**A Feminist Evaluation of Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives***

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**Abstract**

Over the years, African literary scholars and theorists have come up with different variants of feminism such as “womanism”, “femalism”, “motherism”, “stiwanism” and recently, “snail-sense feminism” by Akachi Ezeigbo. In this paper, snail-sense feminist model which advocates dialogue, negotiation, good education for women and also lays emphasis on individual empowerment is adapted to examine women emancipation and epowerment in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*. Improving women’s condition in Nigeria has continued to be a challenge in our society and some socio-cultural, political, religious and economic structures that oppress women defy the attempts made to eliminate them. It is imperative for the Nigerian woman to learn and apply other strategies that would be useful in confronting the hindrances to her attainment of self-actualization and self-development brought about by patriarchy. The research methodology used for this study is qualitative. A sociological approach is adapted to the feminist evaluation of the literary text. This paper concludes that the application of indigenous snail sense strategies, derived from the habit of a snail, can achieve the desired women emancipation in areas where aggressive, confrontational and violent feminist strategies have failed. Adoption and application of this model to complement other African feminist models, is therefore recommended not only in African context but Western as well.

Keywords: Feminist model, indigenous, strategies, Snail-sense feminism, women emancipation

**Introduction**

Feminism came into use in English Language as a concept for evaluating the politics of equal rights for women in 1890’s. Ogundipe-Leslie (222) notes that the word feminism is derived from the Latin word ‘femina’, which means all things that are related to ‘woman’. Before 1890’s however; there had been occasions of feminist protests in some places in Europe, for example, the 18th century document by Mary Astell ‘Some Reflections upon Marriage’ (1700) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) are written documents of feminist protests. What can actually be regarded as feminist literary criticism, however, started in the West in late nineteenth century with the works of writers and critics such as Virginia Woolf who wrote *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Simon de Beauvoir, *Second Sex* (1974), Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970), Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1969), Betty Friedan, *The Feminine* *Mystique* (1963), Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970).

It took a long time for feminist criticism to take root in Africa. It actually started emerging in the 1980s and flourished in the 1990s. A few feminist critics from the West had written about the works of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, who are among the first generation of female writers. Such Western feminist critics include: Sabine Jell Bahlsen, *The Concept of mammy* *water in Flora Nwapa’s Novels* (1995), Brenda F. Berrian, *The Reinvention of Woman through* *Conversation and Humour in Flora Nwapa’s One is Enough* (1990), Katherine Frank, *Women* *without Men* (1987), Kenneth Little, *The Sociology of Urban Woman’s Image in African* *Literature* (1980). It was however, not until African women critics, most of whom were Nigerians, came into the field of criticism that the women writers received the attention they deserved. Among the prominent feminist critics that changed the face of Nigerian literary criticism in the 20th century by analysing the works of women writers were Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi author of *African Wo/man Palava*, (1995), Helen Chukwuma, editor of *Feminism in African Literature*, (1994), Molara Ogundipe, author of *Recreating ourselves, African Women and Critical Transformations*, (1994)*,* Catherine Acholonu, author of *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, (1995), Akachi Ezeigbo, author of *Gender Issues in Nigeria: a Feminist Perspective* (1996), Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, author of *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997), Mabel Evwierhoma, author of *Female Empowerment and* *Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria* (2000), Obioma Nnaemeka, author of “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa’s Way” (2004). The challenge of putting women writers on the platform of criticism was taken up by these critics. Some of the women writers whose works have been critiqued by feminist scholars include Flora Nwapa (*Efuru*, 1966), Buchi Emecheta (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979), Tess Onwueme (*The Reign of Wazobia*,1988), Zaynab Alkali (*The Stillborn*, 1984), Ifeoma Okoye (*Behind the Cloud*, 1982).

This study examines Lola Shoneyin’s debut novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives,* using Akachi Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism, a recent model of indigenous feminist theory as a viable model for solving women’s problems orchestrated by patriarchy. Snail-sense feminism complements other contemporary African feminist variants that deemphasise the controversies that have deterred the progress of improvement in the integrity of the woman. According to Maduka (109), each feminist writer has used literary work to expose, and analyse the significance of the ‘quest for female identity in Nigeria/Africa’.

**Snail-Sense Feminism**

Snail–sense feminism is Akachi Ezeigbo’s own brand of an indigenous feminist theory identifiable in the Nigerian social and cultural milieu. The feminist model was first presented at a roundtable discussion on Feminism in Africa at the International Conference titled, “Versions and Subversions in African Literature,” which took place in Berlin, Germany, in May 2003 (Ezeigbo 48). Referring to the model in a Monograph Series by Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos (2012), Ezeigbo clarified that her own model of feminism is a “result of an in-depth research or investigation into the condition of Nigerian women, their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives in the past and in contemporary times. I must state clearly at this point that my view about feminism has undergone some modification, following more than two decades of studying women’s writing from Nigeria and other parts of Africa…” (25). Ezeigbo asserts that in spite of the theorizing and critical analysis over the years on feminism, the challenges women face in the society still persists. She states further that “the principles of shared values which operate in many cultures in Nigeria encourage tolerance, in order to imbibe the virtues of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance” (26).

As a result of the consideration of the peculiarity of Nigerian women and their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives, Ezeigbo is of the opinion that new feminist models are needed especially those that are “realistic, practical and functional” (26). One of such models is snail-sense feminism. The snail-sense feminist model is derived from the habit of the snail which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationships with men.

Women in our cultures-from different parts of Nigeria- often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects.… The snail 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 which I call snail-sense feminism (Ezeigbo 27)

The snail-sense feminism is generated from the Igbo adage that says, “Ire oma ka ejule ji aga n’ogwu” – meaning, “The snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue” (27). The feminist model proposes Nigerian women’s application of certain qualities of the snail to issues and obstacles encountered by them.

Ezeigbo’s snail sense feminism liberating model is indigenous and she is convinced of its viability:

My investigation into the working of snail-sense feminism- a veritable variant of the indigenous feminisms advocated by Nigerian theorists- compelled me to study the Nigerian woman from the pre-colonial and colonial periods to the present. From my findings, one thing is clear: the strategy was applied by our foremothers in their interactions with people in their communities. Therefore, if women of the past adopted the strategy of the snail to survive, today’s Nigerian women should do no less as she negotiates and renegotiates her way in her dealings with the men and the society at large (31)

**Strategies Derived from Ezeigbo’s Snail-sense Feminism**

The three prominent strategies derived from Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism are:

1. Effective dialogue and negotiation
2. Individualism
3. Good education

The snail’s ability of negotiation, tact and conciliatory attitude are proposed as useful survival strategies which Nigerian women must learn in order to surmount the enormous obstacles they encounter in order to attain emancipation and empowerment in a harsh patriarchal Nigerian society.

The second strategy of individualism distinguishes snail-sense feminism from other variants of African feminism by various feminist scholars such as “womanism”, “femalism”, “motherism”, “stiwanism” and “nego-feminism”. Even though snail-sense feminism has common features with these variants of feminism theories, there is a distinguishing element of individualism in snail-sense feminism. This individualistic tendency is observable in the snail which does not move in a group or in the company of its young as a hen or a duck does. However, the snail can exist close to other snails in an individualistic manner. According to Ezeigbo (28), “the individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help other people to stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to snail-sense feminism. The woman should not just accommodate others, but should ensure that she achieves recognition for herself." Self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman’s success in life. However, the snail’s individualistic manner of existing close to other snails is a sign of sisterhood, female bonding and group consciousness which symbolises the strength of snail-sense feminism. Ezeigbo stresses further that:

Snail-sense feminism, adopting this habit of a snail, focuses on the individual, but encourages respect and tolerance for the group, with a readiness to negotiate and cooperate with others. Indeed the strength of snail-sense feminism lies in its uniqueness in interrogating existing ideas about sisterhood, female bonding and group consciousness. In the end, it is the individual that constitutes the group. (36)

In addition, self-preservation is not for the exclusive reserve of the human instinct. It is “also a reflex that the snail adopts by withdrawing its ‘horns’ into its hard shell when threatened” (Ezeigbo 39). This by no means should be seen as a sign of weakness, but rather a life preservation measure which by no means indicate strength. For instance, Aunt Ifeoma in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* resolves the issues that oppress her by taking the option of relocating outside the country to create a conducive environment for her and her children to survive and succeed.

Another strategy incorporated into snail sense feminism even though it is not directly a characteristic of the snail is the acquisition of good education. This strategy is emphasised by Ezeigbo while proposing the snail sense feminism. In her opinion, a woman who has all the snail’s attributes of wisdom, resilience, patience, sensitivity, doggedness and hard work but is not educated is at a great disadvantage. Ezeigbo also reasons that, “good education is the key to open the door of opportunities for Nigerian women, for when a woman is educated, the family in particular and the country in general are educated and empowered” (29). For instance, in politics, women who are well-educated stand a better chance of voting, seeking for political positions and being voted for than illiterate women who most likely will lack the confidence of engaging in politics. Aku in Promise Ogochukwu’s trilogy (*Hall of Memories*, *Zita-Zita* and *Fumes and* *Cymbals*) personifies the individualistic trait traceable to the snail, given her resilience and determination in facing the various challenges life thrust upon her right from infancy when she lost both of her parents. In the texts, Aku also lost her home, marriage and position as first lady of the federation and suffered betrayal from her husband with her house maid. Irrespective of these challenges, she was able to develop herself educationally, psychologically and financially.

Other strategies derived from snail-sense feminism are: wisdom, resilience, patience, sensitivity, doggedness, subtleness and hard work. These are salient attributes a woman needs to inculcate in order to survive and be empowered in the patriarchal society.

**Deficiency of Snail Sense Feminism**

The major deficiency of snail-sense feminism is in relation to the slow movement of the snail. As a matter of fact, slow movement is seen as a negative attribute and as such, any person identified with slow movement is usually likened to a snail thereby we have the simile: “as slow as a snail”. This point is buttressed by Niyi Osundare who regards snail-sense feminism as an unsuitable model for the African woman, pointing out that the snail is a slow, sluggish and weak creature, (37). The argument is that the snail metaphor would do the African woman no good and that the snail should not be advocated as a symbol worthy of emulation in women’s struggles for emancipation and empowerment. The general notion by feminist critics concerning women’s rights is that the African women need to be revolutionary and not conciliatory or apologetic in their demand for their right from men and from the society.

In reaction to this, Ezeigbo (37) agrees that there is merit in such an argument, but she points out that there are specific qualities about the snail that triggered her endorsement of snail sense feminism which are doggedness and ability to get round obstacles no matter how formidable by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude. She describes this virtue as ‘snail sensitivity’ and that it has nothing to do with speed and movement. Ezeigbo says that it is important to point out that “negotiation or dialogue is sometimes more efficacious in achieving success in human relations than aggression or confrontation. The emphasis is on the ability of the snail to smoothen rough spaces to enable it to move easily, in like manner, the Nigerian woman ought to be wise, sensitive and proactive in her quest for justice and self-actualization” (37). She explains further in an interview with *The Sun* newspaper on August 5th, 2012, that all the African theories that have been conceptualized about women are all related to our culture; “it is a universal thing and you have to key in into your own culture” ([www.sunnewsonline.com](http://www.sunnewsonline.com)). Ezeigbo also adds that feminism, in the African sense, is not aggression, quarrelling or fighting for superiority. It just wants women to rise and be empowered; women can achieve whatever they want to achieve but not through aggression.

Another deficiency of the snail–sense feminism is the inadequacy of its strategies to solve certain female challenges such as rape, child abuse, child marriage/early pregnancy, female genital mutilation and a few related others. In these instances, the deed and harm would have been done and as such, snail sense strategies of ‘snail sensitivity’, doggedness, determination, tenacity, negotiation, dialogue, individuality or good education will not only seem inadequate but it will be irrelevant.

No feminism model is however devoid of any weakness, they all have their strengths and weaknesses just as indicated in snail-sense feminism which has common features with the other variants of feminism. For instance, the weakness of Catherine Acholonu’s ‘motherism’ is its presentation of the rural woman as an ideal motherist “… innocent, unspoilt, unsophisticated in her world view, her thinking and her way of life” (120). This theory does not only exclude the urban or the educated woman who espouses the feminist ideology, but it also makes hopeless any educational, political or social empowerment for the rural woman.

**Current Trend in Feminist Writings**

The concept of the recreated female characters is the current trend in Nigeria feminist literature which reveals an ideal world for women in the Nigerian society. Feminist writing came to be as a result of women’s discontent with the patriarchal negative portrayal of women as inferior in the society and by male writers. It is clear that in patriarchy, power resides with men and more often than not, “they institute cultural norms and values, which promote the subjugation of women” (Ogbonna 390). It is interesting to realise, however, that the oppression, segregation and debasement of the womenfolk is not the exclusive reserve of the male gender. Some women are themselves guilty of actively participating and upholding some of these oppressive structures to the detriment of their female counterpart. This situation is buttressed by Ogbonna (391):

Unfortunately, it is women who propagate all these negative socio-cultural expectations against themselves. Women compete with themselves. They are the mothers who learn that another woman’s daughter married a rich man at 18years and encourage their own daughters to abort their education and do the same. The same women snatch their fellow women’s husbands, frustrate their fellow women out of jobs, and build hostility and spirit of competition amongst themselves… Mothers are quick to assent to cultural values, even against their daughters.

The recent works of emergent female writers such as Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba* *Segi’s Wives* do not portray African feminism to be antagonistic to African men. Shoneyin examine structures upheld by both men and women that are oppressive of both man and woman in a polygamous setting. In the same vein, other writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Bimbo Adelakun, Promise Ogochukwu, Chika Unigwe, Unoma Azuah and other emergent female writers also explore the experiences of women struggling to make a meaning of their lives, to interact with men and find realistic ways to make their marriages or relationships work. The female characters in their works are made to explore options open to women especially when their relationships fail or almost fail. For instance, with strategies identifiable with snail-sense feminism, Olanna and Odenigbo in Adichie’s *Half of a* *Yellow Sun*, a civil war epic, manage to stay together after their relationship and union passed through betrayal, infidelity and the crucible of war-generated conflicts and crises.

Consequently, the snail-sense feminism, designed by Ezeigbo to be used as a strategy by women to negotiate their way with men in their “determination to survive and make imprints in the socio-political, cultural and economic landscapes of the country” (1), can also be adopted by women in dealing with their female counterparts too as Bolanle does with her co-wives. This is “the age-old but still relevant strategy women adopted in the past and which Nigerian women and women characters in contemporary novels apply to negotiate their way to survival” (1).

**Synopsis of Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives***

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* is a fascinating story set in Ibadan about the polygamous household of Ishola Alao, a.k.a. Baba Segi, his four wives and seven children as they create and respond to the intrigues, jealousies, rivalries, complexities, intricate family politics and extra-ordinary events commonly associated with polygamy. The uncommon situation in this instance is the alignment of the fourth wife, Bolanle, with a polygamous household, being the only educated spouse in the midst of an illiterate husband and three illiterate co-wives. Her university degree puts her at odds with her co-wives and her presence threatens to overturn the uneasy balance that reigns in the Alao household. Bolanle is envied and resented by the other wives. They are not only jealous and afraid of her because of her education, they are also worried that she will monopolise Baba Segi’s already shared affections.

As the story unravels, it becomes obvious that Bolanle did not marry Baba Segi, a successful businessman, for the sake of his money.Raped at fifteen, she considers herself disgraced and alienated and wants to marry a man who will ask her no questions about her past life. She prefers the emotional detachment that comes with being another wife and not an only wife. Incidentally, of all the four wives, Bolanle is the one that Baba Segi chose by himself. The other three wives were thrust upon him by different circumstances.

Bolanle is not just the only educated wife; she is also childless of the four wives with no “Iya” alias like the other three wives because she is unable to conceive. (“Iya” in Yoruba means “mother”. A woman who has more than one child is usually called by the name of her first child). After over two years of marriage, her bareness becomes a source of concern to her husband who in a bid to do something drastic about Bolanle’s childlessness, especially when she is thought to be the source of the problem, gets revelation of a shocking dark secret amongst the first three wives. Iya Segi has no option than to confess that Baba Segi is not the biological father of all the seven children on whom he prides himself. As she puts it, “…if my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? … So, I found seed and planted it in my belly.” (215). Iya Segi did not only mastermind the conception of her two children with another man who happens to be her husband’s driver, but also sold the idea to the second and third wives, who also conceived their children with other men of their choices. This twist in a typical polygamous setting where the wives are usually at the receiving end of patriarchy leaves the reader sympathetic to the man rather than his wives.

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* is narrated from the differing narrative perspectives of the four wives, Baba Segi and his driver in different chapters with Bolanle being the main voice of the novel. Each chapter, except for the first, is told from the point of view of all the major characters, a strategy through which the reader has the back story filled in by flashbacks. The voice of Baba Segi as narrator does not feature until near the end of the novel. Each character in the novel has secrets different from the general one amongst the first three wives with illegitimate children and as the story unfolds, the background of each wife, prior to her marriage to Baba Segi, is revealed, providing insight into their fears and motivations for aligning with polygamy.

The conflicts in the story are resolved by the application of snail sense strategies to different women’s circumstances and Baba Segi’s wisdom to retain the illegitimate children as his (an end to a means of his irreversible inability to father any child due to his impotency). With this reconsideration, they all continued to live together except for Segi who falls victim of an evil scheming that backfires and Bolanle who left to “rejoin her life’s path” (245).

**Identifying Snail-sense Strategies in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives***

Ezeigbo refers to the snail as being “wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged or determined. Nigerian Women are all these and more. They work very hard, are tenacious and patient.” (28). In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Bolanle, Baba Segi’s fourth wife, exhibits these qualities the most and at certain instances, so also do Iya Segi, Iya Femi, Iya Tope and Segi in their own way.

Bolanle’s upbringing, beliefs, experiences and innate qualities, enable her to be wise in handling life’s misfortunes and she is able to withstand the storm that erupts upon her arrival in the Alao household. The inspired jealousy by the first and third wives as a result of Bolanle’s education results in their connivance to make her life miserable and even to eliminate her. Despite their callousness towards her however, she tries to be pleasant to everyone. She even goes as far as trying to teach them how to read and write (22), but nothing she does ever pleases Iya Segi and Iya Femi. In a bid to get rid of her, they execute all sorts of vile plans against her, one of which ends up boomeranging on Iya Segi. According to Iya Segi, “Those educated types have thin skins, they are like pigeons. If we poke her with a stick, she will fly away and leave our home in peace” (53). As the application of snail sense is not only for the exclusive preserve of male gender, the snail strategies of wisdom, resilience, doggedness and determination identified in Bolanle enable her to cope with the likes of Iya Segi, a powerful, vindictive woman who will stop at nothing to protect her favoured position as the ruler of her husband's home and Iya Femi the third wife, a scheming woman who is determined to attain all that she desires, no matter the cost. It is Bolanle's unexpected subtleness that leads her and her husband to uncover the secret amongst the three other wives.

The mean and nasty acts by Iya Segi and Iya Femi to Bolanle include: smearing her books with palm oil and charcoal, deliberately tearing off some pages of her books and hiding them under the kitchen cupboard because of their ‘deep-seated’ disdain for her university degree (22), convincing Baba Segi to withdraw the armchair he had broken his rule to give to her, claiming that she has no right to earn an armchair because of her supposed barrenness, “the tradition was that the comfort of an armchair had to be earned, which meant that unless you were pregnant, with oedema, breast feeding or watching over toddlers, you were not entitled to one” (53), banishing her friends from the house claiming “that they were bad role models for the daughters in the family, especially her daughter, Segi, who was at an impressionable age” (54) and pushing her hard on one occasion till she topples over and hit her head on the hard tiles thereby sustaining a bleeding injury (161). Bolanle’s co-wives’ children also follow the examples set by their mothers: “Iya Femi’s sons will not sit on a chair I have vacated. When I walk past them in the corridor, they turn to the wall and flatten themselves against it. No matter how many times I offer them sweets, they treat me as if I have a contagious disease” (23).

Despite all these provocations, Bolanle still remains so calm that a reader may not easily comprehend her kind of character just as in the novel Iya Tope, the second wife, who will not join Iya Segi and Iya Femi in their evil plot, admits that she has not seen anyone like Bolanle before:

Iya Segi was wrong about the skin of educated types. The more those two poked Bolanle, the more mercy her eyes showed, the more her hands opened to the children. I have never known anyone like Bolanle before. Even after two years of their wickedness, she still greets them every morning. What more do they want? (54).

Bolanle is so determined to overcome all challenges on her way to having a blissful home that on one occasion she reasons within herself; “one day, they will all love me. I will buy their affection with the money Baba Segi gives me if I have to… one day, they will all accept me as a member of this family” (23) This kind of attitude she adopts saves her on a couple of occasions, first from being thrown out of her matrimonial home by Baba Segi as a result of wrong accusation framed up by Iya Segi and Iya femi and second, from being killed from the poisoned food served to her by Iya Femi with the connivance of Iya Segi.

In another instance in the text, Bolanle displays wisdom to proffer solution to a complex situation of a sour relationship amongst her extended family members. Bolanle’s mother is the opposite of Bolanle for she is the aggressive and nagging type who does not handle any situation subtly and this creates enmity, dread and loathe for her from husband and children. Bolanle’s father resorts to alcohol for succour and subsequently becomes irresponsible thus, Bolanle’s mother single-handedly labours to raise Bolanle and her sister, up to University level, therefore she expects a lot from them. While she is still nursing her disappointment over Bolanle’s decision to marry a polygamist, her second daughter, Lara comes home pregnant for a Jamaican musician who “has knotted hair and smells of cigarettes” (177). Bolanle gets to her parent’s house at the peak of the hot argument between Lara and her mother. After digesting the situation, she chooses to be sensible and says “Mama, there is just one thing…and I want you to consider the implications of your words before you utter them. This child that Lara is carrying, what do you want her to do to it?” (177). Bolanle’s mother ponders that “this wasn’t just another of Lara’s frivolities but a foetus that would one day speak, walk and laugh” (177) that ends not just the controversy, but the long-drawn disaffection amongst Bolanle’s mother, her two daughters and her husband. Bolanle’s entire extended family reconciles and joy returns again to the family. Bolanle’s mother exemplifies the inadequacy of a violent and aggressive approach at attaining a peaceful coexistence. A conciliatory and wise disposition will most likely not have resulted in her having fallible daughters, an estranged husband and even coming down with a stroke.

Iya Segi is another character in the text that employs the snail strategy of wisdom, effective dialogue and negotiation in getting whatever she desires. She does not complain openly anytime her husband takes a new wife and is always at Baba Segi’s beck and call anytime he needs her help over the administration of his household. With verbal eloquence, Iya Segi is able to talk her husband into allowing her to open a shop and start a business on her own even though Baba Segi initially opposes such. Furthermore, when Baba Segi discovers to his chagrin that none of seven children are his, Iya Segi, who masterminded the whole plan had to apply tactic, otherwise she and the other two wives involved would have been thrown out.

Iya Segi knew him better than the others silenced by anguish, so she dealt her final card. ‘My lord, I know you want to send me off into the wilderness but I beseech you to have mercy on me. My eyes have already seen what no mother’s eyes should see. Forgive me, for I seek nothing else but to stay by your side, serving you as I have done all these years. Consider that I have lost one child but there is yet one remaining. I give that child to you. Take him! Own him! What do I know about bringing up a son? Which words will I use to chastise him? If your heart does not forgive me, my lord, take Akin…’ With this, she lowered herself onto her knees, lay flat on the floor and reached out her hands until they held her husband’s feet. ‘My lord,’ she whispered, let us not allow the world to see our shame. Let us keep our secrets from those who may seek to mock us.’ (242)

Iya Segi’s supplication, which she does so well, touches Baba Segi’s heart and he eventually allows them to stay but with certain conditions such as Iya Segi relinquishing her business which has grown to four shops and Iya Femi ceasing to go to church anymore. These so-called punishments are nothing compared to the shameful offence committed by the three women and Baba Segi is expected to have taken a more grievous action against them.

The snail sense strategy is identified in Iya Femi as she uses dialogue and negotiation to get Baba Segi to marry her as a way out of her life of misery and slavery in her guardian’s house, “I didn’t waste time in telling Taju I was looking for a man to marry me. I was desperate; I didn’t want Grandma to come back and find me there” (128). After achieving her aim and thereby becoming the third wife, Iya Femi’s tireless hard work (also a snail sense strategy), good looks and culinary skills, endears her to Baba Segi and as such, she remains his most favourite wife before the emergence of Bolanle,

“…things are different in this house now. For five years, Baba Segi loved me the most and showed it. He would pretend he had an evening fever so he wouldn’t have to endure Iya Segi’s bed. Then he would sneak into mine at night so he could be with me…He loved the way I cooked, the way I looked. (137)

The situation of Iya femi losing her place as the most favourite wife may not occur or last if only she did not abandon her snail sense strategies to become brutish.

The snail sense strategy is also identified in Segi even though she is not yet a woman and would have grown to become one if she had not been a victim of her own mother’s evil scheming. Segi applies the snail sense strategy of negotiation and subtleness in order to swear Bolanle to secrecy when she thought that Bolanle had seen her with a boy at a palm wine joint, “Aunty, please don’t tell, Mama will kill me” (153). Before then, Segi had been unfriendly and hostile to Bolanle and this had put a lot of strain on their relationship. This sudden change of disposition by Segi comes as a welcoming surprise to Bolanle, “…It occurred to me that although Segi had always been civil, she had never addressed me as ‘Aunty’ before. She’d always just blurted out whatever she had to say. And now, this rain of affectionate ‘Auntys’ (153). After this conciliatory episode, the relationship between Bolanle and Segi becomes so cordial that Segi opts to spend the rest of her dying days with Bolanle in Bolanle’s room and not with her own mother.

Iya Tope’s snail sense strategy of resilience and unagressiveness to everyone in her household enables her to relate freely with them and eventually to become her husband’s favourite at the end of the story. Of the three wives, she is the only one who relates cordially with Bolanle right from the time she arrives at the Alao’s household till her exit. The first two wives, Iya Segi and Iya Femi, treat Iya Tope unkindly and refer to her as stupid and weak such that they do not involve her when plotting their dastardly plans of eliminating Bolanle for fear that she might let the cat out of the bag. Iya Tope’s snail sense strategy pays off as she is the only one Baba Segi do not have rules for as a punitive measure when the secret of his wives’ illegitimate children is revealed.

Surprisingly, he didn’t have any rules for Iya Tope. Rather, he came to favour her and now decided to spend most of his nights with her. (243)

Bolanle’s character exemplifies the need for good education for the empowerment of the woman and the pursuit of individual success and development. Bolanle realises that illiteracy is chiefly responsible for the excessive erratic behaviour of her co-wives. She thinks within her: “Living with them has taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy” (22). Bolanle also personifies the individualistic trait traceable to the snail given her resilience and determination in facing the various challenges life thrust upon her before and after she became Baba Segi’s wife.

Furthermore, it is characteristic of the snail to withdraw into its shell which it carries about whenever it encounters an obstacle. Such was the strategy adapted by Bolanle as she walls herself up and eventually opts out of a ridiculous marriage that would have brought eternal stagnation to her and render her university education a waste. According to her, “I’d woken up from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation. It started a few days after Segi died. I’d walk through the house and feel as if I was in the midst of strangers, people from a different time in history, a different world. I didn’t feel soiled anymore” (244). She does not voice out these feelings to Baba Segi who asks if he has offended her in anyway when she informs him of her decision of returning to her father’s house. Bolanle again applies the snail-sense by tactically explaining to him that there was no point staying if she would not be able to give him any children instead of telling him her true feelings which may infuriate him and subsequently lead to dispute between them. At twenty-five and with her education, Bolanle is most likely to still get married again to a young and educated husband better than Baba Segi and also get a good job in order to be empowered.

**Conclusion**

The essay has foregrounded the merit in Akachi Ezeigbo’s snail-sense brand of feminism. This is against the backdrop of the fact that, despite all the theories that have been formulated to tackle the problems encountered by women in Nigeria and other African countries, the problems still persist in varying degrees. As shown in the evaluation of the model in Shoneyin’s *The Secret* *Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, there is the need to look for other realistic, practical and functional means of solving women’s problem. However, this does not imply that other theories before snail-sense feminism should be discarded, since they equally attempt to solve women’s problems and, as a matter of fact, snail-sense feminism has common features with a few other African feminist theories, where it mainly differs is its emphasis on the individual pursuit of success. Snail-sense feminism, like other feminism models indigenous to Nigeria, underscores the primacy of accommodating, cooperating and negotiating with men for all-inclusive social reformation. From Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s ‘Stiwanism’ (1994), Catherine Acholonu’s ‘Motherism’ (1995), Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s ‘Womanism’ (1996), Chioma Opara’s ‘Femalism’ (2004), to Obioma Nwanneka’s ‘Nego-feminism’ (2004), Nigerian gender thoughts seek to ‘Nigerianise’ feminist struggle by devising strategies for gender complementarity that support African communal life. Snail-sense feminism, like other liberating models, gives credence to womanist strategies than to radical feminist opposition. With all these theories complementing one another, the desired women emancipation and empowerment can be realised as proposed in literary texts.

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