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# The Predicaments of Childless Women in Nigerian Fiction: A Womanist Reading of Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Célestin Gbaguidi, Panaewazibiou Dadja-Tiou, and Maurice Gade

## ABSTRACT

Using womanist literary criticism, this work has critically analyzed and revealed that women's worth is tied to their ability to bear children. The study has also examined the plight, predicaments, and abuses of childless women in African culture. The paper has revealed that childless women are verbally abused, physically beaten, psychologically abused, and maltreated. The paper argues that it is unethical and immoral to maltreat childless women for involuntary infertility. The pressures coming from society constitute huge struggles for childless women when they fail to bear children after a couple of times. The emotional turmoil is further compounded by societal pressure. Family members compel the husband to take another wife for the sake of ensuring a continued lineage. In some cultures, these women suffer domestic abuse, and divorce and are even driven out of their marital homes. The plight of childless women is unfathomable in most African societies with regard to how society maltreats these women because of their incapacity of bearing children. Furthermore, the study has revealed that the social pressures and their predicaments have nevertheless become an impetus for these childless women's self-actualization and self-realization. Hard work and self-reliance become imperative for these childless women if they really yearn for social thriving.

**Keywords:** Abuse, African Societies, Childless Women, Predicament.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is used by writers and critics to redress the inconsistencies of mankind. Across time and space, many African scholars have ventured into the defense of childless women. The hideous and shameful treatment of infertile women in African cultures and the negative portrayals of these women have been concerns in literary works by some African writers. The plights of African childless women and their struggle for social integration have been the main focus of their various discussions. They have focused on the problems of childless women with the vision to provide solutions to their indescribable predicaments. Scholars like Abasili (2015) and Egede (2015) have discussed in their respective works how childless women are discriminated against, seen as a burden, and stigmatized as it appears in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

In the two novels, the two writers reveal the social pressures that women face in childless marriages in which they are blamed, stigmatized, and even rejected because of their infertility. In their fictional worlds, Nwapa and Shoneyin disclose how childless women are often verbally abused, and how physical violence is meted out to them. Such childless marriages are often made unbearable and uncomfortable for women who cannot bear children. It is to correct and to challenge these cultural assumptions impeding childless women that this work entitled "The Predicaments of Childless Women in Nigerian Fiction: A Womanist Reading of Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" has been undertaken. The purpose of this paper is to interpret and analyze the place of childless women in Nigerian society and show how the various predicaments these women are victims of have become an impetus for their self-realization and self-actualization. It also explores the extent to which contempt, segregation, and differentiation influence the psychological and emotional stability of barren women. Womanist literary criticism is the theory used to scrutinize this study. According to C. Hudson-Weems (1993), womanism is "grounded in African culture, and focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs,

and desires of African women” (p.24). This theory centers on the woman and her role within the family, and community especially highlighting her “experiences in settings chiefly defined by the patriarchy” (NgongKum 2016, p.139). This concept looks at society, the characters living in it, and how their cultures can affect and influence their behavior and opportunities. To come to this end, the present study is structured around three main sections. The first one deals with the social hardships of childless women in the two novels. The second section discusses the boomerang effects of childlessness on African women and the last one is about the impact of societal perception on childless women in *One is Enough* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

## II. THE SOCIAL HARDSHIPS OF CHILDLESS WOMEN IN THE TWO NOVELS

Marriage defined as **the committed union between two souls** plays an important role in the daily life of many Africans. Marriage is the means par excellence of perpetuating a family lineage through the process of procreation. In Africa, the connection between marriage and family can hardly be separated as it has been the view of Ayisi (1997) who discloses that: “the family is then the logical outcome of marriage. A family consists of a man, his wife, and a child or children. By this definition, a childless marriage is not a family. An individual belongs to at least one family in his lifetime” (p.15). This issue has been the main focus of the two female Nigerian writers, Flora Nwapa and Lola Shoneyin, who have depicted how childless women suffer from emotional, psychological, and physical abuse, depression, and loneliness as well as humiliation in their respective novels, *One is Enough* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The predicament of these childless women is based on the belief that not having one’s own child is viewed as a big failure in life. Literature, no doubt, is a mirror of the world. On this score, Flora Nwapa, in *One is Enough*, tries to x-ray Amaka’s unpleasant conditions in the society she belongs to. In his article devoted to this issue, Ohaegbu (1998) reckons about the role of literature when he has it that:

All literatures are in a way criticism of the society which it mirrors, of the human condition obtainable in the society, and even of the writer himself. The writer cannot help exposing the ugly in man and society. This is why much of African literature is a deploration of the harsh and inhuman conditions in which the African lives; poverty and misery, political oppression, excesses of the rich, liquidation of humane African traditional values, exploitation and all sorts of injustices (p.15).

In the fictional world of Flora’s *One is Enough*, the Onitsha community believes that a woman without a child will have her old age doomed to loneliness as there will be no child to care for her or mourn her death. This assumption is observed when Amaka’s mother advises her after her shattered marriage with Obiora and her subsequent decision to remain single after that ugly experience saying: “But remember, make men friends and start thinking of having children. Marriage or no marriages have children. Your children will take care of you in your old age. You will be very lonely then if you don’t have children. As a mother, you are fulfilled” (Nwapa, 1981, p.54). It is clear that Amaka’s mother shows the necessity and the importance of children in a family in particular and in a community by extension for the welfare of the family. She induces her daughters to find men who will make them pregnant within or outside marriage. For her, a man is worthless if he is unable to impregnate his wife.

Indeed, children are so highly valued among the Onitsha community that procreation is considered the *raison d’être* of any reasonable union. Children are considered blessings to the community, the pride of every woman, and the strength of every race. This justifies Amaka’s longing as a teenager for getting married and having children of her own. This notion is reflected in Amaka’s aunt’s advice to her when she is tossed around by irresponsible suitors: “What is important is not marriage as such, but children, being able to have children, being a mother. Marriage is no marriage without children” (Nwapa, 1981, p.12). This clamor for children as symbols of family posterity, the pride of a woman, and the bedrock of marriages, makes people of Onitsha in Nwapa’s *One is Enough* to deem childlessness as evil and the greatest misfortune that can befall any couple.

The same issue has been the concern in Lola’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. We are informed about the rich Yoruba man, simply called Baba Segi, who attaches much importance to childbearing as the ultimate goal in marriage. In the Yoruba community, the importance of any marriage is linked to its capacity of being fruitful. Like the Onitsha community of Amaka, Baba Segi’s community believes that a woman without a child is like a mango tree without fruits and will have to suffer from loneliness and humiliation. In this wake, Greil *et al.* (2011, p. 741) contend that “motherhood is so tightly connected to marriage in many cultures”. African traditional conception of marriage is teleological. It is primarily for procreation. Marriage can be dissolved on the ground of childlessness. The importance attached to children is however without basis. One major reason for that attachment is summed up in what Mbiti (1969, p.131) calls “personal immortality”. Indeed, when a man dies, he needs somebody to bear his name, so that his name does not die. According to Awolalu and Adelumo (1979, p.172) “The Yoruba attach importance to child-

bearing. Unfruitful marriage is not only a misfortune but also a curse since the couple has not contributed to the community of the family and therefore, of society. A barren woman, however rich, famous, or prosperous, is a shame to her race”.

The importance attached to children among traditional Africans can be rationalized. In an agrarian society, especially in the past, the manliness of a man was measured by his farm produce. The higher the produce, the greater the respect accorded to him. Many hands on the farm led to greater output. Also, leadership roles and chieftaincy titles were reserved for men who had many wives and children under them. The reasoning behind this is that a man who could control many wives and children if leadership roles are given to him would be effective. Africans were not taught how not to die, but they believed that if they have many children, some of them would outlive them even if some of them would die.

### III. BOOMERANG EFFECTS OF CHILDLESSNESS ON AFRICAN WOMEN

Childlessness is a situation that creates many troubles such as trauma, stress, and depression in marriage. Trauma is a condition of serious emotional or psychological stress. It is an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock which may result in lasting psychological pain or torture. Generally, trauma affects negatively people and pushes them consequently to fear and abhor situations that subject them to traumatic conditions. Situations of distress, sadness, disappointment, loss, deprivation, isolation, scorn, dejection, and even barrenness can lead to serious psychological and emotional breakdowns in people facing them.

This issue is inherent in most African societies and especially Nwapa's fictional Yoruba community as is illustrated in *One is Enough*. Childlessness is a social plague that leads to serious traumatic stress and breakdown in the marriage of Amaka and Obiora. This issue not only constitutes emotional pain to the husband and his wife but also to the mother and father-in-law. Mention can be made of the Onitsha community in Nwapa's *One is Enough* where childbearing and rearing are considered the primary and most valuable objectives in marriage. It is this inordinate desire for children or childbearing that puts Amaka in *One is Enough* in a perpetual subservience in her matrimonial home. It is the same issue that shatters her joy, peace, and marriage at a time when she needs most the care and comfort of marital life.

In fact, this novel captures the pitiable condition of a good-natured and industrious woman who is stricken by childlessness in a society that sees child-bearing as the only value attached to womanhood. In the novel, the author presents us with Amaka's marriage to Obiora who suffers a lot from emotional and psychological trauma because it is bereft of children. As a character, Amaka is portrayed as a very industrious woman, well-educated, very respectful, humble, and a good wife to Obiora. Amaka has throughout her life desired and longed to marry and have children of her own, who will call her mother and a man she can call her own, love and cherish. To her, a woman's history starts and ends with marriage and procreation. However, this aspiration hits the rock as Amaka confronts the problem of broken relationships at dawn.

Nevertheless, her hopes and aspiration to get pregnant immediately after marriage are thwarted as she waits for six years without any sign of ever conceiving. This situation of barrenness raises a lot of anxiety in Obiora's family and eventually shatters the lovely and peaceful atmosphere that exists between Obiora and Amaka as well as the mother-in-law. The one-time lovely and understanding husband of Amaka at this time becomes apprehensive over their childless situation. This fear and anxiety of losing his name and blocking the channel of family continuity on account of his wife's barrenness affect Obiora's frame of mind, his attitude, and his love towards Amaka, the woman who has been powerful succor to him at the critical moments of his life.

Notably, Obiora's sudden change and rash treatment of Amaka results in a great psychological and emotional trauma in the life of the poor woman, who at this point sees herself as an outcast in her matrimonial home. The first of such strange attitudes is Obiora's violation of the law of marital fidelity by indulging in illicit secret relationships with another woman, a relationship that fathers two male children, and a situation that confirms Amaka as barren. Secondly is Obiora's secret marriage with this strange woman who has two sons for him without Amaka's knowledge. Thirdly, Obiora conspires with his mother to inflict injury on Amaka. A pure case of this rash treatment is demonstrated when Amaka reminds Obiora of her assistance to him in buying a car, providing food money and other necessities at home, buying a plot of land for building a house as well as giving herself and her resources unreservedly to her husband. Instead of being appreciative of his wife's love and care, Obiora is rather rash. He says to Amaka: "You are being senseless [...] How many mouths were we feeding? You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you are childless. You would not raise your voice in this house if you were sensible. You should go about your business quietly and not offend anyone because if you do, one would be tempted to give you one or two home truths" (Nwapa, 1981, p.56). In a normal and peaceful atmosphere, a childless woman should get consolation from her husband who is supposed to share and bear the pains with her. Her only hope and sustenance are usually the husband's love and support against external attacks on her. Conversely, in a

situation where the husband turns his back on the childless woman, the pain is usually aggravated and can lead to depression, frustration, and in extreme cases, to trauma and eventually death of the hopeless woman. This is the situation that confronts Amaka when her one-time lovely and caring husband becomes belligerent. In fact, an account in the novel has it that, at the sudden announcement of Obiora's extra-marital relationship with another woman resulting in two children, and the declaration that the same woman is coming to take over Amaka's position as a wife, Amaka is utterly devastated. She begins to tremble. She could no longer control her emotions. She holds on to the bed, so she does not faint. This sudden heart-breaking news leaves the poor woman in a serious emotional quagmire as she pines in sorrow.

Despite this heavy blow to Amaka, Obiora does not feel for her, instead he goes further to threaten Amaka saying: "but let me warn you that if you step out of this house in protest when my wife and my two sons arrive, you stay out forever. You must not come back" (Nwapa, 1981, p.25). In fact, Obiora's sudden inconsiderate disposition towards Amaka, his harsh attitude to her, as well as his infidelity to their matrimonial vows, worsen Amaka's agony. Her lamentation, therefore, is that "God had deprived her of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joy of being a mother." (Nwapa, 1981, p.35) Thus, in her sorrow and humiliation on account of the new woman married to displace her as the legal wife of Obiora, that in this sort of thing, a wife, even a barren, one should have been taken into confidence. On this score, Amaka's hopelessness rings as follows: "It beats me how you should do all this behind my back, be involved with a woman, have sons by her, marry her without breathing a word to your wife. You have changed a good deal my husband" (Nwapa, 1981, p.51). Amaka's plight at this point is not just a product of her childlessness alone but pure proof of the stereotypical image painted on female characters in African literature. Here, Nwapa demonstrates that a woman is just a figure to be seen not to be heard. Amaka's consent is not needed in basic decision-making in the family even when the decision is to her detriment. This incident justifies the position of Chukwuma (1998) when he contends: "The female character in African fiction ... is a facile lack-luster human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife, and mother even when the decisions affect her directly" (p.85). This notion is in line with Celestine Obi's view that: "the position of a wife in her husband's family remains shaky and unpredictable until she begets a child" (1970, p.68). It stands out that in traditional Africa a child is a practical vindication of a woman in marriage.

Amaka's agony in marriage is not just because she is childless, but because her husband, who is supposed to be her defender and consoler, is now her chief tormentor. He always finds reasons to beat or inflict injuries on Amaka. As Amaka lays her complaint to Obiora about his infidelity and harsh treatment of her, the husband retorts by saying that he is a man. But when Amaka responds that she is also a woman, Obiora rushes with great indignation at Amaka and gives her a thorough beating. Amaka's hiding in the toilet at this time when actually she has done nothing wrong is a mark of respect, yet, Obiora does not see reasons to control his anger, instead, he bangs at the door saying: "Open the door, you whore, you good-for-nothing woman, you a prostitute. What have you been doing behind my back? Sleeping with other men? I am going to kill you today and take your corpse to your mother and nobody will ask questions [...] Open the door and I will tear you to pieces" (Nwapa, 1981, pp. 28-29). Obiora's unreasonable attitude towards Amaka could be interpreted from the sheer exploitative and patriarchal domineering nature of African men who often shift blames and intimidate women on issues they are rather guilty of.

Since Amaka could not enjoy a fulfilled and peaceful life through marriage, she decides for an independent life as a single person in order to ensure her freedom and happiness in the future. Thus, she breaks off from her marriage, which has oppressed, exploited and humiliated her. In recounting the issue that has shattered her marriage to Adaobi, her childhood friend, Amaka expresses her misconception about marriage thus: "I thought erroneously at first that marriage involved two people. I thought the emphasis was on this unique relationship of man and woman that children did not even matter. I was wrong. A childless marriage cannot last in the Nigeria of today. So, if a wife is unable to have children by her husband, she should leave and try elsewhere" (Nwapa, 1981, p.34).

Another traumatic experience in the novel is the one that arises from the friction Amaka has with her mother-in-law over the issue of her childlessness. In a typical African setting, it is believed that a child is a gift not just to the man and his wife but to the entire community. This is why issues of childlessness attract community concern. Every mother or father-in-law desires grandchildren who keep the home warm and serve as powerful companions to them at old age. To them, grand children are blessings to a family and they are the descendants that would mourn them at their death. Usually grandmothers have special affinity with their grandchildren whom they see as their pride and joy. No mother-in-law ever wishes to be afflicted by children's childlessness as this has a great psychological effect on them more than the actual victims, that is, the husband and wife. It is in this devastating state of mind that Amaka's mother-in-law finds herself after six years of her son's fruitless marriage with Amaka.

Obiora's mother, like every other mother-in-law, feels desperately sad that Amaka cannot give her a grandchild after six years of marriage to her son, Obiora. She pines in sorrow seeing other women of her

age carrying their grandchildren whereas she has none. In fact, the fear of having her son's lineage ended, because of his wife's barrenness, and the pains of having her old age doomed to loneliness heighten the anxiety of the old woman and she becomes very restive. Her fears and anxiety exasperate her mental and emotional stress that she becomes so impatient, unaccommodating, and hostile to everyone around her, particularly to Amaka. She sees Amaka as a nuisance and a good-for-nothing woman who has come to inflict her ill luck on her family. With this impression, Obiora's mother wages psychological war against Amaka, whom she accuses as the cause of the misfortune in her family saying: "I have been sleeping badly for the past year. Don't you see how thin I am? Was I as thin as this when you married my son six years ago? So don't complain of sleeping badly for just one night" (Nwapa, 1981, p.59). To the old woman, Amaka's childlessness has caused her a lot of mental, emotional, and even physical stress. It has cost her sleepless nights. It has sapped her joy and has affected her physical look and beauty. Thus, in her primitive mentality, Obiora's mother fails to see this predicament as a possible work of fate or as a problem of hormonal incompatibility. Instead, she sees it as a result of Amaka's ill-fated nature which she transfers to her son, Obiora. At this, she could no longer hide her indignation towards Amaka's scolding: "And you, with your ilk talk of my son, my lovely son, my good son who saved you from shame and from humiliation. How many suitors had you before my son came to marry you? [...] I told him not to marry you. I shouted it from the rooftops. I told Obiora not to marry you, that you were going to be barren" (Nwapa, 1981, p.64). This harsh and outright attack on Amaka by her mother-in-law portrays the psychological state of the old woman who must have been in pain all these years waiting for her son to bear her grandchildren. For her, a child means the whole world for a woman and without a child, a woman's essence remains meaningless. In Amaka's community, a childless woman takes the blame for any ill luck, hardship, or failure of her husband. Obiora's mother demonstrates this when she blames Amaka for her son's backwardness: "The next thing I want to tell you is that you have done nothing at all towards the advancement of my son since you married him six years ago. Look around and you see others married at the time you were married. My son has not started building a house yet, nor has he done anything for his age grade in this town" (Nwapa, 1981, p.78). The myopic mentality of the old woman is that the infertility of her daughter-in-law hampers her son's progress in business as well as his general success in life. The old woman rashly forgets that Amaka is greatly instrumental in Obiora having a Peugeot car in order to save him from societal scorn and other inconveniences. Equally, the old woman also rashly ignores Amaka who has saved her son, Obiora from being sacked from the ministry. Indeed, when Obiora might well be fired from the ministry for his carelessness and overtrusting nature, it is Amaka who protects his interest and saves the situation by meeting with her husband's permanent secretary at Enugu and pleading his case. In the end, Amaka's care and efforts are turned down by Obiora's mother simply because Amaka is childless.

In many African communities, women are seen as objects in marriage, while their male counterparts are viewed as agents. They are even blamed for challenges related to infertility because, in patriarchal communities, it is unthinkable that men can be infertile. Greil *et al.* (2011, p. 741) buttress this view when they posit that "the presumption is that women are only childless if they are infertile". It is as if there is a lot wrong with their wombs, without looking at the potential defects of manhood. That is the case, even though the medical tests can reveal that it is not the woman who is infertile.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the Nigerian female writer deals with similar issues such as the African cultural pressures in marriage; although the setting is within the Yoruba of Nigeria, the challenges raised are prevalent in most African societies as well. Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi, and Bolanle are married to one man, Ishola Alao a.k.a. Baba Segi. As the opening section commences, we are informed that Baba Segi's youngest and only formally educated wife, Bolanle, his fourth spouse, is causing him worries through her alleged failure to conceive. Baba Segi is, after all, the father of seven children with his first three wives and because he is not a slacker in his marital sexual obligations, something needs to be done to address Bolanle's childless condition. Bolanle scoffs at traditional healers and remedies, so his teacher advises the troubled husband to take his modern, skeptical wife to the University Hospital for tests. This is the process that will in due course unleash a torrent of unforeseen consequences. Baba Segi is confident in his virility and stature as a patriarch.

The apparent barrenness of Bolanle, his beloved and educated fourth wife, causes him much concern. His three other wives have, unbeknownst to him, solved the problems of childbearing in their own unique, crafty ways. But Bolanle insists that she and her husband take a test. He learns that he is, indeed, not as virile as he has claimed. Baba Segi recalls the day they met; he thinks to himself: the gods have sent her to me ... as his eyes rests on Bolanle's bosom. He then asks her: "Now that you and your friend have finished university, are you going to marry a man who will look after you? And she had replied 'When I find one'" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.6). So, along the way, she does make it clear that she has made an honourable commitment in which she said: "I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity [...] and when you choose a family you stay with them". However, her friends challenge her choice to marry in polygamous setting. Yet, in him, Bolanle sees "a large but kindly, generous soul" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.17) beyond being a polygamist. The most powerful of the spouses is Baba Segi's first wife, Iya Segi, whose

daughter Segi is the eldest of the household's children. Iya Segi firmly believes that Bolanle wants their husband to cast them aside as the illiterate ones but also that "these educated types have thin skins; they are like pigeons. If we poke her with a stick, she will fly away and leave our home in peace" (Shoneyin, 2011, p. 53). Things come to a crisis in the morning when Baba Segi first takes the new wife (Bolanle) to the hospital for the fertility test. However, Iya Segi declares to the other two wives that "That Bolanle is a trouble-maker [...]. She will destroy our home. She will expose our private parts to the wind. She will reveal our secret. She will bring woe" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.55).

Because of this, a first serious attempt to expel Bolanle is immediately hatched – which brings the point of how innocent people suffer as compared with those who find their way through crafty means. Despicable substances are planted around the house; the other wives claim to discover by good fortune that Bolanle attempts to cast a fatal spell over Baba Segi's life. But Bolanle's calm logic disproves the false accusation. Moreover, Bolanle's food has been mischievously poisoned in a plot by Iya Segi and Iya Femi to get rid of her. Instead, the plot boomerangs Segi, the first wife's daughter, who lies on the floor in agony, her father on his knees beside her, pleading to the dying girl to "tell the gods you want to stay here with me" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.159). At this time, the medical investigators of Bolanle's apparent barrenness have invited Baba Segi to come in for a sperm test. Before they reveal the results to him, they ask him to bring one of his other wives to the hospital with him.

Profoundly shaken by her daughter's condition, Iya Segi volunteers to be the one at the hospital, and the doctor reveals to Baba Segi: the 'father' of the seven children is, in fact, sterile. The news shatters him. At home that evening, deeply drunk, he denounces his unfaithful wives; in the midst of the dreadful scene, Segi releases her last breath. Just after the quick Muslim funeral, Baba Segi summons his wives and says: "It is not every day, that a man finds out his children are not his own" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.240). He tells them they are free to go. At this point, the bereaved and utterly chastened Iya Segi intervenes: "Who is the father of the children?" she asks him (Shoneyin, 2011, p.241). She insists that it is he, Baba Segi, the man who has lovingly and generously brought up and supported these seven (now six) children, who is their only real father. She begs Baba Segi to keep them and to allow the wives to stay, having acknowledged earlier that it is she who has instigated the plan for the other two wives to seek impregnation by other men as she has done.

But this secret, she says, must be kept within the family. Baba Segi accepts this compromise solution. However, Bolanle announces her intention to leave and restart life on her own elsewhere. She remarks quietly to herself, "I will remember Baba Segi. I won't miss him but I will remember him [...]. Perhaps on some days [...] I will remember him with fondness [having] learned many things from the years I spent under his roof" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.244). So, this concludes the sometimes harrowing and sometimes poignant account of the numerous dark secrets of Baba Segi's wives.

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is an example of the unbearable pain African women are subjected to on the basis of childlessness. It is unbearable in that it locates women to a level beneath the human. In the account above, a woman is expected to solve the problem of childbearing in her own unique and possibly crafty way. Bolanle is at the center of what is claimed to be a societal norm, that is, any married woman should give birth. Bolanle thus struggles to face her own people and community. Moreover, her barren state is used as a means to psychologically control her. While African women face societal criticism and mockery because of childlessness, men struggle to confront all that threatens their social standing and the power of their manhood. However, Greil *et al.* (2011) put forward that "while wives are pitied, husbands are teased" (p. 741) but in other societies, it is the opposite. Baba Segi makes it very clear to Bolanle that her barrenness brings shame to him in society. Baba Segi asks Bolanle rather accusingly what "was wrong with her womb" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.84) and his own ugly warning to Bolanle rings as follows: "If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him" (Shoneyin, 2011, p.84). On this score, Ruether, a theologian feminist, (2008) opines that in a male-controlled society a woman's body and her reproductive process are the ownership of men; in such settings, women are in the service of men regarding procreation and domestic chores. In agreement with the description offered by Ruether, Baba Segi sees nothing valuable in Bolanle except that she is a woman he marries to give birth. Baba Segi's condescending and misogynistic stance toward Bolanle is as plain as the nose on one's face despite his earlier feelings when they meet. Bolanle's educational qualifications meant nothing to Baba Segi as the patriarch of the household (Walby 1989). Baba Segi does not feel the pain of his wife's supposed barrenness because it disturbs his wife, but because it apparently makes people think that he is no longer a man.

In any case, he cannot feel for her because she is under his authority. In his mind, she is his subordinate, after all, an object for him to do with whatever would please him. Ruether (2008, p.219) argues more on the control over a woman's womb in that: "The subjugation of woman is the subjugation of her womb, the subjugation of access to her body, so that she should not explore the pleasures of her own body but that her own body and its fruit should belong first to her father, who would sell her or trade to her husband. She must be delivered as undamaged goods, duly inspected". Once again, Ruether gives a precise analysis that reflects the character of Baba Segi, especially in his ugly warning to Bolanle, "If your father has sold me a

rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (Shoneyin, 2011, p.84). In Baba Segi’s mind, Bolanle could be a damaged commodity, which has never been duly inspected before ‘purchase’. But then, who is to inspect Bolanle? Her father? This sounds more like a patriarchal play in a form of controlling her sexuality. Furthermore, Baba Segi’s use of the word ‘sold’ reduces Bolanle to a mere object or commodity, which one can buy and return back to the seller if it fails to deliver according to expectations. This brings to light the wrong and misplaced conceptions that most African men participate in the process of resolving the barrenness problem faced by their spouses. Baba Segi’s focus is to get what he wants and not sympathetically respond to the situation faced by his fourth wife. Bolanle’s supposed barrenness makes Baba Segi refer to her as a ‘thing’, which in essence reveals the quality of their inter-subjective relationship. This unreasonable victimization of the innocent woman deepens her depression and subjects her to emotional and psychological trauma.

#### IV. IMPACT OF SOCIETAL PERCEPTION ON CHILDLESS WOMEN IN *ONE IS ENOUGH* AND IN *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Practically, traditional society has a way of molding or destroying individual characters. Because a human being is a social being and an integral member of human society, all his actions and thoughts are interpreted and judged based on the societal norms and ideological beliefs of the immediate community. In literary works, a character’s actions and reactions to issues are guided by the geographical setting of the work and the ideological belief of the community from which he emanates. In Nwapa’s *One Is Enough*, for instance, the Onitsha community’s concept of childlessness as a misfortune and a curse affects their general attitude toward childless women.

In this vein, Kalu (2008) declares that “Both the women and men feel threatened in their self-esteem in terms of manhood and womanhood. The man has a special threat related to lineage and the woman in relation to her position in the man’s family” (p. 66). This threat is the root cause of the anxiety that grips childless couples, especially women in African literature. In Nwapa’s *One is Enough*, childless women are held in great contempt. They are disregarded, humiliated and rated low in society as people who are cursed.

In her book, *Childless by Choice*, Marian Faux sheds light on the issue of childlessness to witchcraft. She opines that ‘witch’ has become a metaphor for the childless woman. It is this notion that confers societal hostility towards childless women as witches who deny the unborn children their right to existence. Given this notion, therefore, the question of showing compassion or understanding to childless women is pointless in some societies. Such outright victimization, isolation and rejection impose great psychological and emotional trauma on childless women. Among the Onitsha community in *One is Enough*, childless women are not only jeered at but are also made to realize that they are not important and then useless to the community.

In the novel, Nwapa explores the psychological effect of societal scorn on childless women. This societal scorn, indifference, and isolation towards childless women affect them drastically and provoke in them, terrible feelings of depression and hopelessness. For instance, Amaka’s marriage with Obiora collapses because of societal mockery and undue victimization. Obiora who is seen initially as a caring and loving husband who will stop at nothing in seeing that Amaka is comfortable, turns hostile, owing to societal scorn and the pressure from his immediate family. Thus, after six years of their childless marriage, his mother sees him as a disappointment and as a stubborn son who is insensitive to her advice. In anguish for her son’s condition, Obiora’s mother shuns him when he wants to intrude on her discussion with Amaka. Her embarrassment and disregard for Obiora on account of their childlessness affect Obiora’s tender and loving attitude towards his wife, Amaka. Thus, Obiora turns so cruel and hostile to Amaka that he always finds reasons to beat her up at any slight provocation and misunderstanding. Equally, in order to satisfy societal demands of perpetuating the family lineage, Obiora breaks the moral principles of marital fidelity to indulge in a secret relationship with another woman who eventually gives him two sons.

Despite his cruel disposition towards Amaka, Obiora is seriously affected both psychologically and emotionally. His aggressive and cruel attitudes towards Amaka can be attributed to the depression occasioned by societal mockery and isolation. His poor psychological state affects not only his actions but also his physical appearance. Obiora is seen aging fast and emaciating on daily basis as a result of emotional and psychological stress necessitated by his condition of childlessness. Thus, according to his mother, Obiora is getting older and older every day while Amaka is getting younger and younger every day.

Another impact of societal scorn on Obiora is inducing him to indulge in an extra-marital affair which ordinarily he might not opt for. Obviously, Obiora before this crisis loves Amaka and is impressed by her attitude and assistance. The first misunderstanding he has with Amaka which leads to his beating her makes Obiora take one week of sick leave from his company just to stay with Amaka and take care of her. This is done as proof of his love and remorse for offending such a wonderful lover and wife as Amaka. On the other hand, Amaka’s trauma as a childless woman stems from both societal mockery and the cruel disposition of her in-laws toward her. This societal scorn and cruelty subject her to great emotional and

psychological torture. This attitude of isolation has a devastating effect on Amaka, who pines away in loneliness and depression. Her presence is no longer appreciated and her efforts are no longer valued. Amaka finds herself in great emotional stress and isolation, where staying married is as painful as well as quitting the marriage.

Consequently, the dramatic and sudden change in attitude by Amaka's in-laws as well as the entire community results in a strong feeling of isolation and loneliness in Amaka. She is seen most of the time thinking, lamenting, and bearing her burden all alone in silence. The people that are supposed to console and encourage her to turn out to be perpetrators of her agony. Even her own mother could not bear her but scolded her for failing to play her card well when she finds that Obiora is incapable of impregnating her. However, because she is guided by a strong moral principle, Amaka rejects her mother's advice to look out for men outside her marriage who could impregnate her. This issue of rejecting the old woman's advice and insisting on the ideals of fidelity to one's spouse creates friction between Amaka and her mother to the extent that the old woman disowns Amaka as her daughter when she pours out her feelings about her situation.

I told you, four years ago to leave him or if you did not want to leave him to go to other men and get pregnant. You are my daughter. We are never barren in our family, never. Even in your own imbecile father's family, there was nothing like barrenness. But you refused to take my advice. You were being a good wife, chastity, faithfulness my foot. You can go ahead and eat virtue. Here are your belongings sent to me in this disgraceful manner, my daughter humiliated in this way. You are not my daughter. (Nwapa, 1981, p.98)

This repudiation by her own mother, together with the harsh and hostile treatment meted out to Amaka in her matrimonial home, leaves her in a psychological no man's land. She is all alone without any consolation.

Ilo (2006) indicates that African societies have embraced incorrect perceptions that through marriage a woman earns respect and dignity. What this insinuates is that outside the institution of marriage, a woman remains a nonentity. But within the marriage itself, that respect is actually conditional; that is until a child is born, a woman is not respected fully as 'Iya', literally meaning 'the mother of. In Shoneyin's novel, Bolanle is addressed by her name, while the other three are addressed as 'Iya' (mother of). Already, there is a challenge of failing to understand that the use of the term 'Iya' has power dynamics in the lives of women. It contributes to the process of disempowering and undermining women and the essence of being human with full rights and dignity. 'Iya' becomes a decisive title for women's freedom in society today, and where the title 'Iya' is not applicable, a woman suffers greatly. There is absolutely no consideration of a situation where the woman can lose her child yet, she has suddenly lost her identity and come to be referred to as someone's mother.

Understanding women's dignity by virtue of marriage is highly problematic, as it portrays marriage to be the only institution that confers dignity and respect to women. In reality, this institution in a male-dominated society is also known to be the first among others in constructing norms and systems that enslave women. Although other people perceive unmarried women as free from male supremacy and control (Osiek 2006), there seems to be a dynamic of control over women by virtue of gender and patriarchal ideologies, that is, they are inferior to men notwithstanding their education, cultural affiliation, class, and religion. Gender remains one of the most significant factors in shaping the power dynamics in households.

With marriage in the cultural context similar to that of Baba Segi, a woman is regarded as the property of her husband who can do anything with her, including returning her to her parents. Both in marriage and outside, she is under the oppressive power of a male patriarch. Similarly, Ilo (2006) captures such argument for it is through marriage that a woman gains dignity; hence, she is *someone* because she is married and she *is nobody* outside marriage. This way of understanding is quite misleading, as it paints women as subordinates and commodities of men. But of course, there is a history of gender inequality, which established itself as a norm in different spheres of life. It is unfortunate to notice in a patriarchal setting that a girl or woman is viewed as immature, incapable of authority even over her own person giving more power and authority to men over her life. While women are not considered adults, "the young male is taught to identify with the male sphere as higher than the female sphere" (Ruether, 2002, p. 63), and he begins to establish themselves as persons of power and authority over women in society highlights the manner in which some male individuals have capitalized on such sexist and patriarchal norms as means of exercising power over women.

Men, therefore, inherit social norms that negatively affect women even though the mechanisms of control vary with their social context. Tichenor (2005, p.193) points out that, "within marriage, men's power over women has been linked to and legitimated by their role as breadwinners" and many other norms or aspects that go with the sociological perceptions of masculinity.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined and interpreted the plight, the predicaments, and the abuses of childless women in African culture as featured in Flora's and Lola's fictional worlds. The paper reveals that childless women are verbally abused, physically beaten, psychologically abused, and maltreated. Very often, these women are traumatized, stigmatized, and rejected by their respective societies. The paper argues that it is unethical and immoral to maltreat childless women for involuntary infertility. The pressures coming from society constitute huge struggles for women when they fail to bear children after a couple of times. These women experience the torments of both social and cultural oppression which originate from the patriarchal nature of African societies.

The emotional turmoil is further compounded by societal pressure. The paper has also revealed that family members compel the husband to take another wife for the sake of ensuring a continued lineage. In some cultures, these women experience domestic abuse, and divorce and are even driven out of their homes. The plight of childless women is unfathomable in most African societies with regard to how society maltreats these women because of their incapacity of bear children. Furthermore, the study has revealed that the social pressures and their predicaments have nevertheless become an impetus for these childless women's self-actualization and self-realization. These findings demonstrate that infertility can have a serious effect on both the psychological well-being and the social status of women in the developing world. Besides, the study provides insight into the cultural context of involuntary infertility in Africa. Hard work and self-reliance become imperative for these childless women if they really yearn for social thriving.

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