

## Centering Female Protagonists: explorations of Ama Ata Aidoo's influence in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Guillermina Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón*

Benedicta A. Lomotey  
University of Ghana  
Joanna Boampong  
University of Ghana

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/afri.96029>

Recibido: 16/05/2024 • Revisado: 15/07/2024 • Aceptado: 28/07/2024

**EN Abstract.** By all accounts, Ama Ata Aidoo can be heralded, together with writers like Flora Nwapa and Mariama Ba, as a trailblazer in African literature and African feminist thinking. A staunch defender of African value systems, her works centre female protagonists and explore the complexities involved in exercising agency, seeking self-fulfilment, coming into a full realization of themselves or their human condition. A key aspect of her work is how it resonates with younger generations of female African writers after her. In an Interview with Madeleine Thien in 2013, Tsitsi Dangarembga credits Aidoo's experience as a black woman in Germany as the inspiration for Tambudzai, the protagonist of her *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie affirms in *The Africa Report* (January 20, 2011) that "Her storytelling nurtured mine. Her worldview enlarged and validated mine" (np). Our aim, in this paper, is to examine the extent of Ama Ata Aidoo's influence on Lola Shoneyin and Guillermina Mekuy, two writers of the Anglophone and Hispanophone literary traditions respectively. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial African feminism, intertextuality (Kristeva) and dialogism (Bakhtin) we examine ways by which Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Guillermina Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) [Three Souls for One Heart] engage Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991). Like Esi in Aidoo's novel, Bolanle in Shoneyin's and Aysha in Mekuy's are formally educated female protagonists who opt for polygamous marriages. While these protagonists raise questions regarding women's exercise of freedom and agency, and their quest for self-fulfilment, do their works communicate similarly? How do the latter novels, in their approach and engagement with the polemic topic of polygamy, echo, revise, or build on Ama Ata Aidoo's legacy? Do they reimagine and posit new perspectives?

**Keywords:** Ama Ata Aidoo; Anglophone literature; Hispanophone literature; African feminist thinking; intertextuality

## ES Centrando a las protagonistas femeninas: Exploraciones de la influencia de Ama Ata Aidoo en *Las vidas secretas de las esposas de Baba Segi*, de Lola Shoneyin, y *Tres almas para un corazón*, de Guillermina Mekuy

**ES Resumen.** Según todos los indicios, Ama Ata Aidoo puede ser anunciada, junto con escritoras como Flora Nwapa y Mariama Ba, como una pionera en la literatura africana y el pensamiento feminista africano. Defensora acérrima de los sistemas de valores africanos, sus obras se centran en protagonistas femeninas y exploran las complejidades implicadas en el ejercicio de la agencia, la búsqueda de la autorrealización, la plena realización de sí mismas o de su condición humana. Un aspecto clave de su trabajo es cómo resuena con las generaciones más jóvenes de mujeres africanas. En una entrevista con Madeleine Thien en 2013, Tsitsi Dangarembga atribuye a la experiencia de Aidoo como mujer negra en Alemania la inspiración para Tambudzai, la protagonista de sus *Condiciones nerviosas* (1988). Del mismo modo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie afirma en *The Africa Report* (20 de enero de 2011) que "Su narración nutrió la mía. Su visión del mundo amplió y validó la mía" (np). Nuestro objetivo, en este artículo, es examinar el alcance de la influencia de Ama

Ata Aidoo en Lola Shoneyin y Guillermina Mekuy, dos escritoras de tradición literaria anglófona e hispanófona, respectivamente. A partir de los marcos teóricos del feminismo africano poscolonial, la intertextualidad (Kristeva) y el dialogismo (Bajtín), examinamos las formas en que *Las vidas secretas de las esposas de Baba Segi* (2010) de Lola Shoneyin y *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) de Guillermina Mekuy abordan *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) de Ama Ata Aidoo. Como Esi en la novela de Aidoo, Bolanle en la de Shoneyin y Aysha en la de Mekuy son protagonistas femeninas con educación formal que optan por matrimonios polígamos. Si bien estas protagonistas plantean preguntas sobre el ejercicio de la libertad y la agencia de las mujeres, y su búsqueda de autorrealización, ¿sus obras se comunican de manera similar? ¿De qué manera las últimas novelas, en su enfoque y compromiso con el tema polémico de la poligamia, se hacen eco, revisan o se basan en el legado de Ama Ata Aidoo? ¿Reimaginan y plantean una nueva perspectiva?

**Palabras clave:** Ama Ata Aidoo; Literatura Anglófona; Literatura Hispanófona; Pensamiento feminista africano; Intertextualidad

**Sumario:** 1. Introduction: Some reflections on Ama Ata Aidoo. 2. Rethinking the identity of the African woman: motherhood and female agency. 3. New perspectives on female sexuality. 4. African culture, victimhood, and agency. 5. Polygamy and education. 6. Marriage and masculinities. 7. Conclusions. 8. References.

**Cómo citar:** Lomotey, B. A.; Boampong, J. Centering Female Protagonists: explorations of Ama Ata Aidoo's influence in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Guillermina Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón*. *Africanias. Revista de Literaturas*, 2, e96029

## 1. Introduction: Some reflections on Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo, widely regarded as a trailblazer in African literature, has left an indelible mark on both the literary and feminist realms. Her contributions have resulted in a “string of African classics” (Sackeyfio, June 7, 2023). Born into a royal family of the Ghanaian Fante ethnic group on March 23, 1942, Aidoo quickly emerged as a prominent figure in postcolonial literature. She was a prolific playwright, novelist, poet, short story writer, and critic whose works explored themes such as colonialism, gender politics, the marginalization of women, neocolonialism, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Her enduring legacy as a pioneering African woman writer is noteworthy, as she was part of the first generation of African women writers whose works paved the way for a new era in African feminist writing. *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections of a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977) and of course, *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), which is of particular interest to us in this study, are a few of her works that highlight the connection between the issues she raises within feminist thinking and that of the third generation of African feminist writers. Indeed, Ama Ata Aidoo may have been a first-generation African female writer, but her influence undoubtedly ripples down the generations and makes her a precursor of her time. Unlike the writers of her generation, and much in tune with present day writers “who seek to complicate the conventional notion of African cultures” (Eze, 2015, p. 311), she was not nervous about being called a feminist. Aidoo's literary works involve feminist expressions that dwell on the complexities and challenges faced by African women in colonial and postcolonial times—how they navigate societal expectations, indigenous norms and traditions. Her works are also outstanding for their brilliant presentation of female protagonists who face the complexities involved in exercising agency and seeking self-realization. In her novel *Changes*, she questions issues such as polygamy, marriage, motherhood, women's sexuality and female agency. Outgrowths of her thematic contents and style are evident in the works of several third-generation writers and contemporary authors. Two groundbreaking novels which serve as lenses through which we can examine the legacy of this great African literary icon are Lola Shoneyin's<sup>1</sup> *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Guillermina Mekuy's<sup>2</sup> *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) [Three Souls for One Heart]. *Changes*, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, and *Tres almas para un corazón* are masterly crafted novels that examine, among other things, the complex choices women make and their responsibility for the final outcomes of these choices. The authors present women confronted with choices that challenge traditional norms and expectations in a modern world of social change and shifting values.

## 2. Rethinking the identity of the African woman: motherhood and female agency

As mentioned earlier, Aidoo's works are salient because they portray central female characters who can be considered to be unconventional according to the standards of African traditional norms and practices that prescribe subservience for women. In *Changes*, for example, her protagonist, Esi, does not fit into the box of the Ghanaian society's expectations on the role of the woman as wife and mother. In trying to navigate the complexities in balancing her career, family and marriage, she sheds these traditional norms of childbearing and caregiving by using contraceptives soon after the birth of her only child to ensure her “freedom of

<sup>1</sup> Lola Shoneyin is a Nigerian poet and writer who lives in Lagos, Nigeria. Her poetry collection includes *So All the Time I Was Sitting on an Egg*, *Song of a Riverbed*, and *For the Love of Flight*. She runs the publishing house Ouida and is founder of Book Buzz Foundations which organizes the Ake Arts and Book Festival.

<sup>2</sup> Guillermina Mekuy is from Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking country south of the Sahara. A former Minister of Education and Culture, she lived and schooled in Spain.

movement” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 67) and independence. She also divorces her husband, Oko, because she feels his overwhelming affection limits her possibility to concentrate on her career. Her friend, Opokuya, finds it difficult to understand her complaints because in contrast to Esi, Opokuya typifies the traditional African notion of a wife who desires her husband’s attention and a mother who must find ways of attending to her family’s needs despite her career demands. Esi’s unconventionality thus makes her the aberrant m(other) because motherhood is highly venerated in African society and it is believed, as Mikell (1997) asserts, that “no self-respecting African woman fails to bear children” (p. 9; as cited in Dosekun, 2021, p. 55). Bádéjo, for instance, underscores this with her assertion that the “mythicoreligious foundations” of African life show that “womanhood is power,” and this power is “feminine, mysterious, and beautiful” (Dosekun, 2021, p. 53). For Esi, however, motherhood is disempowerment as she believes it will inhibit her independence. In many ways, Esi brings to mind Kaboré’s (2017) article in which, drawing on Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, he compares the woman’s womb to a room. He asserts that “whereas barrenness [or the absence of multiple children in this case] in the symbolism of an empty room can be seen in Western feminism as an incentive to ... productivity, it is seen by African women writers as a curse” (Kaboré, 2017, p. 414). In line with this, Esi is victimized by her in-laws who consider her as a “semi-barren witch” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 84). Yet, she does not allow this to unsettle her. Rather, she leaves her daughter in the care of her ex-husband’s family and soon after, convinced that “monogamy is so stifling” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 117), enters into a polygamous marriage with Ali, her lover. Amazed at his wife’s dedication to her profession, “leaving the house virtually at dawn; returning home at dusk; often bringing work home” and “all these conferences. Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half”, Oko asks himself “Is Esi too an *African* woman?” and concludes that “She not only is, but there are plenty of them around *these days*” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 12, our emphasis). In essence, Oko’s questioning and conclusion point to the advent of the postcolonial African woman who clearly sets out to carve a different life for herself or tries to explore other possibilities for her life.

It is in this sense, and several others, that one identifies Ama Ata Aidoo as a forerunner of contemporary African feminist writing. The aberrance between Aidoo and her compatriots on the one hand, and on the other, the connection between Aidoo’s feminism and her literary daughters, becomes evident in relation to themes such as these—motherhood and female agency. Indeed, the centrality of motherhood in African feminism has been underscored since the burgeoning of African feminism in the 1980s (Steady, 1980). Aidoo’s *Changes*, Mekuy’s *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) and Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010) however, set the stage for new perspectives as they present African women who are uncharacteristically independent and determined to tread the path of self will.

Like Esi, Aysha in Guillermina Mekuy’s *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) is strongly attracted to Santiago, a man who is already married to two women. She too is educated, career oriented, and independent. However, this does not deter her from relocating from Paris where she received her university education to join Santiago’s polygamous household in Equatorial Guinea. Like Esi, Aysha also uses contraceptives firstly, because she wants to enjoy her youth, freedom and sexuality, secondly because she is dedicated to her profession as a journalist and thirdly, because, after coming to terms with the reality of polygamy, she doubts she will last in Santiago’s household and does not want to leave her children behind, as their Fang tradition demands, should she divorce. On the other hand, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Bolanle, whose life has been turned upside down after she was raped, chooses to marry Baba Segi and a polygamous marriage for her own declared purpose of regaining her life and healing in anonymity. Thus, she stays in the marriage and vows to bear Baba Segi a son even after the rat incident which saw her being accused of planting a rat juju to kill their husband. The context of her marriage plays a crucial role in her desire to be a mother. Bolanle has no armchair of her own because she is not yet a mother and her cowives capitalise on this to make her unhappy. When their husband returns home from work, he greets them: “Iya Segi. Iya Tope. Iya Femi. Bolanle.” and they all “curtsied, proud to be defined by [their] firstborn child, except Bolanle, who was *iya* to none” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 8). Although the description of Bolanle as “iya to none” may carry negative connotations, it signifies that Bolanle is not defined through her children or her role as a mother. She maintains her sense of self and is not overshadowed by her childbearing abilities or defined through motherhood.

### 3. New perspectives on female sexuality

The relationship between Esi and Ali is “depicted strictly as sexual magnetism” (Elia, 1999, p. 139). As Elia (1999) notes, Esi is a “ground breaking character in African fiction, the mature woman who freely enjoys her sensuality, with none of the social pressures to bear children” (Elia, 1999, p. 139). Ali marvels at how Esi, unlike the several other African women he had been with, feels so at home with her body. The erotica captured in Aidoo and Mekuy’s works is also reflected in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010)—especially with Baba Segi’s second wife, Iya Tope. In her narration about her sexual encounters in her adulterous relationship with the butcher, Iya Tope declares:

I will never forget that day or any other that I spent with him. He made my body sing. He made me howl when he bent me over; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly. And when he took me standing up, it was as if there was a frog inside me, puffing out its throat, blowing, blowing and blowing until *whoosh*—all the warm air escaped through my limbs (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 85).

She is so lost in the world of her sexual pleasures that she neglects her children and does not come to her senses until Iya Segi chastises her as a “penis worshipper” and forbids her from seeing her lover again.

Not only is the emphasis on erotica striking but also, in Shoneyin's novel, the reader is struck by the constant reference to Baba Segi's penis which is described as "so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 132). Constant reference is made to the sex act and sometimes with violent metaphors such as "lashing" (p. 43) and "hammering" (p. 43). This reference is however reiterated by the author to underscore the contradiction which comes to light when the reader finally discovers that Baba Segi's "big testicles were empty and without seed" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 242). As a chauvinist whose biggest pride was his virility and sexual prowess, he was ignorant of the importance of satisfying his wives sexually and his biggest concern was to satisfy himself and, in the case of Bolanle, get her pregnant. His first three wives thus found sexual fulfilment elsewhere: "He took me to a hotel not far from his workplace and said renting a room for two hours in the afternoon was called short time. It was good to have him back between my thighs, especially after two nights with Baba Segi" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 132). Baba Segi is thus a chauvinist who prioritises his ability to father children above everything else. With Bolanle, so desirous is he of her conceiving that Bolanle notes how, on one occasion, he "hammers [her] like never before... empt[ies] his testicles as deep into [her] womb as possible... as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn't make light of his husbandly duties"—he "wanted to fuck [her] pregnant" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 43-44). Unfortunately, this is also what evokes the memory of being raped and it destroys the affection she had built up for him. As Tuzyline Jita Allan insightfully notes, by creating Esi, Aidoo "break[s] the silence on erotica in the African novel" (p. 184; in Elia, 1999, p. 139). Shoneyin and Mekuy reach through this open window following in the footsteps of their literary godmother, Aidoo, with the presentation of Aysha and Baba Segi's wives. It is important to note that the objective of these African female writers is not to encourage adultery or promiscuity among women but rather, to deconstruct the image of the woman as a passive being in the sex act who is always at the receiving end. In this regard, Shoneyin underscores the relevance of women's sexuality through her creation of the Alao wives. She reiterates this point in the following quotation from Iya Femi:

That night, Baba Segi came to me. He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts. I thought it was all quite amusing until he *jumped* between my legs and tried to *force* his penis into me. "I am still wearing my underwear," I told him. He wasn't like Tunde at all. There was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening. Baba Segi was heavy; everything about him was clumsy and awkward. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts. Tunde never did that..... I looked forward to the day our paths would cross again at meet-roads. ... I knew I would find Tunde when the time was right. (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 130; our emphasis)

Shoneyin takes the theme of female sexuality a step further by creating a female character with a homosexual orientation—Iya Segi. It is striking that Iya Segi's first instance of sexual desire, which was at the age of 23, was in connection with another woman. So strong is this feeling that even on her wedding night she dreams about the "tomato seller": "I could not stop looking at her. ...everything about her fascinated me. I was awash with lust... but she did not return... I was disappointed...I went to bed scattered and perplexed...I couldn't get the girl out of my mind" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 99). As Kolawole, the creator of African Womanism insists, there is a general acknowledgment that "to most Africans, lesbian sexuality is actually a non-existent issue," being "completely strange to their worldview" and "not even an option to millions of African women" (1997, p.15; in Dosekun, 2021, p. 53). By creating a character with lesbian tendencies, Shoneyin challenges this and opens another door to discussions on female sexuality that were hitherto non-existent. As third-generation writers, these authors therefore, with the beckoning of Aidoo, initiate public discussions of a topic—sex and sexuality—which was previously taboo in African literature. Eze observes:

In exposing the inner workings of polygamy and introducing the discourse of gay sexual orientation into the minds of her fellow countrymen and women, Shoneyin opens new ways of exploring the African experience beyond the conventional postcolonial discourse that presumes a monolithic African identity and culture. (Eze, 2015, p. 323)

#### 4. African culture, victimhood, and agency

The feminist theme of female agency emerges through the actions of Aidoo's Esi. She is a blazing example of female agency although she is also an uncharacteristic example of what is typified in African feminism as the stereotypical African woman. She prioritizes her career over family life and is indeed so relieved when she divorces her husband on account of a marital rape incident. She revels in the opportunity to live all by herself and have all the time she needs for office work after her divorce. Her agency resides in her determination to pursue her own path. However, it is significant that this conflicts with the typical image of the distinction between victimhood and agency which first-generation feminists evoked in their construction of the African woman. First-generation feminists constructed the image of African women as distinctively African—built on African cultural values—and in opposition to western feminine thoughts which they considered as an imported concept and an imposition from the West (Nkealah, 2006; Nnaemeka, 2004). Elia (1999) describes Esi thus: "As a married woman, she had felt stifled, subject to the constraints on her time and money imposed by a demanding husband, but also, very importantly, she had felt stifled by the greater political dimension of embracing feminism in contemporary Africa, namely the (false) charge that this is a foreign concept" (p. 141).

This trans-generational change is reflected in Aysha and Bolanle, who also insist on marrying the men of their choice despite the disapproval of their family. They show varying forms of self-determination. We see the trials and pains of motherhood in the mothers of Esi, Aysha, and Bolanle who watch their daughters rebel

against their advice. Thus, their mothers have no choice but to stand back, after all their self-sacrifice, and watch their daughters face the consequences of their actions.

Aysha depicts female agency because she refuses to bear Santiago's children since, in the Fang culture, a children belong to their father and doubting her ability to survive in her polygamous marriage, she is unwilling to risk losing her children someday if she decides to put an end to the marriage. She thus takes birth control pills much to the chagrin of Santiago. Bolanle on her part is the opposite of Esi and Aysha in this sense as she desires to have children but is assumed to be barren for her co-wives do not reveal to her that their husband is sterile. She exercises her agency and search for self-fulfilment by refusing to allow Baba Segi to drag her to medicine men in search for a cure to her supposed barrenness. Although Baba Segi's friends insist that he is "the husband and she is a mere wife, and the fourth one at that!" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 4), Bolanle refuses to be dictated to. She rejects the idea to go with her husband to a prophet either "so he will lay hands on [her] belly and perform a miracle" because for her those prophets were nothing but "white-garment con men" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 43). As Eze affirms, "Bolanle, as a deconstructive tool in Shoneyin's hand, interrogates the culture from within, and in so doing shakes the presumptions of ascribed identities and rigid cultural norms" (pp. 322-323). While Bolanle's co-wives demonstrate solidarity towards each other by banding together and taking steps to safeguard their position as child-bearing wives, they also cover up their husband's sterility and go to the extent of falsely accusing Bolanle of being barren. Consequently, although they exercise agency by getting impregnated and having children by other men, by covering up their husband's sterility, they also uphold and perpetuate the erroneous belief that women are to blame when a marriage is childless. One can only guess whether Bolanle would have been complicit in her co-wives' secret had they opted to tell her. Nevertheless, it is from her position as an outsider to her co-wives' "sisterhood" that Bolanle eventually exposes their secret and leaves the marriage. While one could consider this as the author's critique of the absence of solidarity towards Bolanle, it also serves to question the basis of her co-wives' solidarity.

As the ideological throbs of these novels continually pendulate between victimhood and agency, the reader also observes how the female protagonists develop ruses to navigate the patriarchal cultural norms that threaten to place an embargo on their self-realization and happiness. Melba finds happiness again and regains her life when she begins to have an affair with her driver, whereas Aysha succeeds in taking Santiago's offspring away by becoming pregnant just before she leaves the marriage and returns to Paris. Santiago's case is striking because unlike the other two husbands (Oko and Baba Segi), he is determined that his wives should not influence him, not even Aysha. Yet, in the end he yields to Aysha and although he knows she had his child after leaving him, he does not make any effort to take the child from her. Baba Segi's wives are perhaps the most exemplary epitomes of the assertion that 'the man is the head, and the woman is the neck' as they develop crafty ways to solve the problem of their presumed barrenness and allow their husband to continue believing in his virility and standing as a patriarch.

## 5. Polygamy and education

The most striking detail on how *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Tres almas para un corazón* echo Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) is in their approach and engagement with the polemic topic of polygamy. These novels focus on the "conditions that limit women's ability to make choices, conditions that ultimately force them into polygamous marriages" (Eze, 2015, p. 321). Like Esi in Aidoo's novel, Bolanle in Shoneyin's and Aysha in Mekuy's are formally educated female protagonists— university graduates—who opt for polygamous marriages. One observes elements of intertextuality in the characterisation of these protagonists. Esi, Aysha, and Bolanle all have their reasons for opting for polygamy and they all ignore the warnings they receive from their relations, and they also disregard the astonishment of the people around them at their readiness to wander into another woman's home as second, third, and fourth wives respectively.

Esi is warned about the difficult world of polygamy by her mother as well as her bosom friend Opokuya, but she is too determined to pursue her passion to pay any attention to them. Snippets of how she could however survive in the marriage filter in with the advice she is given on how to behave in a polygamous marriage. Aysha also disregards her mother's warnings about polygamy because, like Melba and Zulema she falls madly in love with Santiago. With Aysha however, one is tempted to believe part of her attraction to Santiago is due to the fatherly figure she finds in him, a compensation for the void her own father left in her life as he failed to play his role as a father to her and a husband to her mother. For Bolanle, her acceptance to be a cowife is because of her desire to escape the memories of her rape and her painful past because she believes she can find that refuge in Baba Segi who is uneducated and thus, will not prod into her silence:

"I wasn't seduced. *That buffoon* was prepared to take me as I was. He didn't ask me any questions. Neither did he know a past he could compare my present with. I was lost and didn't want to do anything with my life. He was prepared to take me like that. All he wanted was for me to be his wife. Imagine how appealing that was to me!" (Shoneyin, 2010, pp. 150-151)

The other characters emphasise their disbelief in an educated woman accepting to be in a polygamous marriage because they consider it as an unconventional world for an educated woman. In line with this, Iya Segi, like other characters in the other two novels asserts: "Let Bolanle draw on every skill she learned in her university! ... Listen to me, *this* is not a world she knows. When she doesn't find what she came looking for, she will go back to wherever she came from" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 49). Bolanle's mother on her part, maintains that "polygamy is for gold diggers and bush dwellers, not educated children brought up in a good Christian home" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 17). Thus, nobody expects these protagonists to last in their polygamous marriages

and indeed, they do not. Perhaps, what strikes the reader even more, and reveals how tall Aidoo stands as a formidable oak in African literature through whose stem many feminist classics have sprouted, is how she merges the treatment of the polemic topic of polygamy into the treatment of issues on modernity and tradition—that is, from the perspectives of women from completely different backgrounds—the educated and the uneducated. As educated Christian women, expected to adhere to the modern practice of monogamy, Esi, and Bolanle after her, rather adopt a traditional African epistemological worldview that does not consider African traditional beliefs (and polygamy) to be incompatible with Christianity.

What exactly does *Changes*, as well as *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Tres almas para un corazón* reveal about polygamy? The answers are many and varied and the reader does not find any one single answer in any of the novels. Aidoo captures diverse perspectives as the story is told in the third person narrative. Shoneyin and Mekuy revise and build on Aidoo's work by adopting an even more revealing narrative style, dialogism, that allows them to reimagine and posit new perspectives. As a journalist, Mekuy's approach consists of an interview with Melba, her cowives and their husband and this gives a first-hand account—devoid of all literary tropes and embellishment—of life in a polygamous home. Similarly, Shoneyin presents her readers with different perspectives. Each wife adopts a confessing posture as she is allocated a chapter in which she details her experiences and her feelings. This enhances dialogism as each one of the wives, as well as the husbands, reveals their motives for entering a polygamous arrangement and their experiences and feelings. For Melba, who, as an aristocrat had been brought up since she was a child to see Santiago as her very reason for living, it was pain, and her account reveals the torture many wives in her situation feel when their husbands decide to bring home another wife. For Zulema, a young orphan who came from a poor family without resources it was pure delight as she accepted the marriage proposal of Santiago who she genuinely saw as her prince. She can be paralleled with Iya Segi, who, similarly, never knew her father; as well as Iya Femi, who confesses her gratitude to Baba Segi: “don't get me wrong. I don't hate Baba Segi; on the contrary, I have several reasons to be thankful to him. He gave me a place of refuge when the wicked of the world were ready to swallow me whole” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 132). Apart from the educated protagonists who got involved in their polygamous marriages because they truly loved the men—or in the case of Bolanle, later developed the affection—the other female characters reveal the socioeconomic conditions that pushed them into polygamy.

The rivalry and bitterness in polygamous marriages is most evident in the experiences of Melba and Zulema as they squabble over who is the preferred wife of Santiago. Zulema seems to be enjoying this position until Aysha comes in, erroneously thinking she can succeed in making herself the only wife. In *Changes*, Fusena's experience can be likened to that of Melba because not only is she being compelled to accept a cowife but additionally, the new wife has the life she could not achieve for herself due to her self-sacrifice as a mother and a wife for Ali, i.e., a postgraduate education. This is evident in her private thoughts: “It occurred to her that life should offer more than marriage. That is, if the life she was leading was in fact marriage.... The first time that this hit her she actually sat down and wept bitterly” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 79). We also observe this in her conversations with Ali: “The first time Ali informed Fusena that he was thinking of taking a second wife, Fusena asked him, before the words were properly out of his mouth, ‘She has a university degree?’ . . . ‘[W]hat has that got to do with it?’ ‘Everything,’ she shot back” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 118). Elia (1999) rightly describes her as an “angry, betrayed woman who realizes too late that having made one major concession (being talked into giving up higher education to have children), she is bound to continue on a trail of self-sacrifice, or forcefully assert herself” (p. 140).

It is perhaps in *The Secret Lives* that one sees more variance in perspectives because, except for Bolanle, all the wives of Baba Segi— Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi—are illiterate and the first and third, especially, are tough skinned and appear to be made for the world of polygamy. That notwithstanding, they all reveal the intricacies of rivalry, jealousy, hatred and discontentment that result from sharing a husband. Through dialogism, Shoneyin and Mekuy also present the perspectives of the husbands whose reasons for polygamy are narrated by themselves. In the case of Santiago, he desires to have children and Melba is infertile. His need to reproduce was reinforced by the fact that he was an only child and in Africa, children are considered treasures. The reader however observes that this decision to be polygamous goes beyond the need to reproduce because Santiago believes that men are not created to be ‘tied’ to only one woman. In this sense, he is like Ali in *Changes* who is portrayed as a chronic womanizer and Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives*.

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Tres almas para un corazón* are inspired by Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, which upsets the stereotypical portrayals and expectations of women especially in a polygamous context. Following the footsteps of Aidoo, Mekuy and Shoneyin present intelligent, strong and independent female protagonists who are unconventional according to the social norms of the indigenous societies in which their stories unfold. By allowing the voices of the characters to emerge in their first-person narrations, the authors engage a dialogic approach which portrays different categories of challenges faced by different women. In the end, the highly educated women are the ones who are able to walk out of the polygamous marriages as they realise the truth in Iya Segi's words—polygamy is not a world for them because it conflicts, among other things, with the “Western institution of romantic heterosexual love” (Elia, 1999, p. 139). Elia (1999) explains the intricate world of polygamy thus:

For polygyny to work, however, passion, desire and love cannot exist between the man and one or more of his wives. Instead, the community of women, the co-wives, must band together, oblivious to feelings of possessiveness, jealousy, betrayal, and similar passions characteristic of sexual or monogamous

love. Such friction free (not to say utopic) sharing of the male spouse is unlikely in marriages that result from love between husband and wife, rather than a traditionally arranged family transaction. (p. 139)

Melba and Fusena who are not as highly educated as Esi, Aysha and Bolanle stay on in the marriages in 'total surrender' (Eliá, 1999, p. 144) and with self-defeatist attitudes—especially because their husbands had become their worlds. As Fusena whispers “Yes, Mma. Yes Auntie. yes ... yes .... yes,” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 130) to everything the “good” women of Ali’s family said as they met to officially inform her of Ali’s second marriage, the importance of a good education—the higher the better—is brought to the fore. The following quotation from the novel underscores the importance of education and sisterhood in the attempt to erode patriarchy: “The older women felt bad. So, an understanding that had never existed between them was now born. It was a man’s world. What shocked the older women though, was obviously how little had changed for their daughters—school and all” (Aidoo, 1991, p. 130). Had Fusena followed her dreams of higher education and been as liberated as Esi, she could also have abandoned the marriage. But she was not, and she felt trapped after having dedicated the best part of her years to “being pregnant, nursing another infant, helping Ali to find them somewhere to live and making a home” (p. 80).

Shoneyin emphasises the theme of education for female empowerment through Iya Tope, who, alluding to her description as a mercantile that was shipped off in marriage without her consent, says about her daughters:

I have taught them all I know. ‘Do not commit adultery,’ I tell them. ‘Follow the path that is good and right,’ I say. And when they forget to do their homework, I ask them if they want to be educated ladies or useless tubers with arms and legs. (Shoneyin, 2010, p.88)

By all accounts, in Baba Segi’s household, Iya Segi is the closest to an empowered woman after Bolanle. She knows how to make money and obtain financial empowerment and she manipulates her husband to allow her to learn how to drive. Yet, she also yields in the final chapter of the novel to Baba Segi’s upgraded total control. This is because although her embittered mother had continuously hammered into her head how ‘useless’ men were, her mother was unable to surmount society’s criticism of childless women:

“My husband? Mama, women don’t need husbands.” I spoke her own words back to her.

“You do. You need one to bear children. The world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out.”

“Is this all so I can bear children?”

“It is every woman’s life purpose to bear children”. (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 101)

Her mother is thus stuck between two generational ideologies, and in the end, so is Iya Segi. It is worthy to note that, in a way, Iya Segi’s mother contributed to her daughter’s fate by indoctrinating her that every woman must have children. The importance of female education for deconstructing gender limiting ideologies is symbolically recaptured in the denouement of Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives* as Bolanle says:

The wives will be relieved by my departure, I know. Maybe not Iya Tope, but the other two will remember me as the wicked wind that upturned the tranquillity of their home. When they talk about me, they will console one another by calling me the uppity outsider, the one who couldn’t cut it as an Alao wife. I will remember them as inmates, because what really separates us is that I have rejoined my life’s path; they are going nowhere. (Shoneyin, 2010, pp. 244-245; our emphasis)

Bolanle’s “life path”, as the reader is now aware, is to either get a job or “improve [her] prospects by going back to university for a master’s degree” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 179) as she previously informed Segun, the son of their wealthy landlord with whom she had had an affair, and his mother.

## 6. Marriage and masculinities

Given the importance of marriage in the African context, it is of no surprise that the theme of marriage plays a central role in the selected novels. The importance of marriage and family for women’s self-realization in many African societies is summarised by Adichie who states that her Igbo society “teaches a woman at a certain age who is unmarried to see it as a deep personal failure” (2014, p. 30). Feminist concerns on marriage in *Changes: A Love Story*, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, and *Tres almas para un corazón* are projected through the parents of the protagonists and the effects their marriages have on their daughters. These texts which can be classified as transformative African-feminist literature criticise men sharply “not only [as] accomplices, but also products of patriarchal patterns of thought” (Arndt, 2002, p. 34). In Mekuy’s novel, Zulema’s father is never known to her and is constantly cursed by her mother, whereas Aysha does know her father but detests him deeply for how he ruined her mother’s life. In Shoneyin’s novel, Iya Segi’s mother hated her husband so much for abandoning her and chasing after “a beautiful girl” that she is not afraid of death because she wants to die so she can “go to heaven and kill [him] all over again” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 100). She constantly criticises men and tells her daughter:

Men are nothing. They are fools. The penis between their legs is all they are useful for. And even then, if not that women needed their seed for children, it would be better to sit on a finger of green plantain. Listen to my words. Only a foolish woman leans heavily on a man’s promises. (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 97)

So much is the effect this has on her daughter that she also grows up thinking “Men are like yam” and “You cut them how you like” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 75). She has little value for them and actually depicts lesbian tendencies when at the age of twenty-three she experiences her first pangs of sexual desire. Iya Segi too

never knew her father. As for Iya Tope, her father sold her into marriage like a “tuber[s] of cassava” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 82) whereas Bolanle’s father would come home late most nights, oblivious to her sufferings and “too drunk to save [them] from Mama’s madness” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 145). The fathers of Melba and Iya Femi, who are depicted positively, died tragically and left their daughters as orphans. While the absentee fathers abandoned their responsibilities, their wives toiled night and day for their daughters’ futures and lived bitterly for having made the wrong choice in marriage. Esi’s mother dedicated her life to bringing her up properly and giving her a good education. Aysha’s mother toiled to send her off to Paris for a good education, Iya Segi’s mother suffered to bring her up successfully, whereas Bolanle’s mother worked herself “to death” because she wanted her daughters to receive excellent education so they could “own houses and cars” and be “able-bodied women who will fight for prosperity and win” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 93). Aysha’s mother is depressed, Iya Segi’s mother eats away the pain of her abandonment until she becomes as huge as an elephant, whereas Bolanle’s mother works herself up until she suffers a stroke. Unfortunately, these fathers, together with society at large, played one role or the other in the conditions that ushered their daughters into polygamy.

It is striking that Shoneyin and Mekuy both give a voice to their male figures by dedicating chapters to their first-person narrations of their personal experiences and feelings. By giving some attention to the men in their novels, as third-generation writers, they answer the contemporary call for more attention to be given to masculinities as well in gender studies (Schippers, 2007). And this is one more aspect in which Aidoo, their literary godmother, is a forerunner of feminism. In *Changes*, Oko is not the typical portrayal of an African man. He cannot get his wife to willingly have sex with him but rather, must use force, which Esi identifies as marital rape. This is the final straw that ends their already strained marriage while, ironically, Oko thought it would rather improve their situation. Additionally, he is not the main breadwinner and he lives in his wife’s bungalow. Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni (2020) define African masculinities as “a set of social and cultural placed attributes and patterns of behaviour expected to be exhibited by African men” (p. 54). The two key elements they identify for being accepted as a man in most parts of Africa are (1) virility and the ability to produce children and (2) the economic ability to head one’s family. As these authors point out, these two key elements of masculinity, have an inadvertent effect on men as well as women. Contemporary African feminist writers like Shoneyin and Mekuy therefore construct their narratives not only from a feminist perspective, but they also expose the effects of masculinities in their writings.

Unlike first-generation African female writers who focused on infertility and sterility in women, Shoneyin, through her creation of Baba Segi, reminds us that it takes two to make a baby, even if our patriarchal societies have often overlooked this fact. Baba Segi is unable to win his wives’ affection because he focuses more on his virility, “pound[ing]” them until they are “cross-eyed”, taking “the length of his manhood on [their] back—splayed out and submissive” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 4) and “fuck[ing] [them] pregnant” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 44). He is a metaphorical representation of patriarchy. The constant reference to his “big penis” and “testicles”, often, in conjunction with violent imageries such as “lashings from his penis” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 102) indicates the symbolic character of this figure. By uncovering the secret of Baba Segi’s big but empty testicles, Shoneyin questions the foundations of male supremacy and dismantles the ideological structures of male power. Baba Segi now realises that all his beatings and lashings with his big penis were nothing but illusive demonstrations of his chauvinism. The fact that there are other men like Baba Segi who must bear the torture of secrecy and silence about their inactive manhood is revealed through Teacher, who, on the other hand, has already lost his manhood because he is impotent and sterile. Another character who presents a different kind of masculinity in *The Secret Lives* is Bolanle’s father who is described as having “long ago come to terms with his emasculation” and being, apparently, “happy to exist without responsibilities” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 173). Through Baba Segi, Shoneyin drives home the message that it takes more than a display of virility and male domination to be a man. In the end, after laboratory tests Bolanle insists he gets done reveal his sterility, and contrary to his friend, Teacher’s advice, Baba Segi accepts the children his wives had conceived with other men, and seems to have a change in his way of thinking. He advises his son, Akin, who has throughout the novel been described as an exemplary figure, to turn away from polygamy:

“Before you go, child, I have some words for you.” Baba Segi started abruptly, his eyes unnaturally eager. “Keep these words in your left hand lest you wash them away after eating with your right. When the time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone. And when she causes you pain, as all women do, remember it is better that your pain comes from one source alone. Listen to your wife’s words, listen to the words she doesn’t speak so that you will be prepared. A man must always be prepared”. (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 238; our emphasis)

## 7. Conclusions

As our study shows, although Shoneyin and Mekuy are third-generation writers who produce their works decades after Aidoo’s *Changes*, they resonate with one another in their centring of their female protagonists. With Esi in *Changes*, Ama Ata Aidoo initiates the production of female protagonists who destabilize the traditional profile of the African woman where questions of identity, motherhood, marriage, gender roles, sexuality, female agency, and self-realization are further explored in the works of Guillermina Mekuy and Lola Shoneyin. While all three novels present educated, urban women who opt to enter polygamous marriages, these marriages are not presented as perfect and, indeed, fail. Nevertheless, these novels portray female protagonists who exercise their agency and who resolve to have a say in the running of their lives. Even Baba Segi’s first three wives do not remain inactive or helpless in the face of their husband’s infertility. By



hatching and carrying out an elaborate plan that enables them to hide their husband's infertility from him they appropriate an authority that traditionally would have been unavailable to them. With this appropriated authority, they can prove that they are indeed fertile and thereby forestall infertility being imputed to them as is usually the case when marriages remain childless. On the other hand, by her determination to carry out a lab test instead of consulting a traditional healer, Bolanle reveals the true state of Baba Segi's reproductive system and exposes her co-wives' deception. Ultimately, it is Baba Segi's wives who determine the course of their family members' lives. Similarly, by taking away her son when she leaves her polygamous marriage, Mekuy's Aysha subverts the Fang tradition that assign children of divorced families to the father. In their own ways, Mekuy's Aysha and Shoneyin's Bolanle, stand on the shoulders of Aidoo's Esi and figure out ways to appropriate authority, exercise agency, assert themselves and accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

## References

- Adichie, C. N. (2014). *We Should All Be Feminists*. Vintage.
- Aidoo, A. A. (1991) *Changes: A Love Story*. Heinemann.
- Arndt, S. (2002). Perspectives on African feminism: defining and classifying African-feminist literatures. *Agenda*, 17(54), 31-44.
- Ben-Daniels, F., & Glover-Meni, N. (2020). African masculinities: Discussing the men in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2013) and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017). *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(4), 53-69.
- Dosekun, S. (2021). African feminisms. In O. Yacob-Haliso, Falola, Toyin (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (pp. 47-63). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4\\_58](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4_58)
- Elia, N. (1999). To Be an African Working Woman: Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*. *Research in African Literatures*, 30 (2), 136-147.
- Eze, C. (2015). Feminist empathy: Unsettling African cultural norms in the *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. *African Studies*, 74(3), 310-326.
- Kaboré, A. (2017). Differentiating African and western feminisms through room symbolism. *Linguistics Literature Studies*, 5(6), 408-416.
- Mekuy, G. (2011). *Tres almas para un corazón*. Planeta SA
- Nkealah, N. N. (2006). Conceptualizing feminism (s) in Africa: The challenges facing African women writers and critics. *The English Academy Review*, 23(1), 133-141.
- Nnaemeka, O. (2004). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29 (2), 357-385.
- Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, 36, 85-102.
- Shoneyin, L. (2010). *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Profile Books.
- Steady, F. C. (1980). *The Black Woman Cross-culturally*. Schenkman Pub Co.

