

# **MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION IN AFRICA: THE PORTRAYAL IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES***

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## **Abstract**

Marriage as a social institution should be a union of love and interdependence between spouses. This is not always the case in African, where many societies are largely patriarchal. Marriage is contracted for many reasons, some of which are beneficial only to the men; some female folk also see marriage as a way of escaping from certain unpleasant experiences. Marriage in Africa is mostly for procreation which is often more pronounced than the relationship between couples. Cases of crashed marriages owing to childlessness are always on the news and women often take the blame. This paper examines the issues of marriage and procreation in Africa using Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Through the experiences of the female characters in the novel, the novelist criticizes the society where the female gender is subjugated, deprived, oppressed and abused. To examine this problem, this paper adopts the feminist approach to literary criticism, and it is discovered that marriages are contracted due to some patriarchal reasons as well as its perception by the female folk as a fortress from life's ugly experiences. It is discovered that procreation is used in securing marital positions and that women often contribute to the unfortunate and painful experiences of fellow women. The paper recommends that marriage for African women should be a thing of choice; that the women should be aware of the fact that marriage does not guarantee social and psychological fulfilment; that marriage should emphasize love and commitment rather than procreation, and that women should

cooperate with one another to fight deprivations and marital disharmony.

Keywords: marriage, procreation, gender, feminism, patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

Marriage is an institution established by human society. It is a legal union between two persons after concluding all the necessary arrangements stipulated by their society. It is usually a lifetime alliance although it can be short-lived for a number of people. Until recently, especially in some parts of the Western world where same-sex marriage is legalized, marriage is universally acclaimed as a union between a man and a woman. Olantunde and Ade (as cited in Onwuasoanya, 2017) defines marriage as a “union between a man and a woman such that any children born within the union are regarded as legitimate offspring of parents...” (p.148) while Ubesekera and Jiaojiang (2008) point out that it is “merely a socially approved sexual and economic union between a man and a woman” (p.1). It is, therefore, an arrangement in which a man and a woman are given societal recognition as having an assertion of a right of sexually accessing one another and the woman in the union qualifies to bear children.

This institution of marriage, broadly speaking, is of two types: monogamy and polygamy, and both are legally recognized in African society. A monogamous marriage involves one man and a woman while a polygamous marriage “allows for plurality of mates” (Onwuasoanya, 2017, p.149). In the words of Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh (2018), “the main purpose of marriage in African society is to bear children, to build a family and to extend life” (p.3). In other words,

marriage and procreation – the sexual activity of conceiving and bringing forth children – are inseparable. It is therefore, expected that once a marriage takes place, procreation commences immediately and failure to meet up with this expectation does not usually go well especially for the woman who is placed at the receiving end of every marital failure and shortcomings in Africa. Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh's assertion that "infertility in any African marriage is the woman's fault and the women themselves have been made to believe so even without any medical proof" (p.3) remains an indisputable fact and this is one of the issues which many African female writers stand against using their literary works.

The African society has been described as patriarchal in nature. It is a society where the men folk wield power over the women folk. It is made up of a male - dominated power structure. Udogu (2019) posits that in such a society, "men are accorded more power than women by tradition and culture. To that end, women are looked upon as inferior to men in everything. Women are, therefore, seen as objects of men in everything" (p.11). This is in line with Ezenwa-Ohaeto's definition of patriarchy as "the social system where men are the primary authority figure and their decisions are central to social organization. In this system, women are not accorded much recognition; they are seen as suzerains to be owned, either by the father, an uncle or a husband" (2018, p.29). Gender, therefore becomes a sell out for the female folk in Africa. An African woman suffers domestic violence: she faces various degrees of sexual harassment ranging from female genital mutilation to rape; she is forced into marriages and often times at a younger age; she suffers abandonment, neglect and other forms of denials; she bears the blame of infertility in marriage, and once her husband's success begins

to dwindle, she is equally blamed for that; she is raised to take care of men as husbands and brothers. Ezejiolor (2011) asserts that "...history tells us that the persistent effort by men, in the name of patriarchy, to dominate women is only an indication of power struggle" (p.143). It is this form of 'power struggle' that some female writers in Africa set out to expose. They "want to project the opinion that these awful treatments against women have both moral and global implications and can no longer be ignored" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2018, p.41). African female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Ifeoma Okoye, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chimamanda Adichie and others have, in one way or the other, in their literary works, uncovered some cultural issues of women in relation to men in the African society.

Accordingly, this paper explores marriage and procreation in Africa as portrayed in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Using feminism as an approach to literary criticism, factors that propelled the marriages contracted by some African women as well as the relationship between procreation and marital status in the African society are examined. Equally examined are the situations where women fight against fellow women in marriage and procreation issues.

### **Theoretical framework**

This research is hinged on feminism, one of the theories in literary criticism. This angle of literary criticism presents various opinions and beliefs about the place and conditions of women in different societies as well as the factors behind such behaviours. Asika (2015) puts it that "a critic using this theory is interested in the portrayal of the womenfolk in a

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patriarchal society and how these literary works project or diminish the rights and equality of women in the world” (p.346). It is important to state here that feminism in Africa is quite different from that of the Western world where the likes of Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elaine Showalter dealt with the vindication of the rights of women – the gender that form the oppressed class with no right whatsoever. African feminism, as Udogu (2019) puts it, “is the type of feminism introduced and preached by African women. It addresses, in particular, the condition of women in Africa” (p.11). African female writers and critics such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Akachi Adimora - Ezeigbo and others have made their contributions on the conditions of women presenting their various perspectives on this struggle.

In her essay, “Women and Creative Writing in Africa” Nwapa (2007) discloses the idea behind the creation of her female protagonists in her novels. Her works, according to her, project a more nuanced image of African womanhood which the male African authors such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Elechi Amadi have neglected in their works. As she puts it, these writers, have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men. Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* is a prostitute; Wole Soyinka’s *Amope* is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband. Achebe’s *Miss Mark* doesn’t hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives. J.P. Clark’s *Ebiere* entices her husband’s younger brother into a sexual relationship. This focus has always been on the physical, prurient, negative nature of woman. (p.528).

Nwapa, therefore, sets out to present women who are not the types presented by her male counterparts but those

who are successful in their trades and properly take care of their families. She debunks “the erroneous concept that the husband is the lord and master and that the woman is nothing but his property” and another wrong concept “that the woman is dependent on her husband” (p.528). She advocates for “womanism” because she believes in honouring of women’s strength and experiences.

Ogundipe-Leslie, on her part, projects stiwanism – a word formed from the acronym, STIWA (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), which borders on the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. For her, it is necessary that the needs of African women should be put into consideration in our indigenous cultures. This is one of the attitudes of African women to feminism which often separates them from their Western sisters (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2007). Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012), in her snail sense feminism, posits that women in our culture often “adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men” (p.27). This attitude she likened to that of a snail which

carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory. . . .(p.27)

Adimora-Ezeigbo, in this brand of feminism, emphasizes persistent determination and sensitivity, together with the

ability to surmount obstacles as the qualities which the women folk need in their quest for justice and self-actualization. Looking at these offshoots of feminism, one accepts the fact that it is “about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better condition for them” (Quayson, 2007, p.586). Literary artists who advocate feminism, write about the women, their strength, their rights, their challenges and their conditions in their various communities. These literatures, as Ogbazi (2012) puts it, “are not only reflective but also protesting, debunking, readdressing and liberating” (p.19). They mirror and present the nature of as well as expressing the issues as it concerns the women; they reaffirm the truth or the credence of some behavior exhibited by women; they express strong disagreement or disapproval about some certain ways women are treated in our society as well as the ways they have been portrayed by male writers in their writings and they set out to put right some certain issues regarding to the female gender in our society.

**Brief background information on the author and the novel**

The data for this research is Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* and it deals with marriage and procreation with regard to the African society. The portrayal of the female characters in the novel in relation to those of their male counterparts are used to explore these issues of marriage and procreation in Africa. Born in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, Lola Shoneyin is a poet and a novelist, having published three volumes of poetry and launched her debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, which placed her on the list of the Orange Prize in the United Kingdom in 2010. A winner of the PEN Award in America as well as the Ken Saro -Wiwa Award for prose in Nigeria, Shoneyin was

also, in 2014, named on the Hay Festival's Africa39 list of 39 Sub-Saharan African writers below the age of 40 who possess the capacity of defining the course of African Literature.

The title of the novel clearly states that the main subject of the novel is the controversial and culturally contentious question of polygamy (Moola, 2017). In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin tells the story of four wives in a polygamous home of Ishola Alao (Baba Segi), their husband, who deals in building materials in the city of Ibadan. She tells the story of the infertility of this illiterate businessman which becomes exposed towards the end of the story through his eventual visit to the hospital with his last wife, Bolanle, who, unlike the other wives does not engage in adultery in order to retain her position in her husband's home. In her narration too, are various circumstances surrounding the marriages contracted between Baba Segi and his wives as well as other issues bothering the female folks in a typical African society.

### **Marriage for patriarchal rationality**

Marriage in African society is contracted for many reasons. It is, most importantly, a socially approved way of establishing a family for procreation (Ubasekera & Jiaojiang, 2008). Couples, in most cases, agree to unite themselves in this alliance with the consent of their families. Others whose unions lack the support of their families often elope so as to start their own families. But there are situations where the contraction of marriage does not need the approval of the persons involved. This often is found in a patriarchal society and the victim in most cases is the woman. The decision is made for her by her father or any other person who stands to make certain profit from the marriage. The male-dominated

power structure speaks and acts for her. Women are not seen as “human beings with voice and choice but as commodities owned by the male world either as brides to yield money for the family in form of bride wealth or as child bearing commodities for the male world or as means of satisfying male sexual urge” (Udogu, 2019, p.13).

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin presents the character of Iya Tope, who is a victim of patriarchal rationality in marriage. The marriage between her and Baba Segi is a mere recompense for a poor harvest. Even when the young girl is still enjoying her childish pleasures, her brother becomes the first to inform her of attainment to a marriageable age whereas her father reproves her for being lazy, a quality detested by men and the factor that has turned suitors away from her. Then comes the poor harvest and her father has to pay for it, for he has been paid by Baba Segi to tend his cassava farm. Iya Tope becomes “a piece offering from a desperate farmer” (*The Secret...* p.201). Iya Tope describes herself:

I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms, two legs. Without fanfare or elaborate farewells, I packed my bags. . . I should have known something unusual would happen that year. (*The Secret...* p.82)

The young woman’s right is consequently denied her and this is in line with the position of Odinye (2018) that “... many women scholars and activists have pioneered a literary canon hinged on human rights abuse and feminism in order to create massive awareness on the bizarre experiences of women and girls in society” (p.64). Iya Tope’s father gives

his daughter away in marriage for his own personal reasons. The bride's consent is never sought; she has to succumb to what the patriarchal system puts in place for her. Another character who is indirectly a victim of patriarchal injustice is Iya Femi. Having lost her parents at a younger age, she becomes dispossessed of her father's house. She is told that "a girl cannot inherit her father's house because it is everyone's prayer that she will marry and make her husband's home her own" (*The Secret...* p.21). She is denied her education as she is given out as a maid to a rich woman who mercilessly dealt with her. It is an attempt to get away from the mess she found herself in, due to her uncle's unjust behaviour that she offered herself to Baba Segi and becomes his third wife.

### **Marriage as an escape**

Marriage to some African women is a means of removing themselves from an environment which they consider unpleasant for them. Some young women go into marriage due to poverty or the desire to live a flamboyant lifestyle, while some see it as a road to freedom from parental guidance. To others, it is a means of retreating from unpleasant emotional experience while another group sees it as that which is ideal for every woman who has attained a particular age and that failure to be identified with a family of her own becomes a shameful phenomenon. Shoneyin's *The Secret Live of Baba Segi's Wives* presents characters who have their marriages built on finding relief either physically or psychologically. They see it as a way of gaining freedom; a kind of healing. Referring to Ogundipe-Leslie's essay on "African Women, Culture and Another Development", Davis (2007) avers: "the important challenge to the African woman is her own self – perception since it is she who will have to define her own

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freedom” (p.562). This is the case with Bolanle, Baba Segi’s fourth wife. To her, marriage seems an avenue for healing and emotional freedom; a step that will resuscitate her. Her mother is described as a “relentless nagging” one whose behaviour caused series of miscarriages for Bolanle. Her continual fight with her husband and her younger daughter is quite unbearable. This behaviour of hers coupled with the emotional stress which Bolanle found herself after she is raped one rainy day and the consequent abortion, form the factors that propel her into marrying a polygamist. She narrates,

I didn’t only come here to get away from my mother; I came to escape from the filth that followed me. If I stayed at home, I knew the day would come when Mama would open my bedroom door and find pools of blood at my wrists. After everything happened, I tried hard to continue being myself but I slowly disappeared. I became Bolanle – the soiled, damaged woman... So, yes. I chose this home. Not for the monthly allowance, not for the lace skirt suits, and not for the coral bracelets. Those things mean nothing to me. I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity.  
(*The Secret...*p.16)

The above summarizes the reason behind Bolanle’s marriage to Baba Segi. Although she is aware that there are some incompatibilities between the two of them, she is determined to make the best out of the marriage. Her plan is to educate her husband and other members of the household on certain issues that will save them from public embarrassment. In other words, she desires to recreate the situation she meets into one that suits her personality. This is the situation many

African women find themselves when they perceive marriage as the solution to their present predicament. In such cases, there is a separation of love from marriage. Commitment becomes the key factor and when the response or commitment of the other party in the union does not commensurate with hers, there is a possibility that the marriage becomes another horrible nightmare to the woman. Despite her literacy status, Bolanle becomes entrapped in Baba Segi's net.

Iya Femi is another character whose marriage is a form of escape because of her suffering in the hands of her uncle who dispossessed her because of the nature of lineage and family arrangements in Africa, where the idea of the nuclear family is never allowed to solidify into a clear-cut category in opposition to more traditional forms. In practice, there is always an area of overlap between the nuclear arrangements and the claims of extended families (Quayson, 2007). It is the 'claims' from her extended family that pushes her into Grandma's house where she is tortured in every sense of it. She narrates:

From the day I got here, I was a house-girl and my status didn't change. They pillaged the most fruitful years of my life, all the time treating me as if they'd found me in a pit latrine. Grandma slapped me if a drop of oil fell from the ladle to the cooker. If I didn't answer the first time she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head. If I overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chilli powder into the wounds. Once, when she saw me speaking to the gateman, she stripped me naked, rubbed chilli between my thighs and locked me out of

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the house for a whole day. She didn't remember that I was eighteen years old with chest full of breasts and thighs full of hair. All I could do was weep in shame. (*The Secret...* p.124)

She equally loses her virginity to Tunde, Grandma's only son who eases off his stress between her thighs. It is he who gives her idea of escaping to freedom. Her encounter with Baba Segi provides her the opportunity she desperately needs at that point and she perfectly utilizes it. Marriage becomes a place of refuge for her when the wicked of the society are ready to swallow her whole; a base from which she can call in her debts, for the society owes her a lot. Although Iya Femi feels relieved at Baba Segi's house, her background still creates a room for insult to her. This is used to depict the fate of African women whose background determines their place in their matrimonial homes. A woman from a poor family is easily victimized so also are those who have been perceived as having no other option in their life apart from marriage. Baba Segi's response to Iya Femi's rants summarizes this situation: "Iya Femi, you can sleep in the gutter if you want to... That is where you came from" (*The Secret...* p.62). Shoneyin uses these characters to portray the conditions of many African women who see marriage as a place of refuge from their unwholesome life experiences.

**Procreation and marital position**

Marriage in Africa can be said to emphasize procreation more than anything else. Being a patriarchal society, a woman's position in her matrimonial home is often times determined by her ability to procreate. The fate of an African woman is such that she is nobody outside the institution of marriage and even within the institution, her position or respect is

conditional. It is only when a child is born – a male child significantly – that a woman is fully respected in her matrimonial home. Ngcobo (2007) asserts that “marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman’s fertility to the husband’s family group” (p.533).

It is, therefore, a frightening and unpleasant experience for a childless married woman in Africa. She is branded ‘barren’ even when her husband is the infertile one. African writers especially the female ones have portrayed this situation in their writings that they have been criticized and challenged to write on more important themes. But Nwapa (2007) has a response to this. She replies:

...the life of a man and that of a woman are interdependent. But then the problem that a woman faces in the world is the pain of not being able to bring forth a child from her womb, a feat no man can (yet) perform. The pain is great if she is denied of this function and this is why the theme of barrenness is explored by many African writers, particularly the female ones. A wife is more often than betrayed and abandoned by her husband if she does not have a child. Therefore, the desire to be pregnant, to procreate is an overpowering one in the life of a woman. She is ready to do anything to have a child. . . (p.531)

This is the major theme of the novel under study. The novel portrays the fears and pains which African women are subjected to on the basis of childlessness. The pain is

unbearable because it places women to a level below the human (Baloyi, 2019). In order to secure and maintain their positions in their matrimonial home, the uneducated wives of Baba Segi involve themselves in adulterous acts. The armchair in Baba Segi's household symbolizes this marital position: "The tradition was that the comfort of an armchair had to be earned, which meant that unless you were pregnant, with oedema, breastfeeding or watching over toddlers, you were not entitled to one" (*The Secret...* p.53). This situation is more biting in a polygamous home because the woman becomes a thing of ridicule not just in the hands of her husband but also in those of her co – wives. What then becomes the fate of those women who have taken alliance of marriage as a place of solace? They certainly will go to any extent to ensure that their marital positions are retained. This is the case with Baba Segi's wives. Their engagement in extra – marital affairs is as a result of "their desire for children and the preservation of the polygamous household, which for them is the only haven in a hopeless world" (Moola, 2017, pp. 84 – 85).

The presence of Bolanle in the picture, however, portrays the other dimension of life which Nwapa (2007) advises female writers to follow: creating African women who are not completely engulfed by the burden of barrenness and other domestic confinements just as her eponymous character Efuru who finds fulfillment by becoming the priestess of the water goddess. Shoneyan uses her character Bolanle in the portrayal of the fact that marriage and procreation should not be burdens on the woman. As Emecheta puts it that "women are quarrelsome and jealous" (2007, p.555), the unwholesome behaviours which the others of Baba Segi wives exhibit towards her do not completely inhibit her. Ironically, such rivalry fully exposes their

adulterous adventures and the oppressive nature of polygamy. Their behavior towards this educated wife of Baba Segi confirms the assertion of Orabueze (2010) that “women are always afraid and uncomfortable with other women who have their own minds and are liberated. They do all they can to bring them to their lowly level” (p. 289). In as much as Bolanle seeks to have her own child for her husband as that will be of great pleasure to him and equally save herself the painful nights of sexual pummeling from Baba Segi, she realizes later that living in Baba Segi’s house as his wife has been “a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation” (*The Secret...* p.244). She, therefore, quits the marriage and braces herself up to face and conquer the society. This is to summarize the point that motherhood does not always guarantee social security.

### **Women against women in marriage and procreation issues**

Women have been identified as sources of grief for fellow women in Africa. The older ones seem to dictate the type of lives which the younger ones should lead. Just like Aunty Nabou in Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Maami Broni in Darko’s *Faceless* and Tambu’s mother in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, these women in different ways, make life experiences a bitter one for their fellow women. It is pertinent to state here that many harmful practices against women in Africa such as genital mutilation, breast ironing or flattening, widowhood practices and other forms of oppressions and humiliations are mostly championed by women.

Shoneyin, in this novel, portrays Baba Segi’s first wife, Iya Segi as a domineering character. Because Baba Segi’s business is established by her savings, she becomes

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determined to manipulate her husband and other wives to her own advantage. She sees herself as the queen mother of the household. But as soon as Bolanle the graduate joins the family, she feels that her position is under a threat. She becomes afraid and uncomfortable and fights consistently to have the new wife out of the way. Since Baba Segi ties his masculinity to procreation, Bolanle has to bear a child so as to retain her position as a wife, and Iya Segi who has been educating the other wives on how to surmount this challenge connived with those other wives not to keep Bolanle on the know. Her sole desire is to humiliate Bolanle but she ends up shooting herself in the foot. She represents those African women who make life unbearable for their fellow women in their matrimonial homes.

Iya Segi's mother, though a minor character, is used to portray those mothers who are bent on seeing their daughters get married. To such women, a woman is worth nothing if she is not married, her fortunes notwithstanding. She tells her daughter, "...you cannot buy land and build your own house. The village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can't! ... You have made money your husband" (*The Secret...* pp.97 – 99). This type of pressure exerted on a girl-child often becomes a psychological torture and in most cases pushes her into a regrettable married life as in the case of Iya Tope whom her mother describes as one who "is bordering on decay" at twenty three. Other female characters who jeopardize the happiness of their fellow women include the wife of Iya Femi's uncle who is presented as a messenger for the patriarchal structure which successfully deprives Iya Femi of her father's house; the Ayikara women who "lived for other women's men" (*The Secret...* p.2); and Bolanle's mother who nags her children into the hands of men.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* exposes that marriage and procreation are among the issues which are causes for concern among the female gender in a patriarchal society. As a feminist writer, she is concerned with revealing the challenges faced by women in Africa due to their gender. Such challenges include rape, property deprivation, forced marriage, procreation issues, among others. Although Shoneyin portrays what Orabueze (2010) describes as "...a rosy side of polygamy where the head of the family fulfils his role to the various wives and their children" (p.151), she equally depicts the intrigues, savagery, jealousies and other pressures encountered in a polygamous home. With the use of symbolism, humour, irony and satire, and perfect characterization, the novelist is able to explore the patriarchal rationality behind some marriages in Africa and the dangers of perceiving marriage as a social fortress. She equally depicts the relationship between procreation and the position of women in matrimonial unions as well as the nightmares created for women by fellow women as regards marriage and procreation.

This paper, in summary, advocates marriage as a matter of choice for an African girl-child. She should not be forced into it for any reason whatsoever. This is to say that her training from the onset should not be directed only towards marriage. Women, on their part, should note that marriage does not always guarantee both social and psychological healing and liberation. Education coupled with vigilance as deduced from the novel, are the means through which female liberation is achieved. Women generally should cooperate with one another to fight marital disharmony and deprivation (Okpala & Utoh – Ezeajugh, 2018). It is evil and

more heart-breaking when women are not physically and emotionally secured among fellow women in a male-dominating society.

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