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Co-wife Bonding in Sue Nyathi's *the Polygamist* (2012) and Lola Shoneyin's *the Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010)

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Abstract:

*This paper explores the portrayal of co-wife bonding and its impact in polygamy in Sue Nyathi's *The Polygamist* (2012) and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) (hereafter referred to as *Polygamist* and *Secret Lives* respectively). The identity of women in polygamy, particularly that of the junior wife, often has a sense of inadequacy and inferiority. This often results into unending jealousies and co-wife rivalries. However, this paper argues that co-wives, perennially considered rivals, are capable of forming mutual and reciprocal bonds of friendship. The findings reveal that co-wife bonding is both marginal and key towards a transformation of the co-wives status quo in polygamous marriages in sub-Saharan Africa. Through the representation of this special bonding, the two authors are able to rediscover women in African Literature. By digging into the biographies of women brought together by the love of one man, the writers demonstrate that co-wives are not only vital figures in the peaceful co-existence of the African polygamous family but are promoters of the union. The special friendship that grows between co-wives in *Polygamist* (2012) and *Secret Lives* (2010) makes this especially clear, bridging the ever-widening gap separating the traditional narrative and modern perception of the identity of women in polygamy.*

Keywords: polygamy, Africana Womanism, victimhood, agency, co-wife bonding

1. Introduction

Polygamy has always remained a sensitive and controversial topic for African women over the ages. Across cultures, attitudes towards polygamy vary from complete acceptance to total condemnation (Oguda, 2012). For instance, the developed countries see polygamy as an attribute of primitiveness (Maillu, 1988) and "an important marker that distinguishes the uncivilized *them* from the civilized *us*" (Calder & Beaman, 2014, p.2). While the idea of polygamy is widespread and universal, its prevalence within different cultures and religious societies is comparatively uncommon (Altman & Ginat, 1996). In Africa, polygamy constitutes one of the distinctive features of African marriage and is still widely practised (Fenske, 2012).

Polygamy is mainly associated with conflicts that often occur among competing wives (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006; Fenske, 2012; Oguda, 2012). A study by Oguda (2012) found that the arrival of each new wife signifies the beginning of continual anxiety, frustration and aggression among the existing family members. Co-wife conflicts often stem from the imagined preference of one wife or one household to the other by the husband (Oguda, 2012, p.14). Consequently, the plural marriage may also generate acrimony between the children of the different wives (Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006). Though it is indisputable that the internal social dynamics of polygamous households are inherently volatile and may threaten the family's viability, and though anti-polygamy crusaders maintain that there can never be genuine friendship between women married to the same man (Ndabayakhe, 2013), this paper demonstrates that such families can live harmoniously with co-wives bonding and children enjoying love from all the mothers. Unfortunately when co-wives form an affection-based relationship, it appears to be the exception rather than the norm (Jankowiak, Sudakov & Wilreker, 2005).

Literary critics argue that polygamy in African fiction is a site of male dominance and female victimhood. Ndabayakhe (2013), for instance, contends that the institution is a stumbling block in the path of female emancipation and self-expression and should not be defended in a democratic society (p.120). In her view, polygamy as portrayed in African fiction silences the voices of women involved and condemns them to perpetual victimhood. Adesami (2005) agrees with this and adds that "whether polygamy [in African fiction] is

depicted as actually functioning [...] or is introspectively dissected after it has broken down [...] the holder of power and subalternity respectively is never in doubt" (Adesami, 2005, p.304). For Ndabayakhe (2013) and Adesami (2005), the identity of women in polygamy as the subordinate is charged from the onset.

However, Pool's (1972) study, cited in Kabaji (2005), negates Ndabayakhe's (2013) and Adesami's (2005) observation. In her view, "polygamy allowed co-wives, for example, to form a power-bloc within the family, a power-bloc that was notoriously effective in coercing an otherwise stubborn husband to behave in ways congenial to his wives" (Kabaji, 2005, p. 80). Apparently, polygamy has some inherent mechanisms that allow women to cope with the burdens of the lifestyle. Women in polygamy could, for instance, form a bond of friendship that in essence enables them to work together against the pervasive authority of the husband. As Kabaji observes, such friendship and solidarity allow these women to form a subtle but potent identity that reveals them as "conforming to the patriarchal norm overtly [while] secretly subvert[ing] it" (Kabaji, 2005, p.78). The women pass as victims of polygamy overtly but powerful agents at a more implicit level.

This paper, using African Womanism theory as its guiding principle, explores the extent to which co-wife bonding is exploited in Nyathi's *Polygamist* (2012) and Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010) and how it creates a new way of thinking about human interactions. African Womanism is an afrocentric theory that encourages women to engage in genuine sisterhood where they forge bonds of friendship characterised by amicable and complementary interactions between individuals (Hudson-Weems, 1997) and which enables them to develop agency and implicit power, which in turn bolster their autonomy and influence in polygamy. The paper singles out key issues in the experiences of co-wife bonding for the reader to gain a distinct picture of its African womanist setting.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by African Womanism, a platform through which we can investigate the unique issue of African polygamy. Hudson-Weems (1997) explains that African Womanism is fore grounded in African culture, focusing on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. African Womanists believe that to meaningfully explain the African experience in its entirety, it is only to the African environment that one must refer (Nnaemeka, 1998 cited in Nnaemeka, 2004). The theory focuses on issues of reciprocal relationships where those involved strive to have power with rather than power over others (Butler, 1990).

As a theoretical framework and methodology, African Womanism identifies the participation and role of the African woman in the struggle, but does not suggest that female subjugation is the most critical issue they face in their struggle for parity (Hudson-Weems, 2006b, p.40). African womanists focus on tangible things, apart from women oppression, which are of utmost importance for survival in the African community (Hudson-Weems, 2006a, p.50). These include gender complementarities, motherhood and nurturing, sisterhood, family as well as socio-cultural changes (Orjinta, 2013, p.83). Basically, the theory prioritises on the part of the African woman and is more concerned with her "aesthetics of living" rather than "ethics of survival" (Ogunyemi, 2006, p.34).

African womanists call for mutual love and respect among women. Various studies show that groups of people are more likely to get things right than an individual – so women need each other to overcome male oppression. According to Hudson-Weems (2006b), an African womanist does not feel threatened that others are able and has a self-assurance that comes from knowing she belongs in a community of sisters who are diminished when another is oppressed; a community which underscores the importance of human relationships including sisterhood. The 'sisterhood' principle celebrates the ability of women to respect one another no matter the settings. When women realise that they are made for togetherness (Kolawole, 2004) instead of being manipulative and self-seeking (Sy, 2008), they are more willing to make excuses for others and even discover new meaning in these others (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). They become a critical and decisive force in each other's life.

3. Literature Review

Various scholars have studied African literary works on polygamy with particular focus on women identity and come up with varied views. Ndabayakhe (2013), for instance, contends that polygamy is a stumbling block in the path of female emancipation and self-expression. In her view, polygamy as portrayed in African fiction silences the voices of women involved and condemns them to perpetual victimhood. Her major concern is that women, especially the senior wife are forced to accept polygamy. However, Adeyemi and Ajibade (2009) disagree with the assertion that the patriarchal society condemns these women to the submissive roles. In their opinion, literary writers often portray women in bad light because of the numerous atrocities that women commit in real life (p.108). The scholars seem to imply that women have themselves to blame for the negative portrayal they suffer in African fiction. Though the critics approach the subject from different perspectives, they agree that women are subjugated in all spheres of life in the African society.

Marriage in Africa, often considered indispensable, is one of the few spaces where equality between the sexes remains elusive. Oriaku (1996) cited in Fonchingong (2006) describes marriage in real life and in fiction as, perhaps, the most circumscribing factor in the life of an African woman (p.140). Women are indisputably subjugated as they contend with absolute rights of a husband and live at the behest of hostile in-laws and the husband's clan. The worst scenario is in polygamous marriage where women share one husband. Such marital arrangement is incessantly touted to be harmful to women as they are forced to scramble for husband's affection, his limited resources and/or favours from in-laws. Due to the perennial disagreements between them, co-wives are often referred to as 'rivals' and are believed to abhor one another. This image leaves women vulnerable to male oppression with men always taking advantage of the infighting to punish the 'undisciplined' wife.

Hudson-Weems (2004) proposes that the antidote to the rivalry problem is for women to form bonds of friendship among themselves. She avows that such female bonding allows women to reclaim their lives and develop new identities by blurring conventional boundaries between self and 'other.' She writes:

- Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each other. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs (Hudson-Weems, 2004, p.73).

Hudson-Weems in her writings “neither denies nor endorses man-sharing” (Kilbride & Page, 2012, p.141) but invites all sisters to simply love one another. This is because, as Okereke (2000) cited in Onwuegbuche and Akung (2013) states, female friendship “serves as a balm over the wounds of marital abuse and betrayal for woman. It also opens new vistas of life for the brutalized woman” (Onwuegbuche & Akung, 2013, p.11). This study argues that in deed sisterhood in the form of co-wife bonding begets a new strain of women in polygamy; women who turn to one another for companionship in the face of their husband’s betrayal and help each other in child care among others. The women co-mother children, help one another during crises such as a death or sickness in the family, and constantly consult when they need advice; they become collaborators instead of conspirators. Such cordial co-wives are visible in both Nyathi’s *Polygamist* (2012) and Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives* (2010).

In his work, Cherekar (2014) agrees that female bonding of any kind is of great significance in the society. Such bonding has a healing power that soothes pain and facilitates women with vigour to endure male oppression in the society. Female bonding, he further states, allows women to face adversity and challenge masculine attempts to subjugate them. Cherekar illustrates this position in the female friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, two women who have both suffered deception and betrayal from their respective husbands. Although these two women adopt different attitudes towards their plight and take different decisions about their polygamous marriages, they are bonded in friendship. Living in different continents does not make the bond weaker. The women derive comfort from the love of the other thus defying victimhood.

Examining the image of women in Elechi Amadi’s fiction, Nyamndi (2004) concurs with Cherekar (2014) on the virtues of female bonding and adds that such friendship is also possible among co-wives in polygamous homes. Co-wife bonding enables women brought together by the love of one man to explore the possibility of mutual and reciprocal friendship. The co-wives may choose to be sedate, supportive and compassionate towards one another always displaying a depth of mutual love despite sharing a husband. The bonding endows these women with new strength to fight the endless machinations of the egotistical male bigots and creates a new image for them. Nyamndi (2014) particularly cites the example of Wogari, a wife in Amadi’s *The Great Ponds* who refuses to plait her hair while her co-wife Nyoma lies ill (p.221). This courageous act of selflessness by Wogari marks a turning point in the politics of co-wife relationships. It validates assertions that mutual friendship among co-wives minimises jealousy and destructive sexual competition that might undermine a family’s survival and cohesion.

Moreover, as Kabaji (2005) notes, co-wives may forge bonds in a polygamous family to subvert the husband’s power. The bonds are forged out of female complementarity and are a unification of opposing characteristics to form a joint identity. The women who the society expects to be bitter rivals find common ways of struggling to survive in and transform the patriarchal society. Kabaji alludes that the co-wives’ problems are reduced when the two work together (p.80). In reciprocating and complementing each other’s life, these women break out of the situation in which their husband has placed them. In the African society where husbands are usually considered the absolute authority, it takes a lot of courage to outdo him in his own game. Women in Nyathi’s *Polygamist* (2012) and Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives* (2010) represent true nature of co-wife bonding in the sense that they nurture a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another despite sharing the same husband. Given that they go through similar experiences, they understand and help each other in difficult times.

Nevertheless, there is always another side of a coin and Sy (2008) argues that not all women believe in the principles of female solidarity. She explains that not all cadres of female friendship are founded on sincere love for one another, but that others are constructed out of individual selfish agenda. In today’s changing family life, in which African womanists advocate for genuine sisterhood, women’s simple act of putting forward personal objectives to the detriment of other women may be seen as selfishness; an unfortunate way of caring for personal interest without paying sufficient attention to the needs of other women. Such injurious emphasis on self puts female bonding in danger since self-centeredness does not allow for a sincere commitment to the other. This view is relevant to the current study as it also explores the impact of negative bonding between co-wives in the texts. There are women characters in Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives* (2010) that exhibit a hostile attitude towards cultivating sisterhood, thus presenting a great threat to co-wife bonding in polygamy.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This research was a qualitative study. Qualitative research, according to Kombo and Tromp (2006), seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of human beings and their groups. Co-wife bonding in polygamous relations is the natural setting of this study. The research was conducted through analytical research design, a qualitative method of inquiry which, according to Macmillan and Schumacher (1997), describes and interprets the past or recent past from selected sources. These sources may include oral testimonies or written documents, for instance the primary texts in this study. The design enabled an in-depth examination of co-wife bonding expressed in Nyathi’s *Polygamist* (2012) and Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives* (2010). The study particularly explored how the co-wives defy patriarchal oppression when they form a mutual and reciprocal bond of friendship.

4.2. Data Collection Techniques

The study collected both primary and secondary data. Two novels, Nyathi’s *Polygamist* (2012) and Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives* (2010) were its main source of primary data. The primary data was gathered through close textual reading. The novels were subjected to an

Africana Womanist lens and analysis done to establish how complementation, mutuality and reciprocity are achieved by co-wives in the texts. Descriptions of events, analyses of characters and language provided data for this study and were used to present the main arguments of the study. The secondary data was collected through library research. The secondary data aided the study in reconciling the different realities of co-wife relationship.

4.3. Data Analysis

Data collected for this study was analysed using qualitative content analysis, an approach that focuses on analysing both manifest and latent content of texts (Granheim, U. & Lundman, B., 2004). In this study, the underlying content was revealed through analysing the mode of characterisation, thematic concerns, and the authors' commitments.

5. Discussion

5.1. Co-Wife Bonding in Nyathi's *The Polygamist* (2012)

In *Polygamist* (2012), Nyathi drafts a relationship between Joyce and Matipa, two women thrown together by polygamy. She breaks the stereotypical image of co-wives as bitter rivals by elaborating upon a different and unique female bond that always seems untenable in the African society. Joyce and Matipa each choose to adapt to their circumstances differently. When Joyce finds out about her husband's marriage to Matipa, maintaining her pride and avoiding embarrassment from being a scorned wife becomes of great importance. With her mind already made up about Matipa's promiscuity and greed, all she is looking for is a small fact to prove her point. Her bitterness at her husband's betrayal and her jealousy drives her to take measures to separate the new couple. Convinced of Matipa's lack of maternal instincts, Joyce decides to scare away the new wife by leaving her children with the newly-weds. Nevertheless, this simple act of rage and jealousy heralds a new beginning in the lives of the two women. Matipa's reaction to the situation thoroughly contradicts the expected and leaves even Joyce confounded. Joyce narrates her thought thus:

- The day I dumped [the children] over at their father's girlfriend's house I thought I was actually opening Matipa's eyes to the baggage that came with Jonasi. I actually thought she would be so disgusted and run a mile. But what do you know; the bitch embraced my children wholeheartedly. She treated them like they were her own. At first I thought she was pretending but after a year, I knew she meant business (Nyathi, 2012, p.42).

One can argue that Matipa was only using cooperation as a substitute for competition to win the husband's favour. Since she regarded Joyce as her competitor, her actions were simply motivated by a need to maintain her relationship with Jonasi. Yet, on another level, this selfless act of co-motherhood negates this line of reasoning. In any human community, "the most profound sisterly relations are to be found in co-mothering [...] not reducible to biological motherhood" (Oyewumi, 2003, p.13).

Matipa had a choice: to either reject the unpaid babysitting job or stay calm and take care of the innocent children. She chose the children over herself. Matipa's noble action responds strongly to the principle of family-centredness in Africana Womanism that advocates for women to be concerned with the entire family rather than with just herself (Hudson-Weems, 2006b). It also gives a new meaning to step-mothering when her unexpected but present maternal instincts distances her from the predictable ogre-image that dogs stepmothers in both African fiction and African orature.

In this co-wife relationship, Nyathi (2012) articulates the triumph of prudence. Joyce's unconcealed contempt for her co-wife, which seemingly relied on her need to be seen as the legal wife, fueled her initial hostility towards Matipa. Yes, the arrival of a new wife challenges the certainties of the past to the existing family and leaves the future unclear. The senior wife often panics and decides to fight back against the 'enemy.' Yet despite this hostility, Matipa not only embraces her step-children but believes that there could be some kind of understanding between her and Joyce. Her observation about their sprouting friendship is also significant, especially in light of what she says about their relationship:

- I knew we were at the point of negotiating some kind of truce. Look, there was no point of fighting anymore. We both loved the same man. We both made love to the same man. We both had borne children with the same man. [...] Jonasi was our common denominator (Nyathi, 2012, pp.84-5).

The friendship has been building for some time and what started as rivalry between two women becomes a story of friendship and solidarity. A new understanding develops between the two and their subsequent reinterpretation of the other enables them to engage in practical cooperation rather than endless competition. Ultimately, both women come to realise that their friendship is the only permanent, meaningful relationship in their lives. As a result they begin to confide in and comfort each other.

The strong bond of friendship that develops between the co-wives is further strengthened when Jonasi starts to physically abuse both of them. When Joyce realises that Matipa has equally been physically and sexually abused by the man who promised to take care of them, she breaks down. She weeps for both Matipa and herself. The identical situation in which they find themselves becomes the final hurdle that changes the course of their relationship and turns them towards each other. As Kabaji (2005) so rightly observes, the co-wives form a special bond of friendship that help them subvert the oppression of their husband. Matipa and Joyce lay their feud to rest and work together to resist their common enemy. The co-wives who were once far apart and excluded each other in their lives are brought together because of male arrogance. Where once there was a barrier and dividing wall of hostility, now there is mutual understanding and love. The result of this power of commitment is a union that marks the turning point of co-wife relationships. Matipa explains this bonding thus:

Joyce broke down and cried then. I reached out and hugged her. I had no words but I knew my touch communicated a thousand things to her. I think that's all she needed right then (Nyathi, 2012, p.130).

Nyathi (2012) emphasizes women's ability to independently define themselves through the security of each other's presence, allowing them to separate their identity from their societal role. Each woman finds in the other the comfort and security she is looking for. This contrasting appreciation reveals a difference of judgment between them which finally enriches their bond. The difference also illustrates their complementarity since each unknowingly completes the other's perceptions and opinions and changes her for the best. Their bonding and its results clearly exemplify the transforming power of sisterhood.

Matipa makes good use of her newfound friendship with her co-wife, Joyce. She leaves her children under Joyce's care when she decides to walk out on her abusive marriage. She knows Joyce would take good care of her children because Joyce genuinely loved them (Nyathi, 2012, p.128). Matipa goes on to acknowledge what most co-wives would never say about their 'rivals' aloud; that Joyce is a genuinely nice person (p.128). Each woman has come to appreciate the goodness of and relies on the other. However, the most profound effect of this friendship is felt through one of the most striking and significant admissions that come from Joyce's reaction to Matipa's leaving:

- For a long time I was bitter that she had gone. You know we had become such good friends overnight. I had finally found someone I could confide in in a way I could not with my mother or my sisters. I felt betrayed that she would just up and leave me to fight [alone] (Nyathi, 2012, p.133).

What had begun as revulsion of a senior wife against an unfaithful husband and his unwelcome second wife transmutes into a strong bond of friendship between the co-wives. The barriers of rank and hierarchy fall away and Joyce starts to look up to her co-wife as her only anchor in the frenzied waters of polygamy. Their interaction henceforth does not suggest any hint of superiority of the senior wife over the junior wife. The women get involved in a give-and-take relationship with Joyce viewing Matipa as dearer to her than her natal family.

The two women's self-understanding is manifested in their concrete actions; the most striking experience being that the co-wives are able to comfort each other in the face of their husband's maltreatment. In so doing, they break out of the narrow situation in which their husband, Jonasi, has placed them. Their action blurs the difference between rivalry on the one hand and sisterhood on the other thus opening up a new term of reference for them, 'sisters' instead of 'rivals.' What once was visible rivalry of two women competing for the love of one man is quickly replaced by peaceful co-existence. Thus, this bonding between Joyce and Matipa alters the perceived relationship between co-wives and gives them a new identity in polygamy. Polygamy brings the women together; co-wife bonding keeps them together, one being complemented by the other and finding potential in each other's opposing characteristics.

Joyce and Matipa demystify what Cattell (2003) calls the "myth of co-wife hostility" (Cattell, 2003 cited in Jankowiak, Sudakov & Wilreker, 2005, p.86). These women break from the ethic of mere survival and realises genuine love from being a co-wife. They make contributions towards achieving good purposes in this plural marriage; they come to trust each other in word and deed. In mutual bonding, the co-wives give their lives a cause beyond themselves by including each other rather than excluding them.

5.2. Co-Wife Bonding in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010)

Nyathi's *Polygamist* (2012) has demonstrated that despite co-wife bonding being such a herculean task, there is a noble chance that co-wives can form bonds of friendship and solidarity for positive change in their lives. Owing to these bonds, women are experiencing a new identity in polygamy, one that is replicated in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010). Shoneyin, however, keeps the debate alive by representing extremes of such bonding. While on one instance she portrays positive co-wife bonding in the amiable relationship between Iya Tope and her co-wife Bolanle, on the other she portrays co-wife solidarity that comes into collision with the barriers of Africana womanist tradition of genuine sisterhood.

When Bolanle came into the Alao family, she may not have known that she was coming into direct conflict with three co-wives. She narrates how naïve she was to have expected a warmer welcome thinking she was only an insignificant addition when, in reality, she was coming to take something away from the existing co-wives (Shoneyin, 2010, p.21). Bolanle later comes to discover that there are subsets of families within the larger polygamous one. Each of the three women has children who do as they bid. Not having children of her own, she is compelled to find companionship in her co-wives and their children. The need to conform turns into a hard struggle that leaves her isolated and lonely in the two years she has been in the marriage. However, despite the strained relationship with the Alao women, she soon discovers a potential sister in her second co-wife, Iya Tope. She explains their relationship:

- Iya Tope is still cordial, even kind when I am alone in the house with her. She doesn't say much except when she's talking about hair. Her eyeballs bounce around in their sockets and she uses her fingers to draw the hairstyles in thin air. I often ask her to describe then again, just to hear a friendly voice that belongs to another grown woman (Shoneyin, 2010, pp22-3).

The camaraderie that develops between the women raises the readers' expectations for a happy outcome. Bolanle and Iya Tope experience positive feelings generated whenever they are together. They begin to see each other as sisters, providing the other with the much needed attention and affection, not as rivals. Iya Tope corroborates and celebrates this budding relationship by also narrating her experience. When for four days she is hit by intense constipation, pain drawing tears from her eyes, she too experiences the soothing love of another woman. As the other co-wives looked away from her suffering, she finds help from the kind hands of Bolanle which makes her "feel like a human being again" (Shoneyin, 2010, p.55).

Encouraged by the friendly attitude of her second co-wife, Bolanle extends a hand of friendship to all three co-wives by offering to teach them to read but yet again, only Iya Tope was keen to learn (Shoneyin, 2010, p.22). Bolanle soon discovers that the task of changing a conflictual relationship into a smoothly functioning one is quite challenging. Nonetheless, she does not give up and tries to reach to the children as a prerequisite for the elusive co-wife friendship. She says:

- I have tried to help the children, too. I once told them to assemble in the dining room every evening so I could read to them. Only Iya Tope's daughters turned up the first day. The next morning, Iya Segi told me not to be in a hurry, that I should wait until I have my own children if I was so eager to become a teacher (p.22).

Bolanle goes out of her way to make herself welcome in the Alao family but her offer to assist though necessary is not appreciated. Her actions are spontaneous, almost naive; probably assuming that she would enjoy the same equitable acceptance and respect she extends to others. However, the resultant portrait of her first co-wife, Iya Segi, is a representation of how women in polygamy are highly resistant to co-wife bonding. She becomes hostile and non-receptive to Bolanle's good gesture. Iya Segi is puzzled by the audacity of this stranger who comes in and tries to impress herself upon everyone's heart with her education. She and another co-wife, Iya Femi, thwart Bolanle's pursuit for friendship, effectively confirming the arguments that co-wives can never have an amicable relationship.

It is important to note that co-wife bonding does not come readily and easily. Women in polygamy having stumbled into each other's territory as adults must now spend time to decode each other's values and habits. This makes co-wife bonding quite a difficult task since it is argued that each woman fights to win favours from the husband and to prove that she is the most loved (Oguda, 2012, p.39). The women sometimes have to battle numerous impediments to achieve mutual and reciprocal friendship with their co-wives. That is why in spite of Bolanle's spirited efforts, and despite repeatedly feeling the impulse and responsibility to befriend her, Iya Tope dared not openly show her growing fondness for her young co-wife. Being conscious of the intense hatred her other two co-wives have towards Bolanle and of the fact that the duo is planning something to try to coerce the husband to 'divorce' Bolanle, she finds her situation quite frustrating:

- I fear for Bolanle but I am a coward. I know I should extend the arm of friendship to Bolanle. I should not pretend she is a stranger when the other wives are around. I should tell her to be careful but I can't. I am afraid of these women (Shoneyin, 2010, p.56).

Iya Tope is caught between her responsibility to Bolanle and her fear of being branded a traitor by the others. She tries to find a way of caring that does not at the same time destroy her relationship with either party. In spite of the sentiments above expressing her indecisiveness on how to openly relate with Bolanle due to the anticipated consequences, her every action and words continue to signify an increasing concern and compassion for the co-wife:

- Bolanle does not deserve the treatment the other wives give her. They bark at her as if she were a child: 'Don't sit there!' and 'Don't touch that!' All day long, they are at it, yet she does as she is told and never complains. We both do as we are told. One of these days, I should talk to her. I must think of the words that I will say to her. Perhaps it is too early. And the other wives would call me a traitor (Shoneyin, 2010, p.88).

Iya Tope finds a kindred spirit in Bolanle. She recognizes that like her, Bolanle always does as she is told by her hateful co-wives without complaint. Iya Tope's narration displays her willingness to join herself to her new co-wife and, together with her, they become victims of intense hatred that breeds and legitimizes co-wife conflict. Her narration, however, moves from 'she' to 'we,' the author's nuanced attempt at constructing a polygamous world that coheres through co-wife bonding rather than through conflict.

Yet despite all the obstacles placed on their path by their other co-wives, bonding between Bolanle and Iya Tope becomes a reality. Bolanle confirms this in the last paragraphs of the novel. After the revelation of the secret of Baba Segi's wives Bolanle decides to leave the marriage. She is aware of the fact that while Baba Segi's other two wives would be relieved by her departure, Iya Tope will not (Shoneyin, 2010, pp.244-5), an indication that their bond of friendship had become strong.

So far the study has established that women agency in polygamy is realised when women involved show a willingness to take a stand, even if it is unpopular. By choosing to ignore all possible consequences and befriend Bolanle, Iya Tope exhibits her inherent sense of self-consciousness and democratic choice to associate with whoever is directly responsible for her positive sense of wellbeing (Oguda 2012, p.39) and in so doing she confirms the possibility and effectiveness of co-wife bonding in polygamy.

However, on a separate level, the study is in agreement with Sy's (2008) claim that not all women believe in the value of sisterhood. Her assertion that some women promote personal gains to the detriment of other women is not far from the truth. Such women put the merits of female bonding in doubt effectively maligning the identity of women in polygamy. The relationship between Baba Segi's first and third wives, Iya Segi and Iya Femi, is a kind of co-wife bonding crafted for malicious reasons; to scare away their new co-wife Bolanle. They form a bond that controverts the principle of Africana Womanism that recommends that no woman should partake in the oppression of another woman. The two women declare a war of invective, accusation, and competitive escalation against their husband's newest wife, Bolanle. Iya Segi and Iya Femi constantly criticise Bolanle whenever she comes up with suggestions for ways of improving their lives. "Iya Segi would listen and shake her knee, and Iya Femi would hiss for the world to hear" (Shoneyin, 2010, p.52). However, their negative attitude fails to discourage the resilient Bolanle. In fact she becomes more conciliatory in her deeds, which does not go well with the two as Iya Tope narrates:

- After a few months the same, Iya Segi who said she would watch Bolanle from a distance started to boil. She called me and Iya Femi to a meeting, saying that there were words to be spoken. These words were nothing but curses and insults: the bigger Bolanle puffed out her chest, the smaller Iya Segi became. Iya Segi told us she had changed her plan, that it was no longer enough to wait until Bolanle's barrenness made Baba Segi chase her out. 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 has recently joined our household, it is her duty to submit herself to our wishes, not to think she can teach us!' (Shoneyin, 2010, p.52)

Iya Tope's description of her elder co-wife's reason to call upon other co-wives to join her in her mission to get rid of Bolanle conveys a prominently different impression about the exemplars of co-wife bonding. Once again the hallmark of co-wives depicts women

whose rivalry and conflict are par for the course of polygamy. The underlying assumption about co-wife relationships is that these women are always crammed with malice afterthoughts towards fellow co-wives. Probably relying on this assumption, Iya Segi masterminds the 'perfect plan' that would convince everybody of Bolanle's evil intentions towards the fecund co-wives and help sever her connection with the husband's family. She and Iya Femi plant *juju* in Bolanle's room and go on to accuse her of witchcraft. When their ploy does not convince the husband to act, they again unite to hatch a plot that would ensure them a "permanent solution", and allow them "to restore the [Alao] home to what it was" (Shoneyin, 2010, p.70).

The pain of Iya Segi and Iya Femi's relationship with Bolanle wells up and spills out from them, poisoning their environment with distressing outcome. The relationship has all along been characterised by a conflict that eventually erupts and boils over to homicide. The two women form a coalition that would give a guarantee of permanently kicking Bolanle out of their lives. Their choice of action brings dire consequences and regrettably, they end up murdering Segi, the first born daughter in the Alao family. From this scenario the reader cannot escape seeing the futility of adversary struggles over power among co-wives. In this novel, Shoneyin (2010) uses the jealous co-wife motif common in African oral narratives to caution against unhealthy bonding—that friendship founded on selfish grounds is a drawback to the individual woman, her family as well and the society.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that Co-wife bonding is a reality that writers should not overlook. The reading of the two texts has brought to light the unfamiliar grounds of co-wife bonds stronger than sibling-bonds, a far cry from the stereotypes associated with them. Although the texts do not fail to portray bitter and unhealthy co-wife rivalries, a reality that cannot be wished away, it is demonstrable that co-wife relationships in African fiction have become more accommodative and satisfying for many women in polygamy. The texts particularly point to the fact that the popular image of co-wives as archenemies; which at first may seem incontrovertible, eventually collapses on the foundation of co-wife bonding. Co-wives come to realise that neither has privilege over the other, neither is more valuable in relation to the positive values that constitute the essence of their womanhood.

Nyathi (2012) and Shoneyin (2010) display positive models of co-wives, a public signal to readers that women who share husbands are capable of genuine sisterhood and an invitation for critics to take an interest in the identity of co-wives as agents in polygamy. The images of Joyce and Matipa in *Polygamist* (2012), for instance, is a mirror to the effectiveness of co-wife bonding in the struggle against women's subordination and oppression and can be a source of support to the contemporary woman. There is need, therefore, for contemporary writers to take into account revised narratives of women in polygamy which differ from monolithic traditional co-wife psychology in which the relationship between co-wives has largely been seen as antagonistic.

Similarly, co-wife bonding between Bolanle and Iya Tope in *Secret Lives* (2010) foregrounds the merits of female bonding to effective co-mothering and peaceful co-existence in polygamy. The bond of friendship brings transformation to the women's lives and presents an answer to the stifling tentacles of patriarchy. Nevertheless, the text also shows that co-wife relationship is still bound up with competitiveness and aggression, and even the contemporary African woman does not seem to have changed her image. The negative bonding between Iya Segi and Iya Femi is imprudent and destructive. *Secret Lives* (2010) highlights that the struggle for sexual intimacy, social acceptability and economic security has caused the rivalry level of women in polygamy to increase exponentially.

7. References

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