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Examining Lacanian Ideation of Patriarchy in Lola Shoneyin's *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the manifestations of patriarchy in Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It argues that patriarchy in Nigerian society functions as a cultural structure of "Otherness" (De Beauvoir, 1949), sustaining female subjugation and producing alienation. The study aims to examine how patriarchal systems inscribe identity, regulate gender roles, and perpetuate domination, while also exploring the potential for resistance within such structures. Specifically, the objectives of the study are: to analyse the interplay between the unconscious and language in defining gender relations, to examine the phallus as a symbolic marker of masculine ego, and to expose the destabilising contradictions inherent in patriarchal authority. The theoretical framework is grounded in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic model, particularly his concepts of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, as well as the phallus, desire, jouissance, and masquerade. Methodologically, the paper adopts close textual analysis, engaging the novel's language, symbols, and character dynamics to reveal the unconscious operations of gendered power. The findings demonstrate that masculinity in the novel is tethered to procreation, while femininity is validated through motherhood. Baba Segi's infertility destabilises phallic authority, exposing the fragility of patriarchal structures and shifting agency to the wives, whose subversive strategies reveal women's capacity to destabilise entrenched hierarchies. The conclusion affirms that patriarchy, though pervasive, is neither immutable nor uncontested, and that resistance emerges through female agency, collective knowledge, and discursive reimagination. This study contributes to African gender studies and psychoanalytic literary criticism by extending understandings of patriarchy as not only a social system of dominance but also a psychological mechanism of alienation.

Keywords: Emancipation, Gendered power, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Nigerian literature, Otherness, Patriarchy.



Introduction

This paper explores a literary depiction of patriarchy as a structure enhancing "Otherness" in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, analysing the manifestation of patriarchy and how women react to it within a Western Nigerian context. Patriarchy is understood here as a power struggle in social contexts, where power is the ability to possess and exert authority over others. Foucault's (2010, p. 23) argument that power is not merely what we want or have, but how we are able to exercise it, is particularly relevant, suggesting that power is a potent symbol defining identity. In gender discourses, power is often defined by what one gender possesses that is absent in the other, leading to a patriarchal notion of power based essentially on masculine structure in most African societies.

Historically, the emergence of patriarchal structures is traced to the need and fear of controlling women and their sexuality, as women were associated with the great mother goddess who controlled fertility, life, death, and rebirth. This perception led to women being feared and thus controlled. Masculinity, consequently, evolved into a tool of social relevance and a defence mechanism, with the development of a phallogocentric society linked to men's attempts to gain mastery over nature by replacing female goddesses with male gods. Freud's (1933) theories, particularly his New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, further

reinforced this by considering libido as a masculine force, attributing a less complete superego development to women, and positing "penis envy" as a central aspect of female psychology, which led women to a sense of inferiority.

The essential projection of women by men in early writings was to associate femininity with qualities such as passivity, narcissism, and masochism, while masculinity was linked to activity, completeness, and control. This way of thinking, prevalent in literature, art, and the behavioural and social sciences, developed patterns that assigned women a subservient role in society, aiming to polarise gender and restrict women under male control indefinitely. In the Nigerian context, patriarchy is symptomatic of structural inequality maintained by rules, norms, and procedures dictating a subordinate role for women in all spheres of societal existence (Kure, 2011, p. 26). This makes the home as a social space where "Othering" becomes salient.

The socialisation process further entrenches these gendered identities, where male children are highly valued and trained to be "domineering, ruthless, and in control," believing themselves to be naturally superior to women. Conversely, female children are groomed to be "obedient, submissive, meek, and a humble housekeeper" (Izugbara, 2004, p. 98), internalising their perceived inferiority. This cultural socialisation agenda explicitly privileges men over



women and endorses the belief that it is the natural order for men to control women. Ideal men are constructed around terms like 'strong,' 'hard,' 'unyielding,' 'vigorous,' 'stout-hearted,' 'resolute,' 'aggressive,' 'active,' and 'tough,' while ideal women are described as 'dutiful,' 'submissive,' 'quiet,' 'fearful,' 'humble,' 'faithful,' 'patient,' and 'careful' (Izugbara, 2004, p. 7).

This paper critically interrogates the persistence of patriarchy and the enduring quest for female emancipation in contemporary Nigerian literature, focusing specifically on Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The research fills a gap by employing the Lacanian variant of psychoanalysis as its primary theoretical framework, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how the unconscious is revealed through language and illuminating the intricate mechanisms of power and identity within gendered relationships. While the novel has been widely interpreted through various literary theories, this study's unique psychoanalytic approach aims to unveil the psychological effects of patriarchy that lead to social alienation and anomie.

The study aims to examine patriarchal structures in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, specifically focusing on how patriarchy serves as a structure of enhancing "Otherness" in the text. Its objectives are to analyse the interaction between the unconscious and language in the construction of gender relations, to examine the

phallus as a symbolic signifier structuring masculine ego formation, and to expose the internal contradictions that destabilise patriarchal authority. Its theoretical framework is anchored in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic model, drawing particularly on the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, as well as on the concepts of the phallus, desire, jouissance, and masquerade.

This study contributes significantly to the discourse on women's place in Nigerian society by examining how patriarchy, as a cultural system, has historically marginalised women, fostering social divisions and excluding them from various societal structures. It argues that the novel provides a critical lens for understanding these gender inequalities and imbalances within Nigeria's socio-political context, thereby extending the body of knowledge by interrogating gender "othering". The adoption of psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework is crucial, highlighting the trauma caused by denial, rejection, and domination, which restricts women's agency and denies them environments conducive to realising their potential. Ultimately, it seeks to promote self-recognition and self-actualisation for Black women by challenging lopsided power structures and advocating greater visibility for marginalised women in Nigeria's 21st-century socio-political space.

The central argument of this paper is that patriarchal structures, and their



inherent arbitrariness, result in anomy and social alienation both in the home and the larger society. The analysis demonstrates that the psychological consequences of patriarchy engender alienation and instability, but that women's acts of defiance can destabilise entrenched hierarchies and reconfigure gender relations. It posits that patriarchy, though deeply embedded, is neither immutable nor uncontested, and can be dismantled through women's agency, collective resistance, and discursive reimagination. The study reveals how literary texts function as cultural critique and vehicles for envisioning emancipatory futures within postcolonial gender politics.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts Psychoanalysis as the framework of analysis. Originating from Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking work, psychoanalytic criticism provides a unique lens for understanding the complex human psyche. While some criticisms argue that Freud's work is flawed (Barry, 1995, p. 96), it is widely recognised that his emphasis on the "unconscious" aspects of the human psyche marked a significant breakthrough in psychology (Guerin et al., 1999, p. 127). Freud's theories, though sometimes controversial, have profoundly influenced the understanding of human actions and motivations, revealing hidden desires, fears, and conflicts that shape personality dynamics (Coleman, 1976, p. 8). His earlier writings, such as *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933),

upheld masculinity over femininity, positing the libido as a masculine force in both sexes and suggesting that women suffer from "penis envy," leading to a less complete superego development than men.

This paper draws primarily from Jacques Lacan's variant of psychoanalysis, which reinterpreted Freud in light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories (Evans, 1996, p. 92). Lacan significantly broadened the scope of the unconscious, arguing that it is always at work and constitutes "the being of everything." A distinctive feature of Lacanian theory is its emphasis on language and its contention that the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 2006, p. 412). This means that the unconscious comes into existence with an individual's entry into language, and its contents are acutely aware of linguistic structures, modifying Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about the signifier and the signified (Fink, 1995, p. 6).

Lacan posited three fundamental orders of human experience: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary is the realm of images, identification, and misrecognition, where the infant first gains a sense of a unified self through the Mirror Stage (Lacan, 2006, p. 75). In this stage, the child identifies with an external image of itself, forming an ego that is fundamentally alienated from its true, fragmented self. The Symbolic Order is the world of language, law, and social structures, into which the subject enters by negotiating the Oedipus



complex. It is governed by the Law-of-the-Father, which prohibits the infant's desire for the mother and introduces the subject to social norms, morality, and language. Within this order, the phallus functions as the primary signifier of power and differentiation, marking positions in a masculine-oriented world. For female subjects, this entry is fraught, as they are positioned as "not-all" (*pas-toute*) within a phallogocentric discourse, meaning their desires and experiences are not fully inscribed or represented by the phallic function (Lacan, 1975, p. 75; Mykyta, 1983, p. 51; Gana, 2021, p. 87).

The Real, Lacan's third order, is that which resists symbolisation and understanding; it is the "impossible," existing beyond the framework of signification and remaining "unknowable, unthinkable, and inassimilable to signification" (Rabaté, 2000, p. 50). It is distinct from the Imaginary and outside the Symbolic, with no absence in it. Another key concept is desire, which, for Lacan follows Freud's concept of *Wunsch* and is central to psychoanalysis. Desire is fundamentally a "desire for the Other," shaped by a fundamental lack, and its articulation is crucial for the subject's self-creation (Fink, 1995, p. 54). Lacan also differentiates *jouissance* (enjoyment) into phallic *jouissance*, which is limited and tied to the Symbolic, and feminine *jouissance*, which is "not-all" inscribed in the phallic function, operating beyond articulated desire, and often linked to the Real (Lacan,

1975, p. 75; Rabaté, 2009, p. 337). This "non-phallic *jouissance*" offers an escape from the repression of phallic discourse (Rabaté, 2009, p. 337). Finally, Lacan's concept of femininity as masquerade (Rivière, 1929; Rabaté, 2009, p. 340) is relevant, suggesting that women may perform femininity to navigate the Symbolic order and shield against the castrating power of the phallus. Unlike Freud, who focused on the author or characters, Lacan (in his *Écrits*) primarily focuses on the language of the text, viewing the unconscious as continually circulating chains of signifiers rather than a chaotic, pre-verbal realm (Qazi, 2008, p. 91; Rabaté, 2000, p. 61).

Synopsis of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* critically examines patriarchy and female emancipation within a contemporary Nigerian context, focusing particularly on polygamous households. The narrative centres on Baba Segi, a man whose masculine ego and sense of relevance are intrinsically tied to his perceived potency and ability to sire children. In his household, a woman's worth is largely defined by her reproductive capacity, with her identity often linked to her firstborn child, symbolised by the right to an armchair. This initial setup immediately establishes a patriarchal environment where male dominance is upheld through the power of procreation.



The central conflict arises from the childlessness of Bolanle, Baba Segi's fourth and educated wife. Her inability to conceive leads to her being labelled a "failed woman" and an "object of rejection," resulting in apathy and mistreatment from her husband and co-wives. Baba Segi experiences physical pain and shame due to Bolanle's "barrenness," which he believes threatens his reputation and their relationship, leading him to become sexually disenchanted with her, further marginalising her. This tension highlights the immense pressure on women in this patriarchal society to fulfil reproductive roles to maintain their status and acceptance.

The narrative takes a pivotal turn when medical examinations reveal Baba Segi's own infertility; he has "not a solitary sperm swimming around" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 194). This shocking discovery fundamentally destabilises his patriarchal identity and authority. It is then exposed that his first wife, Iya Segi, had been childless and, desperate for children, sought "seed elsewhere" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 215). She "misled" the other wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, to do the same, resulting in none of the children Baba Segi claims being biologically his (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 216). His driver, Taju, is revealed to be the biological father of Iya Segi's children.

This revelation "punctures the ego of masculinity," highlighting the subtle yet profound agency women possess in determining paternity and

challenging the patriarchal order. The novel suggests that a woman's womb is the most powerful space, advocating for collaboration and mutual respect between genders rather than male dominance. Ultimately, it critiques patriarchy as a system that perpetuates silencing and objectification of women, while simultaneously showing how their resistance and "subversive knowledge" can destabilise entrenched hierarchies and reconfigure gender relations. The conclusion implies that the strength of paternity lies in matriarchy, as it is a woman's prerogative to give a man a child, thus upholding his pride.

Phallus and the Formation of Masculine Ego in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

In Lacanian ideation, the ego is internalised when an individual imagines themselves with no notion of absence or incompleteness, particularly as a man enters what Tyson (2006, p. 30) terms "the Symbolic Order," which shapes society's idea of maleness. For Lacan (2006), the ego itself is founded on misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) during the Mirror Stage, where the subject forms an imaginary sense of wholeness that conceals its constitutive lack. In a patriarchal system, this imaginary wholeness is built upon a man's sense of potency, conditioned by the functionality of the phallus, which symbolises not merely the organ but a privileged signifier of power within the Symbolic Order (Evans, 1996).



As an erectile and seed-producing tool, the phallus fosters an egoist posture, positioning men as the dominating "self" in binary relations. Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* vividly captures this through the character of Baba Segi, whose relevance and self-assertiveness are derived from his ability to "conquer" his wives with the power of his seed. This is evident in his ritualistic greeting: "'Iya Segi. Iya Tope. Iya Femi. Bolanle'. Each curtsied, proud to be defined by her firstborn, except Bolanle, who was iya to none" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 8).

This representation reveals a social discourse where men's ego is tied to their phallic power, and women's ego, in the African context, is inflated by their womb's capacity to harbour and produce a man's seed. Femininity is thus defined by a woman's reproductive capability, leading each woman to "curtsied, proud to be defined by her first-born child" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 8). In Lacanian terms, this indicates how womanhood is structured as the "Other" in relation to the phallus, since within the Symbolic Order, woman is marked by lack – not in biological terms, but as positioned outside the phallic signifier of power (Lacan, 2006/1977). The phallus becomes a metaphor for dominance, "othering" women by making the man the centre of their existence and the woman the periphery, perpetually defined as a receptive bio-space. Iya Segi's deferential response, "May your breath be long, my lord. Where would I be if not for you?" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 9),

underscores this patriarchal dynamic.

The fear of being branded a "failed woman" afflicts Bolanle and even Iya Tope, but in Lacanian psychoanalysis, this failure points to a deeper structural dynamic: the impossibility of fully attaining the phallus as signifier. Bolanle's childlessness—"One day, I will have a child of my own and everything will fall into its place" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 23) – illustrates her attempt to move from the margins to the centre by securing symbolic recognition. In Lacanian terms, she struggles to overcome her imposed lack, but the Symbolic Order of Baba Segi's household inscribes her as perpetually incomplete until she bears a child.

A tangible symbol of this inscription is the armchair. The fact that Bolanle's chair is revoked when her belly remains flat (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 54) parallels Lacan's claim that social recognition is mediated by the Name-of-the-Father – the authority that regulates access to symbolic power. Here, Baba Segi assumes the role of the paternal signifier, determining which woman gains recognition and inheritance. Bolanle's removal from the symbolic space of the armchair signals her exclusion from paternal law and the Symbolic Order.

Baba Segi's unease intensifies into what Lacan describes as castration anxiety: the fear that the phallus, as a signifier of power, will be exposed as absent. His complaints of stomach pain, his obsessive concern with Bolanle's barrenness, and his rage –



"Offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a maggot?" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 43) – reflect the anxiety that his masculinity is threatened by the possibility of symbolic impotence. In Lacanian terms, the anxiety arises not from literal castration but from the destabilisation of his imagined completeness as patriarch.

The hospital scene marks the collapse of Baba Segi's symbolic authority. When the doctor reveals that "not a solitary sperm [is] swimming around" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 194), the Symbolic Order itself unravels: the phallus as signifier of potency is exposed as an illusion. This disclosure strips him of the paternal position he sought to enforce over his wives, dismantling the Name-of-the-Father that had previously legitimised his household power. His "effervescence dissolves into embarrassment" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 216), demonstrating the Lacanian insight that the phallus is never a possession but always a signifier that circulates within discourse (Lacan, 1977).

The wives' revelation that none of Baba Segi's children are biologically his underscores this point. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, paternity is symbolic rather than biological – it rests on the authority of the Name-of-the-Father. Baba Segi's downfall lies in his misplaced reliance on biology, while his wives manipulate the Symbolic by planting "seed" elsewhere to secure their maternal recognition. Taju's reminder that "only a mother knows who the father

of her child is" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 223) deconstructs phallogocentric authority, revealing that the paternal law is fragile and contingent upon the maternal body. Thus, Baba Segi's collapse dramatises the Lacanian paradox: masculinity is constituted through the phallus, but the phallus itself is a signifier that cannot guarantee mastery.

In the end, Iya Segi's confession – "in a matriarchy lies the strength of paternity" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 242) – affirms that symbolic authority is reconfigured through maternal agency, displacing Baba Segi's failed paternal law. The novel, therefore, demonstrates the instability of the phallus as guarantor of masculine ego, illustrating instead that power within the Symbolic Order is negotiable, fluid, and perpetually haunted by lack, castration anxiety, and the arbitrariness of paternal authority.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that patriarchy, sustained through socio-cultural mechanisms, functions as a primary structure for producing "Otherness" (De Beauvoir, 1949) and fostering alienation. Through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens (Lacan, 1977), Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* illuminated the psychological foundations of gendered power, showing how the male ego is bound to the phallus as a signifier of potency and how women's worth is reduced to reproductive capacity. Baba Segi's infertility destabilises this illusion of masculine authority, shifting agency



to the wives and exposing the fragility of patriarchal identity. This rupture underscores the possibility of gender relations based not on dominance but on mutual respect and shared vulnerability.

The novel further reveals that masculinity is tethered to procreation while femininity is validated through motherhood. Bolanle's childlessness renders her a "failed woman" until Baba Segi's infertility exposes the deception sustaining his household, a revelation that "punctures the ego of masculinity" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 223). Women's subtle determination of paternity demonstrates that patriarchal control is neither natural nor absolute, while Iya Segi's confession affirms that male pride rests on fragile foundations and that deeper bonds may emerge through shared dependence (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 242).

More broadly, the novel affirms that patriarchy (Ibrahim, 2016), though seemingly immutable, contains destabilising contradictions that invite resistance. The Lacanian framework – emphasising the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real; jouissance (Lacan, 1975); masquerade; the phallus as a signifier; and the divided subject – proved effective in tracing unconscious desires, fractured identities, and the role of language and silence in shaping alienation and resistance. By revealing the breakdown of patriarchal ego and the assertion of female agency, the study underscores that liberation is

not only social or political but also deeply psychological, involving the re-negotiation of desire and identity.

This work contributes to literary criticism, gender studies, and psychoanalysis within the African context by extending the understanding of patriarchy beyond dominance to its function as a system for reinforcing Otherness (De Beauvoir, 1949; Ibrahim, 2016). It shows how patriarchal structures, built on assumptions of male potency and female subservience, collapse when those assumptions are destabilised. Finally, by highlighting language, silence, and non-linguistic acts as instruments of both oppression and resistance, the study affirms that emancipation can emerge even within alienation, challenging power structures and reconfiguring the meaning of agency and freedom.

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