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Idealism versus realism: The complexities of polygamy in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979)

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Abstract

Polygamy is a common practice in Nigeria and Africa at large. Despite its disadvantages which outweigh the advantages, many still practice it. The study, however, established that the vision of polygamy by would-be practitioners which is idyllic vary from the actual experience when they come into it (realism) and this knowledge serve as a caution. Although some view polygamy as a 'problem solver', they end up worse than they went in. This is a problem because it has resulted into divorce, infidelity in marriage, distrust / suspicion among spouses and sometimes murder. This study revealed other reasons why women marry to become second, third and even fourth wives. The study concluded that the practice of polygamy brings a lot of problems in marriages which also has a multiplier effect on society hence its practice where possible should be curtailed.

Keywords: idealism, literary realism, marriage, polygamy

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Public Interest Statement

The study presents a realist view of polygamy which most times is a contrast from the idealist concept of polygamy and throws a note of caution to would-be practitioners. Many critics have centred their works on the thematic concerns of the texts understudy but the ills of polygamy have not been given so much prominence from a realist perspective. This is the gap that this work intends to fill.



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Introduction

Many societies have beliefs that are rooted deep in ancient religion and culture. Some of these beliefs include; polygamy, monogamy, polytheism and many others. Polygamy which is the practice of marrying more than one wife has both cultural and religious backing. The acceptance and practice of polygamy is very common among many cultures in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large. It is a wide-spread phenomenon in African countries. According to Mankaabi, “polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa is not only a type of marriage but also a value system. Polygamy existed with the primitive system of Agriculture in which women did most of the farm work” (25). Many traditional customs and values promote the practice of polygamy. The Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa cultures in Nigeria practice polygamy, religious beliefs also dictate many customs and rituals which include the practice of polygamy. In Islam for example, a man is permitted to marry a maximum of four wives. Qur’an chapter 4 vs 3 reads:

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls then marry those that please you of (other) women two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then (marry only) one or those your right hands possess (i.e. slaves). That is more suitable that you may not incline (to injustice).

African traditional religion and practice which is anachronistic does not limit the number of wives a man can be entitled to. The Igbo culture in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* is hinged on polygamy. In an essay “Marriage and family structure in *Things Fall Apart*,” Saerey Chau says “In the Igbo culture, the family structure is very different from what we are used to. They practice polygamy, where it is the norm for the men in the culture to have more than one wife... “The more wives the man has, the richer he is” (1). Thus, a man’s wealth is partially measured by the number of wives he has. Nwakibie in *Things Fall Apart* has nine wives and thirty children and Okonkwo has three wives and eight children. The text also shows that the masculinity of the male is tied to how many wives he can garner and how well he can support them and provide for them and their children. In most African countries, the educated elites find themselves torn between their culture, religion and modernity, especially as it relates to issues of marriage. Polygamy in Africa is not as common among city dwellers as it is in the rural areas or villages. In the two texts under study, polygamy is central to the discourse.

Research Question

To what extent does the idealist concept of polygamy reflect the realist experience in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* and *The Joys of Motherhood*?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks adopted for the study are realism and idealism. Realism in the arts is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, exotic and super natural elements. There are various realism movements in the arts such as literary realism, theatrical realism and Italian neorealist. African literary realism in particular is adopted for this study. Literary realism is the faithful representation of reality. Realism focuses on showing everyday activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society; idealism on the other hand is an art or practice of envisioning things in an ideal and often impractical form. It is a form of imaginative treatment that seeks to show the author’s representation of imagined

types. This theory also holds that things exist only as ideas in the mind rather than as material objects. Literary realism in contrast to idealism attempts to represent familiar things as they are. It portrays the characters as they are real in life, bringing together their ways of life and stating their challenges. Ian Watt in *Rise of the Novel* posits that “the novel’s novelty was its formed realism; the idea that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” (11). This study shows the reality of polygamy as against the mental picture or image of polygamy and it throws a note of caution to would-be practitioners to know and count the cost.

WHY POLYGAMY?

Culture

Some cultures especially the Igbo culture in Nigeria practice polygamy as part of their lives. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a man’s wealth is measured by the number of barns, wives and children he has and his ability to feed and control them. Polygamy is a deeply rooted aspect of Nigerian culture. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Idayi Suggests that Agbadi should let Nnu Ego marry Amatokwu’s son because she will be the senior wife. Idayi’s statement implies that there is a possibility that Amatokwu may marry more than one wife. This is a realist view because it is a cultural practice. Another customary practice in Igbo land is that a younger brother is expected to inherit the wife/wives of his late elder brother or relative. Agbadi, Nnu Ego’s father had seven wives. He married three and inherited four on the death of relatives. When Nnaife’s elder brother died, Nnaife “felt it his responsibility to inherit his brother’s widows” (146). So, although Nnaife did not set out to marry four wives, providence through observance of custom gives him additional wives. This constitutes an unforeseen circumstance or experience of life.

Religion

Religion also plays a role in marriage. It plays an important role in the lives of Africans. Religion directly or indirectly influences substantially the intelligence and emotions of individuals with their respective communities. Christianity prohibits polygamy but Islam allows a man to marry a maximum of four wives. Islam also stipulates that these women should be treated equally. This was earlier quoted from Qur’an chapter 4 vs 3. Nnaife is a passive and non committed Christian who is caught between the practice of this new modern religion, christianity and upholding the tenets and values of his culture. He chooses the latter and ends up marrying four wives.

Childlessness/Barrenness

One of the reasons why men marry more than one wife is because of the inability of their wives to bear children and in some cases sons. When Nnu Egu fails to give birth to a child for Amatokwu her husband, she knows that in no distant time a second wife will be brought in. she prays to her ‘chi’ and says “please pity me, I feel that my husband’s people are already looking for a new wife for him. They cannot wait for me forever” (Emecheta 30). True to her feeling, Amatokwu marries another wife and begins to order Nnu Egu around like a farm slave while the new pregnant wife is given attention. He tells, Nnu Egu that “If you can’t produce sons at least you can help harvest yams” (31).

Ifeoma Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds*, Flora Nwanpa’s *Efuru* and Mariama Ba’s *So Long a letter* show that childlessness or barrenness is one of the major reasons why men marry two or more wives. A woman without a child for her husband is seen as a failed woman. Efuru says “It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature.

It was regarded as a failure” (Nwapa 165). Culturally, a woman is made to see polygamy as a part of her culture and accept it without opposition but childlessness which is beyond her control is regarded as a failure and this gives the man an alibi to marry additional wife or wives. Helen Chukwuma expresses her concern thus “In each situation the test is, how a woman escapes the tyranny of a tradition and a system, assert her individuality while still playing out the roles of daughter, wife...” (7).

Running Away From the Past

One of the not so common reasons why women marry into polygamous homes is so that they can hide from their past. A feeling that a polygamous setting would swallow up their past as the husband may not care to dig into ones personal and private life. Bolanle marries Baba Segi as a fourth wife with such an illusion. She was raped at the age of fifteen. She was horribly defiled therefore sees herself as ruined, damaged and destroyed. Added to this problem is an overbearing and nagging mother. She consciously decides to be a fourth wife so as to get away from her nagging mother, escape the feeling of guilt that follows her and to avoid suicide. She says “How would I tell her I had failed to preserve my dignity? I just wanted the war between who I used to be and who I’d become to end”(Shoneyin.16).

In her imagination, Bolanle thinks “it all made perfect sense when I met Baba Segi. At last, I would be able to empty myself of my sorrow... so yes, I chose this home. Not for the monthly allowance... I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity”(16). Bolanle’s view is idealistic, creating an imaginative world; envisioning things in an ideal and impractical form but in reality, the reason for her marriage does not solve the problem. It rather made her remember her past. Bolanle has lived with this secret for long without her mother’s knowledge. Her marriage into a polygamous home unravels rather than cover her secret. Shoneyin reveals through Bolanle’s experience that what one perceives or views may not necessarily apply in reality.

Complexities of polygamy

There are certain situations and challenges that are common to polygamous homes and they help complicate the marriage experience. These are realities that one can hardly avoid in a polygamous home. They include:

Extra Marital Affair/Infidelity

The intricacies and problems associated with polygamy have adverse effects particularly on women and children. A polygamous system is portrayed as oppressive and women in this institution are silenced and without a voice. Women are mostly sexually abused in polygamous homes. Zahra opines that “Females sexual pleasures are neglected within the polygamous system. Agbadi disregards his wives for years. They just receive one yam a day. He sleeps with his mistress while his wives wish to hear a word from him” (15). This statement highlights the extent to which women are sexually oppressed and disregarded. Either of the spouses can be involved in infidelity. This could be as a result of sexual dissatisfaction especially by the women whose sexual experience is reduced to a time table. When Baba Segi and Bolanle were asked by the Doctor on how frequent they have sexual intercourse, he says “She gets her ratio on Tuesdays and sometimes she gets an extra day. No less, no more... “(Shoneyin 37). This tells that there is a sex drought in the home especially for the wives and this can encourage infidelity. For Iya Tope, Bolanle’s arrival will affect their sex rotation also, Baba Segi does not satisfy her sexually. Her experience with the meat

seller leaves her with fond memories: she admits “I will never forget that day or any other that I spent with him... There was something he gave me that I wanted constantly, endlessly”(85) Iya Femi, the third wife of Baba Segi also has a similar experience. She is sexually dissatisfied with her husband and yearns for another experience with her ex-boy friend. She compares her husband with Tunde thus; “He wasn’t like Tunde at all... Tunde never did that; he always shook his water onto my belly. I looked forward to the day our paths would cross again at a junction” (130). In an ideal situation, one will expect that a man with two or more wives should not be philandering; on the contrary and surprisingly, some have mistresses. Baba Segi’s three wives did not stop him from making advances to Bolanle. At one point in his shop, he “felt an overwhelming urge to reach across the table and touch her” (9). He later marries her. Iya Segi also acknowledges that women are her husband’s weakness as he cannot resist them especially when they are low and downcast. Nwokocha Agbadi in *The Joys of Motherhood* had seven wives yet spends most of his free time with Ona, his mistress. Infidelity is a sad reality in polygamous homes.

Schemes and Intrigues

A polygamous home is often a cleft for schemes and intrigues which are mostly carried out by co-wives. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, the first three wives did scheme to edge Bolanle out by not revealing a secret to her and since their husband values children more than what fills his mouth, “When Bolanle fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out” (10). This scheme eventually fails to work and another scheme is plotted by Iya Segi as she becomes impatient with the first plan. She says, “We must work together to blow this cloud away” (53).

The impression created by their plot against Bolanle is that they are united and understand themselves. But this is not true because when asked to make *aso ebi* for the entire household, Iya Femi tells the tailor to sew the clothes too big, baggy and shapeless for the other wives while hers’ is well fitted and adorned. Iya Femi’s action reveals the heart of the wives beyond their pretence in their actions. A polygamous family setting is an example of a typical African family setting and in most cases it is characterized by competition, jealousy and intrigues.

Iya Segi and Iya Femi plot to kill Bolanle by lavishing poison into a meat meal given to her which was eventually and unfortunately eaten by Segi and she later dies. So deep rooted is the hatred in some co-wives that they can plan to commit murder. Painfully though, sometimes innocent children fall victims of the evil machinations of their mothers. This shows a description of the schemes and intrigues that go on in polygamous homes which is a reality of life.

Female Antagonism and Distrust

Polygamy gives comparative advantage to the husband as he asserts his dominance in the home. Wives try to outwit themselves to win the love and attention of their husband. In a desperate desire to be the centre of attention, Baba Segi lets out an explosive fart. He gets different reactions from his wives. Iya Segi: The first wife “Inched towards him and asked... Iya Tope stared unblinking at the TV while Iya Femi pinched her nostrils and turned her lips down at the corners...” Bolanle on the other hand, “shifted a little closer to Iya Tope’s armchair” (10), Polygamy is a type of marriage that propagates female antagonism as it pitches women against themselves. The man is the focal point and all wives jostle for his attention. When Bolanle arrives her new home, “Iya Femi’s head was hot. She wanted the blood of this new wife who had taken her place as the newest, youngest, freshest wife” (47). Iya Femi feels threatened because her position as the newest wife is taken away. She is quick to forget that she also displaced someone else when she came in as the third

wife. Bolanle is taunted by her co-wives. The real attitude of co-wives is portrayed in the novels thereby expressing the workings of the minds of co-wives in a polygamous home.

When asked to fetch water, Oshia tells Adaku that he is a boy, his statement sets Adaku off. Onyemaechi and Chima opine that “what would have passed for a childish remark of ‘I am a boy’ sets off Adaku”. They also add that “Emecheta highlights the issues of bitter rivalries between co-wives in most polygamous setting” (294). The complexities in polygamous homes are real and palpable. Constant quarrel amongst co-wives is a recurring decimal. When Nnu Ego and Adaku have their minor quarrels, it is said that “Ubani, Nwakusor and their other friends were usually called to settle the disputes” (Emecheta 181). Constant quarrel amongst co-wives is a common practice and this gives room for third party interference.

The idea of polygamy sounds more appealing and favourable to men than women. It is sometimes seen as achievement with pride and a sense of fulfillment, Baba Segi tells his son, Kola to grow big and strong and marry many wives. “My Kola must grow big and strong so he can marry many wives...” (60). But Iya Femi, his mother whispers “God forbid. For women the glitter and attraction of polygamy is from the imaginative world but when they go into it, they are imprisoned and desire an escape route.

Effect on Children

Polygamy has negative influence and effect on children as they are pitched against themselves and other wives. This generates acrimony among the children and co-wives. Iya Segi warns Segi from going to Bolanle, “I warned her, I told her that a girl who abandons her mother’s breast for another women’s will be cursed. I told her that she must be my eyes, my ears, my nose, and my hands when I am not in this house” (Shoneyin.104). Oshia in *The Joys of motherhood* lies to his mother that he sees Adaku in his dream and she does not mean well for him. This makes Nnu Ego to seek protection for her sons. Onyemaechi and Chima in an essay, “Language, Polygamy and Motherhood in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood: A stylistic critical Approach*” are of the view that:

Nnu Ego’s response to Oshia’s lie in these words “What dream are you talking about”? Serves as a prelude to the fear that envelops Nnu Ego and subsequently serves as a confirmation of the faint suspicion that she has always harboured about co-wives’ rivalry creeping into their polygamous home...This is a sad commentary on polygamy and its corrupting influence even on innocent children (291).

The effect of polygamy cannot be over emphasized as such setting can serve as a breeding ground for corruption. In an essay on “The effects of polygamy on children in Northern Nigeria”, Solomon and Nuhu say “Children from polygamous homes have a tendency of not doing well academically as most parents pay less attention to their children. They identified polygamy as one of the reasons for the downward trend in the educational achievement of children. Also, many mothers would not want a co-wife who is more educated to help their children. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Bolanle, the fourth wife who is a graduate tries to help Femi with his assignment and to teach the children how to read and write but her good gesture is rebuffed. Iya Femi’s sons treat Bolanle as if she has a contagious disease; they refuse her offers and will not sit on a chair she vacates. Children are indoctrinated to hate and despise a co-wife.

Although the points above are some of the major reasons why men marry more than

one wife and some of its effects, this study gives additional views and show the complexities associated with polygamy through certain expressions that are extracted and analysed.

The ideal versus reality

Realism in the theater directs attention to the social and psychological problems of ordinary life. The realistic portrayal of characters and their actions in the two texts under study reveal some of the social and psychological problems of ordinary life. The rifts, intrigues, schemes and jealousy expressed or exhibited especially by co-wives leaves one in no doubt of the complexities and complication of polygamous homes. Polygamy is also said to have a close link with mental illness between the children and co-wives.

Ideal situations vary from real life situations. What one views, thinks or imagines may not necessarily be applicable or actualized in reality. When Bolanle is picked from home to start life with Baba Segi as his Wife, Baba Segi tells her that “Everyone is prepared for your arrival” (18). She envisages a warm welcome from her co-wives. Bolanle meets a cold welcome by the children and wives of the house. Her greeting is barely answered and one of the wives “The large one rolled on to her toes and gave me a hair-to-shoe examination” (Shoneyin 20). This is an indication that she is not welcomed. Two years into her marriage, Bolanle confesses that

Looking back, I realize how naive I was to expect a warmer welcome. I was foolish to think that 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” (Shoneyin 21).

Bolanle’s admittance reveals that her idea of a polygamous home which motivates her to come in is far from her experience in reality. She calls herself foolish for conceiving such a thought. Bolanle’s mother tries to dissuade her from going into a polygamous home, but Bolanle tells her that “I am doing what is best for me” (34). This response is born out of Bolanle’s idealist mindset. In reality, the option of being a fourth wife to an illiterate husband cannot be termed as good. Ideals are most times unreliable and at odds with practical life situation. The Doctor in the hospital tells Bolanle that the environment she describes, that is her home, does not sound very healthy. This realistic view shows that a polygamous home is not a healthy environment and so cannot be the best for a woman.

One very common monster that cannot be murdered in polygamous homes no matter how hard one tries is favouritism/partiality. This is a reality of life. In Islam, a man is expected to marry a maximum of four wives subject to his ability to treat them equally. This is an idealist perspective where things are envisaged in an ideal and often impractical form. Baba Segi’s idealist vision of polygamy makes him think he is unbiased in the way he treats his wives. This belief only exist as ideas in the mind rather than as material objects. While Baba Segi thinks he does not sleep with any wife more than the other, some of the wives feel cheated Iya Tope complains that “Most weeks, Iya Femi got Sunday because she enticed him with her groundnut stew... A more discerning husband would have been evenhanded with his Sundays”. Iya Segi is also accused of owing Baba Segi “She already owned his mind and did with it as she pleases” (48).

What is worrisome is that the obvious acts of favouritism are not recognized by the main actor. This complicates the situation. Teacher, tells Baba Segi that “Your Partiality is the cause of these problems... Treat your wives equally” (65). Although the problem identified is real and a co-wife can easily connect with such behavior, the solution proffered by teacher is ideal but not realistic since a man cannot treat his wives equally. Ones affection must tilt more to a particular

side.

Nnaife's actions in *The Joys of Motherhood* show that he gives more time and affection to Nnu Ego. Adaku says "when a man starts showing preference to one wife then he is asking for trouble" (Emecheta 54). A husband is supposed to share the bed of the wife whose turn it was to cook unless she was indisposed "like many a husband Nnaife would break this rule as it pleased him. Adaku resented it whenever she heard Nnaife moving in Nnu Ego's bed when by right he should have come to her..." (154). This act of favouritism is natural and human and also reveals how fallible and culpable a man is. To expect equal love and affection by a man to two women is unrealistic and only but an ideal view. So like many husbands, Nnaife tows the same line. A wife is expected to be hospita-

le to her husband's new wife and treat her like a younger sister. This expectation of society is unrealistic. How can a woman willingly open her heart and arms to receive a usurper? This expectation of society especially from the first wife who is referred to as mother of the house, is oppressive, repressive and depressing. It encourages pretence and falsehood.

In reality, it is not a pleasant and welcoming idea for a woman to share her husband with someone else. The arrival of a new wife to a home is a threat to the old one(s). At the arrival of Adaku, "Jealousy, fear and anger seized Nnu Ego in turns" (131). This woman who is aggrieved and bitter is expected to play the role of a 'welcoming senior wife'. Although she tries, "Nnu Ego fought back tears as she prepared her own bed for Nnaife and Adaku" (138). She ends up unable to sleep as agony and torture grip her. A similar case is seen when Agunwa, Agbadi's first wife dies out of bitterness because her husband gave pleasure to Ona, his mistress, in the same courtyard where she slept.

Baba Segi from the beginning of the text is an advocate of polygamy. He advises his son Akin to tow the same line but after the revelation of the true paternity of his children and the many things that happened in a house he thought he was totally in charge of, he later warns his son against polygamy. Realist writers are unafraid to present their characters as ordinary, impotent and unable to arrive at answers to their predicaments. This is seen in Nnu Ego and Baba Segi, the protagonists of *The Joys of motherhood* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Baba Segi's words capture the crux of this paper "it is not every day that a man discovers his life is a mere shadow and that there is a gulf between what he believes (idealism) and reality (realism).

Conclusion

Polygamy is a popular phenomenon in Nigeria and Africa at large. It is mostly practiced by Muslims, people in rural areas so as to increase their labour force in some cases, to obey custom through the inheritance of the wives of one's relations and many other reasons. No matter what the advantages of polygamy are, the fact is that the disadvantages surpass the advantages. Polygamy is a cultural practice that is associated with a lot of problems in marriage. This study shows that the ideal is far from reality. This is why "we wake up to find that things are not the way we imagined them" (Shoneyin 238). Polygamy constitutes a social problem and can threaten the very foundation of society through broken homes and children who are uncared for. This cultural and religious practice brings a number of problems in marriage which also has multiplier effect on society hence its practice where possible should be curtailed or limited. Baba Segi later becomes as disillusioned by polygamy as any of his wives. This is captured in Baba Segi's counsel to his son Akin, "when the time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone. And when she causes you pain, as all women do, remember that your pain comes from one source alone" (238).

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Dung Ishaya Pwajok is a lecturer with Plateau state polytechnic and majors in the field of language. Research taken in the field enhances her ability to use language appropriately and communicate well. Occasionally, I delve into the literary world to learn the different human traits. Feminism captures my interest. This has seen my attitude change towards discriminatory laws against women, especially fetish traditional beliefs which have no basis in modern science. I earned a Bachelor degree in English and currently working on my Master's thesis in English.

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