigerian women must perform. He added that, even though the representational woman figure often overcomes challenges rather than being completely overwhelmed by them, the snail-sense model's suggested natural pace of transformation may be too slow for Nigerian women to keep up with the demands of the global community. According to Coulibaly et al. (2017), majority of African female writers preserve their cultural norms while denouncing those that provide a significant obstacle to the emancipation of the other sex. Despite their opposition to such traditional behaviors, they appear to be opposed to any abrupt or drastic rejection of African culture or disregard for culturally predetermined standards. This viewpoint is the reason why they advocate discussion and conciliation above ingrained patriarchal conventions. Nwiyi & Edache (2021) conclude that the African woman is potentially independent and is not so to the detriment of others around her. They further claim that Akachi-Ezeigbo establishes harmony within the framework of a developing African community. The study arrives at the conclusion that African women should take the initiative to adopt strategic alternatives for self-actualization and rejuvenation. The present research is unique in that it illustrates the fallacy of the "new woman" in the context of African culture by using the metaphor of a snail to make the point. In the name of modernism, the notion is also used to highlight the defiant nature of an African woman, which is revealed through the research on women's emancipation. The above-mentioned previous studies are concerned with how the African woman adopts the method of the snail, which helps her achieve her goal slowly. However, the present study uses the concept to expose the defiance of the African woman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a significant amount of research and criticism produced in response to the novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This article tries to look at other literary works in order to find the gaps that may still exist and fill them in by contributing something new to the conversation. This research is unique in that it examines the novel as a fallacy in which the author, who is a woman herself, attempts to preach the notion of a "new woman" using the concept of snail-sense feminism. The study examines Baba Segi's wives' "secret lives" as a kind of folly rather than a successful adventure in portraying women as the writer attempts to do. This is because the research explores the "secret lives" of Baba Segi's wives. The whole idea of the "new woman" is a fallacy that only leads to self-destruction.

Chioma Emelone (2020) describes Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as portraying individuals whose relationships are founded on seeking comfort, either physically or mentally. They regard it as a means of achieving independence as well as a form of healing. She goes on to describe how Shoneyin portrays the idea that marriage

and procreation should not be burdens on women through her character Bolanle, Baba Segi's youngest wife. The writer is attempting to stress the novelist's other message to her readers, in addition to childlessness: the necessity to realise that a "new woman" does not rely just on her life's procreation. This study focuses on the theme of marriage and childlessness alone; it does not look at other issues such as the struggle by the "new woman" to emancipate herself from what they describe as toxic masculinity and men's dominance over them. According to Azuike (2020), the majority of modern African tales continue to show women as being morally slack even when males effortlessly entice them or indecently draw them to bed, as is seen from the fact that many of these stories. Therefore, the modern woman seeks to free herself from the shackles of male domination.

In an article entitled *African Masculinities: Discussing the Men in Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2013) and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017), Faith Daniel-Ben and Nathaniel Glover-Meni (2020) describe the display of masculinity by Baba Segi as nothing but a display of ego and superiority over women, which is often seen in most African societies. They claim that Baba Segi's role as head of the family supersedes all other issues. This is because being manly must manifest itself in a man's ability to be the head of his home. As such, if Baba Segi refuses the illegitimate children born to him by his wives, he does not only lose his manhood but also ceases to be the head of his family. This means that he can no longer be the leader of his household, and as such, his home falls apart. As such, the writer, Lola Shoneyin, explains that after he mops around the house for three weeks, "contemplating the manliest, most honourable way to present his proposal," Segi eventually calls his wives to a meeting. He decides to remain as the father to his illegitimate children and the head of his household. Baba Segi understands that by giving in to Teacher's advice to send his wives and their children away, he loses the reins as the head of his household. However, being the head of his household is a great responsibility that he cannot shirk for any reason. To do so would be to cease being a man. To cease being a man is to lose himself and his identity. This study focuses on men's displays of ego and masculinity in a typical African setting, using characters such as Baba Segi. Whereas the present study looks at the sexual escapade and lack of faithfulness by three of Baba Segi's wives as a form of vengeance on the male dominance over women. As mentioned in the introduction, this idea of vengeance by the so-called "new woman" is evident in Shoneyin's portrayal in the text under review.

D'Almeida (2020) opines that, to most African female writers, polygamy is oppressive to the African woman. Ikeke (2021) noted that the issue of infertility has been one of the most significant obstacles that African women have had to overcome, both in the past and in the present. She added that this has been the case throughout history. It is common practise to lay the blame for infertility on the woman, even though it may occasionally be caused by the medical circumstances of the man. This was done despite the fact that it was possible for a woman to be infertile due to her own medical

conditions. A lack of offspring in a marriage is considered a portent of ill fortune, and the woman in particular was likely referred to as a “man” or a witch at the time. In traditional African society, children had a great level of significance.

As a result, the central preoccupation of female-authored novels has become the quest for happiness through monogamy. Although polygamy is frowned upon by educated African women, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* portrays it as a confrontation with the self, an independent decision toward self-healing and self-reconstruction. He goes on to explain how the study deconstructs polygamy as women's sexual degradation, refuting its designation as a badge of shame for women on the one hand, and argues for a modern African woman's right to happiness on her own terms through polygamy on the other. This research is limited to the issue of polygamy as a form of degradation that is universally condemned by feminists and the educated in most African societies. The current study examines the novel beyond the concept of polygamy, focusing on the methods employed by educated women to retaliate against men who have attempted to relegate them to the background, employing the metaphor of a snail, an animal that moves slowly to achieve its goal.

DISCUSSION

Shoneyin seeks to demonstrate how today's women exploit sexual escapade as a kind of vengeance against men's inflated egos and excessively masculine characteristics, also known as toxic masculinity. They conceived plans in order to maintain their pride in his eyes as well as in the eyes of society as a whole because they are aware that he exemplifies the archetypal African man who would place the blame for his wife's inability to conceive on the fact that he is infertile. When women find themselves on the receiving end of society's wrath, they are frequently pushed to seek marriage as a means of escaping their predicament. The four women who are Baba Segi's brides did not marry him because they loved him; rather, they were compelled to seek refuge in his household by circumstances beyond their control.

Chief Ishola Alao, popularly known as Baba Segi, is a man who is wealthy yet has never had any kind of formal education. He is of the opinion that, because of his wealth, he is entitled to have any woman that he desires for himself. Although he is unaware of the source of his wealth, his mother gave him a large sum of money when he was still a young man and trying to make his way in a city like Ibadan. Unknown to him, Iya Segi, his first wife, is the one who really has to be thanked for the enormous riches that he likes to boast about possessing. Because she is his first wife and the one who has been with him the longest, he does give her part of his power. Given the fact that both of their mothers are from the same village and that they were childhood friends, when Baba Segi was a young man, Mama Segi's mother handed him the money that she had saved up throughout her life. On the other hand, Mama Segi has never revealed the mystery of how her mother gave him her life savings. She most likely persuades him to think that he is the head of the family, which is why she is so deliberate about following

him wherever he goes in order to be in close proximity to her money.

Shoneyin systematically demonstrates the naivety of her male characters, who think that just because they are men, they have the freedom to act however they please; in reality, the real power was given to the female characters. This naivety is shown by Shoneyin by having her male characters feel that just because they are males, they can behave in whatever manner they deem fit. The fact that the female characters in Shoneyin are given greater responsibility helps drive home this point, which is one of the main themes of the novel. Take, for instance, the predicament that Baba Segi finds himself in. He is under the assumption that he can exert power over his wife, and the rest of his family is afraid of him. On the other hand, they think of him as a naive man who is oblivious to what is occurring in his own household.

The story of how Baba Segi managed to marry off his three separate wives is one that is not only fascinating but also rather funny. He married Iya Segi because their families were friends in the village, and both parents believed that it would be a happy union for their children. When the young couple's mothers presented them with the proposition, they did not have much of a choice but to accept the conditions that their mothers set down for them. Iya Segi values the financial assistance that will be supplied to her future husband very highly, which is the primary reason why she has decided to grant her consent to the wedding. As a result, she is resolved to follow her money. On the other hand, Baba Segi thinks that in order to be a “real man,” one must be wealthy and patriarchal. For this reason, he takes a great deal of pride in the fact that he has both attributes. As was said earlier, he is suffering from a severe case of self-delusion since he thinks he wields genuine authority. The writer uses the portrayal of the character Iya Segi as a means of coming to terms with the overwhelming display of male ego that occurs throughout the narrative. She realises that she will be blamed for her inability to have children and seeks help from Baba Segi's driver, Taju, in order to conceive a child after learning that her husband, Baba Segi, is unable to father children and realising that she will be held responsible for her inability to have children. She now has two children of her own. The concept of “the new woman” refers to someone who consciously engages in behaviour that runs counter to the standards and expectations that have been established by society. Because she does not believe that the responsibility for infertility should be placed solely on women, as is traditionally the case, and that men should be exempt from guilt in this context, Iya Segi's personality is unquestionably that of a modern woman. This is because she does not believe that men should be exempted from guilt in this context. She comes to the conclusion that the best way for her to take responsibility for her own fate is to increase the size of the family with the addition of children in a way that would ensure that her husband would be content with his role as a father figure. She did not stop there; she also sought the support of the other two wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, in her plot. She is not satisfied with this result. A technique similar to that of a snail is used by the three wives in order to get

revenge on their husbands for the disorderly conduct shown to them. They followed out their plans in a systematic and steady manner, which allowed them to escape getting caught.

Baba Segi's second wife, Iya Tope, is a farmer who has been unable to live up to the standards set by his business partner, and she was a kind of compensation for the failed harvests. Iya Tope's father offered his daughter to Baba Segi in the form of a gift, as if she were a piece of clothing, in the hopes that Baba Segi would be delighted with the "gift". "I was a compensation for the terrible crops," she cries out in her anguish. "I was equal to the cassava tubers that were in the basket; there was no difference between us. It is possible that it is something even less important and odder, such as a tuberous plant with eyes, a nose, arms, and legs (82)". Baba Tope believes that his wife is a worthless person and portrays her in that light. However, the writer deftly makes her find her way in her new home as she follows in the footsteps of the senior wife, Iya Tope, and has three children from outside the marriage. This gives her the opportunity to establish herself with her new family. She may give off the impression of being ignorant and seldom speaking, and she is often seen plaiting Segi's hair, but she still manages to get away with it, and Baba Segi has little chance for revenge given that admitting his infertility would make him a laughingstock. Shoneyin achieves her goal, which was to crown the once-dumb woman as queen over a man who believes he can have it all again.

Shoneyin paints the majority of the novel's male characters in a negative light in order to illustrate the unkind treatment that men give to women, and this is a technique that is common in feminist writing. Consider the situation between Iya Femi and her uncle as an illustration. After the terrible car accident that claimed the lives of both of her parents, her uncle did not leave her any of his wealth. Both of her parents had been killed in the accident. Even though he had a very positive relationship with her father when he was still alive, he does not let her follow her dream of acquiring an education, even though her father was exceedingly nice to him while he was still alive. As if that were not enough, the culture does not allow her to take anything that her late parents left behind, although she has taken over her father's house since she is the only heir and she is a female. This is because she is the only heir and the only female. She is instead sent off to the city to work as a maid in the houses of total strangers there, "This is not your home, and it will never be," the woman, who was her aunt's wife, informed her. "It will never be." A girl is not permitted to inherit her father's home because everyone expects her to marry and make the home she shares with her husband her permanent residence (121). She returned as a "new woman," resolved to become stronger and more powerful so that she might exact vengeance on those who had been cruel to her in the past. Regardless of the initial disappointments in her life, she manages to overcome them and exact her vengeance on her uncle by using the principle of the snail's sense. According to the concept of "snail-sense feminism," a new woman is one who is bright and driven to succeed in anything she sets out to do, regardless of how much time it takes.

Iya Femi comes triumphant, notwithstanding that she has been an orphan since she was a little girl. Because she was unfamiliar with the tradition in question, she did not allow her uncle to get away with taking what he desired from her, although it is expected of her. The fact that she has moved to the city indicates that she is becoming more powerful and that she is more motivated to exact her vengeance. After some time has passed, by which point her uncle is a middle-aged father of many children, she goes back to the village and sets fire to the home. She cannot contain her joy because, notwithstanding the passage of time, she is ultimately successful in carrying out her plan to carry out her vengeance. She is pleased with herself, knowing that she has come out victorious in the end, and she smiles as she bids her goodbyes to the town. She takes a calm and determined attitude to the transition into the role of a woman. She did not put up with Grandma, the woman who is responsible for her misery while working as a maid at her family's house, and she did not let her get away with the terrible things that she had done to her. She flees with her jewels before being married to Baba Segi. She does not feel genuine love for her husband, Baba Segi, but she is ready to continue living with him since their marriage offers a safe haven for her. She follows Iya Segi's advice, and regardless of the fact that she is married to another man, she becomes pregnant by another. She was able to conceive all three of her children because of the relationship she had with Tunde, who is Grandma's son. Her secret was kept concealed along with the secrets of the other wives until Bolanle, the new wife, arrived.

On the one hand, Bolanle seems to be different from Baba Segi's three wives. She is well-traveled, well-educated, and stunningly gorgeous. She, like the other three wives, has had her fair share of disappointment throughout her life as a result of being raped when she was a teenager. When she finds out she is pregnant because of the rape, she has no choice but to have an abortion. If her overprotective mother finds out, she will punish her severely. Even though she has since completed her education and moved on with her life, the painful experience of the sad occurrence that occurred in her life is still very vivid in her mind. She has to find a way out of her present predicament, and the only choice she has is to marry an illiterate man such as Baba Segi. She is of the view that the events that have taken place in her life have made it unbearable, notwithstanding the ardent opposition of her mother, who believes that her life should continue as it is. She continues to be unwavering and resolved in her pursuit of happiness in her marital home, much like the genuine new woman that she has become, in spite of the competition she faces from her other wives, most particularly Iya Segi and Iya Femi. This is similar to how she has changed over the course of her marriage. In contrast to them, Bolanle has absolutely no intention of tricking her husband or concocting any type of nefarious scheme, either against him or men generally. In spite of all that has taken place, she makes the decision to go on with the rest of her life. She is a terrific example of how a young woman should carry herself by being cautious in her pursuit of her life's goals. When she realises that staying in the marriage would not bring any benefits,

she leaves Baba Segi's household unharmed because of her determination and her resolve to stand up for the truth in the face of adversity. Baba Segi is not able to harm her because of her stance. She is a wonderful illustration of the kind of peace that a "new woman" needs to discover in order to escape patriarchal society. Just like a snail she slowly becomes independent without hurting the man in her life.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how late-nineteenth-century European women writers like Sarah Grand popularised the notion of the "new woman." Shoneyin presents her female characters as new women determined to redress society's long heritage of male control over women. Using Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's "snail-sense" concept, the study looked at how women in the struggle to survive become victorious, although slowly. Coulibaly et al. (2017) come to the conclusion that the "snail sense" of feminism is best understood as feminism that values compromise, dialogue, balanced relationships, and reconciliation. The present study also portrays the novelist's intention to present men like Baba Segi, Taju, and Tunde, Iya Femi's uncle, as irrational and insensitive to the plight of the women around them. While the female characters are made to appear as victims of the men's brutality, although they are made to look so, despite the atrocities they committed. The novelty of this research is that it offers a new perspective on the text under consideration by looking at the strategies used by the writer to demonstrate how educated women should retaliate against male folk who have sought to relegate them to the background by employing the notion of "new woman" as the tool for analysis.

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