

Moral Issues in Recent Nigerian Novels: a Reading of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

The novel form has been deployed, over the ages, as a tool of propagating moral issues that have been the basis for defining the human person in his relationship with both terrestrial and celestial forces. The human person is accepted or rejected on the basis of the moral codes set by and with which man lives his life. Every society holds its individual member accountable and subsequently demands compliance to its moral laws. Relying on the Yoruba moral principle and through character analysis of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the paper examines the author's radical departure from the moral norm, through which the Yoruba view their world. It is established that, most female characters provide justification for their sexual escapades outside their matrimony. Consequently, the author has impliedly sanctioned moral vices, especially adultery, within the context of constant threat, as a result of inability to have children. I have argued that, the justification provided by the author of the novel for extra marital escapades, especially by her female characters, is unacceptable. I concluded that, virtuous act should never be sacrificed on the altar of any radical ideology. This is because literature, in my view, is the most important and richest source of insight into moral codes and as such should be in favour of the best moral standard.

Keywords: morality, adultery, norm, person, codes.

1. Introduction

In almost every society of the world, literature, either in its oral or written form, has been a tool of propagating moral issues from time immemorial. The novel form, in particular has been deployed by novelists to project and assess these moral codes. This is because morality is seen as a very vital aspect of the society. In fact, it is one and inseparable from life. Without moral principles to regulate our code of conduct in the society, life would be almost meaningless, chaotic, disorderly and uninteresting. As human beings living in a society, men are bound to always relate with one another. In the process of relating, we sometimes do things and act in ways that are either morally right or wrong. Moral rights create positive social effects, while moral wrongs are adverse; hence, every society strives to reward moral right and punish moral wrong. To the Yoruba, morality is summed up by the word '*Iwa*' which can be translated as character. *Iwa* is seen as a very essential ingredient that defines a man. It is an aspect of human existence that results into *Iwapele*, the very core of the Yoruba moral principle, which situates man within the socio-religious milieu. According to Wande Abimbola (1975), Every individual must strive to have "Iwapele" in order to be able to live a good life in a belief system dominated by many supernatural powers and a social structure controlled by a hierarchy of authorities.

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The man who has “Iwapele” will not collide with any of the powers both human and supernatural. (394-395) To avoid the inevitable consequences of the conflict within the social order, each member of the society is expected to be guided by virtuous codes in his dealings with other members of that society as well as supernatural elements. In the Yoruba moral philosophy, *Iwa* means the principles guiding good or bad character or right and wrong. While *Iwapele* (good character) produces one who behaves as a well-born. Anyone who practices *Iwabuburu* is *Eniyankeniyani* - a mere caricature of a person. (E. B. Idowu, 1996; Niyi Adebajo, 2011). The main purpose of religion in Yoruba culture is to cultivate *Iwapele*. The import of this, in the Yoruba cosmology, accounts for why moral right is preferable to riches, children, house and clothing. A man who possesses riches and other material things, but lacks *Iwapele* is sure to lose them all to someone who knows how to order his life without any collusion with natural and supernatural forces. The main components of good character to the Yoruba include the following: chastity before marriage (most especially, on the part of the woman), hospitality, kindness, selflessness, goodness and truthfulness, among others. Consequently, stealing, adultery, covenant breaking, hypocrisy and falsehood are condemned and frowned at. There exist therefore, within the Yoruba world, moral codes which all men are bound to obey. All men who have not lost the use of their reasoning or conscience feel obliged by these moral laws. The moral law may be regarded as that which obliges all men to refrain from evil and do good. The ancient Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, are convinced of the existence of an absolute, unchangeable standard of behaviour. Immanuel Kant (2008), in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* describes moral law as a categorical, imperative and unconditional command that obliges all men to perform their duties because they are under obligation to do so and not for any possible gain. The implication of this is that, this unconditional command places imperative responsibility on the individuals.

There are moral principles, which constitute the standards of moral behaviour. According to Omoregbe, J. I. (1993), moral principles are of two kinds: the positive principles and the negative principles. The positive principles indicate what we ought to do, such as respect, truthfulness, honesty, fidelity and so on, while the negative principles indicate those acts that should be avoided, such as stealing, lying, murder, adultery and so on. The questions at this juncture are: Who determines what is morally acceptable and what is not? Who is at the receiving end of these socially determined moral codes? Is it the male or the female gender? Should a person’s gender be a major concern when moral issues are being considered? In the specific case of adultery, if the man is free to commit adultery under the guise of a new wife, should any code restraint the woman? Attempts are made here to provide possible answers to some of these questions.

2. Aims

I have, in this paper, therefore, examined the perspective through which Lola Shoneyin has considered the moral issue of adultery in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, with the intention of searching for a justification for her moral mutations. I have tried to locate the place for such feminist outburst of subtle legitimization of adultery within the Yoruba world of the novel. The Yoruba moral principle is adopted because the novel considered here is situated within the Yoruba social context; this of course is without a disregard for the global outlook with which the author paints her pictures of gloom and bloom.

3. Storyline

Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* is a novel that deals extensively with moral issues in a polygamist setting. Almost all the major characters display one form of immoral act or the other or are victims of some immoral acts. Moral vices that are explored in the novel include; adultery, jealousy, murder, evil conspiracies, betrayals, rape, falsehood, hatred and malice. The story exposes the secrets of Baba Segi’s wives. Baba Segi, a prosperous business man marries four wives, with Bolanle, a graduate and the youngest, as the last of the four wives. Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi are the first, second and third wives respectively. The trio comes up mysteriously, with seven children for Baba Segi. The conflict in the text arises when Bolanle, the fourth wife, arrives. She becomes the potential danger that is likely to expose the “big secret”. So, the other women decide to make her life a living hell in the house through their evil plans and malicious acts. Meanwhile, Baba Segi becomes worried at Bolanle’s inability to conceive and so decides to take her to the hospital to find out the cause of her infertility. The result of the hospital test comes out and it is discovered that there is nothing wrong medically with Bolanle. Baba Segi’s worries aggravates as he discovers that the disease he had as a child, has made him sterile.

So, how come he has seven children by the other wives? After further investigation, it is discovered that the other wives, with the influence of Iya Segi, have committed adultery with other men and have attributed the results of their illicit affairs to Baba Segi.

4. Analysis of Major Characters and Their Moral Roles in the Novel

Adultery, the subject matter of this paper, is the main issue in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. All the women, with the exception of Bolanle, commit adultery with such impunity and utmost disregard for their marital vows. Adultery, for them, becomes nothing but a tool of protest. Iya Segi, the first wife, for instance, is the secret source of Baba Segi's success, both as a businessman and as a father. As a young girl, she has made so much money trading with her mother. After her mother discovers that Iya Segi's insatiable desire for wealth was making her sacrifice marriage for pleasure of moneys, she forces her to marry Baba Segi, her friend's son. Her mother gives all of Iya Segi's savings to her own friend in order to induce Baba Segi into marriage with her daughter. Wounded and hurt, Iya Segi could not forgive her husband who has betrayed her by marrying other wives. After a while in Baba Segi's house and without children, Iya Segi lures Baba Segi's driver into sex and so she is able to have children. She is not ashamed to engage in illicit sexual affairs with the driver and she boldly walks up to the other wives and tells them to do the same, in order to protect her secret. She holds such an unimaginable spell on both Iya Tope and Iya Femi. With her weak moral judgment and the fear of Baba Segi carrying out his threat of sending her back to the village, Iya Tope easily accepts Iya Segi's suggestion that she gets pregnant at all costs. Iya Femi on the other hand does not even need Iya Segi to prod her into adultery, as she is already three months pregnant for her former employer's son. Should Iya Segi be seen as a bad role model, not to be imitated by other wives? The answer to this question from the perspective of the author is, no. A woman who has sacrificed all for a man should enjoy the union without any interference from other women as bed sharers. Iya Segi receives little or no blame from the author even for killing her own daughter through the poisoned food she prepares for Bolanle. Her husband ridiculous forgiveness does not conform to the Yoruba's moral norm. In a radical feminist manner, Shoneyin justifies Iya Segi's moral ineptitude. To this extent, the author has impliedly sanctioned adultery in the face of domestic oppression. This justification is unacceptable, not only because of the norms that guide the society of the novel, but much more because, as pointed out by Eldridge (1989), while commenting on the novels of Conrad and Austen and poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, literature is the most important and richest source of insight in favour of morality. As such, our capacities for acknowledging the moral laws, as a formula of value, and for acting according to moral dictates, are tested through the interpretation of these narratives. Moral codes should not be sacrificed on the altar of any radical ideology.

The second character that Shoneyin uses is Iya Tope. Iya Tope, Baba Segi's second wife, has the right to be angry, brash and unfaithful in a marriage she enters merely in exchange for the debt her poor father fails to pay Baba Segi. In spite of Iya Tope's timidity, friendliness, carefulness and godliness, adultery is a channel of escape for her bottled up hurts, as long as her husband is not privy to it, even if the whole world is aware. She visits the meat seller at his store in the market place, to satisfy her sexual fantasies. She neither shows any sign of regret or remorse for her adulterous escapades, especially with the meat seller, nor does she put the views of the society as regards adultery into consideration. She deliberately ignores the moral code, which frowns at adultery and she also ignores the fact that her conduct as an individual affects her society. Her disregard for her children's welfare is the peak of her moral ineptitude.

Iya Tope symbolizes the contemporary woman who confronts the perceived oppressiveness of the male gender. Why should her future be sacrificed to redeem her father's pride? Why would she be bartered for a cause she is never part of the bargain? Must she, as a sacrificial goat, languish on the bed of a man who has little or no emotional feelings for her? The author's answer to these questions is simple: her character must protest and this protest must be an outright disregard for fidelity. Evil, in my opinion, is not the antidote for evil. The tree of morality cannot be nurtured on the barrage of acidic rain but on showers of uprightness. As argued by Doki, Ama Gowon and Ali, Sule Ako (2010) creative art, as a discipline, should be used to enforce a change of attitude among Nigerians, such that virtuous acts, like honesty, integrity, accountability, responsibility and so on, are embraced by all. Literature should be used as a tool for positive change in the society. Iya Femi is the third wife of the house and in my own opinion, the most incongruous. Her disregard for moral codes is unparalleled. She is portrayed as a very malicious, vengeful, and unforgiving woman, which is of course, are products of terrible and bitter childhood experience at Grandma's house where she worked as a maid.

Through the flashback technique, we learn that she lost her parents early in life and subsequently was forced to leave her parent's house and work for Grandma, as a house help. At Grandma's place, she was deprived of education and was subjected to all sorts of inhuman experiences.

These experiences mold her into the wicked and heartless character she becomes. While at Grandma's place, she has an affair with the son of the house, Tunde. Even after she runs away to marry Baba Segi, she continues her sexual adventures with Tunde. At a point in her life, she accepts Christianity, not because of its religious moral codes but because of the pleasure of hearing that her enemies, including the wicked Grandma, will burn in hell. She is the most daring wife of Baba Segi. Her level of disregard for human life is revealed in her attempt to murder Bolanle, when she poisoned the latter's food. John Gardner (1978) claims that moral affirmation is the most fundamental artistic value. In his opinion, most critics, including writers, evade the real task of criticism. He asserts that 'true art treats ideals, affirming and clarifying the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Ideals are art's ends: the rest is mere methodology'. Shoneyin's male characters are not spared in this affront to moral standards. Taju, Baba Segi's driver, is the backstabbing employer, who sleeps with his boss' wife without any shame. In an ironic manner he often refers to his boss' children as his own while casting disparaging looks at their father.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives has its own unique way of unraveling the moral issues in the story. Her use of alternating and multiple points of view aid her purpose and make her story an interesting one. This technique has also helped to provide a back-story for past events and given meanings to present circumstances. For instance in the "Rat Head" chapter, we are not given much information on how the rat head got into Bolanle's room, but in the next chapter, we are supplied the much needed information through Iya Femi's narration. Much more, the use of alternating points of view in the novel has been very useful in giving us a thorough insight into the lives of the characters. We are sometimes provided with reasons for why the characters behave the way they do and what led to their immoral behaviour and how their actions and those of others affect them. The use of flashback is another prominent technique used in the narration. We are, sometimes, taken back to events that have happened at a previous period in the lives of the characters. For instance, in the chapter titled "Iya Femi", we are given a glimpse of her growing up years and the terrible experiences she has had. This glimpse into her past helped in giving us some clues as to why she is a vengeful lover and wife. This flashback technique has made it possible for the reader to understand the reasons behind their immoral actions and sometimes to even sympathize with them. Told in light and humorous way, the novel is satiric in form and content. The tone employed by Lola Shoneyin is humorous and sometimes exaggerative. The satiric intent is pronounced through ridicule that comes alive in a subtle way. An instance is the excerpt below: "If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?". She shrugged her shoulders. "So, I found seed and planted it in my belly" (215).

In the above excerpt, Iya Segi explains how she cheated on her husband by committing adultery in an offhand way. The humour in her tone is an expression of the protest in her heart. The kind of English used in the novel is a direct translation from the Yoruba language, domesticated English, so to say. For instance we find sentences like: "Thank you for returning our mouths to the matter at hand my friend". And also in, "Iya Femi picked me up with her eyes and threw me to the floor". It can also be seen in: "I will not let Bolanle turn my future upside down". This type of expression helps the characters maintain the epigrammatic, imagistic, symbolic and proverbial qualities of the Yoruba language. The novel is rich in its use of figurative language.

Examples are:

Simile: Sitting on a bench next to my father, Baba Segi looked like a hungry demon. (79) She is not a great beauty...but she is as strong as three donkeys. (31)

Metaphor: I didn't know that our stray hen had brought friends until I heard them rattling down the corridor. One day that fat frog, Iya Segi, asked if I'd noticed that Iya Tope had left all the house-cleaning to me. (130)

Hyperbole: Iya Femi picked me up with her eyes and threw me to the floor. (55)

Personification: What a terrible appetite this ground we tread has! It eats the bones of good and bad alike.

(121). One is not stunned at the author's radical disposition in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It is obvious that the society encourages people's acts of immorality.

People who pursue good moral standards are most times shunned, abused and discarded, while those who engage in moral decadence are praised, encouraged and even honored. This shows how much the standards of morality have fallen within our society.

Most of the characters, who exhibit moral weakness, do so without regards for their society. The justification provided for her characters is foregrounded by the character's personal and direct narratives of their ordeal and experiences in polygamy, so that the reader sees from their point of view. Shoneyin has the right to represent them as such. What is wrong, however, is her affirmation of such act of immorality in the face of feminist ideology.

Morality is grossly disregarded by the will to revenge. Vengeance itself is split between good and evil, in that it could be both constructive and destructive. Good moral disposition remains a condition for balanced social relations, happiness and peace.

5. Conclusion

From this brief exploration of the major characters in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, we are given an insight into the various immoral acts that women in polygamy can engage in. We see jealousy, adultery, murder, and hatred as product of the will to remain humane, in the face of rejection and oppression. In spite of this, man must not throw caution to the wind by flaunting his disregard for morals. Moral codes are communal bound and, as such, products of cultural beliefs. The Yoruba, as a people, frown at all ideological persuasions that undermine their moral principles, irrespective of the rationale of such ideological stance. The 'omoluwabi' traits are necessary requirements for a functional state without which the state breaks. A dysfunction state, for the Yoruba, is a product of dysfunctional individuals. Consequently, the individual member, under whatever social or family pressure, is expected to conform to the moral codes, even at the risk of his own life. The affront to moral standard demonstrated by individuals, as seen in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, is unacceptable because it is an affront to the ideological conscience of the Yoruba state. As we empathise with the individual characters in the text, we should be guided by our commitment to social order which is necessary for a balanced state. The novel form should not be a tool for justifying moral ineptitude. Rather, the novel should be an instrument of projecting virtuous acts, like honesty, integrity, accountability, responsibility and fidelity.

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