

## Woman against Woman in Post-colonial Fiction: Rethinking African Feminist Discourses in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a Gynocritical analysis of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It purports to evidence aspects of women against women. It is a critically shared-view that feminists look upon men as victimizers of women, but less attention has been devoted to women who victimize their fellows. Through gynocriticism, a progressive trend of the feminist approach, this research work investigates both the main factors motivating women to victimize each other in the society, and the consequences and perspectives about such a violence against women by women as they are contextualized in the novel considered. Facing polygamy, power abuse and jealousy, women are pushed to ill-treat their similar. However, in their bad behaviour, women are confronted with vengeance and false accusation. The final assessment is that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the African society rife with oppressive and retrogressive customs that oppress and subjugate women. The latter's journey from these shackles of patriarchal bondage to freedom, fulfilment and social change requires a rethinking of African feminist discourses. Ever since at crossroads, African women no longer need to limit themselves in their choice of strategies or weapons if there is any hope to win their battle to change the status quo.

**Keywords:** Victims , women, victimizers , retrogressive customs , feminist discourses.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a worldwide reality and one of the most topical issues of the African literature. Most of the time, African feminist writers of all generations expose, in their narratives, female characters challenging the patriarchal standards in a society where they are confined to marginality kept marginalized. Until recently, little critical attention has been given to women oppressing other women. Indeed, in the field of creative writing, many influential feminist writers have endeavoured to construct another portrayal of womanhood, breaking then ground to feminist discourses that A. D. Makosso (2018:208) considers as “*the proliferation of women-centred text in recent African literature as a means by which feminist writers intend to correct the ambivalence in gender relationships*”. With revolutionary changes not only in the field of Science and Technology but also in various fields, Makosso (2018:208) opines that the African literary arena witnesses a steadily increasing production by scholars noted:

For their attempt to rewrite back women into the African literary landscape, giving then the gender question a critical dimension. Indeed, with the onset of the feminist movement and the attempts to re-constitute the distorted image of the female gender, most male writers are revisiting their earlier approaches by presenting women in an all-rounded perspective.

The above opinion corresponds to our understanding of the social responsibilities of African writers which fully match up with their role of making people aware of gender realities. This position is corroborated by K. A. Djossou Agboadannon (2018:9) who argues:

Literature is therefore about fictional people and retells their life experience which can be interpreted in different ways. The reason is that literature is a study of life itself, so it cannot be dissociated from its study ground. [...] This evidence is apparent in the novel where it uncovers the relation between social cause and effect as it enables us to perceive reality beyond the words and characters' deeds.

This finds credence in Michel Zeraffa's assertion (1971:20): "*Le roman est destiné non seulement à montrer qu'il n'y a de condition humaine qu'historique et sociale, mais encore à expliciter cette condition, à l'illustrer par des exemples précis et cohérents.*"

Many Feminist critics still opine that the representation of women in literary works has always been restricting, consecrating the latter's relegation to men, if not preventing them from realizing their potential. A position shared by Francis Jibin (2017:1) when he writes:

In earlier time, women had only a decorative role in the films. Their representation was merely for satisfying the needs of men. The roles of women were always under the norms and rules of the patriarchal society. They were most often presented on the screen as sexual objects. Here women were abused twice, first by the male character in the film and second, by the spectators. But now the scenario is different.

The South African key feminist figure, Virginia Woolf for instance, echoes the ambivalence in gender relationships since she inscribes women's freedom of intuitive sympathy in a process of subverting dualistic system of thinking inherent in patriarchal ideology. Woolf's position tallies Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "*gender has nothing to do with one's sex and it is a social construct, since one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" (quoted in Charles E. Bressler, 2011:160). Yet, considering the treatment of female characters by Ngũgĩ and Lanre Ari-Ajia, A. D Makosso (2018: 232) concludes:

It clearly appears that time is no longer to "*bitching about one another*" as Buchi told James Adeola (1990, p.6), nor to wiping their skin with *ambi* and sow fire in order to be praised just for the splendour of beauty, reducing the woman to her simplest expression of a decorative flower in a man's life. Instead, in a more and more demanding society, the African woman has to demonstrate her capacity to meet new social challenges for a tangible self-accomplishment. The selected heroines, Sewa Adesewa, Jacinta Warĩinga and Grace Nyawĩra are fit enough to embody this dynamic vision considering their noteworthy contribution to the gender issue.

Today, Lola Shoneyin, along with Buchi Emecheta, Sefi Atta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to mention only somerank among the best feminist novelists noted for their tremendous grasp on the changing Nigerian literary landscape which for long centered on the shenanigans generated by political chaos. They are projecting the image of a 'new woman', who is trying to find new horizons of self-esteem and liberation through their writings. Indeed, Shoneyin's concept on feminism is enlightening and empowering since she castigates those who still regard the woman as the weaker sex or a victim of male deceit, male lust and economic necessity. For they opine that the African woman, more specifically, needs to challenge long-held patriarchal assumptions in established literary canon which stereotypes them as a 'weak' sex.

As far as the review of the related literature is concerned, worth highlighting that Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*<sup>1</sup> has already received a particular attention by some critics but none of the feminist/womanist critical works particularly identifies women as victimizers of their fellows so far. Unlike our predecessors, this study focuses on violence against women with a special emphasis on women not as mere victims and spectators but as real oppressors of other women. Thus, the central question of this research work can be stated as follows: to what extent are women responsible of other women's victimization in Lola Shoneyin's *The SLBSW* ?

In this respect, the hypothesis backing up this study can be stated as follows: Lola Shoneyin grew up in Africa and experienced violence against women. By the way, Lola Shoneyin is a right testimony, being an African writer and a female living with the stereotypes of women inferiority.

Drawing from Gynocriticism, this study aims at examining and unravelling the feminist and womanist novelist, Lola Shoneyin pertinently deploys language and style to redirect attention to an alternative feminist stylistic approach which was devoid of radical and confrontational tendencies. As Feminism comes in different types, the one to be applied in this article draws from the brand which Elaine

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<sup>1</sup>- Subsequent quotations from this novel will be inserted in the text as *The SLBSW* followed by the page number.

Showalter terms as 'Gynocriticism' – a 'revolutionary' feminist approach as she argues – constructs a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models on the study of female experience.

Any reader conversant with works by the above-mentioned feminist tendencies cannot miss to realize that with their political horizon, advocate a 'socialist-feminism', a complementarity feminism, which establishes a non-radical and non-rebellious feminist message which preached complementarity of the sexes. Indeed, *The SLBSW*, for instance, highlights the issue of gender equality and consider women not as mere victims and spectators but as real oppressors, who for diverse reasons ranging from polygamy, power abuse, jealousy, patrimony's issue, to freedom's privation by other women, and inflict all kinds humiliations on their akin. Lola Shoneyin's representation of a new generation of African woman who, in a more and more demanding society, is ready to challenge the patriarchal ideology and show her capacity to meet new social challenges, working on the conditions for self-realisation.

Three main points will be considered in the completion of this study. While the first analyzes the factors of women's ill-treatment by their fellows, the second focuses its drawbacks and the last underscores victimization of women a means of reaching a destiny.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GYNOCITICISM AS A REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST TREND**

Women victimization is one of the topical issues in the post-independence African novel. It has been tackled, through the lens of feminism by many scholars such as M. J. Osirim, (Crisis in the state and the family: Violence against women in Zimbabwe, 2003), A. L. Koussouhon, P. Akogbeto, & A. A. Allagbé, (Portrayal of male characters by a contemporary female writer: A feminist linguistic perspective, 2015), (Z. L. C. Capo-Chichi, A. M. Allagbe, & Allagbe, A. A. Allagbé, (Women's empowerment against wife-battery in Daniel Mengara's *Mema*, 2016), and A. D. Makosso (Patriarchal Stereotypes as Allegories of Protest and Conflict in Lanre Ari-Ajia's *Women at the Crossroads* and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, 2018), amongst many other. Many these works devoted to the African novel focus on women's victimization. Accordingly, Z. L. C. Capo-Chichi, A. M. Allagbe, A. A. Allagbé, (2016:1144) asserts:

Women, as in wives, are according to time and space, victims of different forms of violence, physical violence especially in their marital home, in the African societies. [...] Indeed, many scholars have identified among other causes of wife battery in poverty, patriarchy, socio-culturally accepted norms, religious belief, illiteracy, forced marriage, sexual inequality etc., and have come up with educational, economic and socio-cultural equality as sources of empowering women against wife battery.

In *Women in African writings: A study of novels by Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga*, Mansour Gueye (2017:369) asserts:

The issue of women violence is an unfinished business (...). Women should get out of their comfort zone and strive to voice a protest against any kind of biased treatment and humiliation. They need to think locally and act globally on a daily basis, so as to ensure social equity without radicalism of female chauvinism. Only then will they live harmoniously with men and contribute truly to the world's capacity building.

Appealing women to have their own voice, Gueye thinks that African women's destinies should no longer be in the hands of men. On a similar tone, Ulester Douglass and al. (2008:16) conclude that the ongoing challenge is to promote a view of prevention and intervention that gives more than lip service to the idea that violence against women is a community problem that demands a community-based response.

In all regards, though they emphasize that the discrimination and degradation of image of women especially in the post-independence novel has seen significant and constant changes over the past half-century, almost all these feminists critically share S. Sumy's view that in Africa (2017:367):

Women are made archetypes-professional, familial, and societal with respect to the comfort zone of culturists, who belong to the world of 'subalterns'. They are knowingly and unknowingly made symbols of cultural patterns which subjugate them into a mythical arena. They are viewed as 'the other' or the marginalized, provoking to various archetypes set by the patriarchs - the biological pattern, cultural inhibitions and the gender myth.

Feminism as a movement is a revolutionary struggle which requires a revolutionary discourse. A holistic Feminist' posture proves then salutary for the sustenance and maintenance of this struggle. Elaine Showalter who promotes 'Gynocriticism' readily realized that with an exclusive literary discourse, feminism could not go far, conceives this feminist literary approach in the following terms: "*the program of gynocriticism is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models on the study of female experience.*" (Showalter as quoted by Azasu and Geraldo, 2005: 53). Accordingly, Elaine Showalter quoted by (Abrams, 2005: 93), even furthers that gynocriticism constitutes "*a distinctive and concerted feminist approach to literature. [...] a distinctive feminine mode of experience, [...] in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving oneself and the outer world*" with the "*struggle for women's social and political rights.*"

Therefore, a work of art is easily termed as feminists only when it is almost based on the problems existing in the lives of the women and their response to different situations. This is the case of the novel selected for this study: Shoneyin's *The SLBSW* whose protagonists are female protagonists with all the plot centering on women's contemporary challenges, mainly in the context of polygamous households. It is thus, this concept of new representation on the analysis of wives' experience which fuels the development of this study. Indeed, through this progressive trend of the feminist approach, this research work investigates both the main factors motivating women to victimize each other in the society, and the consequences and perspectives about such a violence against women by women as they are contextualized in the novel considered.

As it can be seen, gynocriticism is not a gender discriminatory approach. For, while many male writers are feminists as long as their works are in line with the basic ideology of feminism, gynocritics decry the plight of women in patriarchal societies not matter the sex of the victimizers. Indeed, it is worthy noticing here that Gynocriticism is not a 'female-propagandist' but a 'double-edged' approach for not only does it embrace radicalism to puncture male chauvinistic tradition, but in its recreating and reconstructing the battered image of the African woman, it also lampoons at women as victimizers of their fellows.

Dealing with female radicalism as a means of achieving women empowerment in the African texts and context, Eagleton (2003:155) opines:

we may deny the position of inferiority and insist that women are just as capable as men hence deserve equal opportunity; or we may valorize the subordinated term and claim that sensitivity and an emotional responsiveness is life affirming and more socially productive than brash self-centeredness.

Yet, this study attempts to deconstruct the fundamentally defiant style, characteristic of many African feminist literary work. The Gynocriticism approach to the selected narrative aims then at redirecting the reader's attention and interest to a feminist trend, a 'complementarity feminism' which is obviously sensitive to the African cultural realities and values. Though the many African women are still under the degrading burdens of religious and customary practices, coupled with illiteracy and domestic abuse, few Gynocritical novelists, especially female ones are progressively immersing to highlight and correct the false images of women that their male peers have created.

As demonstrated in this study, Gynocriticism is an ideology which promotes solidarity, cohesion, unity, love, hospitality and social peace in society. For it ontologically constrains the individual, particularly women, in traditional Africa, to consider the interest of others. Based on these findings, we affirm that Gynocriticism can serve as an alternative ideological solution to the multifarious and complex social issues contemporary African women are facing today. Hence, the general critical lens focused on the issue of social cultural empowerment of the African woman.



### 3. SOCIAL FACTORS OF WOMEN AGAINST WOMEN IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SLBSW*

For many years, African writers have devoted much time to depict the realities faced by African women in their societies. Since they are considered as inferior to men, most of the time they are the victims of discrimination by men. But the paradox is that women are sometimes victimizers of their fellows. Guesses about such a paradoxical behaviour of women's ill-treatment by women are numerous, and are due to a given number of factors. A peruse of the selected novel seems to authorize that the reasons that prompt women to victimize their fellows rang from social factors to cultural ones.

Talking about social factors of women's ill-treatment by women, it is important to notice in general, the people's mind-set is socially conditioned that their behaviour largely depends on the socio-cultural environment in which they live. It is a truism that in Africa, women are most of the time abused and insulted not only by men but also by other women in a polygamous environment with vices such as power abuse and jealousy, among the others. An opinion recently shared by A. Ainamon, C. Gbaguidi, and M. Kodjo Agonglovi (2022:7) when they write:

As African societies practice other forms of marriage such as polygamy in which a man marries more than one woman, the chance of creating jealousy and insecurity among the wives is high. Polygamy enables men to have some preferences toward some of his wives and this can lead to jealousy among the wives. A woman who does not feel the love of her husband will use a love potion on the man and the charmed man will turn his regard from the rest of the family and then concentrate all his efforts on the woman doing the charming. This phenomenon is either highly developed or hinted at it in many African novels.

Indeed, the fact of having more than one wife in a given household, is very often source of prospective rivalry among spouses, especially when the husband, the cornerstone of the homestead does not do enough to pacify the atmosphere. For, when a husband decides to marry another wife, this may frustrate the previously married ones who finally set their mind to defend and mark their territory. This is true for Baba Segi's household where Bolanle, the fourth wife is welcomed with disdain by her co-wives, as she complains:

I lowered myself onto my knees and greeted them, only the one wearing dowdy clothes bothered to open her mouth to return the greeting then she glanced quickly at the other wives. The large one rolled onto her toes and gave me a hair-to-shoe examination. [...] Looking back, now two years have passed, I realize how naïve I was to expect a warmer welcome. I was foolish to think I would just be an insignificant addition when, in reality, I was coming to take away from them. With my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to be spread amongst four instead of three. (*The SLBSW*, pp.22-23)

From this passage, one realizes that one of the factors predisposing rival spouses to be at loggerhead is probably the prospective changes that new wife is due to bring into the household. This is certainly what prompts the discontent of Baba Segi's previous wives when Bolanle arrives. Rather, they even dare not respond to her greetings, meaning that they do not tolerate her presence in their house because Bolanle's arrival dangerously disturbs their affective equilibrium, as Iya Segi her co-wives:

Bolanle should have known how her arrival would change our household. (...) My only worry was that Bolanle's arrival would disrupt the sex rotation (...). Now that a new wife had joined us, one of us would have only one night a week. Baba Segi normally went from wife to wife, starting each week with Iya Segi. By Thursday, he'd start the cycle again, leaving with the freedom to choose whom to spend Sunday night with. Baba Segi used this night to reward whichever wife had missed a night because of her menstrual flow. Sometimes, a wife would have Sunday night if he knew he'd been heavy-handed in scolding her. [...] Now that a new wife had joined us, one of us would have only one night a week. [...] Is it that our food wasn't tasty enough? Why would Baba Segi marry another wife? Has he condemned our breasts because they are losing their fists? (*The SLBSW*, pp.50-51)

In the above textual snippet, it is obvious that Bolanle's co-wives worry and do not tolerate her presence because her arrival dangerously disturbs their sex rotation, since instead of having two nights a week, each of them will be reduced to have only one night a week with the husband. Hence, emerges the idea of putting an end on Bolanle's life so as to grab the husband alone and keep their

privileged position, which is customarily due to the Iya Segi the first, who takes it as a burden and a challenge to protect the homestead against invaders, though she has already impotently welcome two rivals:

Perhaps Iya Segi had many thoughts because she knew this mantle would fall over her. She was the eldest. She'd had him (Baba Segi) for fourteen years and was approaching the age when enticing your husband to your bedchamber was unnatural. It wouldn't matter to her that she already owned his mind and did with it as she pleased. (*The SLBSW*,p.51)

In such a competing environment, whatever initiative that the 'new comer' can take to pacify the atmosphere is doomed to failure due to the jealousy of the previous ones. This is the case of Bolanle who tries to establish a joyful atmosphere by appreciating one of her rival's cloths in order "*To ease the uncomfortable silence, I told the wife how gorgeous her skirt and blouse were.*"(p.22)" but in return, she finds a hurtful and frustrating answer from Iya Segi: "*Uneducated women wear good things too.*"

It is also worth knowing that apart from power abuse, another fertile ground for women against women in the context of polygamy is 'jealousy' that the *Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2019:983) defines as "*A feeling of being jealous.*" It is a feeling of unhappiness and anger someone has for lacking something that the others have." From this definition, it appears substantial to keep in mind that jealousy is one of social aspects which can give rise to awful actions towards other persons. Indeed, women are very often accustomed to being jealous vis-à-vis their fellows. Let it be emphasized that jealousy, from a psychologist perspective, stems from inferiority complex about physical features or intelligence abilities. As a matter of fact, women are jealous for the success of other women's career.

In *The SLBSW*, the manifestation of jealousy is clearly viewed through Bolanle's co-wives. Here, the feelings of wanting what the other has, unfortunately turns Baba Segi's household into battlefield. Bolanle is hated by her co-wives because of her will to study. Bolanle's words help buttress this view:

... They have not forgiven me for the affection Baba Segi has for me. Iya Segi and Iya Femi still shout, hiss and spit. They sweep the floor all the time singing satirical songs to ridicule me but it's not their fault that they are so uncouth. Living with them has taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy. So deep-seated is their disdain for my university degree that they smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. I have often found missing pages from my novels in the dustbin, the words scribbled over with charcoal. (*The SLBSW*,p. 24)

As seen in the text above, the hate towards the others is occasioned by the feeling of jealousy. Bolanle's books are destroyed by her co-wives because they want her to stay at the same level like them. This jealousy states the mistreatment of women by women themselves.

Then, it is very important to note that there are some women who do not stand seeing the other do what they cannot do, or envy what the other already gets. This posture prevents women to have right appreciation of their fellows' success as a source of inspiration. Unfortunately, this is far to come true when Bolanle decides to teach them how to read. Their jealousy pushes them to refuse. This is confirmed by Bolanle when she asserts:

It is not as if I haven't tried. I offered to teach the wives to read. Iya Tope was keen to learn but then I found Iya Segi tearing up sheets from the exercise books to line the kitchen cupboards. When I reminded her why I'd bought them, she said I could crawl into the cabinets and teach the insects if I still wanted them to serve that purpose. (*The SLBSW*,p.24)

This textual snippet unveils how jealousy can induce a person to be unpleasant. For instance, Bolanle does not say something wrong, she just proposes her help. Since Iya Segi is jealous, she reacts badly saying to Bolanle to go and teach the insects in the cabinets. So, because of a simple negative feeling, the jealousy hinders Segi from obtaining knowledge. As a result, Bolanle is hurtful by such cruel words.

Jealousy is also manifested when Bolanle proposes to help her rivals' children how to read: "*I have tried to help children too. I told them to assemble in the dining room. (...). The next morning, Iya Segi told me not to be a hurry that I should wait until I have my own children if I was so eager to become a teacher.*" (*The SLBSW*,p.24)

As can be seen, Iya Segi refuses to allow her co-wife working with her children for it is as an insult to see Bolanle doing something that she can never do, preventing then her children to get profit from Bolanle's education. So, a woman's level of instruction can be a source of jealousy in a polygamous household, as Iya Tope, the third of Baba Segi's wives, asserts:

Iya Segi told us she had changed her plan that it was no longer enough to wait until Bolanle's bareness made Baba Segi chase her out. Iya Segi said we had to join hands and force her out. "Don't you see her highbrow and unconcerned eyes? She thinks we are beneath her. She wants our husband to cast us aside as "the illiterate ones", she said. As a wife who has recently joined our household, it is her duty to submit herself useful to our wishes, not to think she can teach us! (p.55)

Furthermore, Iya Segi adds:

Let Bolanle draw on every skill she learned in her university! Let her employ every sparkle of youth! Let her use her fist full breasts. Listen to me, this is not a world she knows. When doesn't find what she came looking for, she will go back to wherever she came from. Iya Segi pointed to the door. (*The SLBSW*,p.52)

In the same vein, the narrator reveals:

Kruuk. Let me ask you this: what does our husband value more than what fills his mouth? " Iya Femi's eyes widened. "Children." "Ah! Wisdom at last," Iya Segi said. When she falls to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out! We know she will not give him children so we should watch from a distance. (p.53)

The above quotations confirm that Bolanle's level of education is a great problem for her co-wives to the point that Iya Segi together with Iya Femi and Iya Tope plot about chasing her away from the house. Their jealousy appears also when they refuse to tell her how to get children, maybe they fear the fact that giving Baba Segi children coupled to her high level of education can make her be the privileged wife.

Moreover, jealousy can push a woman to hate another woman, to treat her hardly and even to put oneself in competition with another woman. This occurs when Iya Femi shouts: "*Iya Segi is right. She walks around as if she owns this house. Who made her queen over us?*" *Envy seeped through every word that came out of Iya Femi's mouth. And look at all the lace Baba Segi buys her! What has she done to deserve it?*" (*The SLBSW*,p.56)

From the forgoing, one easily infers that jealousy is what dominate Bolanle's co-wives. Indeed, when a woman has something, a gift or a talent that other women do not have, jealousy and envy are unavoidable. Hence, like in all polygamous households, there is a competition among Baba segi's wives.

Insults also are part of the manifestation of jealousy in the novel under consideration. *The Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014:916) defines 'insult' as "*a remark or action that is offensive or deliberately rude.*" Generally speaking, it is the embarrassment which brings people to resort to insults. So, insults are seen as means of expressing anger, harassment and boiling feelings. Depending on the mood they are formulated with, insults may appear to be offensive or sometimes amusing to people around or even affective. Insulting is a common phenomenon in most African polygamous households. Yet, Shoneyin puts invectives in some female characters' mouths to show their dissatisfaction towards co-wives, as evidenced in the following passage where Bolanle is copiously despised:

I want you all to look like queens, (...) he married a woman like a toad and scrawny rabbit that nibbles at Bolanle's burrow. And that Bolanle! Is that this idea of a queen? Being a graduate does not make you beautiful. I know true beauty. And it is pale yellow skin. (...). I buy good makeup, unlike that Bolanle, who wanders around with her face as haggard as a sack. Ha! (*The SLBSW*, p.70)

The fact of resorting to insults may have a twofold meaning. It first connotes a 'parody' since, certain insults such as "*These educated types have thin skin; they are like pigeons*" (p.57) or "*Listen to the fool who begs for crumbs from Bolanle's table! (...) Go! Take your small brain out of my sight. Imbecile!*" (p.59) deliberately uttered by Iya Segi against Bolanle, and Iya Tope, appear humorous or amusing. For comparing Bolanle to "*pigeons*", and insulting Iya Tope of "*small brain*" may offend an educated person though it will rather sound amusing to a non-educated person.

The second meaning of insults intended by Lola Shoneyin is the expression of anger. In fact, some conversations between characters are replete with insults, sometimes deliberately to express their anger towards an upsetting act. Indeed, insult is used as form of humiliation through some characters' morally-unaccepted acts. This is true for Iya Femi who severely insults and humiliates Bolanle: "*your legs resemble those of a collapsible chair. Iya Femi pointed at Bolanle's knees and laughed out loud. (...) The poor woman looked like she would faint with shame.*" (*The SLBSW*,p.53)

From this textual snippet, one figures out how jealousy drives women to mischievous behaviours. For jealous women do not hesitate to resort to sarcasm in order to humiliate their fellows. This may be what prompts Iya Femi to pour scorn on the newcomer, Bolanle:

Bolanle's outfit looked like it had been knocked together by a roguish hand. To be honest, I sew it myself. I watched the tailor on a few occasions and made the skirt from the discoloured ends that he did away with. Instead of the square meter that the rest of the wives received as headgear, Bolanle's head was bound by a bright purple strip of cloth about eight inches wide. I don't even remember where the cloth came from. Her face was bland as if there wasn't a single thought in her head. Who knows what the lizard was thinking! Everyone stared at her. Iya Tope drew her palm to her lips but Iya Segi's eyes began to twinkle. Ha! I knew she would like it! (*The SLBSW*,pp.72-73)

This quotation dramatizes the plight of Bolanle who embodies the reality of women victimization by other women. For she is ill-treated, neglected, marginalized, and considered as the least important of the three. Since, Bolanle is the most educated than them, she does not find any occasion to feel at ease, to express herself correctly. From now on, she is surrounded by sadness, deception, and anguish.

Apart from polygamy, female characters are victims of power abuse from their fellows. 'Power abuse' is the misuse of authority on inferior persons, the ability to treat them cruelly, either physically, psychologically, especially on a regular or habitual basis. Actually, Lola Shoneyin epitomizes the power abuse embodied by Grandma a female character whose impishness obviously leads her to consider Iya Femi like a slave, like someone she gathers from nowhere, as the latter can help contend:

As soon as we got Ibadan, the woman snatched my bag, pressed two check dresses into my hand and told me I was to call her 'Grandma'. She said only her children called her Mummy and I was too lowly to emulate them. 'Here' she said, 'the house-girls wear uniforms.' She showed me a tin space under the stairs and pointed to a mat that was wedged beneath three wooden planks." (p.129)

By ordering her house-girl to sleep in "*a tin space under the stairs*", and offering a specific dress, just like a prisoner, Grandma unveils her wickedness.

Iya Femi's situation reminds of the plight of many female workers who are ill-treated by their female employers. Indeed, when a woman is given a certain authority over her fellows, she can sometimes victimize them more ferociously than even men would do. In effect, the old employer regularly pours her wrath on the unfortunate employee whose plight worsens while working for the Adeigbe's, as she is totally desperate:

I served the Adeigbe family for fifteen years. I served grandma and her husband; I served their children and then their children's children. From the day I go there I was a house-girl and my status did not change. They pillaged the most fruitful years of my life, all the time treating me as if they'd found me in a pit latrine. [...] Grandma slapped me if a drop of oil fell from the table to the cooker. If I didn't answer the first time, she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head. If I ever overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chili powder into the wounds. [...] Once, when she saw me speaking to the gateman, she stripped me naked, rubbed



chili between my thighs and locked me out of the house for a whole day. She did not even remember that I was eighteen years old with a chest full of breasts and thighs full of hair. All I could do was weep with shame. (*The SLBSW*,p.130)

Narrations such as “*she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head*” and “*(...)she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chili powder into the wounds*” or “*she stripped me naked, rubbed chili between my thighs and locked me out of the house for a whole day*” tell more about how power abuse by women triggers them off to be bad-tempered towards their fellows, especially those who undergo their poor liver.

From the forgoing, one can understand that there are women who prevent their fellows from getting education, hindering their emancipation. The following passage evidences Grandma's determination to maintain Iya Femi at the level of a house-girl, impeding her to dream bigger:

In my childishness, I decided to give Grandma a chance to redeem herself, so I reminded her that I would like to go to school one day. She cursed me for my ingratitude and took away my mat for three days. The floor was so cold that I never mentioned it again. [...] I became convinced that laundering other people's clothes, cooking three separate dishes every mealtime and comforting babies (that weren't mine) was my life. I was a fool to think Grandma would be interested in giving me the opportunity to improve my lot. (*The SLBSW*,p. 131)

Through this passage, one realizes how desperate Iya Femi is, as she only works for others and cannot do something for herself. For, she loses hope for a better life and feels like all doors in front of her are closed, predisposing her to pass all her lifetime in Grandma's house. But even after the great job she does in that house, she never has a moment to rest, even if she is tired, she has to work, as she keeps on regretting:

It wasn't until the day Grandma sent me to the market to buy two cans of sweet corn that the impulse to flee returned. Grandma had had me chopping, roasting and frying since three A.M. that morning. It was one of her grandson's birthdays and birthdays were a grand affair. I suffered from fatigue after everyone. My limbs would ache and my head would boil for days and there were times when it took me a week to recover, I never let Grandma know this if she saw me resting, she'd punish me. (p. 131)

Here, when Iya Femi contends: “*My limbs would ache and my head would boil for days and there were times when it took me a week to recover, I never let Grandma know this if she saw me resting, she'd punish me,*” she infers that Grandma does not treat her as a human being having the same rights like everybody. Considered as a robot conditioned to work harder without any break, Iya Femi does not want to walk together with Grandma since she compels her to walk two steps behind.

Also, Grandma is very rude with Iya Femi, and does not care about her health. For, she happens to send her to the market under the hot sun; and even dissuade the driver to give her a lift, as Iya Femi complains:

It was surprising that she ever allowed me to go by myself because she preferred to do her grocery shopping herself. I normally walked two steps behind and struggled with the carrier bags. (...). I was the one who was sent into the hot sun. She didn't even permit her driver to take me; she said such luxuries would make me aspire to a status that was beyond me. (p.132)

These above grumbles, help the reader figure out how power or authority makes some women treat their similar without respect and dignity. Hence, many house girls are inflicted all kinds of humiliations by their female employers who, unfortunately, treat them as slaves.

All things considered, *The SLBSW* displays polygamy, power abuse and jealousy as social aspects of women's discrimination by women. However, it also appears that Shoneyin's female characters have each their reasons for ill-treating other women. Meanwhile, the exploration of the novel under consideration reveals that women's ill-treatment by women is also perceptible through cultural factors.

#### 4. CULTURAL REASONS OF WOMEN'S ILL-TREATMENT BY WOMEN

Since times immemorial, the African societies have always been marked by situations that lead some women to be in conflict with other women. That is to say that African women are sometimes against other women because of some aspects related to African culture. Lola Shoneyin raises these cultural causes of women's ill-treatment by women through the exploration of patrimony's issue and freedom's privation by other women.

To start with 'Patrimony' which according to the *Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2019:1333), carries connotations of "a property given to you after the death of your father", is nothing but the heritage left by someone's father or male ancestor. In the framework of this study, the focus here is on how Lola Shoneyin underscores African woman's exclusion from inheriting her father's house just because the house which is devoted to her legacy is for her husband. In fact, in Africa, girls are let out of their parents' house, for they do not have the right to inherit their father's house. Thus, one realizes that gender issue is a serious dilemma in Africa because it somehow jeopardizes the situation of girls who are often obliged to get married at any cost in order to avoid to be chased out of their father's houses. Shoneyin dramatizes the plight of Iya Femi, an orphan girl imprudently expelled by her aunt after her parents' murder.

'I [Iya Femi] don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay on Oke'gbo where my parents are buried. This is my home.'

'Wipe your eyes,' she said, passing me a rag. 'It has been a month since your parents 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 belong to your uncle. That is the way things are.'[...]Go and pack. The People you will work for are coming to collect you this evening. (pp.127-128)

This passage evidences aspects of women victimizing other women. For what is distressing is that Iya Femi is chased out of her parents' house by her uncle's wife just to inherit all things let by Iya Femi's parents together with her husband. Persuasive arguments such as "it is everyone's prayer" or "That is the way things are" used by her aunt infer that excluding and preventing waives enjoy their late parents' inheritance has almost become a banality shared by most of African people. Besides, her woman's directive: "Go and pack. The People you will work for are coming to collect you this evening" epitomizes Iya Femi's nothingness, and unveils her uncle's wife dire desire to see the orphan moving out without any heritage let by her father. What disheartens the more is the woman's unsympathetic attitude toward the unfortunate Iya Femi, even when she pleads for mercy:

'So you and my uncle will live here and use all my father's belongings? My uncle had worn my father's hat at burial. [...] I cannot believe you would do this when you know how much my father wanted me to go to school! He wanted me to be educated. Baba, can you hear me? What kind of misfortune is this that has befallen me?' I place my hands on my head and invoked my father's spirit. (p.128)

As it can be seen, girls are considered as pariahs within the society, and unfortunately, they excluded by other women who relegate them into infra-humanity.

Furthermore, Lola Shoneyin exposes the plight of women who experience some cases of freedom's privation with regard to women depriving their fellows from doing basic things that they need for living and rejoicing fully in their rights. The authoress provides the reader with an outstanding illustration of deprivation of rights through Bolanle who is victimized by her co-wives, as Iya Tope confesses: "Bolanle does not deserve the treatment the other wives give her. They bark at her as if she were a child: 'don't sit there!' and 'don't touch that!' All along they are at it, yet she does as she is told and never complains." (*The SLBSW*, p.93)

Narrations such as "They bark at her as if she were a child..." and "... yet she does as she is told and never complains" clearly show that Bolanle's freedom is hampered due to the fact that her co-wives namely Iya Segi and Iya Femi make her feel unease in that house. This confirms the fact that when a new wife joins a household of a polygamous man, it always brings about some problems such as freedom's privation inflicted by the previous wives.

Additionally, in the African culture, there is a kind of belief which states the fact that a married woman and an unmarried one cannot be close friends to the extent that the first often imposes her supremacy on the second one. In the novel, this reality is seen through Iya Segi who banishes Bolanle's friend, not because of the influence they may have on her daughter, but because she wants to prevent Bolanle from her rights to receive visitors in her husband's house:

The second evil thing that Iya Segi did was banish Bolanle's friends from our house. After Yemisi and other friends visited for the third time Iya Segi told our husband that they were bad role for the daughters in the family (...) he told Bolanle that he didn't want unmarried women near his doorstep. (*The SLBSW*,p.57)

Iya Segi wants Bolanle to feel alone having no one to discuss with. So, she restrains her freedom, convincing their husband to prevent Bolanle being visited by unmarried friends in his house.

Moreover, to be free is not the fact of being controlled or dominated by another person. But realities faced up in *The SLBSW* reveal how women sometimes hinder their fellows' joys of life. As an illustration, Iya Tope's assertion shows how Iya Segi endeavours to exterminate her life just because she needs to learn from Bolanle:

That night, Iya Segi came to my bedroom and told me she would destroy my useless life if I ever sat to learn anything from Bolanle again. What would I do? On the hand was the person who gave me provisions and held my life and the lives of my daughters in the middle of her palm? (p.54)

The portrayal of freedom's privation as a source of conflicts among women is clearly highlighted by the fact that Iya Tope, the third wife, is under the control of Iya Segi, the first wife, who strictly forbids her to approach Bolanle. The latter's obedience towards Iya Segi is viewed as a sign of weakness. Henceforth, Iya Segi becomes the keystone for she decides on everything in the household. Consequently, Iya Tope has no other choice rather than obeying in order not to jeopardize her life and that of her children.

Moreover, freedom's privation is also noticeable in the relation between a mother and a daughter, as Bolanle still remembers and complains:

Mama kept trying to make me do all the things the old Bolanle would have done. Don't you think you should get a job, Bolanle? Won't you apply for this bank job in the Newspapers, Bolanle? Didn't you see the handsome boy that was looking at you, Bolanle! (...) The more she pushed the more I resisted. I didn't want a job! I didn't want a white wedding. (*The SLBSW*,p.17)

Here again, Bolanle's subversive words, reveal how her mother tries to control her life, depriving her rights from making personal choices. Narrations such as "*Mama kept trying to make me do all the things the old Bolanle would have done*" or "*The more she pushed the more I resisted. I didn't want a job! I didn't want a white wedding*" evidence a kind of 'paternalism' which regrettably leads to an obvious ambiguity of thoughts between both characters. Consequently, freedom's privatization generates a conflict between a mother and her. Evidently, it sounds weird to see a mother who goes against her daughter's choice in terms of love relationship. Indeed, Bolanle's mother exasperates and obliges her to get married with a healthy man. Instead, Bolanle craves for Baba Segi, forgetting about her sister Lara's warning:

You want to marry a polygamist and be part of a big, ugly family? Mama will go crazy! [...] You future will be futile and uninteresting. Polygamy is for gold-diggers and bush-dwellers, not educated children brought up in a good Christian home. (*The SLBSW*,p.18)

In Bolanle's mind-set, going with a Baba Segi, even when her sister and mother call him a polygamist ogre, is not a troublesome problem, but what seems tricky is her mother's disapprobation of her choice. To all this wailing and brand of persuasion which embarrass her bloodline, Bolanle's reaction is predictable, as she contends:

It all made perfect sense when I met baba Segi. At last, I would be able to empty myself of my sorry. I would be with a man who accepted me, one who didn't ask questions or find my quietness unsettling. I knew Baba Segi wouldn't be like younger men who demanded explanations for the faraway look in my eye. Baba Segi was content when I said nothing. I chose this family to regain

my life, to heal in anonymity. And when you choose a family, you stay with them. You stay with your husband even when your friends call him a polygamist ogre. You stay with him when your mother says he's an overfed orang-utan. (pp. 17-18)

As it can be seen, patrimony and freedom privation lay a foundation for mistreatment or the hatred in order to maintain other women under their control in order to hinder their blossoming. Though in Africa, marriage is a family affair but Shoneyin appeals to parents' flexibility so as to let their daughters accomplish their love desires.

In all regards, cultural features are important indicators which highlight this phenomenon of women against other women. Yet, Lola Shoneyin portrays certain female characters as wolves smelling their female prey's scent. This simile explains how, because of the love-materials, some women do not hesitate to ill-treat their similar just to be in possession of belongings let by someone's father, as Iya Femi states: "(...) *the woman has the disease of the eye: everything she saw, she wanted.*" (p.127)

However, a peruse of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* also unveils how women's ill-treatment by other women result on consequences that need to be scrutinized.

### **5. CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN AGAINST WOMEN IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SLBSW***

As stated earlier on, if certain women are nowadays determined to abuse other women or if they are sometimes against each other, it is because they have some interests that they want to preserve at any cost. That is to say, they have quantified the degree of risks they are going to take in order to achieve their goal. Basing on the fact that each action has its consequences, the phenomenon of women's violence against women does not make exception. This bad behaviour of women towards their fellows has some consequences which are positive and negative. The rationale behind this point is then to show how Lola Shoneyin contextualizes consequences of women's violence against women on victimizers and the victimized as well in *The SLBSW*. A peruse of this novel reveals aspects of 'Vengeance' and 'False Accusation' among the most harmful drawbacks of this conflictual situation.

To start with 'Vengeance', *The Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2019:2024) defines it as "*a violent or harmful action that someone does to punish someone for harming them or their family.*" To avenge is to retaliate, carrying connotations of the fact for a victimized person, to strike back sufferings that he endures to his victimizer. Since the African woman is always depicted as a victimized who suffers a lot, many fictional works are replete with evidences of her resentment. Yet, some feminists think that African woman deserves to avenge all the suffering she endures. Most of the time, retaliation is proportional to the heavy impacts of bad behaviour and cruel actions done by the victimizers. Let it be tempered here that revenging is not always synonymous to doing bad things to the abuser, it may be wishing him bad things. This issue is raised in the novel with regard to Iya Femi who, after being ill-treated by Grandma, begins to pray God for the latter's damnation, as she confesses:

The preacher spoke (...) Sister, all sinners will "burn". His intention was to put the fear of God in me, but instead the thought of grandma burning excited me. In my mind's eyes, I saw images. Melting faces, singed limbs. When he asked me to repeat the sinner's prayer after him, the sound of grandma's wailing and gnashing of teeth drowned his voice (...) That was a particularly excited me thought. (*The SLBSW*, p.133)

Since the desire of vengeance begins with thoughts, Iya Femi imagines and wishes grandma's punishment for all the evils inflicted upon her. The narration "*the sound of grandma's wailing and gnashing of teeth drowned his voice (...) that was a particularly excited me thought*", discloses Iya Femi's excitement by the only thought of seeing Grandma burning in hell. This accounts for her determination to settle an altar for her prayers:

From that day, I prayed early every morning and late into the night. I created an altar beneath the stairs and laid the map of new Beginnings church on it. [...] About two months after I received Jesus, Grandma scorched me with iron because I'd burnt a hole in one of her silk blouses. As I spread a film of Vaseline over the naked flesh, I decided that it was simply not enough to edify myself with thoughts of her body cracking in hell. Something drastic needed to be done. For hours every night, I would chant: God, send Grandma and her family. (p.134)



From this passage, one notices Iya Femi's willpower of doing Grandma Justice for all. The fact that she creates an altar proves that she really wants to avenge by all means. Iya Femi's desire to avenge herself is not limited to prayers as she decides to go far. Indeed, when someone has his mind made-up for vengeance, he is able to do many evil things against the person who has abused him. His only desire is to see that person suffers. In this connection, Iya Femi's determination to act by herself has a strong impact on her vengeance, and induces her to resort to drastic actions, especially when Grandma inadvertently has her leg broken:

After seven days of fervent prayers, Grandma slipped in the bathtub and broke her leg. My initial joy was shattered when I realised that she would use her immobility to find me more work. She became invalid: I had to bathe her and towel her dry as well as everything else. Was Jesus punishing me? Or was pushing me to use the reins he'd handed me? I chose the latter and starring urine, and then a few drops of toilet water, into Grandma's cup. It wasn't long before she was admitted to hospital for terrible diarrhoea. (*The SLBSW*, pp. 134-135)

This extract shows how far Iya Femi goes to avenge herself. Knowing that Grandma becomes invalid, she uses this opportunity for her benefit. She puts urine and toilet water in Grandma's goblet to make her be sick. This is what happens since she is transferred to hospital for a terrible diarrhoea. The fact that Iya Femi dares use urine which is a very soiled liquid and gives it to Grandma, proves how enormous is her hatred against her victimizer because of her multiple wicked actions.

Moreover, sufferings can cause innocent and kind women to become monsters, mainly when inflicted by women fellows. This is the case of Iya Femi who suffers so much, because, after her parents' death, her uncle's wife chases her away from the house and sells her to Grandma who unluckily mistreats her. Reacting to these sufferings inflicted by her uncle's wife, Iya Femi develops hatred which drives her to go back to her village so as to achieve her desire of vengeance, she confesses:

I won't rest until they are punished. In the Bible, God said, "vengeance is mine." If God can delight in vengeance, how much more a poor soul like me who has been misused by the world? I must have revenge. Only then will I accept that there was a reason for all my suffering. [...] Seeing the young boy remind me that I hadn't come there to harm anyone. Just to claim what was mine. What do you do when something that is yours is claimed by someone else? You destroy it! You take it apart so devastatingly that it can never be put together again. (p.140, 141-142)

Through this quotation, one understands that Iya Femi is involved in the destruction of the heritage left by her father, as evidenced in the following passage:

Starting from the backyard, I poured kerosene along the walls. I poured some on the concrete bench my mother placed her baskets on. I poured some on the doormat we used to scrape mud from our feet. (...) I barged past her and locked us both in. I put the key on my bra and poured kerosene in the clothes in the wardrobes, the basket of food. I emptied the keg onto the over-worn shoes stacked in a corner. I even upturned the kerosene stoves for good measure. It took a lot for me to swallow my laughter when she started banging on the door, shouting, "Don't kill me!" Don-key me, more like. That would have been closer to the truth! How quickly fire eats! I ran outside 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, didn't you? I went seeking revenge, not death. I let her out of the front door, yelling and tearing at her scarf. She didn't know whether to summon her husband or brave the flames. I prayed that her most precious possessions were aflame, forever beyond reach, destroyed before her very eyes. (*The SLBSW*, pp.142-143)

This excerpt undoubtedly evidences Iya Femi's determination to avenge herself, as she destroys not only her father's belongings but also those of her uncle's wife.

As far as false accusation is concerned, it may be understood as an allegation of wrongdoing that is untrue or otherwise unsupported by facts. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010:10) 'accusation' is "a statement saying that you think a person is guilty doing something wrong, especially of committing a crime." In other words, it is a claim whose objective is to make someone guilty of what he has not done. This is the case when Iya Segi and Iya Femi accuse their co-wife Bolanle of murder attempt against Baba Segi:

Iya Segi's voice was loudest. "Woe", she yelled. Iya Femi was screaming in tongues. Iya Tope had an arm around Segi but the arm was limp like a wet cloth. Segi's eyes were red from weeping. Everyone looked around nervously. "She wants to kill him!" Iya Segi pointed when Bolanle was within a few steps of the "commotion" what did my father ever do to her? I am not married yet. She wants to kill my father with Juju before he walks me down the aisle!" Segi flopped to the concrete floor and the spectators standing by rushed to her aid. "Of what use is she?" She cannot have children. Her womb is dead. She wants to kill our husband to save herself from shame. I am too young to be a widow," Iya Femi added. [...] She is a destroyer of homes! Why didn't she go to the abattoir if she was thirsty for blood? There is no blood for you here, Bolanle." (pp.60-61, 36)

From this snippet, one realizes that when a woman is against another woman, she does not hesitate to use evil practices in order to make an innocent guilty. As a matter of fact, Iya Segi and Iya Femi accuse Bolanle to attempt killing Baba Segi, so as to induce their husband to cast her out. As expected, Bolanle vehemently denies these false accusations, as she contends:

To the small crowd that had gathered in the sitting room, Bolanle said, "I say, I have never seen these things before in my life. Neither do I want to, ever again. Why would I want to kill my husband? If I become tired of my husband, there isn't a policeman in the world that can force me to stay with him. I am here because I want to be here!" She exhaled long and meaningfully." I have lived in this house for two years and I want to continue to stay if my husband will have me. Only today, we went to the doctor to see how I could bear his children. I do not want to die barren. How is it profitable for me to become young widow? Why would I want my child or any of these young children to be fatherless? Her hands reached to brush Femi's head but he ducked! (*The SLBSW*,pp.64-65)

Here, one figures out Bolanle's sincerity so that Baba Segi dares apologize and comforts her when he says: "*Bolanle you can go to your room.*" (p.65) This kind reaction particularly hurts Iya Femi who does not appreciate to see Baba forgiving Bolanle. Then, full of anger, Iya Femi protests: "*Go to her room?*" she shrieked: "*is it after she has killed us all you will do the right thing? If this woman is allowed to sleep in this house, I will sleep outside with my sons. I will hold a night vigil pray her out.*" (*The SLBSW*,p.65)

Despite this failure to make Baba Segi chase Bolanle, Iya Segi and Iya Femi do not stop with their accusations. In desperation they rather decide to concoct new mischievous schemes, resorting even to physical assaults in order to jettison their rival out of the household to protect their secret, as Iya Tope reveals:

After a few months, the same Iya Segi who said we should watch Bolanle from a distance started to boil. She called me and Iya Femi to a meeting, saying that there were words to spoken. These words were nothing but curses and insults: the bigger Bolanle puffed out her chest, the smaller Iya Segi became. Iya Segi told us she hand-changed her plan, that it was no longer enough to wait until Bolanle's bareness made Baba Segi chase her. Iya Segi said we had to join hands and force her out.

'Don't you see highbrow and unconcerned eyes? She thinks we are beneath her. She wants our husband to cast us aside as illiterate ones,' she said. 'As a wife who has recently joined our household, it is her duty to submit herself to our wishes, not to think she can teach us!'[...] 'Let us only speak words that will push this matter forward. This girl has already been here five months but I know there will be trouble is she stays,' [...] Now that we are all lying with our heads in the same direction, we must work together to blow this cloud away! These educated types have thin skins; they are like pigeons. If we spoke her with stick, she will fly away and leave our home in peace. (pp.55, 56, 57)

It can be inferred that the three previous wives are jealous and resentful of this interloper who is stealing their husband's attention. Yet, narrations such as "*we must work together to blow this cloud away!*" or "*If we spoke her with stick, she will fly away and leave our home in peace*" unveil the three wives' overriding determination to blow out this quiet, college-educated, young woman named Bolanle from Baba Segi's home. The following passage is illustrative of Iya Segi's fierceness, when she rushes over Bolanle:

Iya Segi grabbed Bolanle by the sleeve, knocking the tray to the floor (...) “Iya Segi please you are hurting me. Let me go to my room.” Iya Segi pushed Bolanle with all the strength in her muscular arms. The smaller fell backward and landed bottom-first on a stool before toppling over and knocking her head on the cold terrazzo, just missing the edge of the rug. Although Bolanle heard the sound of bone grazing stone, she jumped to her feet in case Iya Segi decided to pounce. Unstable on her feet, Bolanle touched the back of her head and hand within view; it was moist with blood.” Look what you have done to me.” She whispered. (*The SLBSW*,p.169)

This dramatic sequence helps the readers figure out that Baba Segi's home becomes a battlefield where co-wives resort to bloodshed for the sake of gaining a good positioning in the husband's heart. Instead of being united, they just care about hunting others. The truth is that, they are not ready to love each other since each of them especially Iya Segi wants the others to consider her as the mother of Baba Segi's household. Narrations such as “*Iya Segi grabbed Bolanle by the sleeve, knocking the tray to the floor*”, “*Iya Segi pushed Bolanle with all the strength in her muscular arms. The smaller fell backward and landed bottom-first on a stool before toppling over and knocking her head on the cold terrazzo, just missing the edge of the rug*” or “*Bolanle touched the back of her head and hand within view; it was moist with blood*” obviously indicate this human ‘butchery’.

Similar reaction is recorded from Iya Femi when the narrator evidences: “*Iya Femi's head is hot. She wanted the blood of the new wife who had taken her place as the newest, youngest and freshest wife.*” (p.50) It is worth noticing that Bolanle's martyrdom has no proven reason since she is accused for something she has not done. In effect, Iya Femi's assault on her rival is just a subterfuge, the truth is that, after Segi eats the poisoned food Iya Segi and Iya Femi destined to Bolanle, they desperately accuse the latter for being responsible of what befell the unfortunate young boy.

What is striking at this level is that though victimized, Bolanle does not consider her rivals' mischievous malignance against her; she rather keeps on behaving approachable. She never loses temper, to the astonishment one of her rivals:

It surprised me that Bolanle could speak to us after Iya Femi turned her like a spinning top. But they say a child who will play in the dark must first learn how to close its eyes. Bolanle wanted to play in the dark, she did not let Iya Femi's behaviour move her eyeballs. The next day, she came to the sitting room and asked if any of us wanted to learn how to read. [...] the more those two (co-wives) poked Bolanle, the more mercy her eyes showed, the more her hands opened to the children. I have never known anyone like Bolanle. Even after two years of their wickedness, she still greets them every morning. (*The SLBSW*,p.54, 58)

It is important to indicate that when Iya Tope feels sick, Bolanle sympathizes and graciously proposes her help. A positive attitude which impacts Iya Tope, seeing that the woman they ill-treat behaves friendly to her, as she confesses:

She said she had seen that I was walking around like a woman pregnant with a grown man. I told her what was bothering me and she ran to the kitchen to fetch three glasses of water. She told me to drink them and wait for her. I don't know where she went but soon after, she ran back with a shopping bag. The two tablets she gave me chased me to the toilet. I thought I would find my intestines on the floor. I sat there for a whole hour but when I finished, I felt like a human being again. (*The SLBSW*,p.58)

Besides, Shoneyin contextualizes aspects of false accusation through the character of Iya Femi, long before she joined Baba Segi's home, mainly while being employed in grandma's house. Iya Femi experienced all kinds of humiliation facts that she was not responsible of, as she contends:

Let me tell you now, I don't like people who think they can outsmart me. Grandma used to throw skirts into the laundry basket with money in the pocket, hoping I'd steal it so she could accuse me. I wasn't that stupid. [...] The most stupid thing was what grandma did about the pants though. She'd creep up behind me and ask me to lift my skirt to check which underwear I was wearing. She did this every time her daughters reported that their pants were missing. Where should I wear stolen pants? They were buried in the big sack of rice in the pantry. I hate it when people think they can outsmart me. (*The SLBSW*,p.138)

One figures out how Grandma indirectly accuses Iya Femi of stealing her daughter's pants. Even if Grandma does not openly say it, but the fact of asking Iya Femi to lift her skirt and shows the underwear she has, somehow is a kind of accusation. In Grandma's mind, Iya Femi is the designated thief who stole those pants. The truth is that they do not check their pants before accusing that poor girl of having stolen them. Talking about those stolen pants, Iya Femi denies this false accusation since she knows that "*they were buried in the big sack of rice in the pantry*" (p.138)

From the foregoing, one easily infers that the fact of being against someone brings certain women to resorting to false accusation in order to spoil their fellows' reputation, and make them lose what they have.

Nonetheless, Lola Shoneyin evinces some positive consequences for the victimized women, who somehow trade their sorrows and pains, turning them into opportunities for self-accomplishment. For there are noticeable positive perspectives of women's victimization by others when for instance it serves as a means of reaching a destiny and friendship establishment after violence.

## **6. MALTREATMENT AS A MEANS OF REACHING A DESTINY**

The word 'ill-treatment' comes from the verb to ill-treat, which according to the *Dictionary of contemporary English* (2014:916) means "*to be cruel to someone*". In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, there are some aspects which bring light to ill-treatment, but in this context, it appears to be redemptive as much as it sometimes leads to a so-called better future. After fifteen years of sufferings, Iya Femi who, after her father's death, is treated unfairly and sent to serve Adeigbe's family, plans to escape in order to look for freedom. So, as a lion which wakes up from its sleep, she decides to change her destiny. The following quotation is revelatory:

You're not going to serve my family for the rest of your life. Are you? I remember this conversation because I was twenty-one years old at the time, yet had never occurred to me that I could leave. Although the prospect of freedom excited me, the idea of escarping made my heart pound. (p.131)

Thanks to Tunde's interrogation, Iya Femi is stirred and drawn by the idea of transfiguring her life and destiny which are invaluable. Then, the search for freedom seizes her and she gets the strength to fight for her life. The particularity here is that thanks to the fact that her uncle sells her to Grandma, Iya Femi meets the man who becomes her husband:

Since the day my uncle sold me, this was the first time Grandma hadn't been able to send on errand. I soon began to believe that I too had dropped from between a woman's legs! While her husband and children spent their days by herb side in a private hospital, I wonder beyond our fence. There was a new house being building across the road and that is where I met Baba Segi. He was supplying the plumbing materials and he looked powerful yet kind in his yellow safety helmet. I offered him Grandma's precious boiled water. He accepted and thanked me. (*The SLBSW*,p.135)

Iya Femi's departure to the town can be seen as a good perspective even if circumstances of this journey are far to be comfortable. Nevertheless, this can be viewed as an occasion to meet her husband in town.

Another point which allows Iya Femi to reach her destiny is Grandma's bad treatment, because after meeting Baba Segi, she does not know that he is her husband to be. In effect, it is the sake of finding another dwelling that pushes Iya Femi to tell Taju that she is longing for a man to get married with, as she confesses: "*I didn't waste time in telling Taju I was looking a man to marry me. I was desperate; I didn't want Grandma to come back and find me there.*"(p.135)

Iya Femi's words actually unveil her determination to change her life positively. Yet, she could no longer help hiding her penchant to welcome Baba Segi as a 'saviour', as evidenced in a conversation with Taju:

Baba Segi is the one who has enough money to marry many women, Taju advised. 'The one I have, complains every day'. Then make him marry me. Convince him and put me in your debt for ever. I have no relatives so there is no one for him to pay homage to. (*The SLBSW*,p.135)

As soon as Taju does his good offices, Baba Segi sends him to go and collect his new wife, Iya Femi whom could not help thanking her go-between:



I don't know what he told Baba Segi but he did his job well. Less than one week later, Taju came alone in the pick-up and park across the road. [...] I felt like I was suspended in mid-air. It was as if I had reached my heaven. Not even God himself could have made me leave Baba Segi's house after that. (*The SLBSW*, pp.136, 137)

Iya Femi finally leaves Grandma's house, free and far from ill-treatments she has endured for years. Indeed, she gets at least what is less cruel than the treatment she used to experience in her employer's home. It is worth mentioning that the seemingly new life she gets is not an end to her problems, but just a bit betterment of her situation. Indeed, the unfortunate orphan does not know that all sufferings that await her in the new polygamous environment. For, she is almost used as a maidservant, as she complains:

The thing that struck me about Baba Segi's house was the soiled curtains. The layer of dust on them was so thick... the walls of Baba Segi's house were stained too. Everything was grubby but the wives (the two first ones) were worst of all- the ageing toad and shameless goat! One ruled the pond, the other played with its shadow all day. [...] I found the kitchen and scrubbed every inch of it the wives stepped around me in hushed curiosity. I finished at eight o'clock in the evening. (*The SLBSW*, p. 137)

In addition to the physical pain, the twenty-three years new married falls into a sentimental deadlock since her 'seemingly' saviour cannot help unleash her sexual desires. Instead, unlike Tunde her former young lover, Baba Segi quickly proves callous and unfair in love with Iya Femi, as she regrets:

Baba Segi came to me. He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts. I thought it was all quite amusing until he jumped between my legs and tried to force his penis into me. "I am still wearing my pants," I told him. He wasn't like Tunde at all. There was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening. Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts. Tunde never did that; he always shook his water onto my belly. (*The SLBSW*, p. 137)

Here, Iya Femi's remorse after her inaugural sex escapade "*Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward*" indicates the extent of the affective disaster that awaits her with the old polygamous man to whom wives' emotional welfare matters less.

All things considered, women's ill-treatment by women in Lola Shoneyin's *The SLBSW* has some positive and negative consequences as well. For, victimization has not erode some abused female characters' willpower to finally clear up the road to their destiny.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This paper has set out to show how some African female writers have depicting the gender issue in their writings against the backdrop of women as victimizers of their fellows taking Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's wives* as template of this trend. Drawing its theoretical insights from the Gynocritical approach, this study has argued that Gynocriticism is an ideology which cognitively and socially shapes the behaviour patterns and controls the beliefs of members of traditional African community. The analysis has revealed some important findings. By and large, it has been noticed that Shoneyin's portraiture on the psyche of women, especially in the context of polygamy, facing power abuse and jealousy, evince implications of traditional yoke which predisposes them to victimize other women. Female characters like Iya Segi, Iya Femi, Iya Tope, and Bolanle are ontologically ingrained at varying degrees in this battlefield. For they quickly deviate from the culture of traditional Africa which enjoins co-wives to co-habit in an atmosphere of peace, forgiveness, love, and mutual understanding, and subsequently turn into an ideological misfit for their society. This study, unlike others, foregrounds Lola Shoneyin's radical feminist stances and shows how most of African women who engage themselves in ill-treating other women believe that it is the only way for them to guarantee their power on their fellows or to have what they need from the latter. The paper concludes that inopportunely, women are most of the time surprised by the results of their bad actions.

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