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Feminist Resistance in Postcolonial African Narratives: Strategic Resistance and Radical Politics in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*

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Abstract

This study investigates how African women navigate patriarchal oppression in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, with a particular focus on postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency. It draws on two contrasting yet complementary theoretical frameworks: Snail-Sense Feminism, developed by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, which champions strategic, non-confrontational forms of resistance; and Radical Feminism, which advocates for the complete dismantling of patriarchal systems. Shoneyin's novel centres on subtle forms of resistance within a polygamous household in postcolonial Nigeria, while Abani's novella highlights trauma, estrangement, and existential defiance in a more global, diasporic context. Employing a qualitative approach rooted in close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism, the research examines character development, narrative voice, and recurring motifs such as silence, memory, and resistance. The analysis reveals that female characters in both texts adopt layered strategies of survival—from covert manipulation and collective solidarity, as exemplified in Iya Segi's domestic politics, to acts of epistemic refusal and bodily autonomy, seen in Abigail's final gesture of resistance. This study contributes to postcolonial feminist discourse by emphasising the diversity and complexity of African women's agency, shaped by the intersecting forces of tradition, modernity, and colonial legacies. It argues that resistance in African literature is neither uniform nor solely radical, but rather emerges through contextually embedded acts of endurance, negotiation, and redefinition. Ultimately, both texts offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of African women, portraying feminist agency not as a single path but as a constellation of adaptive—and at times contradictory—responses to patriarchal and postcolonial realities.

INTRODUCTION

The interrogation of gendered experience in African literature has become an increasingly urgent scholarly pursuit, particularly within the intersecting domains of postcolonial studies and feminist literary criticism. As a continent historically subjected to colonial subjugation and contemporaneously governed by deeply entrenched patriarchal systems, Africa offers a complex terrain in which women's identities, resistances, and subjectivities are constructed, challenged, and transformed. Within this context, literature emerges as a vital medium through which African women writers articulate alternative

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epistemologies and assert feminist agency in response to their sociopolitical realities.

The concept of postcolonial subjectivity—referring to the formation of identity within and against the legacies of colonialism, is especially pertinent in analyzing literary representations of African women. Postcolonial feminist theory asserts that gendered subjugation cannot be extricated from the colonial histories and sociocultural frameworks that continue to shape African societies. As McClintock (1995) argues, "no postcolonial theory is adequate that does not give a central place to gender," foregrounding the imperative to analyze the gendered dimensions of postcolonial experience. In literary narratives, African women are often depicted as negotiating overlapping axes of oppression—namely colonial residue, patriarchal authority, and cultural essentialism—while simultaneously seeking avenues for self-definition, agency, and liberation.

This study explores the articulation of postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency in two seminal texts: Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006).

Despite the growing body of African feminist literary criticism, comparative analyses that situate texts like *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Becoming Abigail* within the dual frameworks of postcolonialism and feminist theory remain underrepresented. Studies such as Ogunyemi's (1996) explication of Womanism, Nnaemeka's (2004) theory of Nego-feminism, and Adimora-Ezeigbo's own work on indigenous feminist praxis have laid essential groundwork for understanding gender in African literature. However, few scholarly interventions have examined how these paradigms coexist or conflict when applied across divergent textual representations of female experience.

This study seeks to fill this lacuna by offering a comparative analysis of how Shoneyin and Abani construct postcolonial feminist subjectivities. Specifically, it interrogates the relationship between socio-political context and the forms of agency available to women within patriarchal and postcolonial regimes. In doing so, it argues that the literary portrayal of African women's resistance cannot be reduced to a single ideological model; rather, it must be understood as an evolving interplay between cultural negotiation, embodied trauma, and existential assertion. By analyzing these two texts through the dual lenses of Snail-Sense Feminism and Radical Feminism, the study contributes to a more expansive and nuanced understanding of feminist resistance in African literature, revealing its multiplicity, depth, and ongoing relevance in postcolonial discourse.

Postcolonial Feminist Agency in Literature

The preceding sections have traced the evolution of feminist thought from global to African contexts, emphasizing the diverse ways women resist gendered oppression within patriarchal societies. It is within literature, however, that the intersection of postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency is rendered with particular clarity and poignancy. African women's fiction, especially that of Lola Shoneyin and Chris Abani, foregrounds female protagonists who navigate hostile socio-political landscapes, offering textured representations of how resistance can be embodied through silence, subversion, withdrawal, or confrontation.

In postcolonial feminist scholarship, the notion of *subjectivity* is often tied to processes of becoming and identity negotiation in the aftermath of colonization. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously questioned, "Can the subaltern speak?"—a query that underscores how postcolonial female voices are often doubly silenced by imperialism and patriarchy. Yet, contemporary African literature offers powerful counternarratives where these voices not only speak but reconfigure their identities through deliberate acts of resistance and reinterpretation of societal norms.

Within this framework, Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) emerges as a quintessential text illustrating Snail-Sense Feminist logic. The narrative situates its female characters within a patriarchal, polygamous family structure but reveals how these women exercise power through coded behaviors, shared secrets, and intellectual agency. While Baba Segi assumes he dominates his household, the internal lives of his wives tell a different story—one of resilience, self-preservation, and strategic navigation of male authority. In particular, Bolanle, the fourth wife and university graduate, symbolizes a fusion of modern feminist ideals and indigenous survival strategies. Her decision to leave the marriage, after exposing the longstanding deceptions of the other wives, marks a turning point in the narrative—an act of self-

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emancipation that avoids confrontation yet subverts the power dynamics at play.

This aligns with Adimora-Ezeigbo's (2012) assertion that "African women do not need to mirror Western feminist hostility to patriarchy but can find strength in culturally embedded negotiation" (p. 27). Bolanle's quiet resistance exemplifies this mode of agency—strategic, non-confrontational, but no less transformative. As such, the text embodies a postcolonial feminist vision that affirms African women's agency not in defiance of tradition, but through its reinterpretation.

In contrast, Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) presents a more radical and psychologically intense portrayal of feminist resistance. Abigail's narrative is shaped by loss, abandonment, and transnational dislocation; factors that render her subjectivity not only postcolonial but deeply fractured. Unlike Shoneyin's characters who find solidarity in sisterhood, Abigail exists in profound isolation, caught between the patriarchal failures of her Nigerian heritage and the racialized indifference of British society. Her resistance is not a gradual emergence of agency but a stark refusal to be defined by the victimhood imposed on her.

Abani crafts a narrative of existential feminist resistance—Abigail's choices, culminating in her final act of withdrawal from a world that repeatedly violates her, illustrate a form of feminist subjectivity that is both radical and tragic. As Alfred Rhode (2011) notes, "Abani does not provide the reader with closure, but with confrontation the confrontation of what it means to be a woman in a world that is neither safe nor redeeming" (p. 73). In this sense, Abigail's subjectivity challenges the very notion of survival as resistance, raising ethical questions about agency in contexts where options are structurally foreclosed.

Juxtaposing these two texts reveals the plurality of feminist resistance in African literature. Where Shoneyin champions subversive agency within domestic spaces, Abani portrays the psychological costs of radical defiance in transnational liminality. Both, however, articulate feminist subjectivities that are deeply post.

Feminism, derived from the Latin term *femina*, meaning "woman," has developed into a multi-dimensional ideological and socio-political movement with no singular or universally agreed-upon definition. Its meanings and manifestations are shaped by cultural, racial, class, and historical contexts, particularly as women across the globe experience patriarchy in distinct ways (Ebunoluwa, 2009; Sircar, 2008). The heterogeneity of feminist experiences necessitates diverse interpretive frameworks—particularly in Africa, where feminist discourse must reckon not only with gender-based oppression but also with the residual effects of colonialism and deeply rooted indigenous structures.

As Hennessey and Mohan (2015) contend, feminism is not merely a critique of women's unequal status, but a comprehensive method of understanding and dismantling the systems such as social, political, and cultural, that maintain this imbalance. Feminism, they argue, challenges the notion of woman as "the other," offering a paradigm through which to interrogate history, labor, sexuality, and identity (p. 464). This resonates strongly within African postcolonial contexts, where women have historically been relegated to subordinate roles within both colonial and traditional power structures.

Moreover, as Tuttle (2002) and Nnolim (2003) assert, feminism's core concern lies in advocating for women's rights as an extension of human equality. For African feminist writers, this has involved reclaiming voice and visibility in a literary canon that has long marginalized female perspectives. Marilyn French (1992) further amplifies this position by arguing that feminism constitutes one of the few universal philosophical paradigms capable of confronting patriarchal ideology across cultures: "Feminism is the only serious and universal philosophy that has the potential to replace patriarchal thinking" (p. 7). In African societies, where gender hierarchies are reinforced through cultural norms and socialization, such a philosophy becomes both radical and necessary.

Ebunoluwa (2009) identifies feminism not only as a belief system but also as a transformative praxis committed to shifting both representation and lived realities. She notes that feminism must address not just institutional inequalities but also the symbolic frameworks through which women's identities are constructed. Literature, in this regard, becomes a vital tool of resistance and reclamation. As Cuddon (1999) and Sircar (2008) emphasize, feminist literary criticism reinterprets women's narratives, foregrounding their voices and validating their experiences. It also interrogates how literature perpetuates, critiques, or subverts dominant gender ideologies.

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These theoretical positions converge with Alfred Rhode's (2011) argument that feminist critique must situate gendered identity within its socio-historical matrix. For Rhode, the female subject is not static but produced through dynamic interactions between personal trauma, social constraint, and historical marginalization. Feminist theory, therefore, becomes a means of making legible these intersecting forces and offering alternative modes of existence for women in patriarchal systems.

Central to most feminist frameworks is the critique of patriarchy, conceived as a structural and ideological system in which men dominate key aspects of public and private life. Feminists reject essentialist notions that equate womanhood with submission, and they resist social practices that limit women's autonomy to their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers. Instead, feminist scholarship and activism seek to dismantle hierarchies that ascribe value based on gender, advocating instead for equitable participation across all facets of life (Hooks, 2000; Frye, 1983).

In African feminist thought, this advocacy often assumes culturally specific forms. For instance, Snail-Sense Feminism, developed by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, promotes a model of resistance characterized by adaptability, patience, and pragmatic negotiation (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012). Inspired by the metaphor of the snail, a creature that progresses slowly but resiliently over dangerous terrain this theory encourages African women to assert agency through culturally intelligible and socially strategic means. As Adimora-Ezeigbo notes, "Snail-Sense Feminism is more realistic, practical, and functional" because it is grounded in the lived experiences of Nigerian women who must navigate deeply patriarchal landscapes without direct confrontation (p. 26).

In contrast, Radical Feminism, as advanced by theorists such as Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, and Andrea Dworkin demands the complete dismantling of patriarchal institutions. Millett (1970) famously conceptualized patriarchy as a "political institution" that manifests across familial, legal, literary, and cultural domains. Firestone (1970), going further, identified biological reproduction as a central mechanism of female oppression, proposing a revolutionary technological future that would liberate women from motherhood as social obligation. These theories stress the need for confrontation rather than accommodation, a stance that often clashes with the more context-sensitive approaches favored by African feminists like Adimora-Ezeigbo and Ogunyemi.

This divergence in feminist strategy is especially evident in African literature. Texts such as Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* offer valuable insights into the ways African women negotiate their identities within postcolonial and patriarchal societies. While Shoneyin's work reflects the cautious, strategic ethos of Snail-Sense Feminism, Abani's novella adopts a bleaker tone, portraying feminist resistance through radical alienation and existential defiance.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the wives subvert the power dynamics of a polygamous household not through open rebellion but via psychological strategies, economic agency, and interpersonal solidarity. Their resilience aligns with the snail's slow yet purposeful movement—a metaphor for patient but inevitable change. Conversely, in *Becoming Abigail*, the eponymous character represents a radical form of feminist resistance. Subjected to layers of trauma-maternal loss, sexual violence, and cultural displacement-Abigail's agency emerges through silence, emotional detachment, and eventual withdrawal from a world that refuses her full personhood.

The present study thus engages these two texts as case studies through which to explore postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency in African literature. By juxtaposing Snail-Sense Feminism's emphasis on culturally rooted negotiation with Radical Feminism's call for systemic rupture, this research investigates how African women's resistance is mediated by context, character, and narrative form. It argues that African feminist literature reflects not a singular strategy, but a continuum of responses shaped by the realities of lived oppression, historical trauma, and sociocultural expectation.

METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis rooted in feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to Snail-Sense Feminism and Radical Feminism as complementary analytical frameworks. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for close, interpretive reading of the texts, foregrounding how language, narrative form, and

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characterisation reflect broader social, cultural, and ideological forces. As Creswell argues, qualitative research "seeks to understand meaning as constructed by individuals within specific contexts" (Creswell 23). This interpretive orientation is especially suitable for feminist inquiry, which values subjectivity and the contextual negotiation of power (Butler 34).

Both texts—Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) are examined through thematic, character-based, and discursive analysis. The study focuses on how female characters resist, accommodate, or subvert patriarchal authority, and how their voices negotiate visibility and silence within postcolonial social structures. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical; it privileges textual depth and symbolic meaning over quantification.

Theoretical Orientation

The study is anchored in two major feminist frameworks-Radical Feminism and Snail-Sense Feminism, each providing distinct yet complementary insights into the representation of women's resistance in patriarchal contexts.

Radical Feminism, following Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971), understands patriarchy as "a system of social relationships in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Millett 35). It guides the reading of overt rebellion and structural critique in both narratives, particularly where women challenge institutional power.

In contrast, Snail-Sense Feminism, developed by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, reimagines resistance within African socio-cultural realities. It describes how women adopt patience, subtlety, and negotiation, "moving with wisdom, like the snail that carries its house" to resist oppression without destabilising communal harmony (Adimora-Ezeigbo 18). This model provides a culturally grounded interpretive lens for understanding adaptive forms of resistance in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, where silence, endurance, and maternal solidarity serve as forms of agency.

Integrating these frameworks, the study identifies both confrontational (radical) and negotiated (contextual) modes of resistance. This dual lens allows for a plural reading of female subjectivity that honours both the universality of gender oppression and the particularity of African women's strategies for survival.

Definition and Operationalisation of Key Concepts

To ensure conceptual clarity, several key terms central to the study are explicitly defined and operationalised for textual analysis. Each of these concepts is used as an interpretive tool to locate instances of women's empowerment, victimisation, and negotiation across both texts.

1. **Postcolonial Subjectivity** refers to the formation of the self under intersecting structures of colonial legacy, patriarchy, and cultural expectation. It is identified in the texts through narrative focalisation, internal monologues, and acts of self-definition against imposed social scripts (Spivak, 104; Mohanty 348).
2. **Feminist Agency** is understood as the capacity of female characters to act purposefully and meaningfully within, against, or alongside patriarchal systems. In textual terms, it is recognised through speech acts, narrative decisions, or symbolic gestures that assert selfhood, such as Bolanle's decision to expose Baba Segi's secret, or Abigail's refusal to conform to victimhood.
3. **Silence and Resistance** are treated as interrelated narrative motifs. Silence is not merely absence of speech but a coded form of communication, a "strategic muteness" (Nnaemeka 382) that conceals resistance. Resistance, in turn, may appear as open confrontation or as subversive adaptation, depending on socio-cultural context.
4. **Feminist Voice** is identified through linguistic and stylistic features that express subjectivity and challenge patriarchal discourse, such as interior narration, irony, and confessional tone.

Comparative Framework and Justification

The comparative dimension of this study arises from the desire to explore divergent narrative strategies for representing African women's agency within varying cultural and authorial contexts. Although *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Becoming Abigail* differ in geography, style, and narrative form, they are united by their focus on women navigating patriarchal constraint in postcolonial societies.

Shoneyin, a Nigerian female writer, situates her story within a Yoruba polygamous household, using humour and satire to critique the intimate operations of patriarchy. Abani, a Nigerian male author writing within diasporic and transnational frames, examines female suffering through the lens of sexual exploitation, displacement, and trauma. Bringing these texts into dialogue enables a nuanced understanding of how gender, culture, and authorship intersect in postcolonial African fiction.

Comparative analysis, according to Susan Bassnett, "is not about measuring equivalence but about mapping relationships, such as cultural, historical, and ideological" (Bassnett, p. 46). The study, therefore, does not seek symmetry between the two novels but rather explores how each articulates feminist consciousness through different narrative and aesthetic choices. The contrast between Shoneyin's communal, domestic feminism and Abani's solitary, existential feminism illuminates the varied textures of female resistance in African literature.

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Data Sources, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

The primary sources are the 2010 Cassava Republic edition of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and the 2006 Akashic Books edition of *Becoming Abigail*. These editions were selected for their accessibility and critical acceptance within African literary scholarship.

The secondary materials include scholarly articles, book chapters, and critical essays on feminist theory, African women's writing, and postcolonial studies. Cross-referencing with multiple critical interpretations ensures analytical validity and guards against interpretive bias.

Regarding researcher subjectivity, the study acknowledges that feminist criticism is inherently interpretive and politically situated. Reflexivity is maintained through engagement with diverse theoretical voices such Western, African, and postcolonial to avoid a monolithic reading of gender politics.

Although the texts address sensitive issues such as sexual abuse, trauma, and gendered violence, the analysis maintains ethical sensitivity by focusing on representation rather than sensationalisation. The aim is to foreground women's resilience, not their victimhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Orientation: Radical, Snail-Sense, and Postcolonial Feminisms

Feminist literary criticism has continually evolved from its origins in the mid-twentieth century to become both a political and interpretive tool for understanding women's experiences across cultures. What began as a movement of resistance against patriarchy in Western contexts has developed into a plural, global discourse that now incorporates local cultural logics and indigenous feminist sensibilities. Within this broader evolution, Radical Feminism and Snail-Sense Feminism represent two distinct yet complementary traditions whose intersection enriches the reading of African women's narratives such as *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Becoming Abigail*.

Radical Feminism, articulated by theorists such as Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, provides one of the earliest and most uncompromising frameworks for analysing patriarchy as a pervasive system of domination. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millett defines patriarchy as "a system of social relationships in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p. 35). Firestone, in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971), further contends that gender inequality originates in biological reproduction and must therefore be dismantled through social revolution. Radical feminism insists that women's subordination is structural, not incidental, and cannot be remedied by mere reform. As Tong observes, it is "a protest against a system of power relations that begins in the body and extends to language and literature" (*Feminist Thought*, p. 79).

However, while radical feminism offers powerful tools for unmasking oppression, it has been criticised, particularly by postcolonial and African scholars for universalising women's experience and overlooking cultural specificities (Oyěwùmí, p. 8). It is precisely this gap that African feminist thinkers such as Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo have sought to bridge through Snail-Sense Feminism, a theory that reframes the struggle for gender justice within African socio-cultural realities.

In *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building Bridges Between African Feminism and African Women's Realities* (2012), Adimora-Ezeigbo likens the African woman's resistance to the movement of a snail, patient, wise, and adaptable. She argues that women often confront patriarchy "not by confrontation but by negotiation and adaptability, like the snail which carries its house and moves with wisdom" (p. 18). This metaphor captures a distinctly African ethic of resistance grounded in community, pragmatism, and emotional intelligence. Snail-Sense Feminism therefore values resilience and tact over open rebellion, enabling women to survive and subtly subvert patriarchal control without destabilising social harmony (Nnaemeka, p. 382).

When read together, Radical Feminism and Snail-Sense Feminism illuminate two poles of feminist resistance, the first grounded in confrontation and structural rupture, the second in negotiation and strategic accommodation. They are not oppositional but dialectical: the radical impulse demands transformation, while the snail-sense approach ensures survival within culturally sanctioned limits. This complementarity provides a balanced theoretical lens through which to examine both overt and covert forms of female agency in African fiction. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin's women wield silence, wit, and solidarity as quiet acts of defiance, epitomising Snail-Sense pragmatism. By contrast, in *Becoming Abigail*, Abani's heroine embodies a radical feminist impulse that seeks liberation through rupture, even at the cost of self-destruction. These differing strategies of survival reveal the plurality of feminist resistance within African postcolonial contexts.

Extending this dialogue further, postcolonial feminist theory situates gender within historical and imperial frameworks. It examines how colonialism intensified patriarchal hierarchies and shaped the ways women's bodies and voices are represented. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against the "Western feminist universalism" that depicts Third-World women as passive victims, arguing instead for attention to "local histories and intersectional struggles" (p. 348). Likewise, Gayatri Spivak's seminal question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) exposes how colonial and patriarchal structures conspire to silence women's

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voices, a phenomenon mirrored in both Shoneyin's and Abani's works.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the wives' stories are literally suppressed within a patriarchal household until Bolanle's arrival disrupts the silence, demonstrating how storytelling becomes a mode of emancipation. Conversely, in *Becoming Abigail*, the protagonist's voice fractures under the weight of trauma and exploitation, embodying what Spivak calls "epistemic violence" (p. 104). Both texts, though different in tone, dramatise the tension between voice and voicelessness, resilience and collapse, core preoccupations of postcolonial feminist thought.

African feminist scholars such as Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and Obioma Nnaemeka have expanded this framework by grounding feminism in indigenous epistemologies. Ogunyemi's *Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel* (1996) calls for an approach that "balances protest with accommodation, rebellion with reconciliation" (p. 12). Ogundipe-Leslie's *Re-Creating Ourselves* (1994) similarly argues that liberation must be culturally sustainable. Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism* (2004) echoes Adimora-Ezeigbo's insights, portraying African feminism as a "feminism of negotiation, no ego feminism" (p.378).

Together, these thinkers articulate a distinctly African feminist vision that interweaves the radical and the pragmatic, foregrounding resistance that is simultaneously personal, cultural, and political. This synthesis creates a rich interpretive space where women's narratives are read not merely as tales of victimhood but as acts of cultural reclamation and self-assertion. It is within this continuum that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Becoming Abigail* are situated—two narratives that explore, through different aesthetic modes, how women reconstruct identity, reclaim speech, and redefine agency within oppressive postcolonial structures.

Review of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wife* and *Becoming Abigail*

The growing body of criticism on *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) by Lola Shoneyin and *Becoming Abigail* (2006) by Chris Abani reflects a shared interest in the lives of women who struggle against power, silence, and pain in patriarchal societies. Both writers give voice to women who are often ignored or silenced in traditional and modern African settings. While Shoneyin uses humour and multiple voices to explore how women survive inside marriage, Abani employs poetic sadness and emotional intensity to show how trauma and loneliness shape women's lives. Together, the two writers reveal how African women continue to find strength and meaning despite cultural oppression and personal suffering.

This review organises the discussion around three main frameworks that appear across the scholarship: Postcolonial Feminism, which studies how colonial history and patriarchy work together to control women; Trauma Theory, which explores silence, memory, and suffering as expressions of pain; and Snail-Sense Feminism, Nnaemeka's African model of pragmatic and gentle resistance. Using these perspectives, critics have shown that Shoneyin and Abani write not only about individual pain, but also about the collective experience of African womanhood.

Patriarchy, Power, and Resistance

Many scholars have focused on how Shoneyin's novel questions male power through the lives of Baba Segi's wives. Adebimpe Adeoti notes that Shoneyin "grants her female characters narrative agency, enabling them to rewrite their experiences from the margins" (p.23). The novel's structure, in which each wife tells her own story, allows the women to challenge the single, controlling voice of the husband.

Chijoke Okonkwo reads Baba Segi's polygamous home as "both a cultural relic and a symbolic structure of control" (p. 55). He argues that the family represents the larger Nigerian society, where women's subordination reflects wider political and social hierarchies. In the same way, Funmi Adewale sees motherhood as both empowering and limiting. She writes that "motherhood becomes a strategy of survival as much as a mark of conformity" (p. 35). The women use the idea of motherhood to gain respect and safety, even while it binds them to patriarchal expectations. Ifeoma Onuoha extends this point, showing that "Shoneyin does not simply critique patriarchy; she interrogates how class and poverty reinforce it" (p. 70).

In contrast, Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* offers a darker picture of womanhood. Alfred Rhode argues that "Abani deconstructs the very notion of agency by presenting a protagonist whose fragmented identity resists coherence" (p. 73). Abigail's suffering shows how women can lose even the smallest control over their lives when faced with social and emotional exploitation. Nkealah Nnaemeka also observes that Abigail's body "becomes a battlefield between autonomy and violation" (p. 82). For Chukwuma Nwosu, Abigail's final silence "is not surrender but refusal, the only act of defiance left to one denied speech" (p. 75).

While Shoneyin's women fight from within patriarchy, using wit and adaptation, Abani's Abigail represents the breaking point, where the system leaves no space for survival. Together, they form two sides of the same feminist struggle: one negotiating from within, and the other resisting through silence and withdrawal.

Silence, Trauma, and the Politics of Voice

Silence is a key theme in both novels. In Shoneyin's story, silence often protects the women. Nkechi Okeke explains that their silence is "a language of survival in a society that punishes outspoken women" (p. 75). For her, silence is not weakness but a

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smart form of resistance. Chinedu Nwankwo adds that the wives' silences "are filled with suppressed speech, moral reckoning, and latent resistance" (p. 80).

In *Becoming Abigail*, however, silence becomes a sign of trauma rather than strategy. Nnaemeka describes Abigail's muteness as "the body's last defence against meaning" (p. 82). Her inability to speak or connect with others reflects deep emotional pain. Okpiliya notes that Abani's broken sentences and fragmented language "linguistically replicate Abigail's dissociation and psychological rupture" (p. 203). Mabel Umeh supports this by arguing that "memory in Abani's fiction does not heal—it haunts" (p. 68).

In short, silence works differently in the two novels. In Shoneyin's story, it can empower; in Abani's, it destroys. Yet in both, silence communicates something profound about gendered pain and the limits of speech. As Adeoti puts it, "sometimes silence is the loudest rebellion" (p. 23).

Motherhood, Sexuality, and the Body

Both writers show how women's bodies are controlled by society, but also how they can use their bodies to reclaim power. In Shoneyin's novel, the wives use fertility and sexuality to secure their positions. Adewale observes that "fertility is currency in Baba Segi's household" (p. 35). For Onuoha, Shoneyin "creates a nuanced picture of female survival in a world where the body must serve as both instrument and armour" (p. 70).

In contrast, Abani's portrayal of the female body is tragic. Nnaemeka sees Abigail's body as "a contested text inscribed by patriarchal and colonial violence" (p. 82). Her suffering-physical and emotional, shows how societies exploit female bodies. Asika and Ifechelobi argue that Abigail's downfall "is not the result of moral weakness but of a society that offers no refuge for its women" (p. 52).

Abani's style deepens this emotional power. Ruth Davis Konigsberg notes his use of "soil, stone, skin" as recurring images to show Abigail's imprisonment (p. 61). Nathan Ihara and Sam Lipsyte also praise his poetic minimalism, saying it "transforms suffering into a quiet indictment of power" (Ihara, p. 47; Lipsyte, p. 89).

Thus, both writers explore the female body as a site of oppression and resistance. In different ways, they remind readers that power and pain often meet in the body.

Tradition, Modernity, and Feminist Awareness

Shoneyin's novel brings traditional beliefs and modern ideas into conversation. Ugochukwu Okafor notes that it is "a battlefield of competing ideologies—tradition, modernity, and the search for selfhood" (p. 55). The educated wife, Bolanle, represents new thinking, while the older wives symbolise traditional values. Emeka Uche describes Shoneyin's humour as "a form of subversive laughter that disarms patriarchal authority while exposing its absurdities" (p. 30).

Abani's novel, on the other hand, shows the dark side of modernity. Nwosu writes that Abigail's journey to London becomes "a repetition of colonial displacement rather than liberation" (p. 75). Even in the West, she remains trapped in systems of exploitation. Both authors therefore suggest that neither tradition nor modernity automatically leads to freedom for women.

Stylistically, Shoneyin's humour and Abani's sadness are two ways of showing resistance. As Onuoha wisely observes, "both laughter and lamentation are languages of resistance" (p. 70). Each writer uses emotion as a form of critique and survival. Across these studies, a clear pattern emerges. Scholars agree that both Shoneyin and Abani explore silence, pain, and female resistance. Yet few studies have examined the two writers together. Most critics focus on one text or the other.

This gap leaves unexplored how the two authors complement each other. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* shows resistance through strategy, irony, and adaptation, while *Becoming Abigail* shows resistance through withdrawal and silence. As Rhode (p. 73) and Adeoti (p. 23) suggest, both writers show how women survive under intense social pressure one by speaking, the other by refusing to speak.

This study therefore aims to bridge that gap. By reading the two texts side by side, it reveals how Shoneyin's humour and Abani's pain express different but related forms of feminist strength. Together, they show that resistance in African women's writing is complex, emotional, and deeply human.

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EXPLORING POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY AND FEMINIST AGENCY IN *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* presents a complex interrogation of postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency, set within the domestic and sociocultural space of a patriarchal polygamous household in Nigeria. The novel, while deeply rooted in local realities, resonates with broader postcolonial feminist concerns: the negotiation of agency in culturally sanctioned structures of gender inequality, the politics of voice and silence, and the search for selfhood in a society historically shaped by colonial and indigenous patriarchal ideologies. Drawing on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense Feminism and intersecting insights from Radical Feminist thought, this analysis explores how the novel portrays African women not merely as passive recipients of oppression, but as active agents navigating structural constraint with strategic adaptability.

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Domestic Patriarchy and the Fractured Postcolonial Subject

At the center of the novel lies Baba Segi, the archetype of the patriarch who exercises social authority derived from both tradition and postcolonial masculinist privilege. His pronouncement "I am the head of this house, and what I say goes*"* (p. 10) echoes the colonial model of patriarchal control that placed African men as heads of localized hierarchies following imperial rule. His power is not only personal but emblematic of the continuities between colonial structures of control and indigenous gender hierarchies, which situate women within narrowly defined domestic roles.

Yet, the subjectivity of the wive sparticularly Bolanle, complicates this hegemonic vision. Bolanle represents the modern African woman: educated, self-aware, and internally conflicted. Her alienation- "I feel like an outsider, and it hurts" (p. 45) signals her estrangement from the cultural norms she is expected to embody. This feeling of unbelonging captures postcolonial dislocation, where a character's sense of self is at odds with traditional structures. Bolanle's subjectivity is shaped by both her education and trauma, making her a liminal figure in the household- neither fully traditional nor entirely modern, but somewhere in between.

Snail-Sense Feminism and Strategic Female Agency

In the novel, Snail-Sense Feminism, which advocates for subtle, incremental resistance, emerges as a defining strategy through which the wives navigate patriarchy. This framework aligns with the wives' cautious and often covert strategies for survival, particularly in their concealment of critical truths from Baba Segi, such as the biological paternity of their children. Iya Segi's actions, while seemingly manipulative, are rooted in a tactical femininity that protects her autonomy within restrictive confines.

The symbolism of the snail, *"*slow but it never gives up" (p. 34), captures the rhythm of feminist resistance in the novel: non-confrontational, embedded in the everyday, yet ultimately subversive. As Bolanle observes, "We inch our way forward, quietly changing the world around us" (p. 89), she articulates a theory of transformation that does not rely on dramatic upheaval but on the accumulated force of small acts of defiance. This resistance, though understated, is radical in its own right—it unsettles gender hierarchies while maintaining cultural intelligibility.

Voice, Education, and Reclaiming Feminist Agency

Bolanle's decision to become a lawyer as captured in his words: "I want to use my knowledge to change the way women are treated" (p. 22) reflects her belief in institutional reform as a pathway to justice. Her feminist agency is marked by voice reclamation, particularly when she declares: "I will not be silenced. I have a voice, and I intend to use it" (p. 113). In asserting the right to speak and be heard, Bolanle embodies what postcolonial feminist theorists have framed as epistemic agency, the right to knowledge production and narrative authorship (Mohanty, 2003).

Her defiance stands in contrast to her co-wives' more traditional adaptations. Yet, Shoneyin does not elevate one mode of resistance over the other. Rather, the novel illustrates how multiple feminist strategies such as radical and incremental coexist within the broader context of African women's lived experiences. Feminist agency, in this text, is plural and culturally specific.

Postcolonial Femininity, Religion, and Cultural Reinscription

The novel also interrogates the cultural inscriptions of femininity. Baba Segi's assertion "A man is respected based on the number of wives he has" (p. 15) links masculinity to polygamy and control, a value derived from both traditional Yoruba culture and colonial legacies of property and productivity. Meanwhile, female respectability is tethered to domesticity, as Iya Segi notes: *"*A good woman is one who knows her place, supports her husband, and keeps the home" (p. 59).

Religious fatalism is challenged by Bolanle's question: "Our faith teaches us to accept our fate, but I want to challenge the notion that suffering is part of being a woman" (p. 72). This critical moment underscores the ideological work religion does in legitimating gendered suffering and the need for reinterpretation of spiritual narratives to empower rather than suppress women. Feminist agency here requires decolonizing theology alongside deconstructing gender norms.

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Solidarity and the Reconstitution of the Feminine Self

The wives' relationships, initially shaped by jealousy and suspicion, evolve into a communal feminist praxis. As Iya Segi affirms, *"*We must lift each other up if we want to be strong... together we can fight against the unfairness of our situation" (p. 90). This moment represents a shift from fragmented subjectivities to collective consciousness, crucial for dismantling systems of patriarchal dominance. In asserting their worth beyond marriage, Iya Segi proclaims, "We are not just wives; we are women with dreams, desires, and the right to live our lives fully" (p. 130). This self-definition disrupts the gendered economy of value that had previously confined them.

Shoneyin thus crafts a nuanced depiction of African feminist resistance, rooted in cultural familiarity yet forward-looking in its challenges to systemic inequalities. The wives' gradual assertion of autonomy within the symbolic and literal space of the polygamous home illustrates how postcolonial subjects reimagine the self, community, and gender roles—not through rupture alone, but through rearticulation.

Postcolonial Subjectivity and Feminist Agency in *Becoming Abigail*

In *Becoming Abigail*, Chris Abani constructs a harrowing yet intimate portrait of a young Nigerian girl whose body and identity become sites of postcolonial and patriarchal violence. Through Abigail's fragmented narrative, the novel illustrates the profound psychological effects of gendered exploitation, colonial displacement, and familial erasure. This analysis draws upon Snail-Sense Feminism as articulated by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Radical Feminist theory to unpack the strategies of resistance and subject formation within a postcolonial context.

Whereas Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense Feminism advocates for patient, culturally embedded resistance through resilience, adaptability, and tact (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012), Radical Feminism posits that male dominance is foundational to all structures of power and must be confronted through systemic upheaval (Firestone, 1970; Millett, 1977). Abigail's trajectory encompasses both frameworks: her moments of endurance and internal survival align with the strategic subtlety of snail-sense resistance, while her final act of tragic defiance invokes the despairing intensity of radical feminist critique.

Postcolonial Identity and Fragmented Selfhood

Abigail's struggle is situated at the intersection of postcolonial identity formation and patriarchal control. From the onset, she is haunted by the legacy of her deceased mother and burdened by her father's projection of this absence onto her: "She was always more like her mother's shadow than herself" (p. 12). This spectral metaphor underscores a central motif in postcolonial feminist theory, the construction of female subjectivity through absence, loss, and patriarchal inscription.

Her displacement to London a remnant of British colonial ties intensifies her alienation. Abigail's attempt to define herself is thwarted by an environment that renders her voiceless, both as an immigrant and as a girl. Her admission, *"*I am not who they say I am, but I don't know who I am either" (p. 67) encapsulates the crisis of identity formation within a world that objectifies and categorizes her without her consent. As Spivak (1988**)** argues in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Postcolonial female subjects are often silenced not only by colonial systems but also by gendered hierarchies that render their voices unintelligible. Abigail embodies this silencing.

Structures of Patriarchal Exploitation

Abani's novel foregrounds the violence of patriarchal institutions through both familial and state structures. Her father's treatment, "He spoke of her as though she was a thing to be shaped, not a girl with her own desires*"* (p. 12) reveals a cultural investment in controlling female identity, aligning with Radical Feminist critiques of the family as a primary site of female oppression (Dworkin, 1981).

Abigail's subsequent exploitation by Uche, who poses as her protector, underscores the failure of postcolonial male guardianship. *"*His hands lingered too long... his words always carried threats unspoken" (p. 45) points to a violence that is normalized through silence and coercion, reaffirming MacKinnon'**s** (1987) view that male power is often embedded in everyday interactions under the guise of care or protection. Silence, here, becomes both a mechanism of patriarchal control and, paradoxically, a strategy of resistance.

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Feminist Resistance: Endurance, Memory, and Self-Assertion

Abigail's resistance, though not overt, is multifaceted. Like the snail in Ezeigbo's metaphor, she persists through unbearable conditions using inner strength and detachment: *"*She held her breath... willing her body to be still" (p. 38). This withdrawal from pain mirrors the strategy of strategic silence in Snail-Sense Feminism, where survival is prioritized through internal resilience rather than direct confrontation.

Memory functions as another mode of agency. Abigail clings to the presence of her deceased mother, "She traced the letters of her mother's name..." (p. 27*)*, invoking matrilineal legacy as a source of spiritual and emotional empowerment. In a postcolonial context, this memory functions as both resistance to erasure and an act of reclamation, evoking hooks' (1984) call for the recovery of maternal voices in feminist discourse.

Refusing to recount her trauma to authorities, "She would not give them the words they wanted" (p. 53) Abigail exerts epistemic control over her narrative. This refusal is not passivity but a form of feminist resistance: a refusal to be commodified or pathologized. Her decision to remain silent resonates with Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) call for "negotiated feminism," where speaking and silence are both strategic acts in women's agency.

Trauma, Autonomy, and the Politics of Despair

Abigail's entire trajectory is shaped by trauma: the death of her mother, paternal neglect, and sexual abuse converge to produce a deeply wounded subjectivity. Her emotional detachment as noted in the words, "She floated outside herself, watching, feeling nothing" (p. 38) is not mere resignation but a coping strategy that allows her to retain a fragment of self.

Her final act, "For the first time, she felt free" (p. 62), though tragic, is the culmination of her quest for autonomy in a world that has denied her agency. In Radical Feminist terms, this act may be interpreted as the ultimate rejection of male control over the female body, echoing Firestone's (1970) contention that liberation demands control over reproduction, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. Yet this moment also critiques the failure of the state and society to provide alternative routes for empowerment. Abigail's death is not just a personal tragedy but a political indictment of the systems that failed her: the family, the state, and social institutions.

DISCUSSION

This discussion draws on the frameworks of Snail-Sense Feminism and Radical Feminism to explore how Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) portray the lives of women in postcolonial African societies. Both writers use fiction to open conversations about how women navigate systems of power that seek to silence or define them. Their female characters struggle, adapt, and sometimes resist in ways that reveal the complexity of womanhood in contemporary African narratives.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin uses the domestic setting of a polygamous household to examine how women respond to patriarchy with intelligence, patience, and quiet defiance. Each wife—Bolanle, Iya Segi, Iya Femi, and Iya Tope—represents a different strategy of survival within the same oppressive structure. Bolanle, the youngest and most educated wife, enters the family seeking emotional fulfilment but soon encounters jealousy and shame because she cannot conceive. Her eventual decision to leave is not a defeat; it is an act of reclaiming dignity and autonomy.

Shoneyin's portrayal echoes Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's (2012) idea of Snail-Sense Feminism, which suggests that African women often resist oppression not through open confrontation but through subtle negotiation. Adimora-Ezeigbo likens such women to the snail that moves carefully over thorns, avoiding harm while still making progress. Bolanle's quiet withdrawal, and the other wives' clever manipulations of their husband's ignorance, embody this philosophy. They use the limited tools available to them to secure a measure of independence and safety. In doing so, Shoneyin highlights an African feminist vision that values patience, collaboration, and wisdom as forms of power.

Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, on the other hand, paints a much darker picture of womanhood. Abigail's story is shaped by loss, loneliness, and exploitation. After losing her mother and being neglected by her father, she is trafficked to Britain,

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where her life spirals into despair. Abani's fragmented narrative mirrors Abigail's shattered identity, showing how trauma disrupts both self and story. Her eventual disappearance is not simply tragic, it becomes a symbolic rejection of a world that refuses to acknowledge her humanity.

This act of refusal aligns with the principles of Radical Feminism, as articulated by Kate Millett (1970) and Shulamith Firestone (1970), which call for dismantling the entire patriarchal system rather than negotiating within it. Abigail's story exposes the limits of endurance in a society where female bodies are commodified and silenced. As Maria Rhode (2011) notes, Abani's work "turns trauma into a language of resistance," where the protagonist's final act such as self-erasure becomes a grim form of liberation.

Placed side by side, Shoneyin and Abani offer two contrasting yet complementary visions of female resistance. Shoneyin's women find power through negotiation and solidarity within a patriarchal world, while Abani's Abigail embodies the consequences of a world that offers no space for healing or belonging. Together, these texts remind us, as bell hooks (1984) argues, that "there is no single path to feminist consciousness." Resistance, in African women's stories, is not always loud or visible—it may appear in silence, endurance, or even disappearance.

Ultimately, both novels show that African feminism is not a monolith. It adapts to cultural, psychological, and historical contexts, allowing each woman to define her own way of surviving and speaking against oppression. Whether through the quiet patience of Bolanle or the radical despair of Abigail, these writers illuminate the resilience of women who, even in pain, continue to search for selfhood and freedom.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* offer profound explorations of postcolonial subjectivity and feminist agency within Nigerian socio-cultural and patriarchal contexts. Both novels illuminate the complexities of female identity formation under intersecting pressures of colonial legacies, indigenous patriarchy, and gendered violence. Shoneyin's work foregrounds the nuanced strategies of resistance embodied in Snail-Sense Feminism, where women employ subtle, incremental acts of defiance to negotiate power within domestic patriarchy, while simultaneously reclaiming voice and agency through education and solidarity. This pluralistic approach to feminist agency challenges monolithic conceptions of resistance by highlighting culturally specific and contextually embedded forms of empowerment.

Abani's narrative presents a more harrowing depiction of the fragmentation of postcolonial female subjectivity, emphasizing the psychological and physical toll of patriarchal exploitation and displacement. Abigail's story exemplifies the dual frameworks of endurance and radical defiance, revealing how trauma shapes feminist resistance and the quest for autonomy. Her ultimate act of self-assertion, though tragic, serves as a powerful critique of systemic failures in protecting and empowering women.

Together, these texts underscore the necessity of recognizing multiple modalities of feminist agency—ranging from covert survival tactics to overt confrontation—within postcolonial African contexts. They advocate for a rearticulation of femininity, community, and spirituality that decolonizes traditional norms and reclaims epistemic authority. These novels contribute to broader postcolonial feminist discourse by illustrating how African women actively reimagine their identities and resist patriarchal domination not only through rupture but through resilient, culturally grounded transformation

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