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Colonial Disruption and Indigenous Feminism: Yoruba Gender Ideology in Modern Nigerian Fiction

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Abstract

Contemporary feminist discourse in Nigeria is predominantly shaped by Western paradigms that overlook the indigenous logic of gender complementarity foundational to Yoruba society before colonial intervention. This paper advances a decolonial feminist critique by examining how British colonialism imposed a rigid, hierarchical patriarchy that distorted pre-existing gender relations rooted in reciprocity and dual authority. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and deconstruction, the study interrogates the ideological rupture between indigenous gender ontology and modern feminist expression through a comparative analysis of Forest of a Thousand Daemons, D. O. Fagunwa's (1982) novel translated by Wole Soyinka and Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010). While Forest of a Thousand Daemons depicts a pre-colonial Yoruba framework where women exercised agency in governance, spirituality, and commerce within a disciplined but complementary hierarchy, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives reflects a postcolonial social order where polygamy becomes weaponised, competition supplants cooperation, and women internalise patriarchal dominance. The study argues that contemporary gender crises in Yoruba society are not indigenous constructs but consequences of colonial epistemic violence. It concludes that African feminism must shift from derivative Western models towards a reclamation of indigenous gender philosophies that privileged balance over antagonism.

Keywords: African Feminism; Decoloniality; Yoruba Gender Ideology; Postcolonial Theory; Indigenous Epistemology

Introduction

Contemporary feminist discourse frequently positions Africa as historically and inherently patriarchal, framing women's subordination as a universal and uninterrupted reality. Such assumptions, however, reflect colonial projections rather than indigenous epistemologies.[1] Prior to European intervention, many

[1] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed Books, 1987).

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African societies, particularly among the Yoruba, were organized around a system of gender complementarity rather than hierarchical patriarchy. Within this framework, women held significant authority in governance, commerce, and spirituality.[2] The very absence of gendered pronouns in the Yoruba language illustrates a worldview in which identity was not predicated on biological sex (Oyěwùmí, 1997).[3]

The advent of British colonialism radically restructured this social order. Colonial administrators, operating from a Victorian understanding of gender, imposed foreign institutions that centralized authority in men across political, religious, and legal domains.[4] Indigenous dual-sex political systems were dismantled, and women's autonomous institutions were delegitimized or absorbed under male leadership.[5] Through missionary education and Christian moral prescriptions, colonial agents further entrenched domesticity as the proper domain of women, erasing historical evidence of female autonomy and leadership.[6]

Revisiting this historical rupture is essential not merely for archival reconstruction but for contemporary feminist theorization. Current articulations of feminism in Nigeria often frame women's liberation as a struggle against culture, inadvertently accepting colonial gender constructs as normative.[7] However, if patriarchal dominance in its current form is a colonial import rather than an indigenous reality, then liberation may lie not in cultural abandonment but in epistemic recovery. This paper therefore interrogates pre-colonial Yoruba gender ideology, examines its distortion under colonial rule, and argues for a reorientation of African feminist discourse towards indigenous frameworks rooted in reciprocity rather than antagonism.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design located within a decolonial epistemological framework. Rather than treating gender as a universal category, the study adopts an African-centered analytical lens that prioritises indigenous Yoruba knowledge systems over Western feminist assumptions.

Data Sources and Text Selection

Two literary texts were purposively selected for their representation of different historical phases of Yoruba gender relations:

[2] Bolaji Akinyemi Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria (1992); Nkiru Nzegwu, Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).
[3] Oyěwùmí, Invention of Women, 32.
[4] Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 23.
[5] Nzegwu, Family Matters, 67.
[6] Oyěwùmí, The Invention of Women, 82.
[7] Akosua Adomako Ampofo, "African Feminist Thinking," (2004).

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- Wole Soyinka's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*[8], selected for its depiction of a pre-colonial Yoruba society characterised by complementary gender structures.

- Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*[9], selected for its representation of a postcolonial Yoruba society in which gender hierarchy has been reshaped through colonial influence.

The texts are approached not merely as fiction but as cultural testimonies and socio-historical documents that encode ideological transitions.

Analytical Framework

This study operates through a dual theoretical lens: Postcolonial Feminism and Derridean Deconstruction. Postcolonial feminism provides the macro-analytic frame for examining how British colonial rule institutionalised a gendered hierarchy that reconfigured indigenous structures of authority. It enables a critique of Western feminist universalism while situating Yoruba gender transformation within imperial political economy.

Derridean deconstruction is employed not merely to identify binary oppositions but to interrogate their instability within the literary texts themselves. Rather than treating male/female or power/subordination as fixed opposites, this study examines how these categories are hierarchically organised, where they fracture, and how subordinated terms disrupt or contaminate the dominant position. Attention is given to moments of semantic slippage, narrative irony, role reversals, and structural contradictions that unsettle the apparent coherence of patriarchal authority.

Method of Analysis

A close textual and hermeneutic reading strategy is applied with specific attention to:

- The construction and privileging of gendered binaries
- Narrative moments where authority is reversed, destabilised, or internally contradicted
- Linguistic markers of hierarchy and their subversion
- The tension between symbolic representation and lived power

Comparative analysis of the texts traces not only the historical shift from complementarity to patriarchy but also the instability of these formations within narrative structure. The goal is not simply to illustrate thematic differences, but to demonstrate how each text produces and simultaneously unsettles its own gender logic.

[8] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, by D. O. Fagunwa (New York: Random House, 1982).
[9] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010).

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Literature Review

Indigenous Yoruba Gender Complementarity: A Philosophy of Balance

Scholars of Yoruba social history have repeatedly emphasized that pre-colonial Yoruba society was not structured around binary hierarchies of domination but around complementary gender roles grounded in social functionality rather than biological determinism. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí argues in *The Invention of Women*, gender as an organizing principle in Yoruba culture prior to colonial contact was less significant than seniority and social responsibility; identity and power were determined more by role and achievement than by sex.[10]

This perspective is reinforced by Awe, who documents the political prominence of women in traditional Yoruba governance structures. The Iyalode, often mischaracterized in colonial reports as merely a "women's representative," in fact functioned as a political authority with jurisdiction extending beyond gender-specific concerns.[11] In Oyo and Ibadan, councils such as the Oyo Mesi incorporated female chiefs whose influence was instrumental in mediating between rulers and the populace. In some cases, royal succession laws even permitted female regency, thereby affirming women's capacity to wield sovereign authority when necessary.

Economically, Yoruba women were far from marginal actors. Bolanle Shadare, in Yoruba in Market Women and Trade Networks[12] notes that women dominated regional trade networks, particularly in market economies where they acted not only as retailers but as financiers and exporters.[13] Figures such as Ẹfúnpọ̀róyè Ọ̀ṣuntínúbú, popularly known as Madam Tinubu, illustrate the extent of this entrepreneurial power. Far from being exceptional, Tinubu was a product of a system that recognized and facilitated female economic autonomy.[14]

Religious and judicial spheres reflected similar parity. Olajubu's study on women in Yoruba religious traditions reveals that priestesses served not only as ritual leaders but also as arbiters of moral and legal authority.[15] Deities such as Ọ̀ṣun and Ọya represented powerful feminine principles, embodying riverine sovereignty, warfare, and justice. Thus, spiritual cosmology reinforced a worldview in which power was transferable and shared rather than monopolized.

While the body of scholarship has been foundational in rethinking gender in pre-colonial Yoruba society, it has not gone uncontested. Critics caution that the language of "complementarity" risks romanticizing pre-colonial social

[10] Oyěwùmí, The Invention of Women, 42.
[11] Bolaji Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria (1992).
[12] Bolanle Shadare, Yoruba Market Women and Trade Networks (Ibadan: University Press, 2004).
[13] Bolanle Shadare, Yoruba Market Women and Trade Networks, 18.
[14] Jeremy Foster, Madam Tinubu: Merchant and Political Power Broker (London: Routledge, 2010.)
[15] Jeremy Foster, Madam Tinubu: Merchant and Political Power Broker (London: Routledge, 2010).

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formations by underemphasizing forms of age-based hierarchy, lineage authority, and ritual stratification that also structured power. Some scholars argue that the absence of Western-style gender binaries does not necessarily imply egalitarianism, but rather a different configuration of hierarchy. Thus, the historiographical debate is not between oppression and equality, but between competing interpretations of how authority was distributed and legitimized within indigenous epistemologies.

Colonial Disruption and the Reconfiguration of Gender

If pre-colonial Yoruba society operated on a framework of balance and complementarity, colonialism introduced a radically different logic, one rooted in hierarchy and extraction. British colonial rule was not merely an administrative structure; it was an economic project fundamentally designed to redirect local labour and resources toward imperial benefit. Central to this enterprise was the establishment of infrastructural systems such as the railway network, which became the backbone of colonial economic expansion. As Oyemakinde notes, the colonial railway service, established at the turn of the twentieth century, pioneered wage labour in Nigeria and quickly became the single largest employer within the Protectorates.[16] However, this new labour system was designed with gendered exclusions. Women were systematically barred from participation in railway employment and other forms of wage labour, a trend that persisted even after independence as female representation in formal economic sectors remained comparatively low.[17] By 1899, more than ten thousand men, primarily Yoruba, had been recruited into railway construction. This availability of male labour was facilitated by what Oyemakinde describes as a "floating population" of displaced men, many of whom had been enslaved during intra-Yoruba wars and now sought reintegration through wage employment.[18]

For these formerly enslaved men, wage labour functioned as a pathway to liberation and economic mobility. Yet, this transition came at a structural cost: it entrenched a male-dominated economic order that displaced women from spheres of labour in which they had previously enjoyed autonomy and authority. As men entered the colonial wage economy and acquired the status of paid workers, women's labour, now confined largely to informal and domestic spheres, was recategorized as economically invisible. Whereas women's contributions in farming, trade, and craft production had been central to precolonial prosperity, colonial capitalism reduced such work to mere "use value," stripping it of social recognition and institutional legitimacy.

This reclassification of labour restructured gender identity. The wage earner became synonymous with the "modern man," while the woman, regardless of her continued economic activity, was cast as a dependent. Ogundipe argues that this dichotomy imposed a new social fiction in which men were seen as "workers" and women as "non-workers," despite the fact that male wages were

[16] Oyeronke Olajubu, Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).
[17] Wole Oyemakinde, "Railway Construction and the Development of Wage Labour in Colonial Nigeria," Journal of African History (1974).
[18] Oyemakinde, "Railway Construction," 118.

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often insufficient to sustain households.[19] Unlike their European counterparts, African men were paid single-person wages rather than family wages, making women's labour essential to household survival even as it was ideologically devalued.

Moreover, the rise of wage labour precipitated patterns of male migration to urban centres of colonial administration and commerce. Women frequently migrated with their husbands, leaving behind kinship-based support systems. This shift altered the structure of marriage itself: whereas pre-colonial Yoruba women often married while retaining economic independence through trade or artisanal work, colonial modernity redefined marriage in terms of dependence and domesticity. Even affluent female traders found their social statuses reframed through the lenses of their husbands' occupations. Anthropologist Jane Guyer challenges the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in colonial economic policy, arguing that the rigid division of labour by gender was foreign to Yoruba society.[20] In pre-colonial contexts, labour roles were often overlapping and situational rather than fixed. Women could be simultaneously farmers, traders, healers, and ritual officials, just as men combined multiple roles. Diviners (onísègùn), for instance, often acted simultaneously as herbalists and traders, demonstrating that labour was polyvalent rather than gender-bound.[21]

Thus, colonialism did not merely restructure the political and economic landscape, it redefined the very ontology of gendered existence. It replaced a system grounded in complementarity and fluidity with one premised on hierarchy and segregation. This reconfiguration would later become naturalized within postcolonial gender discourse, obscuring the memory of an indigenous matrix where women were not dependents but co-architects of society. What remains insufficiently examined in existing scholarship is how these economic transformations recalibrated intimate structures, marriage, domestic authority, and female competition, and how such recalibrations are later inscribed within postcolonial literary narratives.

The Aftermath of Colonial Capitalist Wage Labour

The introduction of wage labour under colonial rule did not merely reorganize economic activity; it reengineered the social logic of gender in Yoruba society. By assigning monetary value exclusively to male labour, the colonial state institutionalized a hierarchy in which men became recognized as economic agents while women were relegated to the status of dependents. What had once been a complementary system of shared productivity was recast through a capitalist framework that rendered women's labour invisible. Their work, in farming, trading, and caregiving, retained its necessity but lost its social legitimacy.

[19] Molara Ogundipe, Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).
[20] Jane Guyer, Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[21] Guyer, Marginal Gains, 109

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The migration that accompanied wage employment deepened this reconfiguration. As men moved to emerging centres of administration and commerce, women often followed, not as co-workers but as appendages, their identities increasingly tied to marriage rather than occupation. The colonial wage economy thus reoriented gender identity itself: to be a man was to earn, to be a woman was to belong.

Ultimately, the imposition of capitalist relations eroded the fluidity that had once characterized Yoruba gender dynamics. What had been a system grounded in reciprocal roles and negotiated authority became a rigid division of labour defined by biological essentialism. Colonialism did not simply introduce patriarchy, it naturalized it. European ideologies of governance, religion, and economics, all premised on male dominance, displaced indigenous structures in which women wielded substantial influence. Matriarchs who had previously held political office, presided over courts, or controlled vast commercial networks were gradually stripped of their institutional authority. In this way, colonialism installed a patriarchal order that was not merely foreign but antithetical to Yoruba epistemology. It substituted hierarchy for balance, dependency for autonomy, and silence for agency. What survives today as "tradition" is often not inheritance but residue, traces of a colonial past mistaken for indigenous norm.

Despite the richness of this historical and sociological scholarship, much of the debate remains confined to archival evidence, colonial records, and ethnographic reconstruction. What remains underexplored is how these structural transformations are narrativized, remembered, and contested within literary texts. Fiction does not merely reflect social reality; it encodes epistemological assumptions about gender, authority, and moral order. A comparative literary analysis therefore offers a distinct methodological intervention: it allows us to trace how indigenous gender ontology survives, mutates, or is erased within narrative form itself. This paper builds upon historical scholarship but extends it by examining how literary representation becomes a site where colonial gender reconfiguration is both dramatized and naturalized.

Women as Spiritual, Political, Economic, and Narrative Agents in *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*

In Forest of a Thousand Daemons,[22] D.O. Fagunwa presents a landscape in which women are not passive figures but commanding forces whose influence spans the spiritual, political, economic, and moral spheres of society. The novel, often read for its fantastical elements, in fact encodes a precolonial Yoruba worldview where gendered power was not a dichotomy but a continuum. Women, whether human or supernatural, possess vital force of authority, and deploy it in ways that shape destinies, negotiate justice, and maintain cosmic order. Far from being relegated to the margins, they sit at the very centre of power and exercise control over life, death, and the metaphysical.

[22] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, by D. O. Fagunwa, (New York: Random House, 1982).

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The narrative destabilizes any presumption of male spiritual supremacy when the hunter-narrator, Akara-Ogun, recounts his lineage and concedes that despite his father's formidable supernatural arsenal, his mother's power surpassed it:

> "My name is Akara-ogun, Compound-of-Spells, one of the formidable hunters of a bygone age. My own father was a hunter, he was also a great one for medicines and spells. He had a thousand powder gourdlets, eight hundred ato, and his amulets numbered six hundred. Two hundred and sixty incubi lived in that house and the birds of divination were without number. It was the spirits who guarded the house when he was away, and no one dared enter that house when my father was absent - it was unthinkable. But deep as was in the art of supernatural, he was no match for my mother, for she was a deep seasoned witch from the cauldrons of hell."[23]

This passage offers a powerful lens into the egalitarian and complementary nature of gender in Yoruba cosmology. Akara-ogun's matter-of-fact description of his mother's prowess as a "deep seasoned witch from the cauldrons of hell," effortlessly surpassing even his father's extraordinary supernatural capabilities, reflects how the Yoruba worldview recognized and revered both male and female powers without hierarchy or limitations. His tone suggests that his mother's formidable abilities were neither unusual nor questioned, affirming that in Yoruba tradition, the heights of power and agency attainable by women were acknowledged and celebrated alongside those of men.

In the scene where Akara-Ogun encounters the witches' assembly, their power is depicted as awe-inspiring rather than demonic. They move freely through space, commanding spirits and shape-shifting at will, which aligns with the Yoruba recognition of àjẹ́ as a sacred, feared, and revered force.[24] These witches are neither vilified nor infantilized; Akara-Ogun approaches them with caution and respect, acknowledging their supremacy in the unseen realm. Their authority is not derivative of men, nor does it operate in secrecy, it is publicly acknowledged. In this, Fagunwa affirms that spiritual sovereignty in Yoruba thought was gender-inclusive.

Beyond the supernatural, women also hold political and communal power. The Queen of the Underworld, for instance, presides over a structured domain with judicial authority, settling disputes and issuing decrees.[25] Her position is portrayed with the same dignity as that of earthly kings, suggesting that rulership in Yoruba cosmology was not restricted to men but extended to any figure capable of administering justice and maintaining order. Similarly, elder women often serve as mediators and moral arbiters in Akara-Ogun's journey, offering counsel and correction whenever he strays from wisdom or was in trouble. Their interventions are decisive, indicating that moral governance in Yoruba culture was frequently entrusted to women.

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[23] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, 5.
[2424] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, 67.
[25] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, 103.

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Economic agency is equally evident. Women in the novel engage in trade, resource distribution, and hospitality, actions that structure social networks and survival. The market woman who aids Akara-Ogun is not merely a helper but a gatekeeper of access and trust, reinforcing the historical fact that Yoruba women controlled significant spheres of commerce. Even supernatural female figures demand offerings and negotiate transactional exchanges, further highlighting how economic logic was embedded in both earthly and otherworldly interactions. Their roles are not passive but strategic.

Finally, women possess narrative agency: they move the story. At key junctures, it is not Akara-Ogun's strength or intellect that turns the tide, but the intervention of women. Whether through warnings, blessings, or trials, they determine his path, testing his character and refining his destiny. They are gatekeepers, catalysts, and judges. Far from being mere supporting characters, they are narrative arbiters, the story bends around their decisions.

Thus, *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*[26] stands as literary evidence that precolonial Yoruba society did not subscribe to a rigid patriarchal system in which male authority was unquestioned. Instead, women operated as co-sovereigns in spiritual, political, economic, and moral domains. Their power was not supplementary but constitutive. In presenting this layered agency without apology or embellishment, Fagunwa preserves a cultural memory that destabilizes the later colonial fiction of inherent African patriarchy. The novel, read closely, becomes not just fantasy but testimony.

From Gender Complementarity to Gender Subjugation: Culture Ruptures in Yoruba Gender Dynamics

The portrayal of African feminism and matriarchy in postcolonial Yoruba culture, as reflected in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*,[27] reveals a complex dynamism that juxtaposes the ideals of gender complementarity with stark realities of subjugation. While indigenous Yoruba traditions historically celebrated an egalitarian ethos between genders, Soneyin's narrative exposes how these ideals are undermined by practices such as Yoruba neo-polygyny, which fosters toxic competition among women, and characterized by societal pressures that tether a woman's value to marriage and procreation. Colonial influences, combined with the entrenched ego of post-colonial patriarchy, have eroded the foundational principles of gender complementarity in Yoruba culture.

Colonization redefined the gendered power dynamics in modern Yoruba society, elevating male authority to unprecedented levels and marginalizing women's agency. Where polygyny originally served as a safety net, offering women solidarity in child-rearing, economic endeavors, and emotional support,

[26] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga (New York: Random House, 1982).
[27] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010).

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it now operates as a tool to isolate women and diminish their collective strength and value. The wives, rather than form alliances, are driven by societal pressures that tether their psychosocial worth to their ability to bear children and secure their husband's favor.

Control within the household is most visible in the manner Baba Segi exercises authority over his wives, reducing their identities to reproductive capacity and prescribed domestic roles. Meanwhile, the competition among the women underscores their vulnerability in a patriarchal system that prioritizes a man's ego and legacy over the well-being of his household. Their infighting is not a natural consequence of polygyny but a symptom of a corrupted system that no longer values the cooperative ideals that once defined Yoruba gender relations.

The hierarchical structure inherent in postcolonial polygamous relationships inherently pits women against one another. We begin to see how Baba Segi's wives each grapples with their own insecurities and societal pressures, resorting to deception, manipulation, sabotage and even murder to maintain their standing within the family. Iya Segi exemplifies this dynamism, wielding her position as the senior wife to assert control over the household to the degree of undermining her co-wives. Such struggles disrupt harmony within the family and erode the emotional bonds that might otherwise offer mutual support among women.

> "That night, Iya Segi came to my bedroom and told me she would destroy my useless life if I ever sat down to learn anything from Bolanle again. What could I do? On the right was the person who gave me provisions and held my life and the lives of my daughters in the middle of her palm. On my left was the wife who wanted to teach me to read and write, the wife who did not yet know that she could also be crushed by Iya Segi's powerful fist."[28]

Although Iya Segi held the esteemed position of "mother of the house," a role that ideally should have involved nurturing and guiding the much younger Bolanle, she instead became the architect of her downfall. Rather than fostering unity, Iya Segi weaponised her authority to instigate discord and resentment among the wives, positioning Bolanle as a threat to their collective stability.

> "Iya Segi said we had to join hands and force her out. 'Don't you see her high brow and unconcerned eyes? She thinks we are beneath her. She wants our husband to cast us aside as the illiterate ones,' she said. 'As a wife who recently joined our household, it is her duty to submit herself to our wishes, not to think she can teach us!'[29]

[28] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, 51.

[29] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives,52.

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Iya Segi's words reveal her deep-seated insecurities and the toxic dynamics fuelled by modern polygyny. It highlights how Iya Segi projects her fears of being replaced or rendered irrelevant onto Bolanle, the educated newcomer. Instead of embracing Bolanle as an opportunity for collective growth, Iya Segi perceives her as a rival and mobilises the other wives to ostracise her. Through this narrative, Shoneyin critiques the internalised system that both perpetuates women's subjugation and erodes the potential for solidarity and mutual support among them. Iya Segi's actions reveal how systemic oppression compels women to replicate the very structures that harm them, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of patriarchal systems on interpersonal relationships and self-worth.

> 'Is it that our food wasn't tasty enough? Why would Baba Segi marry another wife? Has he condemned our breasts because they are losing their fists?'[30]

Here, the devastating impact of neo-polygyny on the self- worth of women is crystalised. Laden with insecurity and self-doubt, Iya Segi's words reflect how polygyny in the post colonial era reduces women to objects of utility and desire, whose value is tied to their ability to satisfy a man's needs, whether culinary, aesthetic, or reproductive.

The wives grapple with the painful realisation that their worth in Baba Segi's eyes is conditional and fleeting. Their internalised fears speak to the broader societal pressures that define a woman's value through her ability to fulfill traditional roles. The question of whether or not their sagging bodies are now inadequate reveals how deeply ingrained these societal standards are, forcing women to measure their self-esteem against an unattainable ideal of perpetual youth and usefulness. The introduction of a new wife compounds this erosion of self-worth, as it serves as a tangible reminder that their contributions, no matter how substantial, are ultimately deemed insufficient. This dynamism fosters a toxic environment where the wives, rather than addressing the helplessness of their situation, turn their frustrations inward or against one another. Their anxieties about their diminishing value are both a product of their husband's actions, and of the societal structures that have conditioned them to see themselves as competitors for a man's approval.

Bolanle's arrival at Baba Segi's household both disrupts the fragile psychosocial equilibrium of a neo-polygyny family and brings to light the deep-seated insecurity, jealousy, and desperation that the system fosters among the wives. Her presence, as an educated and younger woman, expose the cracks in their carefully guarded facades, threatening their individual positions and unearthing the fear of exposure particularly regarding their adulterous lives and the source of their children. The tension culminated in a sinister and desperate act of violence, as vividly captured in the following exchange between Iya Segi and Iya Femi:

[30] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, 48.

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> 'Baba Segi came to my room last night but he didn't touch me. Before I could give him the eja kika I prepared for him, he was fast asleep, or so he wanted me to think. For a man who cannot sleep without snoring,' I said, 'I didn't hear a sound from his mouth. That witch has cast a spell on him. If we are not careful, he won't sleep with us unless he asks her first.' 'The gods forbid it! We forbid it! We will not let that happen. Look what I have brought you.' Iya Segi slipped me a small plastic bag bound several times over with a rubber band. 'Iya Segi, you have the heart of a lion and the wisdom of a tortoise. What better day to bring that monkey to justice!' 'Listen to me. Place Bolanle's portion outside her bedroom door like we normally do when she doesn't join us.' 'How quickly does it work? Will we have cause to rejoice tomorrow morning?'[31]

We see, through this conversation, the extent of animosity and paranoia within the household. Bolanle's symbolic threat to their perceived stability, coupled with the weight of their secrets, drove Iya Segi and Iya Femi to conspire in going diabolical about her, to the extent of poisoning her. However, in a cruel twist of fate, their actions backfired, leading to the tragic death of Segi, Iya Segi's own child, after enduring unimaginable pain.

Shoneyin uses this moment to underscore the possible destructive consequences of neo-polygyny, which both pits women against one other, and erodes their humanity. The rivalry and mistrust among the wives illustrate how patriarchal structures manipulate women into becoming complicit in their own oppression. By fighting for favour within the polygamous hierarchy, they lose sight of solidarity and instead perpetuate the very system that marginalises them.

Moreover, marriage, in a neo-polygamous setting as in the case of Baba Segi's household, is not a union of mutual respect, love and affection, but a transactional arrangement that cements a woman's dependence on her husband. Iya Segi, Baba Segi's first wife, does not marry him by choice, but to follow her money. In the chapter titled "Iya Segi", she reveals her motive and explains her feelings towards her husband as follows:

> 'My new husband turned to me. "I am pleased you are here with me, if only to fatten me up a little," he said. 'I will follow you anywhere, my lord." I raised my buttocks and let him fill me again. I would follow my money anywhere.'[32]

Young Iya Segi had worked tirelessly to amass a considerable fortune, only for her efforts to be exploited. Her mother, upon discovering that her daughter had secretly amassed a large sum of money, a troubling sign of her isolation and

[31] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, 138.
[32] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, 103.

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impending loneliness, responded by arranging a marriage for her, handing over every penny of that hard-earned savings to the man who would become Baba Segi. This decision, reflects a societal norm where marriage is often seen as a safeguard for young women, regardless of their agency or financial independence. Iya Tope, the second wife, enters the Alao household as a peace offering and payment from her father to Baba Segi. After a bad harvest and a big debt, an arrangement is made for Baba Segi to marry Iya Tope. Iya Femi, the third wife, enters into marriage with Baba Segi as a desperate escape from years of mistreatment as a housemaid after being rubbed of her inheritance by her greedy uncle. For her, the marriage is not about love or partnership but a means of liberation from a life of servitude. Bolanle, the youngest and most educated of Baba Segi's wives, chose to marry him not out of love or necessity, but out of a deep-seated belief that she no longer deserved a partner who mirrored her background or aspirations. Having endured the trauma of a violent rape and a secret abortion in her youth, she carried a profound sense of shame and brokenness. Baba Segi's proposal came with no probing questions, no demands for her past, only the promise of a quiet life where her sole duty would be to bear children. To Bolanle, this seemed like refuge, a place to disappear into silence. In that home, she believed, she could hide, bury her past, and fulfill the only role required of her, childbearing. The marriage, then, became not a union, but an escape. A muted surrender to a life where silence was safer than self-expression.

Each of Baba Segi's wives enters the household driven by unique circumstances, yet they share a common thread: victimisation by societal norms that diminish women's autonomy and tether their worth to marriage. For Iya Segi, marriage is a strategic move to secure her hard-earned wealth, which patriarchal traditions rendered as a sign of unavailability to men. Iya Tope is bartered into marriage as a form of debt repayment, her individuality erased in the transaction. Iya Femi seeks refuge from a life of servitude, only to perpetuate cycles of bitterness and discord. Finally, Bolanle, despite her education and modern outlook, enters the marriage as a sanctuary from her own trauma, underscoring how societal pressures and internalised shame can strip even the most promising women of agency.

Conclusion: Summary, Findings, and Recommendations

This dissertation re-evaluated African feminism through the lens of indigenous Yoruba gender relations, foregrounding the principle of complementarity that structured pre-colonial society. Rather than a system defined by male domination, Yoruba culture operated through reciprocal gender roles, where women held significant authority as traders, priestesses, political actors, and cultural custodians. However, the advent of colonialism, particularly through capitalist wage labour, mission education, and legal restructuring, introduced a rigid patriarchal framework that redefined women not as collaborators in communal survival but as dependents of male provision.

The textual analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*[33] affirmed that pre-colonial Yoruba society valorized female agency and leadership. In

[33] Wole Soyinka, trans., Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga, by D. O. Fagunwa.

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contrast, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*[34] demonstrates how patriarchy, shaped by colonial disruption, transformed polygyny from a cooperative domestic system into a site of rivalry, surveillance, and gendered insecurity. Crucially, the text reveals that Yoruba women in the postcolonial context occupy a paradoxical position, they are both victims of patriarchal impositions and enforcers of its logic, policing one another through internalized hierarchies of fertility, obedience, and respectability.

Findings

- Colonialism did not merely weaken women's roles, it redefined social value itself by assigning economic legitimacy only to male wage labour, rendering women's contributions invisible.
- The replacement of communal identity with the nuclear family structure positioned marriage, rather than productivity, as the basis of female worth.
- Contemporary gender relations in Yoruba society reflect not an indigenous patriarchy, but a colonial grafting of Eurocentric ideologies onto previously flexible systems.
- Modern African feminist discourse often reproduces Western frameworks that assume inherent male dominance, thereby failing to account for indigenous models of balance and interdependence.

Recommendations

This study argues for a de-colonial repositioning of African feminism, one that:

- Recognizes Yoruba gender complementarity not as nostalgia but as an alternative paradigm for equitable coexistence.
- Critically interrogates how women themselves sustain patriarchal systems through internalized competition and moral surveillance.
- Encourages feminist discourse to move beyond resistance to domination and toward reconstruction of indigenous balance.

Ultimately, reclaiming Yoruba complementarity is not a call to romanticize the past but to recover a suppressed logic of coexistence that predates colonial hierarchy. Feminism in the Yoruba context must therefore move beyond adopting foreign models of emancipation and instead recenter cultural memory as theory, restoring women not merely as subjects of survival but as co-authors of societal order.

[34] Lola Shoneyin, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

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