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**A Stylistic Reading of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives***

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**Abstract**

*Language, in whatever way or circumstances it is used, is not an end but a means to an end. Every individual has a unique way he uses language to suit his purpose. This paper assesses the pertinent linguistic and literary peculiarities adopted by Shoneyin in portraying the societal mishap levelled on women in an African setting. The study reveals that the author uses the first and third person points of view in the narration. Shoneyin employs a simple diction and a diversified register. In giving accurate details, she uses a lot of obscene words and expressions which gives the work pornographic perceptions. Shoneyin's language habits have indeed resulted in linguistic disparity.*

### **Introduction**

Communicative objectives vary from one individual to another, one group to another, one society to another, one region to another and from one situation to another. The use of any meticulous feature of language at any time is usually intentional as language users seek to attain communicative goals. These cumulative modifications in language habits usually result in linguistic disparity.

Stylistics is the 'study of any situational distinctive use of language and of choices made by individuals and social groups in their usage in all linguistic domains' (Crystal, 323). Any study of the manner and significance of language use in a literary text in order that it could be of direct consequence in the analysis of that text, is of great benefit if in such an analysis our awareness and sensitivities are awakened to the literary and non-literary use of language and to the aesthetic and social (pragmatic) functions of language. This study therefore centres on matters of interpreting the text with particular attention to the demeaning status of women in the traditional society and the idiosyncrasies of the writer.

### **Feminism Issues**

The issue of women emancipation has become a buzz word around the globe. It is alarming that women are deprived of their human rights. To some, women liberation means a rebellion on the male folk. To humanism, it means a revolt against the demeaning status of women in the traditional society. The call for women liberation in Nigeria is a humanistic one, because it urges the non-denial of rights, dignity and respectability of women and the girl child in the society. Women are left with feelings of indignation, resentment and disenchantment. The rights of women enshrined in the Nigerian constitution are consistent with the ideals of humanism. But unfortunately, the rights are simply on paper without any practical bearing on the life of the Nigerian woman. In practice, the Nigerian society is replete with anti-humanist ideals. Women are systematically relegated to inferior positions. Traditionally, women in Nigeria face discrimination and barriers to their advancement in areas of education, equity and even life itself (Isiramen, 2001).

The prejudices women face is evident in the lives of the female characters Shoneyin portrays. For instance, domestic violence is perceived as a waste of police resources (5). Polygamy is a 'man's right'. The man decides to marry as many wives as he wishes to, not minding the mishap he does to the first.

Her psychological emotions are tempered with. This may hamper her progress and even affect her productivity to the society at large. Baba Segi marries four wives and is comfortable with that. The wives in turn, live up to life in polygamy with all its rivalry and challenges. We see how Bolanle's inmates smear her books with palm oil and charcoal and some pages are deliberately torn off because of their 'deep-seated' distain for her university degree. Her friends are even banished from visiting her. She has no right to earn an armchair because of her supposed barrenness (11).

Baba Segi on the other hand, is used as a figure head. The women use him in this manner because of the need to maintain their homes. Societal happenings make Baba Segi's wives use other men to get them pregnant. When a marriage is childless, then the woman in question must be at fault. We see so many instances in the text were Bolanle is accused of barrenness. On page 4, Olaopa advises Baba Segi to '*drag* her to a medicine man if she doesn't follow. You are the husband and she is a mere wife ... If you drag her by the hair, she'll follow you anywhere, I swear it!' Since Bolanle is to blame for their childlessness, she should be taken to a medicine man to be given bitter concoctions just as Iya Segi was taken. Teacher however advises him to take her to the hospital. On page 14, he tells Bolanle these words; 'Your barrenness brings shame upon me.' When he takes Bolanle to the hospital, he yells saying, 'Doctor! Doctor! I need somebody to help me. It is my wife's womb-'. Again on page 36, Baba Segi tells the doctor that they have been married for nearly three years but she is still barren. He blames her for having less than ten children if her womb was not hostile to his seed. Baba Segi did not let any opportunity pass him by without humiliating her.

We see other indignant attitudes women contend with in the text. Iya Femi's uncle for example, throws her out of her father's house at an early age to be a housemaid because she losses both parents on the same day. Mr Taju as well, beats his wife for letting his only son suck on a coin. A male Senator also slaps a female colleague. The slap resonates through all the quiet meeting rooms of the senate building and into the heart of every man on the street. This inspires other men to do same as we see from the following extract;

Men were slapping their womenfolk as if it had become a national sport. At every street corner, disgruntled wives swung suitcases onto their heads, hoping to be persuaded to return home. At the market place, the Igbo fabric merchants tugged women roughly by the sleeve. Peeved

taxi drivers prodded heads of mothers who bargained with them; young girls were assaulted and stripped naked in the streets. Even in the labour wards baby girls were frowned upon by their fathers. Taju too was inspired to throw his best punch (26-7).

### Plot

The story begins with Baba Segi an awkward character that throws up or passes stool at anything unpleasant or bad news in order to regain his calm. He is a forty two year old man who is a husband to four and a father of seven. He wakes up with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row as a result of his fourth wife's (Bolanle) childlessness. Baba Segi is sure that his pain is not as a result of hunger or trapped gas but as a result of the build-up of months and months of worry. His thought takes him back to how he met Bolanle, a twenty one year old university graduate who came to his shop with her friend Yemisi to purchase some items. Bolanle on the other hand is raped at fifteen and she terminates a pregnancy. This becomes a deterrent for her to find a better suitor. Baba Segi however marries her because he wants to 'be envy of all his peers'.

Just as Bolanle had expected, the other wives were hostile towards her because she is educated and her coming meant less number of nights with their husband. Her co-wives ostracise her. She does not find life in a polygamous home easy as she had thought. Her co-wives treat her with distain. In their enthusiastic efforts to throw her out of the house, they frame her up by planting *juju* in Baba Segi's bedroom. Baba Segi initially believes his wives and tries to force Bolanle to confess.

At the bottom of the bag ... was a decomposed rodent, a large bush rat perhaps. 'Tell me why I found this in my bedroom!' There were bits of dried flesh stuck to it. Its mouth was bound together by red thread. A four-inch nail had been knocked into its crown, shattering the skull at the point of entry, then driven all the way in until it protruded out of the rodent's throat (59-60).

Bolanle vindicates herself because she feels there is no reason for her to confess to something she knows nothing of. Iya Tope, the second wife seems to be the only friendly mate to her. She initially accepts Bolanle's invitation to take lessons and even warns her to be careful with the other wives. Iya

Segi and Iya Femi do not give up after the framed *juju* incident. They still plot to go as far as killing Bolanle. They try to execute this by giving Bolanle poisoned chicken meat on Kole's birthday. Bolanle however, innocently gives the whole plate of the poisoned chicken meat to Segi in a bid to extend a hand of friendship to the first daughter of the house. Segi becomes the victim of Iya Femi and her own mother's wicked and murderous plot. Sadly, Segi dies eventually at the end of the story regardless of efforts to save her life.

Bolanle's barrenness becomes a grave issue to contend with. Baba Segi decides to find a lasting solution as he resorts to Teacher (another character) who had helped him 'through his darkest days' for a way out. Baba Segi remembers how...

Sixteen years before, when he was an impatient twenty-six-year-old husband... sat with Teacher and two other men to discuss a predicament that was similar to the one he was in now (3).

Bolanle refuses to go to a medicine man. Teacher advises him not to take Bolanle to a medicine man as he did with his first wife Iya Segi. He says;

You are running from post to pillar when the answer is there in front of your face. Since the woman is educated, she will only listen to people from the world she knows. The place to take her is the hospital. (5)

Taking Bolanle to the hospital eventually detonates the secret. Iya Segi volunteers to tell the truth willingly and without persuasion (213). She says;

My husband and I tried everything. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit. Then I had an idea. It was a sinful idea... So, I found seed and planted it in my belly (215).

Iya Segi confesses that her husband is not the biological father of her children. When Dr Dibia asks her of the children of the other wives, she says;

I misled them. Perhaps if I had not shown the second one my way, this shame would have come out sooner. But you see, they were so desperate to be fruitful. They knew that our husband valued children above all things so when I saw

their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret.  
They also followed the same path.(216)

Iya Segi knows that the truth cannot hide itself forever. She says even if it conceals itself at the bottom of a well, one day drought will reveal it. Bolanle's barrenness had brought drought.

Baba Segi accepts the children and wives as his after pleas from all the wives. Iya Segi gives him reasons of protecting his manhood and concealing their secret from those who may seek to mock them. He however gives them rules to abide by. He bans them from leaving the house without his permission. Iya Segi is to close down all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him. He forbids Iya Femi from wearing make-up and going to church. He did not have any rules for Iya Tope.

Bolanle however decides to leave the house. She says she feels as if she has woken up from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation. She is sure that the other wives will be relieved of her departure. Living with them has taught her the value of education and enlightenment because she has seen the dark side of illiteracy. She confesses that she sees the challenges ahead of her. People will say she is a second-hand woman. Men will hurt and ridicule her but she will not let them hold her back because she is a victor.

Baba Segi too learns a lesson from his life style because we see a sharp contrast. At the beginning of the story, we see him advising his youngest son Kole to 'grow big and strong so he can marry many wives and bear many children' (10). At the end he advises his eldest son Akin to marry one wife (238). He says it is better for his pain to come from one source alone.

### **Narrative Style**

Every piece of writing comes from a particular point of view. Choices have to be made as to who is writing and from where. Shoneyin uses different points of view. The writer tells the story using the first person and the third person narrative. She deliberately expands the limits of her third-person omniscience and keeps everything down to the interactions of her characters. Baba Segi's wives for example, tell their stories from childhood and how they meet and marry Baba Segi using the first person point of view. For instance, Iya Segi tells us of her childhood days thus;

I was an enormous child. My mother said I made her back curve like a cat's tail... After I was born... I shamed her in

front of her customers by demanding breast milk. Let me suck, I am hungry, I whined... I never knew my father (96).

We meet each character as they tell us their stories and experiences in chronological order. The writer skilfully uses each character to tell his or her own experience giving each person a separate chapter. We listen to them and we are carried along. We overhear their thoughts. Sometimes the characters even talk to us. Baba Segi on page (199) for example tells us to say amen to his prayer of not wanting to bury his child. However, there is an omniscient voice that sees and knows everything. For example, this voice tells us of Iya Segi's plan to tell the truth before any question and answer session commences and it also tells the reader of the need of telling the truth using social comments.

Iya Segi had sketched out her own plan. There will be no questions, only answers. She wouldn't wait for the long rope of truth to be pulled from her; she would volunteer it willingly and without persuasion, even if it made Baba Segi force his head through the hospital walls. The truth, they say, cannot hide itself for ever. Even if it conceals itself at the bottom of a well, one day drought will reveal it (213-4).

The author chooses her narrative style carefully not to jeopardize the piece as her basic choice of point of view is between first and third person, 'I' and 'he' or 'she'. Each new chapter delivers us a fresh story, with a voice of its own. This keeps the reader glued to the text.

### **Sentence Types**

The writer uses several sentence types in her narration. We find combinations of simple, compound and complex sentences in the text.

#### **Simple Sentences**

A simple sentence expresses a single idea. It contains one independent clause. There are several examples within the text especially in dialogues between the characters. For example;

*A grunt escaped from the woman lying next to him. (1)*

*He wants to be the envy of all his peers. (7)*

*'Just double the prices'. (6)*

*'I misled them.'* (216)

### **Compound Sentences**

A compound sentence contains two or more co-ordinate clauses linked on an equal basis so that each clause can stand on its own. The independent clauses are joined by coordinating conjunctions like 'and', 'but', and 'or'. For instance;

*My room had been ransacked and my money was gone.* (100)

*I told him I was pregnant but he didn't want to hear it.* (96)

*One day, I will have a child of my own and everything will fall into its place.* (23)

*My new husband observed me with interest but I looked ahead and turned my ear to him.* (102)

The compound sentences above can be broken into independent clauses. For example;

*My room had been ransacked.*

*My money was gone.*

### **Complex Sentences**

A complex sentence consists of one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. There are several complex sentences in the text as exemplified below.

*Without a word or a backward glance at his driver, he dashed down a narrow alleyway.* (1)

*Baba Segi was first warned about Ayikara when he was a young apprentice but the cautioner was female and didn't sound unconvincing.* (3)

*No matter how many times I offered them sweets, they treat me as if I have a contagious disease.* (23)

The simple, compound and complex sentence is replete throughout the text considering the point of view the author adopts.



### **Diction and Register**

A writer's choice of words determines the aesthetic beauty of any piece of writing. The diction a writer uses has great influence on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the message being passed across. Shoneyin uses a simple diction and draws from a wide range of register. The text is pervasive with a lot of obscene words and expressions. The writer's choice may be as a result of the subject-matter of the story line generally. The word *penis* alone appears severally in the text. Other obscene words and expressions are written below;

*Fucked them (2), the married men she screwed (6), sexual relations... coitus (37), Baba Segi climbed off me (73),*

*He returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible... with every thrust... he wanted to fuck me pregnant (43-4),*

*She had Baba Segi four times a week and I had him thrice...I ached so much I could hardly sit (83),*

*He made my body sing. He made me howl when he bent over me; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly. And when he took me standing up, it was as if there was a frog inside me, puffing out its throat, blowing, blowing and blowing until whoosh – all the warm air escaped through my limbs (85),*

*... I have not known anyone to worship a penis the way you do! (86),*

*The penis between their legs is all they are useful for. And even then if not that women needed their seed for children, it would be better to sit on a finger of green plantain (97),*

*... I would soon bear lashings from his penis... he wriggled between my thighs and marvelled at the size of my breast (102-3),*

*You just came to fuck. Didn't you? You want to be fucked! (114),*

*He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts... he jumped between my legs and tried to force his penis into me...there was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening... he heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts (130).*

The peak of pornography in the text is when the doctor asks Mr Alao to provide his semen for medical examination. The nurse plays a video for Baba Segi to enable him 'shed his body water'. The writer gives a vivid account of the details on pages 191 – 3 thus;

Baba Segi held his penis in his hand... his eyes were on the man in the video who was dipping his tongue into a woman's pubis... his member responded... his member grew in his hand... he watched the blonde woman gag on her partner's penis... he looked from penis to the small container. He examined his testicles and gave them a gentle prod. There was a naked Chinese man in the video... the man grabbed his penis and stroke it... he pointed his penis in her direction and massaged firmly. Baba Segi too pointed his penis in her direction and mimicked the man's movements...the wild and wonderful build-up to the orgasm made him shudder...Bolanle naked, on her knees, begging for his seed. As the man in the video erupted all over the dancer's face, Baba Segi who had never had the need to aim, added his own splodge to the far wall while the container lay patiently beneath his testicles.

Shoneyin uses unique and factual descriptions of scenes. She paints an accurate picture of her characters and events. The above expressions and many other vulgar words and expressions lie in the text.

### **Figures of Speech**

Just like any good piece of writing, Shoneyin uses a wide range of this device. Figures of speech add aesthetic beauty and value to what we say or write. We find several examples of the use of simile, personification, hyperbole, alliteration and the use of poetry.

### **Simile**

This is an indirect comparison making use of words as *like* and *as*. We find so many examples in the text as follows;

*Yes, but whose wife's belly is as flat as a pauper's footstool?' (5)*

*He collapsed into it as if he had been struck by death (8)*

*Baba Segi's large form was curled inwards like a boxing glove (13)*

*My legs would curl like caterpillars and...(199)*

*His eyes were bloodshot, as if he'd been weeping blood (225)*

### **Personification**

Inanimate objects or ideas are given animate attributes and vice-versa.

*There were always tears at the gate (30)*

*If this woman's womb was not hostile to my seed (37)*

### **Hyperbole**

This is an overstatement or exaggeration which is not meant to be taken literally. An example is seen on page 2;

These women lived for other women's men. They cooked for them. Drank with them. Fought over them. Fucked them. Nursed them. Slapped them and loved them. And when the longing love caused made the m ill, they surrendered their lives and died for them.

### **Alliteration**

This is a technique which is generally considered the repetition of initial sounds of words, usually consonants in order to enhance the verbal music of poetry or prose. Below are examples from the text.

*The days that men came to meet men (2),*

*Wives without the worthiness of wifeliness! (173).*

### **The Use of Poetry**

In a bid to add colour to the piece, Shoneyin uses poetry thus;

*Talaka nwa paki*

*Olowo nwon 'resi*

*Igbi aye nyi o*

*Ko s'eni to m'ola*

*The impoverished search for cassava flour*

*While the rich consume rice by the measuring bowl*

*The tide of the earth turns*

*No one knows tomorrow. (9)*

She presents some lines in a Nigerian language just like any other good literary genre on the Nigerian experience.

### **Conclusion**

Ikhida Ikheloa suggests, '*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is a triumph over adversity, a joyful ode to the sensual mystery and resilience of the human spirit'. Bolanle becomes a victor as she sets herself free from dehumanisation. The tale is beautifully told choosing words carefully to suit the theme. It is obvious from the analyses carried, that the language is more often than not exhibiting some unique features. Linguistic items were carefully chosen to achieve desired goals. Aside the simple diction and enormous obscene words and expressions used, the author borrows from a wide range of registers like that of the medicalese.

Various sentence types were utilized to sustain the readers' interest. To add beauty to the piece, different figures of speech were employed. The writer tells the tale using the first person narrative 'I' and the third person 'he' or 'she'. The story is cleverly-plotted. Her choice of words proves the assertion that 'no two individuals with a common language use it in exactly the same way' (Yule, 239).

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