

ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLYGAMY IN SELECT AFRICAN FICTION

by

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I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University's policies and rules applicable to postgraduate research, and I certify that I have, to the best of my knowledge and belief, complied with their requirements.

I further certify that this dissertation is original, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university, or for publication anywhere except as follows:

In 2008 I (with the co-authorship of my supervisor, Prof Catherine Addison) published an article in *Current Writing* 20 [2008]: 89-104) that included some of the findings of my MA research. With the permission of the editor-in-chief of *Current Writing*, Prof Michael Chapman, some parts of that article reappear in this dissertation.

I declare that this research dissertation is, save for the supervisory guidance received, the product of my own work and effort. I have, to the best of my knowledge and belief, complied with the University's Plagiarism Policy and acknowledged all sources of information in line with normal academic conventions.

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ABSTRACT

Polygamy is widely practised in African communities. The African social-realist novel, especially when it is woman-authored, shows female characters as having to play docile, subservient roles and accept demeaning positions in polygamous marriages. Although it has been claimed that traditional African marriage creates a satisfactory situation for women, mainly by means of the security it offers and the bonds that it forges between co-wives, the narrators of African realist novels almost always expose only evils associated with polygamy. In most of the texts, co-wives experience conflict with one another, not bonds. Men are portrayed as egocentric beings that greedily satisfy their sexual impulses at the expense of women. Encouraged by their families, they inflict irreparable emotional damage not only on their accumulated wives but often also on their offspring. While blinded by their desires, these men engender many unplanned children for whom they usually take little fatherly responsibility. Consequently, children too are objects of pity in many of the books. This dissertation, by means of close analysis of select African narratives, reveals that, despite all the struggles for liberation and democracy, values highly regarded in modern societies, polygamy is a prevailing sign of male dominance in African communities today. The dissertation shows that even such male-authored novels as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Onuora Nzekwu's High Life For Lizards fail to recommend a polygamous life to women, while Mariama *Bâ*'s So Long a Letter and Scarlet Song, Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood and Kehinde, Es'kia Mphahlele's Chirundu, Lazarus Miti's The Prodigal Husband, Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes, Sue Nyathi's The Polygamist, Sembene Ousmane's Xala, Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, Rebecca HourwichReyher's Zulu Woman, Miriam KWere's The Eighth Wife, T.M. Aluko's One Man One Wife and Aminata Sow Fall's The Beggars' Strike all use polygamy to highlight the incongruence between the ideals of democracy and the facts of life as experienced by African women. These texts reflect real social problems. They cast light on the inequalities that prevail in polygamous relationships and imply that the principle of equality cannot be achieved as long as polygamy exists.

Keywords: polygamy, African fiction, African gender studies

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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, Africa as a continent has suffered various types of oppression in the physical, social, cultural and even religious spheres. These types of oppression have come from both outside and within Africa in the forms of colonialism, capitalism, apartheid, tribalism, sexism and others. No matter where the oppression has come from, it has affected African women directly and indirectly.

As a single entity, Africa has experienced challenges that are common throughout, and has dealt with these in similar ways; hence one can find a social problem that reappears throughout the continent, though manifested in different ways in the diverse African cultures, norms and customs. A salient example is the perception of women in African societies and the effect of this perception on women's roles and significance within the smaller groupings of family and community. African culture, in all its diversities, has placed the male gender above that of women and all over Africa this has been propagated through the medium of culture and tradition. This perception of women in the African mind is one that has been shaped not only by internal factors of Africa, but also by external factors such as colonialism. As a result, African women have been reduced by culture and tradition to objects or secondary human beings, inferior to the male gender and superior only to animals.

In a useful essay, Carol Boyce Davies demonstrates the perspectives of many African women on both African and colonial issues (1986:1-17). She shows that the external influences of colonialism have been a struggle to eliminate throughout the years, but

that these have been much easier to contend with than the internal factors. She quotes Annabella Rodrigues, 'who participated in the FRELIMO struggle for Mozambican liberation' (Davies 1986:8) and who identifies polygamy as one of the most difficult traditions to contend with and amongst the most oppressive to women. Rodrigues claims that 'the colonial, bourgeois influences' are easier to 'eliminate [than] generations of tradition from within our own society' (Davies 1986: 8). Davies also cites Gwendolyn Konie, a woman commentator from Zambia, who claims that the women's struggle is even more difficult than the obvious struggles for national liberation where the enemy is easily recognised:

The struggle for equal rights between the sexes is going to prove even more difficult than that of de-colonization because in essence it is a struggle between husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother. (Konie 1984:744. Also quoted in Davies 1986:8)

Polygamy clearly reveals the truth of this statement as it operates within the family, which is normally the most influential social structure on a woman's life. Although many African cultures are losing their influence due to the encroachment of Western civilisation, polygamy still survives. Some cultures practise it openly and even Westernized communities which claim to have done away with it still practise it discreetly.

In Africa, the novel, a Western literary genre, has been widely adopted in a social-realist form. In writing their novels, many authors have attempted to reflect the

cruelty and injustices that result from the misuse and imbalance of power in polygamous relationships. They show that much as polygamy has been traditionally accepted and tolerated, women do not condone it. This is demonstrated especially in women-authored texts, in which polygamy is normally portrayed very negatively. By its nature, polygamy promotes multiple sexual partners. In Sue Nyathi's recent novel The Polygamist (2012) Jonasi, the husband of Joyce and Matipa, has Essie, his childhood love, as his mistress. Nevertheless, having these women in his life does not prevent him from sleeping with other women:

There were times when Matipa could not find Jonasi and would call Joyce and even she would not know where he was. It was obvious he was screwing around on both of us. He was a greedy, selfish prick and we would never be able to satiate his desires. (Nyathi 2012:124)

As this novel shows, such laxity of sexual conduct makes it difficult to control sexually transmitted diseases and promotes the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The culture of polygamy also helps to maintain a very high fertility rate, which has contributed to the explosive population growth in Sub-Saharan countries.

African novelists express a variety of contrasting viewpoints on polygamy, but they combine to show how women have been disadvantaged by tradition, culture, history and a male-dominated world. This dissertation will examine the attitudes of various types of characters towards polygamy in a number of African narratives.

I am undertaking this study because I am personally opposed to the misuse and imbalance of power that polygamy represents. While I do agree that some change has been observed, as African women gradually gain a voice in our postcolonial societies and even hold stately positions of power, I still believe that, as long as polygamy exists, no woman can enjoy complete freedom, equity and democracy.

What the African novel reveals about the nature of polygamy is that it requires women to seek a mechanism of survival as they compete for significance, acknowledgement, recognition, resources, attention and approval from their husbands. During the process, they are emotionally imprisoned, since they seek approval outside of themselves and not within themselves. They esteem themselves only through the eyes of their husbands, in-laws, children and the community at large. In view of this emotional struggle, men take advantage of the situation and manipulate women to a level of suppression or abuse that can be emotional or physical. Polygamy is thus revealed by many authors as a continual source of suffering and oppression to the women who are involved in it.

In the texts to be discussed, both male and female writers address this issue of polygamy in its traditional or its modern form. Most of them portray women as prisoners in these marriages. Some of the women characters are aware of their miserable state, but most conform and act as willing collaborators in their own oppression because they have been brought up and culturally groomed to occupy a role submissive to their husbands.

Nevertheless, Obioma Nnaemeka strongly argues against the belief that women in polygamous marriages are objects of pity. She asserts:

African women who are in polygamous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims. Many of these women are intelligent, highly educated, successful, independent women who choose polygamous marriage as what is good for them. (Nnaemeka 1997:167)

None of the women characters in the novels to be discussed are 'morons' but many of them clearly become 'victims'. Being 'intelligent' and 'educated' does not normally protect them from the 'exploit[ation]' that their stories unfold. In the novels, the women 'who choose polygamous marriage' are only some junior wives who purposely involve themselves in these relationships at the expense of the joy and security of senior wives, who never seem to choose 'polygamous marriage as what is good for them'. On the contrary, polygamy is forced upon them, often secretly, and they suffer severely when they find it out. Even junior wives can be mistaken as to the advantages that polygamous relationships will bring them. Discussions of polygamy which focus on traditional values or on the interface between colonialism and patriarchy, as Nnaemeka does, often ignore the actual experiences of people. The realist African novel focuses in detail on people's experiences and thus uncovers the emotional dynamics of typically real situations.

An example of a junior wife whose advantage in the polygamous marriage is not sustained is Oumi N'Doye, a character in Ousmane Sembene's Xala (1976), who is furious when El Hadji, the husband, decides to marry N'Gone as his third wife. She regards N'Gone as a rival and would like to see Adja Awa Astou, the senior wife, join forces with her to rebel against this third marriage. Adja Awa Astou has to remind her that:

'It is Yay Bineta who is your rival. I have never entered the fray. I am incapable of fighting or rivalry. You know that yourself. When you were a young bride you never knew I existed. During the fifteen or so years you have been the second wife that man, the same man, has left me every three days to spend three nights with you, going from your bedroom to mine. Have you ever thought about it?'

'No' said Oumi N'Doye. (Sembéne 1976:21)

Like most junior wives on the verge of acquiring seniority, the bitterness of their own medicine is unbearable. Junior wives thus seem to possess the advantage of choosing to be in polygamous relationships, while senior wives must recognise the powerlessness of their position.

Nnaemeka's viewpoint on women in polygamous marriages fails to take into account the fact that many wives are reluctant to challenge their husbands, either because

these wives are trapped, especially by love for their children, who are regarded as the husband's property, or because they depend on their husbands financially.

Moreover we, as readers of African fiction, usually sympathise with the wives because the author's exploration of their emotional traumas enables us to identify with their suffering. The women characters' willingness and determination does not exempt them from their oppression under man's authority. Since their priority is to gain recognition and first preference from their husbands, and this can only be achieved through child-bearing, they often give birth to too many children who struggle through life, supported only by their mothers. The girls are the most disadvantaged. Their birth is despised and later they are simply raised and trained in preparation for their future husbands whose bride price will be a source of family income. Thus, the dilemma of wives in polygamous marriages is shown to have implications for the next generation.

In these novels, men are often portrayed as egocentric beings that greedily satisfy their sexual impulses at the expense of women. Encouraged by their families, they inflict serious emotional damage that not only affects their wives but also impacts negatively on their offspring. While blinded by their desires, these men engender many unplanned children for whom they seldom take full fatherly responsibility; this is another reason why children are also often objects of pity in these books.

In most of these novels it is the senior wives who attract most sympathy. They usually experience a shock when their husbands marry again. They feel devalued and consider

the addition of new wives to the marriage as a way of reducing their dignity, making them feel like unfortunate by-products of an inexorable process that favours men. As senior wives they are admonished and advised to live up to the socially accepted standards of their status. They are made to believe that they hold enviable positions worth any woman's while to fight for. When a husband decides to be polygamous, a senior wife is typically reminded of the position she holds and of how important it is for her to suppress her emotions in order to maintain her dignity and uphold her family's good name. A woman who openly displays emotions of jealousy or any form of defiance is made to believe that she is disgracing her status and her family.

Fiction presents junior wives as characters who in most cases feel that they hold advantageous positions as new occupants of the husband's heart. They often discreetly enjoy the challenging threat they impose on the vulnerable senior wife. Cunningly they try to monopolize the husband's affections. But their efforts are often futile and the husband typically marries again, putting them in the same position as senior wives. With much effort they may try to create a relationship of sisterhood among wives sharing a husband. But this attempt hardly ever works since each wife fights in her own way to get the husband's favour. Thus, women often set impossible standards for themselves and make life intolerable for one another.

Many of these novelists reveal that women in polygamous marriages undergo extremely negative emotional experiences at the hands of their in-laws. In many instances, in-laws are portrayed as opportunists who enjoy taking the place of honour and in some instances they are very spiteful. Women may hold a variety of family

positions in their lives but it appears as if the most accursed position is that of a wife in relation to the husband's family (Egejuru 1997:16). This position automatically evokes enmity in mothers-in-law, brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law. In many African families the wife is regarded as an intruder and family members often gang up on her, making her feel insecure.

One might expect women to be more understanding and sympathetic and to actually join forces with one another against this male-dominated marriage institution. Unfortunately, in many fictional works as in reality, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law readily inflict polygamy on younger women, the wives.

In these novels, children also are seen to suffer ill effects from being part of polygamous families. They often sympathise with their mothers, but they are usually not allowed to express their views on this issue. They are expected to bow down to tradition and to be content, since they have a home and an extended family. However, They often suffer psychologically sometimes physically as well. These emotional dynamics are given voice by the novelists.

Of course, polygamy on its own is not solely responsible for the inequality of status between men and women. As the South African Law Commission's Discussion Paper on Customary Marriages of 1997 concludes, 'Polygamy alone is not the cause of female subordination nor is it directly responsible for abuses suffered by women'. This Discussion Paper, which has been partly responsible for the retention of polygamy as a legal form of customary marriage in South Africa, points out that:

in a particular world, where there is no economic, social or political equality between men and women, it is the institution of marriage itself (whether monogamous or polygamous) which disadvantages women.

(South Africa 1997:85)

Of course this is true, because a man may rule any type of household and the basic tenor of a society will be evident even in its smallest building block, the family. However, the fact that women, as recorded in this same document, overwhelmingly reject the African form of polygamy – polygyny – is a sign that all forms of marriage are not equal. Oppression of women is certainly possible within monogamy – and even in polyandry – but polygyny by its very structure accords ‘men ... a right which women lack’ and it persists as ‘one factor contributing to the patriarchal nature of a society’(South Africa 1997: 85-88).

In my dissertation, chapter one will examine senior wives’ position and viewpoints on polygamy, chapter two will focus on junior wives, chapter three will investigate in-laws and chapter four will address the effects of polygamy on children. I will explore these aspects of polygamy by means of detailed discussion and analysis of Lazarus Miti’s The Prodigal Husband (1999), Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood (1979) and Kehinde (1994), Ama Ata Aidoo’s Changes (1991), Es’kia Mphahlele’s Chirundu (1979), Rebecca Hourwich Reyher’s Zulu Woman (1992), Mariama Bâ’s Scarlet Song(1981)and So Long a Letter (1989),Ousmane Sembène’s Xala(1976),Sue Nyathi’s The Polygamist(2012) and Lola Shoneyin’s The Secret

Lives of Baba Segi's Wives(2010). I shall also make some use of Miriam K. Were's The Eighth Wife (1972), T. M. Aluko's One Man One Wife (1959) and Aminata Sow Fall's The Beggars' Strike (1979). In all of these narratives, women characters take a much more negative attitude towards polygamy than men. It is only in very few male-authored novels, for example, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1986) and Onuora Nzekwu's High Life for Lizards (1965), that polygamous marriage is seen as in any way beneficial to women. These two novels will be discussed in chapter one, where I will show that the benefits of polygamy are very limited in both of them.

By my close analysis of different attitudes to polygamy as presented in these fictional texts, my research will foster understanding of the dynamics of gender inequality in Africa and, therefore, help to bring about social change. African fiction as relating to African communities shows real social problems. It casts light on the power struggles that exist in polygamous relationships, proving that the principle of equality cannot be achieved as long as polygamy exists. According to Michael Chapman:

despite the fact that the novel is a Western literary form it has become a significant vehicle for African writers because it provides a way of exploring the crucial interface between ordinary individuals and social issues they contend with. (Chapman 1996:307)

Thus, this dissertation, through the use of literary analysis, aims at demonstrating that polygamy is a stumbling block in the path of female emancipation and self-expression which cannot be defended in a democratic society.

CHAPTER 1

Senior Wives' Viewpoints On Polygamy

Modern societies regard democracy as a way of liberating individual self-expression. Freedom is claimed by all cultural groups and human rights are supposedly valued and observed in modern democratic countries. But, despite all the struggles for liberation, polygamy is a prevailing sign of male dominance in many African societies today and for personal or traditional reasons some women succumb to polygamy, thus perpetuating this inhuman practice.

In most African societies, recognition brought about by wealth and a sense of authority is the most valued characteristic of manhood. For most polygamous men, polygamy is not only regarded as a type of marriage but as a value system by which they can attain a superior level of recognition in their societies:

A real African man deserved more than one wife. It was a sign of manhood and a measure of wealth. (Miti 1999:7)

Such men who regard polygamy as means to elevate their status have the mindset of Musa, the main character in Lazarus Miti's The Prodigal Husband (1999). Musa has been promoted to a new position as foreman and his salary has been increased:

He considered his new wages – ten pounds. That was enough money. Surely, he could afford a second wife. One befitting a very important

farm foreman. Tisa was fine as the mother of his seven children. But a foreman's wife needed to be a little fresh. He needed a young wife – one who would be no different from Misisi, the wife of his white baas, except for the colour of her skin. (Miti 1999:7)

Musa regards women as assets which, when accumulated, determine a man's 'measure of wealth'. Though Musa decides to be polygamous in order to satisfy his ego, he tries to convince Tisa his wife that he is doing this for her benefit. He claims:

At your age you need a helping hand. After having given me seven children, you deserve a rest. When your co-wife is here, she will do most of the domestic work. That's what junior wives are for. (Miti 1999:8)

Musa here suggests that Tisa has been solely responsible for giving life to all the seven children. He has been 'given' the children by Tisa, who is now worn out by the task of creating the children. Since Musa has been uninvolved in the process, he remains younger and in better health than Tisa. In reality, Musa feels guilty of betraying the mother of his seven children and, in order to ease his guilty conscience, he resorts to deceit. Ironically, Tisa cannot age alone. If Tisa's bearing and raising seven children is reason enough for the need of 'a helping hand', then surely Tisa also needs to find Musa an assistant, since ageing affects both male and female. There is no logical rationale for Musa's requiring a wife who is 'a little more fresh'. However,

a pattern of acquiring new wives, using the excuse of relieving older wives, will be observed as this discussion unfolds.

In Mariama Bâ's Scarlet Song (1981), Yaye Khady has experienced difficulties with in-laws in her marriage. Fortunately for her, Djibril Gueye, her husband, has chosen to stick to a monogamous relationship but, nevertheless, she still feels threatened by Coumba, Djibril's sister, whom she fears might persuade Djibril to marry a second wife once Yaye Khady becomes old. Coumba has actually stated that Yaye Khady is tired: 'she is fading away, for when youth marries age there is an exchange of blood to the benefit of age' (Bâ 1981:55). She claims that Djibril is strong while Yaye Khady, even though she is younger, 'is withering, all the more so as she still has the responsibility of all domestic chores in spite of her age' (Bâ 1981:55).

Once again as in Musa's case, the issue of domestic chores is used as an excuse to prompt the husband (Djibril in this case) into finding himself a second wife. Again the concern is not raised by the affected senior wife, but emanates either from the husband or the in-laws, who see an opportunity to manipulate the situation for their own benefit. The fact that Djibril is not only older than Yaye Khady but is also physically handicapped does not seem to bother Coumba or encourage her to consider finding her brother a suitable younger male assistant to care for Yaye Khady in her old age. Yaye Khady is angered by Coumba's proposal and the idea of Djibril taking a second wife.

Unlike Djibril, who sticks to a monogamous relationship despite his sister's arguments, Musa in The Prodigal Husband is blinded by his selfish desires; he deliberately forgets the value of Tisa. Tisa's loyalty is betrayed, since she stood by her husband through the trying times of his life:

She recalled the early days of their marriage. Her husband then wore a tattered pair of shorts. On top, he occasionally donned an equally ageing vest, the colour of which was no longer distinguishable. His feet were rough and cracked from walking bare foot. Those were the days when they could only afford one meal a day. Musa was then a mere herdboys. (Miti 1999:8)

After journeying together with her through life's hardships, Musa now regards Tisa as too old and unworthy of his love since he has been promoted to foreman, earning a better wage. He considers the position he now holds, and disregards the question of how a new wife will negatively affect Tisa (emotionally or otherwise). Tisa fears rejection and abandonment, common fears among senior wives in polygamous marriages. Over and above her Christian beliefs, Tisa refuses to condone Musa's polygamous desires:

Even if she were not a Christian, she would not allow another woman to share her husband with her. (Miti 1999:8)

Before the arrival of the new wife, there is discord in the marriage. Tisa is troubled by the idea of a co-wife; she tosses sleeplessly in bed. She debates the idea of divorcing Musa or accepting living with him and his new wife. Her peace has been disturbed. (Miti 1991:9)

Tisa's reaction is typical of most senior wives when a junior wife is introduced. Since Musa has been converted to Christianity, Tisa considers it necessary to seek the Bible's guidance on the issue of polygamy. She considers consulting the pastor, hoping that Musa will listen. Musa deliberately remains adamant; he enjoys his position of power:

He was going to marry Rhoda whether the church agreed or not. He would tell the pastor of his intentions, if the pastor objected Musa would ignore him. He would make his proposal to Rhoda irrespective of what Tisa thought. (Miti 1999:13)

Despite Tisa's attempts to discourage Musa, she discovers, sadly, that the Bible does not openly condemn or condone polygamy. Musa has studied the Bible to equip himself with adequate examples of respected polygamous religious leaders from the Old Testament:

Why did the Church prohibit polygamy when some great Biblical figures were polygamists? According to the Old Testament, Abraham was a polygamist. And so were Moses and David. If these men who

were in direct contact with the Lord had more than one wife, why was the Church prohibiting simpler men of today from marrying as many women as they could afford? (Miti 1999:13)

Musa has read the scriptures only in order to equip himself with sufficient defensive proof to back up his intentions. He has not considered how the Biblical wives and children were affected by these polygamous marriages. Musa may be correct that Abraham was a polygamist, but his motive behind his polygamous desire is very different from Abraham's. Sarah, Abraham's wife was barren (Genesis 11:30). Since God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of nations, Sarah's barrenness pushed her to voluntarily offer Hagar, her maidservant, to bear children as Abraham's second wife. When Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress (Sarah) was despised in her eyes (Genesis 16:4). Jacob, another polygamous Patriarch, was married to the biological sisters Rachel and Leah. This marriage was dominated by deceit, trickery, jealousy and favouritism. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, but unfortunately Rachel was, in the early years of her marriage, barren. A war of emotions waged between the two sisters and this resulted in rivalry and a competition that led to them giving their maidservants to Jacob to bear sons for them (Genesis 29-30).

Blinded by love, bitterness and jealousy, women may engage in emotional warfare like this in which triumph is measured by the husband's recognition and favouritism. The various sub-units within polygamous marriages are invariably involved in such power struggles. Children, planned or unplanned, are used as emotional weapons to

injure other members of the family. Children are used either to draw the husband's attention towards the fruitful wife or to constantly spite the infertile wife. The names Leah gave to her sons were either an outcry for Jacob's attention or a message of victory over the more loved yet barren Rachel (Genesis 29: 32, 34).

Thus, with regard to the Biblical polygamists, Musa has no substantial reason to opt for a polygamous marriage. Unlike Sarah and Rachel who were at first barren, Tisa has seven children. Musa wants to satisfy his greed and selfish ego:

He wanted Rhoda to be his and nobody else's. He had to do something to get her for himself. The only way he would acquire Rhoda and still retain his respect was by marrying her. (Miti 1999:13)

Musa easily persuades Rhoda to marry him, since her father is a polygamist and her 'entire family were Christians whose sect permitted polygamy' (1999:31). Tisa's futile attempts to stop the marriage are further discouraged by her own father Lwando who is infuriated by the idea that Tisa should refuse to allow Musa to marry a second wife. He inquires:

Since when did women begin to control their husbands? Your husband is free to marry another woman in the same way that he was free to marry you. So mother of Isaki, let your husband marry whomever he chooses. Once he has married, learn to live well with your co-wife. She

will be your companion and helper. She is not meant to be your enemy.

(Miti 1999:51)

Tisa, who might have thought her father, a monogamist, would support her, is now on her own. For ages women have been silenced by man-made customs that dominate African communities in favour of men. Musa gains all the favour; he leaves Tisa in Walala, in Northern Rhodesia (modern Zambia) with a promise that he will send her money, a promise he never fulfils. Musa believes in himself and in the immutability of tradition; he fails his marriage. When he marries Rhoda, he totally forgets and abandons Tisa and her children. Ironically, Tisa never enjoys the relief from domestic work promised by Musa; she struggles single-handedly, raising all her children in a strange place under the care of Shuzi, a spiteful and selfish brother-in-law.

One observes varying responses from senior wives when junior wives are introduced into marital relationships. In Es'kia Mphahlele's Chirundu (1979), Tirenje the first wife of Chimba cannot tolerate the idea of her husband being in a relationship with another woman. When Chimba engages in politics, he decides to live in a city and, as Musa does with Tisa in the Prodigal Husband, he leaves Tirenje with a promise that he will go forth and prepare a house before returning to fetch her and the children, a promise he never fulfils. After settling in the city he falls in love with Monde and before long marries her without Tirenje's consent or knowledge.

He fears telling Tirenje about this commitment since he knows that Tirenje has clearly stated her stand against a polygamous relationship. Like most wives, Tirenje believes

that she is the sole wife with all the skills to satisfy a man; as the sole wife she knows that she can 'care for, feed, clothe, love and bear children for her husband' (1979:45).

Unfortunately, Chimba's polygamous desire convinces him that he will feel 'prosperous when loved by two women' (1979:44). It will boost his ego and self-worth to see the women compete for him since he believes that 'a husband has to be fought for' (1979:58). To his surprise Tirenje has a different viewpoint. She chooses to use a court of law and accuses Chimba of bigamy. (Being a Bemba, Chimba belongs to a traditionally monogamous people who cannot legally marry more than one wife). She hopes to gain an advantage by humbling Chimba:

She thought the case would bring Chimba down from the top, make him know her again as the only woman for him. She believed Chimba could not see her as a better woman as long as he sat so high in government. (Mphahlele 1979:90)

But Chimba is very stubborn; he wants to retain both his wives. He loves Tirenje and he feels that Monde is a woman who measures up to his social status (1979:103). Tirenje is nevertheless unwilling to comply; she would rather divorce Chimba than remain in a polygamous relationship. Like Aissatou in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter, a character to be discussed later, she writes a letter to her husband in which she clearly states her disapproval of having a co-wife. The letter emotionally drains Chimba, he claims:

That letter felt like a heavy lump of rock on my hands. I found myself trembling at the fingers. Her words pierced like sharp needles. Tirenje was a kind of home, the shelter a man comes to after wandering from the cattle post, part of the reason for being alive, as basic as food and clothing, more than just a habit, without implying that Monde is one of these instant indulgences. (Mphahlele 1979:64)

Confessing such love for Tirenje proves that Chimba, like other men in polygamous relationships, is a slave of his own passion. In his confused state Chimba's selfish nature nevertheless still surfaces. Even though he has deserted Tirenje for three consecutive years, he admits that he 'would not have enjoyed letting Tirenje keep a man during all those lonely days and nights' (1979:92). He adamantly insists that she is his wife. Tirenje is in fact so devastated that she is almost maddened by grief, jealousy and betrayal. After her futile attempts to cause Chimba to be tried and convicted for bigamy, she later burns down his house (1979:107, 154-5).

Aminata Sow Fall in her novel The Beggars' Strike (1979) depicts a similar situation of inequality and betrayal to those portrayed by Miti and Mphahlele. In this novel we meet a married couple, Mour and Lolli. On the day they get married everybody emphasizes the importance of Mour's happiness in the marriage. But all the guests have the following advice for Lolli:

Obey your husband; make his happiness your main concern. If you carry out all his wishes you will be happy here on earth and in the life

hereafter. If you don't you must expect curses from heaven and the shame of giving birth to children who will turn out failures. (Fall 1979:27)

Such advice is meant to convince Lolli that a woman's happiness is greatly dependent on and influenced by her husband's happiness. Lolli remains loyal to the marriage. During the next twenty-four years she works her 'fingers to the bone' (1979:31) to uplift the status of her husband. She sacrifices all the money that her father and brother gave for her dowry paying 'marabouts'(traditional healers)to unlock the door to better times for Mour. She sells her 'boubous'(traditional attire),leaving herself only one boubou which she wears

month in month out. One solitary boubou that in the end couldn't be distinguished from her skin, so that people didn't say, 'That woman there, that's Lolli Badiane', but 'that boubou there, that's Lolli Badiane'.(Fall 1979: 32)

Despite all the sacrifices, hardships and difficulties Mour is ungrateful and disloyal:

Mour would not come home till nearly dawn and would disappear for the whole week-end without ever giving his wife any explanations. (Fall 1979:27)

Lolli is deeply upset, especially when she is pregnant. On two occasions she has to wake the neighbours to get them to take her to the nursing home when her babies are due. When she complains to her parents, they remonstrate with her. She is not expected to grumble but should understand that her husband is free; he is not an object that belongs to her. She has to respect, obey, submit and be patient in order to be a worthy wife. Lolli remains a silent observer and throughout she allows her unhappiness to 'sit heavily on her heart' (1979:27). Time and love invested in the home are only trifles quickly forgotten. Lolli is more than shocked one night when Mour wakes her up in the middle of the night to deliver a message which he (Mour) believes can best be delivered by him to Lolli:

Since you've got to be told, and I want to be the one to tell you myself out of respect and out of love for you, well you see... I'm being given a new wife tomorrow. (Fall 1979:28)

Lolli feels 'an icy shiver runs through her whole body' (1979:28). She feels betrayed and loses all control of herself. Such are the effects of polygamy. Nevertheless, Lolli is prepared to remain in this polygamous relationship hoping that one day, with the assistance of marabouts, she might be able to get 'her husband back for herself alone' (1979:34), since divorcing him might make her responsible for her father's death (1979:33). The threat of killing one Patriarch keeps her a slave to another one (a sort of rude conspiracy). Polygamy has a way of granting men the right to have as many partners as they deem befitting to the lifestyle of their choice.

This male freedom to enjoy multiple partners in a relationship is further demonstrated by Solomon ka Dinuzulu in Rebecca Reyher's Zulu Woman (1992) and by Jonasi the male character in Sue Nyathi's recent novel The Polygamist(2012). Reyher narrates the life of Christina Sibiya, who was locally famous as the rebellious first wife of Solomon ka Dinuzulu, the deceased uncrowned king of the Zulus. Solomon, as the Zulu king (from 1913 to 1933), was traditionally expected to be polygamous. A king had to choose wisely, and select his wives from respected factions and clans to build up his own house. Solomon is captivated by Christina's beauty, her air of clean strength and severe virginity. We are made to believe that Solomon has finally found the woman who satisfies his manly desire since he is already engaged to six girls but still wants Christina – perhaps even as his Great Wife. In the letters he writes to Christina, he makes her believe that she is the only woman who reigns in his thoughts:

I love you, and want you to come and stay with me at the Embatheni kraal. I am a very lonely man – I want you to marry me. (Reyher 1999:26)

Perhaps because it pleases her vanity, Christina never doubts that the king loves her. She has never indulged in undue romantic fancies but 'she expected that someday she would marry a good Christian man who would take her and her alone for his wife' (1999:24). Wooed by the king's flattery, Christina is completely overcome. She consents and surrenders to Solomon. All the flattery, the extra favours and the promises of love everlasting build her false hopes that she will always be cherished by King Solomon:

Christina was not unconscious of the new, almost cringing respect she now received from the community... it was merely sweet to her pride to realise that wherever she went she walked in the dignity of the king's choice. (Reyher 1999:37)

When a woman has been showered with love as Christina has been, she least expects any form of disappointment. Such love makes betrayal extremely painful. Polygamy is one of the most treacherous weapons deliberately used by men against women, and it pierces deep into the heart when the woman is far from expecting any form of betrayal. Christina is made to believe that her love satisfies the king and leaves no room for any extra desires. It is ironic for the king to claim that he is 'lonely', since he is already involved with many women. But his flattery convinces Christina that the love she offers the king is truly fulfilling: 'Christina and Solomon continued to live alone, their intimacy close, passionate and friendly, with never a moment of discord' (Reyher 1999:44).

The sudden unexpected announcement that Nqothi's daughter, one of the king's girls, is to be brought to him is quite disturbing to Christina. It arouses a surge of jealousy that she had not known herself capable of. It is a shocking experience to hear Solomon personally instructing Christina to prepare sleeping mats for him and Nqothi's daughter:

‘I want you to prepare the mats’, he said abruptly. ‘You are to sleep upon the bed, Nqothi and I will sleep on the floor.’ Two months of idyllic happiness and then this! (Reyher 1999:44)

Unless he enjoys giving pain to her, it is hard to understand what pleasure Solomon gains when he insists that Christina has to spend the night with them, witnessing the sexual act:

Solomon stripped himself naked, while Christina picked up his clothes and neatly folded them upon the bed. From the floor in the darkness came little cries of passion. Nqothi was an experienced girl. There was no fear, just animal excitement and pleasure. (Reyher 1999:44)

There is no better description of such behaviour than ‘animal excitement’. Usually sexual intimacy is regarded by human beings as extremely private. It further degrades Christina, who when she is trying to assimilate this animal behaviour finds the king in her bed lusting for her:

Hardly had these thoughts run through her mind, hardly had she composed herself to enforced sleep, when she felt the blanket stir beside her and Solomon’s hand groping for her, and though he had slaked his passion and she had envisaged every detail in it, it was as though it had not happened, for he was crushing her to him as he had done every night these two months past. (Reyher 1999:45)

As time goes on Solomon brings more and more girls to the hut:

With the addition of so many women to the king's household, her position of favourite was definitely threatened, and her opportunity to satisfy passion and retain her hold upon her husband would come only if she were conspicuously available. (Reyher 1999:65)

But 'regardless of whom Solomon takes, he always wants to come back to Christina, uppermost in his mind and heart is Christina' (Reyher 1999:45). There is a marked contradiction between Solomon's behaviour, showing his appetite for many girls, and his claim that Christina provides him with the ultimate satisfaction of his sexual desires. Such behaviour proves that greed is also a contributory factor behind polygamy. Solomon not only satisfies his greed, but he is further excited by the feminine rivalry caused by the resentment and anger 'directed principally against Christina' (Reyher 1999:45). It is ironic that Solomon, who claims to love Christina so much, would enjoy putting her under a spotlight so that he can take pleasure in her vulnerability. Polygamy belittles a woman's sense of dignity.

Furthermore, Solomon formally marries Mbatha before Christina, for whom he has not paid lobola. All the wives of the kraal are set against the King, who has chosen so blatantly to honour only one of them. They are jealous of this woman who has a formal wedding, while they do not, and they say harsh things among themselves. For Christina, the king had agreed to pay 'fifteen head, the traditional lobola. But he only

gave the six on account, and promised that at a future date the others would be presented. They never were!' (1999:54).

Solomon has more than enough cattle and the fact that he pays full lobola for other wives before marrying them not only makes Christina feel insecure but also makes her doubt his love for her. When queried on this issue, Solomon claims that the wives he marries are not solely his, but Christina's as well:

Not only am I marrying this girl, but so are you. We are making her our wife. You and she will be brothers, and will divide between you the work of looking after me. (Reyher 1994:47)

Like Musa and most other polygamous men, Solomon regards women as service providers. Women are to prepare food, bear children, quench a man's sexual desire and keep him safe. Solomon claims to have great love for Christina since he knows that if he makes her feel appreciated enough, his safety will be secured:

Since competition in love is keen, and wives guard against each other, the husband strives to protect himself against them all. (Reyher 1999:55)

Christina as head of the working squad tends Solomon personally. She sets his food before him and directs the other girls at their work. She handles money and the keys to the food cupboard. All these responsibilities make Christina a target of taunts and

insults because they convince her co-wives that she is more trusted by the king and thus has a special place in his heart.

In relation to all his wives, Solomon is self-sufficient and manipulative. He has his own interests at heart. Due to the continuous intake of wives, he neglects some of them but enjoys having them as his own property guarded by his mothers, who make sure that the wives do not have any form of relationship with the king's subjects. Among the neglected wives we note the daughter of Zidumazile and the daughter of the Cebekhulu people:

The king had not called these two wives for months; Cebekhulu not since the time her child had been born dead, over a year ago. (Reyher 1999:120)

While Solomon spends every night with women, the neglected wives are 'severely reprimanded for having merely greeted one of the men in the kraal' (1999:120). Such neglect tempts the women to commit adultery, a temptation that could have been avoided if Solomon had been content with one wife:

'Ever since the King has been married to Zidumazile he has never called her, or been near her in any way,' they said. 'He comes and takes girls away from boys who are in love with them and brings them here, and then plays the fool with them.' (Reyher 1999:121-122)

His being the king elevates Solomon to a position beyond reproach. Ever since he has been married to the daughter of Zidumazile he has never spent a night with her. He similarly neglects the daughter of Cebekhulu and when she is discovered to be pregnant she becomes a victim of vicious rumour:

Cebekhulu kept her eyes pinned to the ground, unable to face the mounting hostility in the hut. But the malice and hatred of the mothers aroused her defiance. It was as if the mothers were hunters and she the prey, and they were about to spear their assegais into her. All their threatening faces were intent upon her, as the head mother pressed still further: 'We must know that man! We must know that man! You had better tell us his name!' (Reyher 1999:121).

Solomon's mothers are mainly concerned about their son's happiness and they do not consider the painful experiences and sufferings his wives have to go through because of his neglect. Unlike the other less favoured women Christina still receives some attention from the king but she is constantly prepared for the disappointments she has to meet along the way. This is in spite of the fact that she was warned before she even married Solomon:

Long Christina lay there reminding herself: 'Maphelu told me this. Maphelu said he (Solomon) would bring other girls to his hut; that was the King's privilege. He, himself told me he would have other girls' (Reyher 1999:45).

Nevertheless, prior knowledge does not stop Christina from feeling betrayed when Solomon brings women each night:

A strange numbness had come over her, her tasks seemingly doing themselves. Christina has been trained to believe that 'even a flicker of jealousy is disloyal to her King' (Reyher 1999:44).

Like most women in polygamous marriages, she has to put up a face and pretend that her emotions are not disturbed by the arrival of new co-wives. When she first meets the daughter of Nqothi, her co-wife, 'the two women shook hands and no one could have detected anything but cordiality in their manner' (Reyher 1999:44). She has to maintain her cool even when she learns that she has to share the room with her husband and this woman and, even worse, take her turn immediately after her with Solomon.

Such calmness shows that women in polygamous marriages can be experts in concealing and suppressing their feelings. The success of such marriages is greatly influenced by the woman's ability to suppress her true feelings of anger and jealousy, since societies judge a woman's level of maturity by the degree of this suppression. But Christina's suppression stops short of allowing her to develop a stable relationship with any of her co-wives. Even though she retains the privilege of sleeping with Solomon on his bed-while other wives are offered only the floor, Christina struggles not to feel rejected. When the king spends the whole night with another wife or concubines, she repeats to herself:

No, I am not jealous; I am not afraid of his showing favor to anyone else, for after all he always keeps me with him. I am better in his affection than anyone. (Reyher 1999:47)

But she does not remain 'better in his affection' any more than she retains her pity for the girls who suffer their sexual initiation in her presence. (Reyher 1999:46)

Eventually, when Solomon acquires more and more wives and leaves Christina and some of his other wives at the Nsindeni kraal 'for sixteen long months' (135), Christina realises that she is being abandoned. Though the king finally arrives:

Christina knew her heart was no longer right. Even though she was with the King, even though he spoke gently to her, even when he sat next to her, playfully caressing her, her heart was cold and empty. (Reyher 1999:136)

Christina feels depersonalised, and continually experiences a stripping away of her identity and self-worth. There is a feeling that her life has been irreversibly tarnished and diminished. Her vulnerability eventually compels her to run away, an unthinkable act for a Zulu queen. She would rather survive as a single woman selling liquor than remain in a loveless relationship (189).

For senior wives such as Christina, there is no security of title to a man, due to the changeable affections of the polygamous husband influenced by unexpected developments in his matrimonial prospects. In The Polygamist, Joyce the senior wife of Jonasi, like most senior wives, had married Jonasi thinking that they would grow old together and spend their weekends playing with their many grandchildren (2012:171). But unfortunately Joyce has had to persevere through painful challenges imposed on her by the co-wives and Jonasi's promiscuous lifestyle that leads eventually to his contracting HIV, which later progresses into full-blown AIDS. As the senior wife, Joyce is expected to look after Jonasi, who is terminally sick and incapacitated (2012:169). From time to time she has to be reminded, even by her children, that she married Jonasi 'for better or for worse'. She claims:

Jonasi had gone hunting for this dreaded disease. Now that he was strung up and near death I had to act like the supportive wife? ... I would have to nurse him. I would have to make sure he took his medication. I would have to bathe him and clean after him. I will be honest with you, I was not up to it. Even after all the betrayal, lies and animosity he was still the father of my children. So once again I was laden with the burden of taking care of Jonasi. (Nyathi 2012:170)

Unfortunately Joyce cannot afford a nurse to look after Jonasi since, at this point, she is financially unstable because 'things in Zimbabwe were beyond the recession stage' (2012:177). Jonasi's condition deteriorates and finally he dies in Joyce's arms, in the absence of the junior wives:

What was even sadder was that the Lindanis and Matipas of this world were nowhere to be seen when it really counted, when it really mattered. (Nyathi 2012:172)

Joyce has stood the test of time like most senior wives, being loyal to her marriage despite all forms of betrayal, even when the junior wives desert the husband.

Such changeable affections are also manifested in Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood (1979). Early in the novel, the patriarch, Nwokocha Agbadi, a very wealthy local chief, takes pride in humiliating Ona, his mistress, who has time and again declined his advances and thus devalued his manhood. Ona volunteers to look after Agbadi when he is sick, but despite his ill-health, his sadistic sexual impulse motivates him to hurt her:

He was not weak enough to ignore his desire. He knew he had to reduce her to longing and craving for him. He knew he had won. He wanted her completely humiliated in her burning desire. (Emecheta 1979:20)

Sexually overpowering Ona excites Agbadi. He enjoys seeing her in pain since:

so unprepared was she for the passionate thrust which followed that she screamed, so piercingly she was even surprised at her own voice.

Grunting like an excited animal with a helpless prey, Agbadi left her abruptly, still unsatiated, and rolled painfully to the other side of the goat skin. Having hurt her on purpose for the benefit of his people sleeping in the courtyard, he had had his satisfaction. (Emecheta 1979:20-21)

Here as in many cases a man's main focus is on his sexual gratification and his dominance and not on the consequences of his actions:

Agbadi's senior wife, Agunwa, became ill that very night. Some said later that she sacrificed herself for her husband; but a few had noticed that it was bad for her morale to hear her husband giving pleasure to another woman in the same courtyard where she slept, and to such a woman who openly treated the man they all worshipped so badly. (Emecheta 1979:21)

Being a senior wife silenced by tradition, even though emotionally crushed, Agunwa is expected to behave in the manner culturally prescribed for senior wives. Agbadi believes his actions simply coincide with his wife's illness but could never be the cause:

You are wrong, Idayi, to suggest she might be sore or bitter just because last night with Ona I amused myself a little. Agunwa is too

mature to mind that. Why, if she behaved like that what kind of example would that be to the younger wives? (Emecheta 1979:22)

Agbadi shows no remorse for his actions. Not even after Agunwa's death does he show any regret. His main concern is:

I don't know who else will help me keep an eye on those young wives of mine, and see to the smooth running of my household. (Emecheta 1979:22)

He does not mourn the loss of a wife but is concerned about the loss of a service provider. To his advantage, people shift the blame for Agunwa's death on to Ona. Agbadi who is the root cause is regarded as blameless. Later, Ona eventually gives birth to Nnu Ego, a character whose experiences are framed by those of the previous generation.

Nnu Ego is married twice, both times to polygamous men. She first marries Amatokwu. Her happiness in this marriage is short-lived since, as months pass by, she realises that she cannot bear Amatokwu a child. At first Amatokwu is concerned and supportive of his wife. Consultations and sacrifices are made, but, unfortunately, despite all attempts, Nnu Ego fails to conceive and prove Amatokwu's manhood, which is the priority concern of both Amatokwu and his family. To add to the pain brought to Nnu Ego by her own frustrated longing for a child, Amatokwu's family

starts looking for a more productive wife who will bear the long awaited heir.

Amatokwu says:

I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones. (Emecheta 1979:32)

Here, as in many African novels, a woman is blamed for the couple's infertility, which is one of life's natural misfortunes. Like many polygamous men, Amatokwu regards marital sex as a duty that he has to perform in order to make a wife pregnant, and not as an act that sustains intimacy. If the duty has been performed and no pregnancy occurs, the wife is solely at fault. She is made to believe that she carries the shame of failing her husband and she is constantly, cruelly and spitefully forced to believe that it is her barrenness that compels her husband to be polygamous:

Nnu Ego was not surprised when Amatokwu told her that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives because his people had found him a new wife. 'I will do my duty by you. I will come to your hut when my wife starts nursing her child. But now, if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams' (Emecheta 1979:32-33).

He addresses Nnu Ego like a third party, foreign to this marriage circle. Nnu Ego finds herself in an unexpected, miserable situation which is worsened when her junior wife gets pregnant quickly and thus meets the expectations of her in-laws. Nnu Ego feels out of place, cheated and undervalued:

‘Father, my position as senior woman of the house has been taken by a younger woman,’ Nnu Ego would lament on her visits to Agbadi’s courtyard, after she had filled his pipe for him as she used to.
(Emecheta 1979:33)

It is surprising that Agbadi feels hurt by the situation his daughter finds herself in. In his house and as his favourite daughter she is an important person. In fact an African woman seems to have human value when she is anything other than a wife. MojúbàolúOlúfúnké Okome (2001:16) points out that an African woman’s influence and importance tend to vary according to the context under consideration. As paternal aunt, for example, a woman may enjoy as much power over her nieces and nephews as their father (her brother). Nnu Ego demonstrates that, as daughter of a house, a girl possesses definite privileges – and she is also valued in youth for her potential to bring bride- price. But a woman’s power really accrues in maturity, after her brother’s marriage and the birth of his children. The role of wife seems, in contrast, to be significantly constrained – particularly the role of junior wife or of wife without children, or without male children. Phaniel Akubueze Egejuru claims that ‘A woman... accepts the temporary hardships and humiliation of marriage to ensure the more ennobling and permanent state of motherhood’ (1997:16). Despite her high

status, Nnu Ego has to withstand harsh treatment from Amatokwu, her husband. Agbadi truly sympathises with her as his daughter, even though he is a typical man in relation to his wives:

Agbadi was no different from many men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him. But when it came to his own daughter, she must have a man who would cherish her. (Emecheta 1979:36)

Nnu Ego experiences intense jealousy of the new wife, especially of her fertility. As this chapter further demonstrates, while senior wives feel more devalued by the accumulation of other wives, junior wives may be tricked into believing that they hold advantageous positions as new occupants of the husband's heart. Unfortunately this feeling lasts for as long as they offer what it takes to gain the husband's favour. Now that the new wife has confirmed Amatokwu's manhood by bearing him the long-awaited son, she feels victorious over Nnu Ego, who has to suppress her feelings and show love to her co-wife's baby, which she cuddles and babysits while her co-wife spends endless hours with Amatokwu. On certain nights the junior wife remains with Amatokwu throughout the night:

The new wife was full of apology the next morning for not having come for her baby. 'Sorry, senior wife. I knocked at your door but you

must have been sleeping, so I knew that our son must be all right. It's our husband, he just won't let me go.' This became almost a daily pattern and Nnu Ego did not discourage it. (Emecheta 1999:34)

Being a senior wife forces Nnu Ego to act out this scenario on a daily basis because a woman of her status should not openly display jealousy or any form of defiance for fear of being ridiculed or belittled by her co-wives.

'Our husband', the joint marital claim made by this junior wife, is not a sisterly assurance and it hardly ever works. Sisterly bonds hardly ever develop between co-wives sharing a husband. Given a chance, each wife struggles to get absolute dominance at the expense of other wives. For Nnu Ego this sisterly claim rubs salt into her present situation. The sense of abandonment that she experiences is common to most women in polygamous relationships. It causes a displacement which is not conducive to promoting sisterhood but, instead, creates a spirit of competition; at a given time when a woman has what it takes to gain her husband's recognition, she feels a winner. Such is the feeling of triumph experienced at this stage by Nnu Ego's co-wife.

Unfortunately, despite all Nnu Ego's efforts, her marriage to Amatokwu fails. During her second marriage in Lagos, the relationship between wives can be scrutinised even more closely. This marriage – to Nnaife – is arranged by her family. Her longing to have a child forces her to try her luck with him:

Nnaife could tell that Nnu Ego did not approve of him. She despised him on that first night. But nevertheless he demanded his marital rights as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind. (Emecheta 1979:43-44)

Nnu Ego is determined to remain in this loveless marriage, hoping that Nnaife will make her pregnant. She is prepared to put up with him and his crude ways and ugly appearance as long as he impregnates her. This shows the extent of the damage caused by Nnu Ego's first marriage to Amatokwu. Her pride is destroyed, and the shame of failing Amatokwu compels her to settle for Nnaife, a man for whom she has no attraction or love. She does become pregnant and remains a faithful wife, but, despite the fact that she has never truly felt any love for Nnaife, she resents the arrival of her co-wife Adaku, inherited by Nnaife from his late brother.

When Adaku introduces the idea of sisterhood again, 'telling Nnu Ego that they are going to be sisters in sharing a husband', Nnu Ego does not respond positively, perhaps because of her previous experience of a co-wife. She knows that this is going to be a test for her, 'but as the spiritual and natural mother of this household she must start acting like one' (Emecheta 1979:123).

Outwardly, Adaku appears to be innocent and submissive towards her senior wife but she seems to enjoy the threat she now imposes on Nnu Ego who is expected to prepare the room for Adaku and Nnaife. Nnu Ego fights back tears as she prepares her

own bed for the new couple. During the night Adaku spitefully exaggerates her sexually aroused squeals and cries:

She giggled, she squeaked, she cried and she laughed in turn, until Nnu Ego was quite convinced that it was all for her benefit. She did not have to imagine what was going on; Adaku made sure she knew.
(Emecheta 1979:124)

Nnu Ego's determination to behave herself and play the role of senior wife as expected is a futile exercise. She struggles through a sleepless night striving to disconnect herself from her feelings. She tries to block her ears as a way of relieving her inner turmoil, but she can still hear Adaku exaggerating her pleasure. What hurts her most is hearing Nnaife remark:

'My senior wife cannot go to sleep. You must learn to accept your pleasure quietly my new wife Adaku. Your senior wife is like a white lady: she does not want noise.'(1979:124)

Nnu Ego is quite aware of this mockery, but despite the fact that she does not love Nnaife, the idea that he fathers her children and the fact that she has been faithful and loyal to the relationship make her feel betrayed. She might not love him but she cannot bear witnessing his sexual activities with another woman. This betrayal stabs deeper because Nnu Ego 'was sure Nnaife was laughing at her' (1979:124). In a pathological reaction to their humiliation and ridicule Nnu Ego bites into her baby's

clothes to prevent her from screaming. Her feelings are not taken into consideration. It is very painful to find Nnu Ego in such a pitiful situation since she might have hoped that bearing children for Nnaife would secure her marriage, as her first marriage to Amatokwu failed because of her inability to give birth to children as expected.

T. M. Aluko in his novel One Man One Wife (1959) denies the possibility of a successful marriage which condones multiple partners. His narrator claims:

Polygamy is the scourge of this land. It poisons the bloodstream of our nation. For love to be true and fully reciprocal it can be directed towards only one person, not two or three. (Aluko 1959:38)

Aluko reveals to us, as readers, that although challenges may be there in monogamous marriages, it is nevertheless much better to deal with them than to take new spouses, since the pain 'comes from one source alone' (1959:271). Husbands or wives in polygamous marriages have to deal with pain from more than one source, as is the case in Emecheta's Kehinde (1994). Kehinde the protagonist returns to Nigeria from London to find that her husband Albert, who had preceded her home, has married and impregnated a second wife without telling her anything about his changing circumstances. Rike the junior wife has used many subtle ways to win Albert:

She [Rike] met Albert when he was low, with neither a job nor accommodation, and presented herself as a ministering angel, even taking him to her church. She became so enmeshed in his life that

when the children returned, Joshua thought she was one of their aunts. And when he found out, he soon became reconciled to it. (Emecheta 1994:74)

To further secure her position before Kehinde's return, Rike bears Albert a son and gets pregnant again soon after. Her influential affection and gentleness towards Albert and his children encompass the whole family within her grip and deliberately close the senior wife out of the circle. When Kehinde finally returns to Nigeria she is struck dumb to discover that Albert has married again. Rike is hostile towards Kehinde and makes her uncomfortable wherever possible. Kehinde is not only hurt by her discoveries and discomfort but by the fact that Albert had earlier forced her to abort a child of her own in London, claiming that they could not afford a third child. When confronted by this accusation, Albert justifies his actions by claiming:

'That child Ogochukwu was born under a lucky star. A woli told me about him before he was born. As soon as I accepted his mother and allowed her to become my wife, I got this well-paying job. They told me that the child will bring so much luck to all of us that we won't know what came over us. (1994:86)

Albert expects Kehinde to be supportive of his dishonesty and does not consider the pain and betrayal that she is going through; especially when she remembers the guilt and anguish she went through during and after the abortion. In spite of the stressful

condition she finds herself in, her sister Ifeyinwa tells her not to behave badly. She insists that Kehinde must:

lower[her] voice and accept his apologies, whenever he gave them. After all, he did not commit a crime against humanity, all he did was marry Rike and have a baby boy, with another on the way, without [Kehinde's] knowing anything about it. (1994:94)

The above quotation suggests that women do not form part of 'humanity'. Albert's betrayal and unfaithfulness is 'no crime against humanity'. Being a victim of circumstances, Kehinde cannot at this point challenge Albert because her unemployment forces her to depend on him financially. In contrast Rike is very much in control of the new household and she enjoys a great deal of attention and love from her husband and her in-laws. Meanwhile life is unbearable for Kehinde:

She had a feeling of wanting to die. This was supposed to be her family, and it was getting on perfectly well without her. (1994:87)

Eventually, Kehinde, after being snubbed and degraded by just about everyone in the establishment, from Albert's sisters to the domestic help, escapes back to Britain to try her luck there as a single woman. We make our choices as we go along in life, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in that. In most cases, senior wives are made to feel responsible for making a relationship work. Such reasoning does not promote individual identity and a sense of self-worth. Kehinde could have, like many wives,

remained in this loveless marriage to her detriment, but she is able to see through Albert and choose life as a single woman in preference to what he is offering her. Though her family regards her going back to London as 'shame', she is wise enough to choose what is best for her.

Such wisdom is also displayed by Aissatou, a character in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter (1989). When Mawdo (Aissatou's husband) decides to be polygamous, he expects his wife to understand and conform. He claims that a man's unfaithfulness to his wife is caused by an irresistible drive beyond his control. He considers this immoral drive as supremacy of instinct that condones a man's desire for variety. He expects Aissatou to be an ally to his polygamous instinct. He says to her:

'You can't resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man. These same laws compel the "male" in other respects. I say "male" to emphasise the bestiality of instincts You understand A wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about "betrayals of the flesh"'. (Bâ 1989:34)

Mawdo's attitude is typical of the male viewpoint in African fiction. Aissatou, however, holds a different viewpoint. She refuses to be part of a relationship that will only favour the interests of her husband and betray her loyalty to this marriage. She leaves Mawdo forever. In the letter she writes to him on her departure, she says:

'I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way'. (Bâ 1989:32)

Aissatou refuses to allow tradition to confine her to a man whom she feels is unworthy of her love. Instead of succumbing to self-pity she, like Kehinde and Christina, resolutely looks forward to a future as a single woman. Successfully she raises her four sons who she knows are despised by their paternal grandmother who 'could not recognise herself in the sons of a goldsmith's daughter' (1989:30).

But not all viewpoints are as extreme as Aissatou's. Ramatoulaye stays in her marriage despite her pain; the epistolary form of the novel gives Ramatoulaye a voice that makes the reader empathise with her. Aissatou, the receiver of the letter, speaks to the reader in her included letter to Mawdo and in her actions which are admirable. Ramatoulaye is perhaps more typical of women because her age, her children, her job, her religion and her ties to her community prevent her from taking dramatic action and leaving her husband. Senior wives are often in this kind of position.

In other novels, senior wives react to polygamy in a complex variety of ways. Kehinde and Christina, like Aissatou, are all courageous enough to leave their positions as senior wives and take responsibility for themselves single-handedly. But others, like Tisa and Nnu Ego, remain trapped in polygamous marriages for a variety of personal reasons. Unfortunately most of Solomon's wives stay in the marriage out of fear. Some try to escape but they are caught and brought back to the king.

As previously mentioned, Ramatoulaye, the character-narrator of Bâ's So Long a Letter chooses to stay married to Modou after discovering that he has secretly married

Binetou, a school friend of their daughter Daba. Before this discovery Binetou has confided to Daba about:

a sugar-daddy who not only pays for her expensive dresses, but offers a villa, a trip to Mecca for her parents, a car, jewels and a monthly allowance if she agrees to be withdrawn from school before her baccalaureate to marry Modou. (1989:35)

Soon, despite Daba's attempts to dissuade Binetou from marrying this sugar-daddy, Binetou, though heartbroken:

is going to marry her sugar-daddy. Her mother cried so much. She begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them. So she accepted. (1989: 36)

Ramatoulaye, who does not expect that Modou, her husband, could be Binetou's sugar-daddy, is dumbfound when one Sunday Tamsir and Mawdo (Modou's brother and friend) come and inform her that Modou has on that very day married Binetou. For the first time she remembers Modou's recent unusual behaviour that could have given her a clue to this painful betrayal:

I thought of his absence, all day long. He had simply said: 'Don't expect me for lunch.' I thought of other absences, quite frequent these days, crudely clarified today yet well hidden yesterday under the guise

of Trade Union meetings. He was also on a strict diet, ‘to break the stomach’s egg’, he would say laughingly, this egg that announced old age. Every night when he went out he would unfold and try on several of his suits before settling on one. The others impatiently rejected, would slip to the floor. I would have to fold them again and put them back in their places; and this extra work, I discovered, I was doing this only to help him in his effort to be elegant in the seduction of another woman. (1989:38)

The idea of being an ally to Modou’s ‘seduction of another woman’ makes Ramatoulaye feel great agitation. What worsens the situation is the discovery that the co-wife is:

Binetou, a child the same age as my daughter Daba, promoted to the rank of my co-wife, whom I must face up to. (1989:39)

In most cases, parents exercise parental roles to their children’s friends or children of the same age group as their own biological children. The fact that Daba, is Binetou’s friend and of her age, gives an incestuous implication to the relationship between Binetou and Modou who should be fatherly to her. For Ramatoulaye this is the most painful form of betrayal since she regards Binetou as ‘a child’.

Despite Ramatoulaye’s painful situation she remembers that as a senior wife tradition expects her to treat her visitors with hospitality. She, like many senior wives, has to put on an act. Even though Tamsir and Mawdo bring her disturbing news, she must not allow her emotions to betray her true feelings. She forces herself to

smile; take the matter lightly, just as they announced it. Thank them for the humane way in which they have accomplished their mission. Send thanks to Modou, 'a good father and a good husband', 'a husband become a friend'. Thank my family-in-law, the Imam, Mawdo. Smile. Give them something to drink. See them out, under the swirls of incense that they were sniffing once again. Shake their hands. (1989:38)

Such punitive pretence is self-destructive and yet traditionally senior wives have to exercise it as a measure by which they can attain respect and a state of worth. In her distress Ramatoulaye remembers cases of many other women who have had to go through her present dilemma. Among others she remembers Aissatou who left Mawdo instantly and Jacqueline who suffered a severe nervous breakdown when her husband Samba Diack spent time 'chasing slender Senegalese women as he would say with appreciation' (1989:42) and did not bother to hide his adventures, respecting neither his wife nor his children.

Ramatoulaye remembers how Jacqueline lost weight, complained of a lump under her breast, used medical prescriptions but continued to be tortured by the insidious pain. Despite being transferred from one hospital to the next 'she remains confined to bed, looking more pitiful and haggard than before' (1989:44). Her condition improves only after a doctor assures her that the source of her misery is depression. Wishing that the conditions of life were different from what they are in reality is the main agony of

Jacqueline's life. It is only when 'she deliberately gives herself a reason for living and is determined to move on in her life that she overcomes her suffering' (1989:45).

At this point Jacqueline is prepared to fight against her distress; she is morally uplifted and finds reasons to live on. Ramatoulaye, like Jacqueline, is determined to deal with her situation positively but in her own way, different from Aissatou's and Jacqueline's. To her family's great surprise, unanimously disapproved of by her children who are under Daba's influence (1989:46), Ramatoulaye chooses to remain married to Modou. She is determined to start again at zero, after living twenty-five years with one man, having borne him twelve children. Sadly, Modou deserts her and remains with Binetou until his early death. Though she is supposed to be in a polygamous relationship, she actually never experiences sharing her husband with Binetou.

Many African novels offer us detailed examination of relationships between co-wives, especially revealing the impossibility of supportive and loving bonds of affinity between women sharing a husband. Belief in its unfeasibility is clearly very old. Even in Sundiata, the oral epic of Mali's thirteenth-century hero king, jealousy between the wives of Sundiata's father, Naré Maghan, is what sets in motion the action of the tale. The first wife, Sassouma Bérété, plots mercilessly to destroy her younger rival, the hunchback woman Sogolon, and Sogolon's child Sundiata. Although Naré Maghan specifically names Sundiata as heir to the kingdom of Old Mali, Sassouma Bérété manages to place her own son on the throne when Naré Maghan dies, threatening the

safety of Sogolon and her children and causing them to flee the country (Niane 1965:13-28).

This ancient text which, despite its male hero, is full of powerful female characters, shows hostility between co-wives as a natural consequence of their position. In Ama Ata Aidoo Changes (1991), which is probably the most complex of the recent novels of African marriage, Esi divorces her husband Oko and chooses to become the second wife of her lover Ali, who is married to Fusena. Esi and Fusena never meet and Fusena, Ali's senior wife, remains silent about her feelings. After being told by Ali that he intends marrying a second wife, Fusena harbours her dissatisfaction internally. Ali always knew that Fusena guessed when he was having a serious affair with another woman. Therefore the question was not whether he was deceiving her or not. There was an unspoken agreement between them not to talk about such affairs.

Like Fusena, Opokuya, another character in the same novel who is also a senior wife, never lets herself worry – at least, outwardly – about whether Kubi her husband's chronic lateness has to do with normal office affairs, or any other kind of affairs. For instance he could be taking a woman or women with him on his bush trips; she is aware that most men in his position do. Senior wives have to appear accommodative even though they might not really be condoning of their husbands' behaviour.

A majority of novelists thus show the detrimental effects of polygamy, as opposed to writers who advocate the practice. These detrimental effects, as this chapter has demonstrated, are particularly evident when the predicament of the senior wife is

considered. However, not absolutely all authors or critics accept the denunciation of polygamy; Obioma Nnaemeka, for example, makes a concerted attempt to vindicate the practice using Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1986) as evidence in her defence (Nnaemeka 1995:96-101). She starts by focusing on a passage in which the first wife of Nwakibie, an important man in the village of Umuofia, drinks a ceremonial cup of palm wine served to her by her husband. Nnaemeka presumably chooses this passage because it had been used (somewhat inappropriately) by the Western feminist Florence Stratton to demonstrate the 'abject servitude' of women in polygamous culture (Stratton 1994:24-5). Nnaemeka is quite right in claiming that the following passage demonstrates 'order':

Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear. She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on her knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away. (Achebe 1986:14-15)

The established ritual, the lack of hurry and the insistence upon appropriateness all combine to create a very orderly picture indeed. But the rigid hierarchy suggested by the phrase 'ruler of the womenfolk' does not sound like a kind of order that is

conducive to sisterly relationships. Tyranny can be orderly but it is not sisterhood. Moreover, this is a snapshot of a household; it does not offer any insight into the hearts and minds of the characters depicted. The reader never encounters these wives again.

Achebe supplies his reader with more 'interior' knowledge of the members of a polygamous marriage later on, in the context of Okonkwo's household. And, indeed, as Nnaemeka asserts (1995:99-100), sisterhood does appear to prevail among Okonkwo's three wives. When the youngest, Ojiugu, goes to a friend's house for a hairdressing session and forgets to come back to cook Okonkwo's food, the senior wife (known as 'Nwoye's mother') lies to protect her, telling Okonkwo that Ojiugu had arranged for her children to eat in her, Nwoye's mother's, hut. This is not enough to protect Ojiugu from a beating, however, even though both the other two wives plead with their husband to stop (Achebe 1986:21). On another occasion, when Okonkwo demands to know who killed a banana tree in his compound, the wives, knowing that the culprit is Ekwefi, the second wife, keep silent. Ekwefi, nevertheless, is also beaten (1986:27). In the aftermath of another episode, when Ekwefi has been awake most of the night in concern for her daughter, the other two wives are seen sympathetically advising her to get some extra sleep, while they also undertake to relay her apologies for arriving late at a wedding (1986:78).

Despite this persistent evidence of sisterly loyalty and understanding among Okonkwo's wives, a reader of Things Fall Apart is nevertheless not licensed to conclude that sisterhood is typical of polygamous marriages. Okonkwo's household

must be regarded atypical because Okonkwo, its unquestionable ruler, is so unusual a character.

Throughout the book, the reader is never allowed to forget that Okonkwo is no ordinary man: he is a leader, driven by shame concerning his impoverished background and rejection of his 'effeminate' father, to an assertion of individual selfhood that is almost alien in so communal a society as Umuofia (Osei-Nyame 1999:151-2). The whole community condemns his beating of Ojiugo in the episode mentioned above, because it occurs during the Week of Peace when all violent acts are forbidden. But even though he knows the rule and the consequences of breaking it (a considerable fine), Okonkwo is 'not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through' (Achebe 1986:21).

His exaggerated masculinity and his intense awareness of his own dignity make him generally a frightening presence, as this initial description suggests:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce quite often. (Achebe 1986:3)

Although his favourite wife, Ekwefi, and their daughter, Ezinma, sometimes see a gentler version of him, he does succeed in being frightening even to his family much of the time. They can never be quite sure when he will ‘pounce’ on next. It is this unusually fierce aspect of Okonkwo’s nature that makes his family not quite typical. The wives must band together in mutual self-defence against a common enemy in a way that would not be likely in the household of, say, Okonkwo’s more amiable friend, Obierika. The reader may interpret sisterhood among co-wives as depicted in Things Fall Apart more as a survival strategy in an especially stressful household than as a condition encouraged by polygamous marriage per se.

Another male-authored novel that shows harmony between co-wives is Nzekwu’s Highlife for Lizards (1965). The narrative ends with a picture of a happy marriage of three: Udezue, the husband, and two wives, Agom and the much younger Ugoye (Nzekwu 1965:189-92). But earlier it shows disharmony when Udezue takes a second wife, Nwadi, while Agom is away visiting her family (1965:101-4). In this earlier episode, Agom is distressed by Udezue’s apparently disloyal act, but her resilience and resourcefulness, which are the main themes of the novel, cause her to accept the situation and actually try to develop a sisterly bond with Nwadi. This, however, is impossible because Nwadi, in an unusual reversal of the normal relationship between second and first wife, is inveterately jealous of Agom. Even the fact that Nwadi is the first of the two to produce a child does not mollify her jealousy. She ends up being caught, first, having an adulterous sexual relationship in order to try to get pregnant again fast and, second, giving Udezue a love potion which proves to be poisonous and nearly kills him. When she is sent away, Agom’s position in the marriage is stronger

than ever, for Udezue is by now fully appreciative of her merits in contrast to the many demerits of Nwadi. The third wife, Ugoye, is entirely Agom's idea, and she brings Ugoye into the marriage mainly in order to space out her own pregnancies according to their community's norm, which is not more than one every three years. Ugoye has, up to the time of her marriage to Udezue, been a servant in their household and, though she adores Agom, their relationship cannot be called sisterhood.

[Ugoye] regarded Agom not as a co-wife, but as her benefactor and mistress. She treated her with the greatest respect and took her words as laws. She continued to look after the children and do the household duties when Agom was away. On her part, Agom occasionally scolded her when she went wrong, but she never talked down to her. She guided her along the path of her new life and kept her happy with presents of clothes and trinkets. (1965:180)

This very unequal relationship is portrayed as happy because Ugoye has been lifted up from poverty by Agom, who even paid for the marriage out of her own wealth earned by her successful oil trading. Ugoye knows her place as grateful protégée and can hence never be a rival to the senior wife. Harmony between wives in Highlife for Lizards is very unlike a sisterhood of equals.

Clearly, the novelists' general verdict on polygamy is far from favourable. Critics such as Nnaemeka, who defend polygamy in the face of this plain message, may be

allowing their dislike of 'Western feminists' to cloud their judgement. Not only do African authors frequently show, in painful emotional detail, how detrimental polygamous relationships are to the happiness of women, but those authors also deny that the institution even offers women the compensations of sisterhood. While friendship between women is cherished by many female writers, none of them finds that being married to the same man encourages sisterly or tolerably harmonious relationships between co-wives. Even male authors who project a positive image of polygamy do not manage to demonstrate sisterhood among co-wives as a convincing norm.

CHAPTER 2

Junior wives in polygamous marriages

As observed in chapter one, junior wives generally have some choice about entering polygamous relationships, unlike senior wives. When senior wives enter marital relationships, they are not expecting any form of betrayal since the husband's love during the early stages of the relationship usually does not suggest that they have any rival. In some cases, culture may subconsciously prepare the senior wives to condition themselves for the possibility of a co-wife being added to the marriage, although this is rarely anticipated. Junior wives on the other hand may enjoy their position as long as they pose a threat to senior wives, but their happiness is usually short-lived, especially when the husband adds another wife to the relationship and the older co-wife acquires a position of seniority to the new wife. In many polygamous relationships the junior wives are flattered into believing that their role is supplementary to the short-comings of the unfulfilling senior wife, which causes dissatisfaction in the marriage.

There are various ways by which junior wives are introduced into polygamous relationships. Some are inherited after the death of a husband; in other cases the in-laws initiate the introduction of a co-wife, often to spite an unwanted senior wife, to fulfill the expectations of the cultural norms or to prove a son's perfect manhood, for example, if the senior wife fails to bear children, especially male children. Some

husbands accumulate wives to affirm their manhood in the eyes of society or simply to pamper their ego.

For whatever reason attributed to the arrival of a junior wife, the feelings of the senior wife are seldom considered. What matters are the motives of the husband, the in-laws or the junior wife. The new 'couple' will often do almost anything to secure and entertain their new-found love. All else, children included, seems not to matter. For the husband, the junior wife serves the purpose of fulfilling a variety of personal needs ranging from sexual greed to a rise in social status. While these needs are being met, the husband never relates well to the senior wife. In most cases he does not seem to care at all about how she might be affected.

In the later chapters of Mariama Bâ's Scarlet Song(1986), Ousmane prioritizes his relationship with Ouleymatou, his childhood love, over his long-term marriage to Mireille. Mireille has sacrificed her identity and crossed the colour bar to marry into a Senegalese family. She has forsaken her noble French family, renounced her own religion and embraced the Islamic faith. Ousmane finds himself tempted and overpowered by Ouleymatou's seductions even though his relationship with Mireille 'has survived the test of time' (1986:75). To justify his actions, he convinces himself that his marriage to Mireille is a mistake:

I love Ouleymatou, that's the important point. I realise now that she has always been the only woman I have ever loved and that I have never stopped loving her. What about Mireille? What was I trying to prove? My manhood ? My ability to attract someone so far above me ? I was excited by the difficulty of the enterprise. Once I had reached my goal, I felt the immense void that separates me from Mireille. When I rediscovered Ouleymatou everything became clear. (Bâ 1986:136)

He further tries to justify his guilt by claiming:

cultural heritage was taking its pitiless revenge. It was reclaiming its due and revealing to him the endpoint of his flight. (1986:121)

At this point, Ousmane seems to have forgotten the depth of Mireille's love for him. Beyond renouncing her religion and forsaking her own family, she has made great efforts to show hospitality to Ousmane's family and relatives, even to Yaye Khady, a mother-in-law who openly displays her disapproval of Mireille as a wife of her son through her words and actions. Ousmane tries to find justification for what is, at least at first, simply a physical infatuation: 'He made love to the black woman because he was happy to rest his head on her plump thighs' (1986:139). While the husband addresses his own motives, the potential junior wife has hidden agendas in securing her position:

She (Ouleymatou) had wasted enough of her youth hanging around the old women. All her contemporaries had got married, one after the other. With or without encouragement, they had accepted their first suitor. Her own short-lived marriage had sent her back into the ranks of a spinsters. (Bâ 1986:115)

In her desperate state, Ouleymatou is ready to compromise her ideas in order to secure a husband. She never disputes the fact that Ousmane will marry her only on his terms. Ousmane says:

I will marry Ouleymatou on condition that she agrees to receive me when it suits me. She will not have her 'turn'. (1986:127)

According to the Muslim religion 'a wife must have a turn' (1986:127); nevertheless in her desperation Ouleymatou, though very much aware of her rights as a junior wife, has to accede to whatever comes from the loop-holes of her husband's relationship with his senior wife.

At the entry point, junior wives may tolerate second-best treatment with the hope of attaining superior recognition in the eyes of the husband as the relationship progresses. Mireille can never opt to settle for less; neither would any senior wife who knows her rights. When Mireille finds out about Ouleymatou and her son, her inability to contain her hurt, betrayal and rejection drives her to insanity. In the most pathological response of all the novels considered, she kills her own son and stabs

Ousmane almost to death. Junior wives like Ouleymatou might find some happiness in the marriage at first but their joy does not often last very long. Sooner or later reality catches up with the thrill of their new-found love. In Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes (1991), Esi, the only wife of Oko, feels overwhelmed by her husband's claims on her. She complains that Oko demands 'too much of her time' (1991:38) and finds his 'attentions so suffocating that she wants very badly to split' (1991:41). Despite her family's disapproval she divorces Oko, accusing him of marital rape. Later, she decides that being a second wife to Ali, the man whom she loves, would be a viable option. As a career woman she believes that this polygamous relationship will grant her more free time for the demands of her work and that she will not be confined to the role of mother, wife and home-maker. Initially, when Ali spends most of the time with his first wife Fusena and has to travel a lot, as his work demands, Esi seems to enjoy the freedom to attend conferences, workshops and seminars inside and outside the country, but she spends more and more time alone in her own house and eventually she finds no pleasure in her solitude. Her experiment of being a junior wife is in the end unsuccessful.

It is loneliness that mainly undermines Esi's determination to make her second marriage work. To make up for his time away from her, Ali showers her with presents that include various ornaments and a new car which he gives her for New Year. Nevertheless, none of these gifts prevents Esi from experiencing neglect and loneliness when Ali is with Fusena, his senior wife. She becomes further embittered when Ali appoints a new secretary, for whom he takes sole responsibility of transporting home each day after work. She feels displaced by this new woman in

Ali's life. Such courtesy directed to another woman triggers jealousy and Esi feels restless and abandoned. It is in a sense ironic that junior wives so often experience anger and disappointment when a new wife comes into the picture. And yet, in Esi's case as in others, the second wife still does not feel guilty about the bitterness she herself has caused the first wife. Esi never meets Fusena but she appears to have no compunction about Fusena's feelings.

Many times when Ali is away, Esi has had to resist the temptation of phoning his house to ask for him, thus confirming his whereabouts. During the daytime she keeps herself busy, but in the evenings she is completely alone. In her vulnerable state and need for a cure for this painful feeling of desolation, Esi is almost sexually exploited by Kubi, the husband of her best friend Opokuya. Fortunately she is quick to remember that:

A man always gains in stature any way he chooses to associate with a woman - including adultery...but, in her association with a man, a woman is always in danger of being diminished. (Aidoo 1991:164)

Esi confesses to Opokuya how much her present situation 'hurts' (1991:155). She has to adapt to the world of isolation and 'teach herself not to expect Ali at all' (1991:165). This is the hardest lesson she ever has to learn. Like many junior wives, Esi might have been tempted to believe that her involvement with Ali would put an end to Ali's polygamous impulses, but the discovery of his interest in other women

pushes her to a point of deep resentment. She sees no value in her marriage and wonders:

in what way was her situation different from what it would have been if she had simply stayed as Ali's mistress, in spite of going to see her people in the village, giving her the ring and all? This was a complete dead end. (1991:149)

At this point she realises that Ali's fashion of loving her has proved 'quite inadequate for her' (1991:165). She simply has to regard him now as just a good friend with whom she can 'once in a while fall into bed and make love' (1991:164). She is very much aware that Ali is 'determined to keep her off his and Fusena's home' (1991:149). Despite her apparent worldliness and previous disillusionment with marriage, Esi continues to believe Ali when he insists that he loves her very much even while 'she couldn't help hearing about his womanizing activities' (1991:165).

As illustrated in Changes, some male characters may consider separate living conditions for their wives as a remedy or a way of preventing conflict and misunderstanding between co-wives, but this measure of control is not always successful. In Ousmane Sembène's Xala (1976), Adja Awa Astou and Oumi N'Doye, El Hadji's wives, are richly provided for, each with her own villa, which makes them seldom meet each other. To be precise, they have met 'only seven times' (1976:21) during the seventeen years of their shared marriage. Each has harboured her

resentment, which manifests itself clearly when triggered by El Hadji's attempted third marriage. For both wives, N'Gone, the junior wife-to-be, appears the most offensive, as previously stated in the introduction of this dissertation. The first wife, Adja Awa Astou, regards this third marriage as an insult, since N'Gone is her daughter's age; the second wife, Oumi N'Doye, feels disgraced and devalued:

The thought that she was the second choice, an option, enraged her. The middle option, giving her some kind of intermediate role, was unbearable for a co-wife. The first wife implied a conscious choice, she was an elect. The second wife was purely optional. The third? Someone to be prized when it came to the 'moome', the second wife was more like a door-hinge. She had given a lot of thought to her position in the man's marital cycle and she realized that she was in disgrace. (Sembène 1976:37)

Oumi N'Doye cannot bear to experience herself the bitterness and insecurity she once imposed on Adja Awa Astou:

With Adja Awa Astou she could accept the life of polygamy, but the advent of a third wife reopened the wound of frustration suffered by all Muslim women of our country. She even thought momentarily of divorcing El Hadji. (Sembène 1976:37)

Metaphorically a polygamous relationship is equated with a 'wound' in order to illustrate the pain suffered by the wives, more especially the senior wives, in such marriages. This is typical of the pathology of women in polygamous relationships. Oumi N'Doye despises Adja Awa Astou for not showing disapproval of this marriage:

She, Oumi N'Doye, had been El Hadji's favourite. There had been times when she had kept the man longer than the code of polygamy allowed. There had been times too, at the height of her reign as the favourite, when she had robbed Adja Awa Astou of whole days and nights. The first wife had never complained, never demanded what was her right, Oumi N'Doye had come to think of herself as the only wife.
(Sembène 1976:37)

Replacing the senior wife and taking full control over the husband is often the basic goal of junior wives yet, due to the pretences that dominate in polygamous marriages, one might be misled into believing that there is harmony between the wives. While Oumi N'Doye is furious about this third marriage, outwardly she appears welcoming. One would be deceived when she tells N'Gone's aunt, Yay Bineta that:

'I take Adja our senior as my example. I thank Yalla for putting me to the test so that in my turn I too can show that I am not jealous or selfish.' The co-wives and Yay Bineta knew they were only playing to the gallery. They resorted to euphemism in preparation for the real hostilities which would come later. (Sembène 1976:18)

Both Adja and N'Doye watch the marriage ceremony:

As they watched someone else's happiness the memory of their own weddings left a nasty taste. Eaten up with a painful bitterness they shared a common sense of abandonment and loneliness. Neither spoke.
(Sembène 1976:23)

Polygamy is bitter to the wives, but for the sake of the husband's affection, women in polygamous relationships, especially junior wives, are experts in pretending that all is normal. This skill of pretending is further observed in Miriam K. Were's The Eighth Wife(1972), where the wives of Chief Malenya under the guise of sisterhood conceal similar bitterness and animosity. Shalimba, the son of the fourth wife Anika, is the first son in the family to survive to manhood and he has to undergo the most revered ritual of circumcision:

For the first time the chief would watch his own son face the ordeal. It had been a long wait. His first wife had given him daughters only. The second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth all had sons and daughters. And at one time Chief Malenya anticipated with his clansmen the circumcision of his sons. But an evil spell had been cast over the household and in less than a year, the five oldest boys died. (Were 1972: 9-10)

The chief is greatly pleased by the maturity of his son Shalimba since 'at last there was going to be another man in the household' (1972:10). Unfortunately the wives do not share the chief's joy; they conceal their resentment especially to Anika and her son. Anika has mixed feelings. She is:

Excited yet frightened. It never occurred to her that she would be the first of the chief's wives to have her son circumcised, yet the irony of fate brought her this honour. The circumcision was the first major event after the great famine. As such, it would be celebrated with exuberance. (Were 1972:17)

While most members of the clan are rejoicing, the wives who lost their sons are in distress; they mourn for their long lost children making it difficult for the chief to join his people in full celebration. The Chief walks about from one house to the next trying to console his weeping wives in vain. The 'shadows of his dead sons and his weeping wives remained before his eyes' (1972:30). He notes that:

If one woman's child meets good fortune and you rejoice with her, the other women remind you of their misfortune. If in your zeal or praise you give a marrying daughter a present, the other women remind you of the insignificant presents you gave their daughters. Woe to me who will never know real peace, me whose joys are marred by the sorrows

of one woman after another. Can a man of many wives ever experience the calm of peaceful joy, O, you spirits of my fathers? (Were 1972:30)

The Chief who initially claimed that ‘wives bring a man power’ now admits that:

a man with many wives never knows peace – the kind of peace a man feels after he gets his first wife and before the coming of the second. (1972:31)

After the circumcision, Shalimba’s health is greatly challenged and word is sent to Chief Malenya that his son is ‘bleeding dangerously’ (1972:31) and his chances of survival are very slim. The Chief is seriously disturbed but his wives are pleased – yet they pretend to be sorrowful: ‘Two of those who were wailing all evening exchanged smiles as Anika ran towards them in hysterics’ (1972:32). When Anika seeks comfort from these women, believing that they are sincerely sharing her pain:

They both put their arms around her and wept with her. But as the fingers of the two women touched each other as their arms encircled Anika, they gave each other a squeeze of secret delight in her suffering. (Were 1972:33)

The senior wife joins the prayers of the clan but her prayers are not motivated by concern for Shalimba's illness. She fears losing a husband in her old age when there is no hope for remarriage: 'Losing the builder of her hut when she had no son would leave her helpless' (1972:35). The sixth wife shows no remorse; she sits 'giving roasted potatoes to her brood' (1972:35). This period of mourning provides her with opportunities to attend to her own errands and promiscuous activities and further reveals her evil nature:

Overhearing the prayers of the old woman, she spoke to her own son. 'By the time you face the knife, the old man and his old hyenas will be good and rotting.' She laughed a high-pitched, mirthless laugh. More quietly she said, 'To think that the old bull thinks my beautiful son a child of his seed! Oh, that poor old man.' Hot tears ran down her cheeks. She took her children to the first wife's house. 'Mother,' she addressed her, 'hold them for me while I go and ask Anika if she has any news.' The old woman took the children. But the sixth wife of the chief did not go towards Anika's house. She ran instead in the opposite direction, coughing loudly. She passed by a hut, still coughing, and then reversed her steps, walking slowly. A figure came out of the hut and walked towards her. (Were 1972:35)

Addressing the senior wife as 'mother' is superficial respect since she regards her as an 'old hyena' and hopes that she will die before her sons reach maturity.

Fortunately Shalimba survives and grows to be the most prominent youth in the clan, gaining praises for his mother Anika. Such acknowledgement directed to Anika:

cut the other women's hearts to shreds. They remembered their dead sons, sons that would have brought them honour long before Shalimba came along.
(1972:28)

Junior wives do not usually challenge the husband's desire for the addition of more wives into the marriage, at least, not openly. They often act as if they condone the husband's actions but secretly each woman fights her own battle to secure herself and her own children. Blinded by love or their own self-importance, husbands may never know the actual hostilities between the wives or the real motives that lead women to be willing partners in such challenging marriages.

But junior wives may be less willing partners than senior wives over time. When a marriage is in real difficulties, junior wives are more likely to quit in search of greener pastures, while senior wives remain and suffer with the husband through the trying times. El Hadji experiences this fact when this third marriage, to N'Gone, is destroyed by his physical incapability. On the very night of his wedding he finds that he is impotent (Xala) and then, in search of a cure, he spends most of his money. Finally, he becomes bankrupt. Apart from monetary loss he loses his work and his material possessions are at risk of being repossessed by the courts of law.

When Yay Bineta and N'Gone realize that they can no longer benefit materially from this relationship, they each:

hired a taxi, filled it with furniture and crockery and drove off, leaving the doors of the villa wide open. Without warning her husband Oumi N'Doye, the second wife, took her children and went to live with her parents in a poor district of the town. Being a prudent woman, under cover of darkness and with the help of brothers, sisters and cousins, she too had emptied her villa, going so far as to remove even the curtains, the fridge and carpets. (Sembène 1976:101)

As if unaware of El Hadji's desperate state, Oumi N'Doye badgers her husband to face up to his children's future. But El Hadji is without work and does not know what to do. Because he is no longer supporting his wives, he ceases to fulfill his obligations as a polygamous husband, allowing the wives the freedom of unmarried women:

Reduced to a cypher, El Hadji no longer visited his second wife. Oumi N'Doye came to meet men who liked the easy life, men who could provide pleasure while they had money. So Oumi N'Doye often went out in the evening. (Sembène 1976:102)

On one occasion when El Hadji visits N'Gone, she displays her loss of interest for him by boldly 'holding hands with a young man in a tight-fitting shirt, his trousers moulding his thighs. They went into the house' (1976:106). Nevertheless, the senior wife Adja Awa Astou remains loyal to El Hadji despite all the challenges she has had to face in her marriage.

Sue Nyathi in her novel The Polygamist(2012) puts further emphasis on the opportunistic character of most junior wives. She reinforces the idea that junior wives remain in the marriage only while their needs are entertained, but that as soon as they realize there is no personal gain in it their interest in the husband ends. Such behaviour is illustrated by Matipa, the second wife of Jonasi, the main character in this novel. Matipa has married Jonasi for his wealth: she drives a Mercedes Benz and a Jeep, lives in a beautiful mansion with her two-year old twins and enjoys all the luxuries showered on her by Jonasi, despite her disapproval of Jonasi's other women. She regards her husband as her 'one stop-shop for money, sex, power, conversation and entertainment' (2012:124).

On one occasion Matipa visits a doctor and unfortunately discovers that she has contracted an STI from Jonasi. She becomes so angry that she refuses to have sex with him. Her refusal infuriates Jonasi who beats her severely, initially slapping her 'so hard across the face' and finally whipping her using 'the metal part of his belt across her fleshy behind' (2012:126). He further rapes her and leaves thinking that Joyce, his first wife, might be more welcoming than Matipa. But to his surprise Joyce

also refuses to sleep with him. He also beats and rapes Joyce, since he thinks that both his wives have ganged up against him.

After the beatings Matipa, who least expected such abusive treatment from Jonasi, quits, leaving her twins under the care of Joyce, without even making any prior arrangements with her. She leaves Zimbabwe and goes to China to try her luck 'playing pussy foot to Mr Guangzhou before deciding what to do with her life' (2012:175). She convinces herself that Joyce will take good care of her children, regardless of the fact that Joyce is also a victim of the same circumstances that led to her own departure. Later on she moves to England where she meets Mark and marries him. Meanwhile Joyce remains to look after the dying Jonasi. As with El Hadji in Xala, when the situation gets really tough, the husband finds solace with the senior wife.

Similar behaviour on the part of a junior wife may be observed in Rhoda, Musa's second wife in The Prodigal Husband (1999). When Musa loses his job at V.V.'s farm, Rhoda prefers returning to her parents rather than sticking with Musa who, for her sake, has forsaken Tisa his senior wife as well as her seven children for almost seventeen years. Just like El Hadji, Musa is readily accepted back by Tisa, despite his desperate state and wrongdoings.

The situation is a little more complex in Lola Shoneyin's recent novel, The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010). Baba Segi, a polygamist with three wives, is

attracted to a graduate, Bolanle. He is determined to take her as his fourth wife and he ignores all opinions that:

she was only after his money, that she didn't really love him and would leave him for a younger, educated man, after she got what she came for. (Shoneyin 2010:8)

Bolanle is secretly loathed by all the other wives, mainly because she is educated. She is very much aware of the situation and acknowledges the fact that she would be naïve to expect any form of welcome since she knows that she is coming not to add to but to take away from the wives:

With my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to spread among four instead of three.(Shoneyin 2010:24)

When Baba Segi introduces her into his family, Bolanle senses unspoken hostilities among the wives who at face value appear to be at ease with one another. Iya Femi the third wife fails to conceal her disapproval; she cannot tolerate any form of affection directed to any other wife: 'If any form of favoritism didn't involve her or her children, she was quick to register her disapproval' (2010:10).

Iya Segi, the senior wife, and Iya Femi seem to have joined forces to ridicule Bolanle. They smear her books with palm oil and hide them from her. At times they tear off pages from her exercise books 'to line the kitchen cupboards' (2010:25); sometimes they scribble over the words with charcoal. They prejudice their children against Bolanle and they do whatever is possible to make her feel uncomfortable so that she may be forced to leave without Baba Segi knowing why. To top it all at one stage Iya Segi physically attacks Bolanle, 'knocking her head on the cold terrazzo' (2010:182). Iya Femi draws much pleasure from witnessing this attack. She 'throws her head back and burst[s] into peals of laughter' (2010:182). All this rivalry goes unnoticed by Baba Segi.

Bolanle withstands all this ill-treatment because she thinks Baba Segi is the only man who would marry her despite her misfortunes earlier in life. Unknown to her parents, she was once raped, fell pregnant and had an abortion. The emptiness she felt after this prompted her to involve herself with a man she never had feelings for and, worst of all, a polygamist. Baba Segi was prepared to take her as she 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. (2010:169)

Unfortunately Bolanle does not bear any children for Baba Segi and she adamantly refuses to be taken to traditional herbalists to seek for a remedy that will solve her problem of 'infertility'. She consents to having a medical checkup at a hospital, however, and the doctor declares her physically fit to give birth to children. Then he decides to investigate the problem from another angle:

In order to arrive at a conclusive prognosis about Bolanle's inability to conceive, it's important that couples hoping to become parents are examined together. (2010:213)

Baba Segi is perfectly willing to have a medical examination since he believes that has already fathered seven children. But then – to his own and everyone's consternation, he discovers that the problem lies with him. Medical results prove that he does not just have a low sperm count, a condition that can be clinically corrected, but 'there's nothing! Not a solitary sperm swimming around!' (2010:219).

Such a discovery is of course proof that Baba Segi is completely incapable of impregnating any woman. It arouses immediate speculation about who, then, could be the biological father of his acclaimed seven children. On consultation, Iya Segi, the first wife, confesses that Baba Segi is not the father of any of 'his' children. As the senior wife, Iya Segi has used her influence and status to encourage her co-wives into

having extra-marital affairs in order to bear children for Baba Segi and thus secure their marriage. Shocked, Baba Segi says:

It was revealed in the hospital today that none of my children are my children. I found out, just today, that the children I have nurtured and called mine were sired by men my wives lay on their backs for.
(2010:265)

This discovery disappoints and humiliates Baba Segi who later acknowledges the fact that polygamy is a painful kind of marriage. His advice to Akin, his 'son', is that when the time comes for him to get married, he should consider taking 'one wife and one wife alone' (2010:271). Baba Segi's emotional breakdown forces him to openly admit what most polygamous men would not confess. There is no peace in a polygamous relationship. To save himself from the shame of being mocked by the whole world, he is forced to remain with all three of his 'adulterous wives' and their illegitimate children. Bolanle decides to return to her parents' home. She feels that there is no point in staying, since he is not able to give her children. It is obvious that personally Bolanle needs a child, and if this need cannot be met, she loses interest in staying in a fruitless relationship, even though she is now on better terms with some of her co-wives.

African novelists are often concerned with the breaking up of relationships as a result of infertility. In most cases infertility is regarded as a female defect but, thanks to

Shoneyin, it is revealed as a human problem. Before his discovery Baba Segi regards Bolanle's lack of children as a cause of enmity between them; 'your barrenness brings shame upon me' (2010:16). Now that he knows he is to blame, he has to make sure that the reputation of his manhood is protected.

Instead of allowing his wives to carry on with their relationships, and thus bear him more children, 'he promptly bans them from leaving the house without his permission' (2010:278). Their shops are closed down, they are forbidden to wear makeup and they are no longer allowed to attend church. 'God hears your heart no matter where you are,' he says (2010:278). He will buy them all 'the jewelry, all the lace, every luxury they needed and wanted, provided these are only worn within the four walls of his home' (2010:278-279). This is some form of house imprisonment which Baba Segi's wives have to endure in order to secure their place in this loveless marriage. Bolanle, the most junior wife, nevertheless opts for greener pastures outside the relationship. Like most junior wives she had chosen to be in this polygamous marriage for personal gain –to cover the shame of her past and to bear children. When she realizes the fruitlessness of her commitment, she quits.

In Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood (1979), Adaku as a young widow agrees to be inherited by Nnaife, her late husband's brother. She has to tolerate his drunkenness and negligence since she 'wanted from him ... a male child' (1979:168). Unfortunately she gives birth only to female children. When she is ill-treated by Nnaife's male friends who favour Nnu Ego as the senior wife and the mother of sons,

Adaku, like Bolanle, leaves and successfully involves herself in sex work and trading. In the end she is more successful than Nnu Ego:

I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship. The do have their uses. (1979: 170-:171)

Here, Adaku acknowledges the fact that junior wives do 'use' men for personal benefit. When Nnaife returns from the war, he learns that Adaku has left and her departure greatly upsets him:

Nnaife's pride was wounded when he found out that Adaku had left his house; from all the rumours people had been supplying him with, he knew that the young woman was doing very well without him. (1979:183)

As a way of pampering his wounded ego, Nnaife returns to his home village of Ibuza claiming that he has neglected his duty of visiting his dead brother's first wife and family. He claims:

I must go and see that nice woman Adankwo in Ibuza. She must be longing for a man. For a woman to be without a man for five years! My brother will never forgive me. (1979:182)

He does go to Ibuza 'to make Adankwo his wife in the normal traditional way' (1979:183). Before long Adankwo becomes pregnant with her last menopausal baby. But she refuses to go to Lagos with Nnaife and prefers remaining at Ibuza. Since Nnaife wants to return to Lagos with a wife, he soon finds Okpo, a sixteen-year-old

girl, for whom he pays thirty pounds 'instead of the usual twenty pounds stipulated by Ibuza custom' (1979:184). Now that his confidence has returned, Nnaife goes back to Lagos, but his character never improves. Nevertheless, Okpo remains married to Nnaife, perhaps because she attaches status to her monetary value and is deceived into believing that Nnaife regards her with esteem. She remains unaware that he would invest any amount to save himself from the shame of returning to Lagos without a wife.

From the various novels, one may conclude that junior wives are often opportunists. Love may be the initial cause of the involvement with the husband but it is obvious that, in many cases, there are motives of gain – either material or in the form of children or stability – which prompt junior wives to commit themselves to polygamous relationships. As revealed by different narrators, polygamy is the breeding ground of enmity between women and in the absence of solidarity between the womenfolk, there is no hope that change in the status quo of male domination can ever be attained.

In most marital involvements, be they monogamous or polygamous, women seek to be loved by their husbands. It is most uncommon to find women willing to share their husbands with no supplementing motives or reasons. If ever they do, it would be for reasons ranging from force to emotional manipulation, cultural expectations or financial desperation. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, some women may involve themselves with already married men, forfeiting their equal marital rights.

However, these women will usually not stay with a man once the reasons for their marrying – status, wealth, children, security, etc. – are removed.

Junior wives may suffer disappointments just as senior wives do, but they are much more likely to make self-rescuing moves when difficulties arise. Being more opportunistic, they are more able to survive or escape the cruelties of polygamous marriages than senior wives. They in fact often represent this cruelty to senior wives.

CHAPTER 3

In-Laws of Polygamous Marriages

Not only do wives suffer from the neglect and sexual greed of their husbands in polygamous marriages, but they also, in many instances, suffer from the avarice and hostility of their in-laws. Of all the positions in families that women may hold, the position most vulnerable to abuse is that of a wife in relation to her husband's family. These positions automatically evoke some enmity, which in most cases is inflicted by mothers-in-law on their daughters-in-law. Surprisingly, fathers-in-law rarely portray this negative attitude towards daughters-in-law, but they may at times show reservations towards their sons-in-law. This not only applies to polygamous relationships, but to monogamous relationships as well. One might expect women to be more understanding and sympathetic and to actually join forces with one another against a male-dominated marriage institution. Unfortunately in many fictional works, as in reality, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law readily inflict polygamy on younger women, the wives.

In Bâ's So Long a Letter (1989), Aunty Nabou does not approve of Aissatou's marriage to her son Mawdo. She believes that Aissatou, a goldsmith's daughter, is not worthy to marry into her royal family:

She clung to old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed firmly that blood carried with it virtues, and

nodding her head, she would repeat that humble birth would always show in a person's bearing. (Bâ 1989:26)

From the day that Aissatou marries Mawdo, Aunty Nabou commits herself to seeking ways of ending Aissatou's marriage. She regards Aissatou as an enemy who has come to take her only son away from her. After the death of her dear husband:

She brought up her eldest son Mawdo and two other daughters, now married...and well married. Now her 'only man' was moving away from her, through the fault of this cursed daughter of a goldsmith, worse than a *griot* woman. (Bâ 1989:26)

Naturally mothers possess a protective maternal instinct which often impacts negatively on their daughters-in-law. The love between Aissatou and Mawdo is no 'fault' since love is a natural emotion and 'marriage is a personal thing' (1989:17) triggered by a mutual understanding between the two partners involved. When Mawdo falls in love with Aissatou, 'he emphasizes his total commitment to his choice of a life partner' (1989:17). He is convinced and happy that he has 'moved in the right direction'. Mawdo is not bothered that Aissatou's father is a goldsmith: 'he admire[s] the man' and appreciates his creativity. Ironically, Aunty Nabou's evil and vengeful heart makes her 'worse than a griot' (a singer), since she has no logical reason to hate Aissatou, let alone destroy her marriage. Devoted with the affection of a tigress to her one and only man (1989:26) Aunty Nabou grooms young Nabou, her brother's daughter, to be the quality wife she deems fit for Mawdo. She constantly reminds young Nabou of her royal origin, a quality she feels Aissatou lacks.

Surprisingly Aunty Nabou does not regard her own daughters' marriages as 'faults'. Their husbands have also taken her children away from her. If all parents regarded the marriage of their children as a loss then Aunty Nabou's marriage to her husband would never have materialized. But her parents allowed her to enjoy her own marriage until death, a natural phenomenon, parted her from her husband. She convinces Mawdo that young Nabou has been offered by Farba, Aunty Nabou's brother, as a gift to Mawdo. She tells Mawdo that if he refuses to marry young Nabou, she (Aunty Nabou) will die, since 'shame kills faster than disease' (1989:30). Mawdo consents to the marriage without discussing the issue with Aissatou, his wife. He has nothing to lose since he will soon be enjoying the benefits of an additional sexual partner. Under the pretence of saving his mother from dying, he expects Aissatou to comply:

'The knocks of disappointment of life have weakened her heart. If I spurn this child, she will die. This is the doctor speaking and not the son. Think of it, her brother's daughter, brought up by her, rejected by her son. What shame before society!' (Bâ 1989:30)

Mawdo might outwardly appear as a victim of circumstances, but his conscience affirms that his acclaimed vulnerability and refusal to resist his mother are because 'young Nabou is so tempting' (1989:30). He strongly believes that 'the force of the instincts in man ... dominate him, regardless of his level of intelligence' (1989:33). Young Nabou continues to stay with Aunty Nabou even after the marriage. Aissatou refuses to compromise and tolerate Mawdo who says that he will go every second night to his mother's place to see his other wife, 'to fulfill a duty' (1989:31). Aissatou

leaves and her departure truly saddens Mawdo. However, he has compensations, noted by Ramatoulaye, the narrator:

His disillusioned air, the bitter criticisms of his home, which railed at everything, did not in the least prevent the periodic swelling of young Nabou's belly. Two boys had already been born. (Bâ 1989:33)

Aunty Nabou reigns victoriously after Aissatou has ended her marriage. She is convinced that 'Blood has returned to its source' (1989:30). All the love and time invested by Aissatou in her home are but 'trifles, quickly forgotten' (1989:30). As for Aissatou's sons:

They counted for very little in this reconciliation between a mother and her 'one and only man'. Aissatou no longer counted any more than did her four sons. They could never be equal to young Nabou's sons. Mawdo's mother, a princess, could not recognize herself in the sons of goldsmith's daughter. (Bâ 1981:30)

Hating Aissatou has a negative impact on children who are now to grow up fatherless. Mawdo is deprived of the opportunity of raising his own sons, a situation that could have been avoided had Aunty Nabou welcomed Aissatou into her family. As the narrator of Bâ's other novel, Scarlet Song, explains:

There are mothers-in-law who act like veritable rivals to their daughters-in-law. They suck the young woman dry with their insatiable demands and if it comes to a show down, they always get the better of

it, as a single tear from them is sufficient to have the hussy repudiated.

(Bâ 1989:72)

Ramatoulaye, when she has been recently widowed, also echoes similar sentiments of bitterness suffered at the hands of in-laws. She relates how some of her sisters-in-law envy her way of living:

They would go into raptures over the many ‘gadgets’ in my house: gas cooker, vegetable grater, sugar tongs. They forgot the source of this easy life; first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working. (Bâ 1989:20)

Ramatoulaye’s mother-in-law disregards the fact that Ramatoulaye is a working woman, whose salary substantially contributes to the buying of assets for her family. Flanked by friends, the mother-in-law often visits Ramatoulaye’s home ‘just to show off her son’s social success’ (1989:19). Ramatoulaye has to give her ‘all the respect due to a queen’ and has to always make sure that, on her departure, ‘her hand close[s] over [a] banknote’ (1989:19). Despite Ramatoulaye’s efforts to gain favour from her mother-in-law, the mother-in-law is not there for her when Ramatoulaye’s husband Modou decides to take a second wife. Still dealing with this bitter situation, Ramatoulaye is further embittered by Modou’s sudden death. During her period of mourning for the loss of this prodigal husband, the family-in-law finds great pleasure in taking away all the condolences, leaving Ramatoulaye and their children ‘utterly destitute’. They mess up Ramatoulaye’s home:

Cola nuts spat out here and there have left red stains: my tiles, kept with such painstaking care, are blackened. Oil stains on the wall, balls of crumpled paper. (Bâ 1989:7)

The worst news for Ramatoulaye is that Lady-Mother-in-Law's villa (donated to her by Modou) and the contents of her house were acquired by a bank loan granted on the mortgage of the villa in which Ramatoulaye lives. This is a betrayal, since the villa is common property acquired through the joint savings of both husband and wife. She describes it as 'insult upon injury' (1989:10). These in-laws seem to have cast a spell on Modou that has numbed his basic reasoning ability. Ramatoulaye finds herself a victim of a sad fate which she did not choose. In-laws have a common desire, 'a dream of a rapidsocial climb' (73):

Having known poverty, she (Lady-Mother-in-Law) rejoiced in her new-found happiness. Modou fulfilled her expectations. He would thoughtfully send her wads of notes to spend and would offer her, after his trips abroad, jewellery and rich boubous. (Bâ 1989:49)

The attitude of the in-laws either towards a daughter-in-law or a son-in-law is often characterized by this kind of greed and manipulation. Modou's value to Lady Mother-in-law is entirely dependent on his ability to provide for her material needs. Binetou's happiness has been traded for riches:

She watches with a disillusioned eye the progress of her friends. The image of her life, which she had murdered, broke her heart. (Bâ 1989:50)

This kind of hostility and avarice on the part of in-laws can manifest itself in both polygamous and monogamous relationships, but the situation may be worse in polygamous relationships, since wives must compete with one another for the in-law's favour just as they compete for the husband's. In Bâ's Scarlet Song(1986). Yaye Khady, who is Ousmanes's mother, feels extremely threatened by the arrival of Mireille, her daughter-in-law. She believes that Mireille cannot be integrated into her family, since she thinks that Mireille wants to keep Ousmane to herself. Before Yaye Khady even meets Mireille she concludes: 'a toubab (a White woman) can't be a proper daughter-in-law' (1986:66). She is determined to do whatever it takes, even invading the couple's privacy, as long as it will eventually destroy their marriage and thus force Mireille to return to her people.

Ironically, Yaye Khady, who has experienced difficult in-laws in her own marriage, should be more understanding of how painful it is to be ill-treated by in-laws. She regards Mireille as 'the daughter of the devil who has bewitched her son' (1986:66). Like some mothers-in-law in real life, Yaye Khady feels that Mireille is incapable of providing all the domestic services expected from a wife:

And I who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who would live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the

house... I'm faced with a woman who is going to take my son away from me. (Bâ 1986:66)

Although Yaye Khady has herself married Djibril and thereby taken him away from his mother, she refuses to accommodate Mireille in Ousmane's life. Some mothers cannot detach their married sons from their maternal grip: 'the old man remains forever his mother's tiny infant' (1986:97). Aggravating the cultural differences that impact negatively on Mireille's marriage, Yaye Khady adamantly refuses to accept and recognize Mireille as part of her family. She blames Mireille for Ousmane's ill health, criticizes Mireille's cooking and mocks Mireille for the meals that she prepares for Djibril on Saturday evenings: 'the meals caused Yaye Khady to laugh in her face' (1986:97). Knowing nothing of Mireille's own finances she warns her angrily: 'you are sitting on my son's money. I'll find the means of dislodging you someday' (Bâ 1986:97).

Mireille undergoes 'two difficult apprenticeships': into married life and into life as a black man's wife in Africa. Over and above the endless round of normal conflicts, inherent in the life of any couple, she feels as though Yaye Khady and the rest of the local community want:

to bury her alive and resurrect her as another woman who would have nothing in common with her except her physical appearance. (1986:99)

Sadly, Ousmane joins forces with his mother in an attempt to prove his manhood. He falls for the seduction of Ouleymatou, his childhood love. Encouraged by

Ouleymatou's family, another set of in-laws that benefits financially, Ousmane impregnates her. On receiving the news of Ouleymatou's pregnancy Yaye Khady is delighted to contemplate the coming event which will distress Mireille. In contrast, when Mireille gives birth to a fine baby boy, Yaye Khady is displeased with the infant's resemblance to the son of her blood:

Her pinched lips betrayed her dissatisfaction whereas Mireille, reconciled to her choice, was radiant in the joy of motherhood. (Bâ 1989:124)

Yaye Khady, who would not allow her husband to marry a second wife, is instrumental in Ousmane's marriage to his second wife. When Ouleymatou gives birth to a son, Yaye Khady spends a great deal of money to make the child's baptismal ceremony an unforgettable occasion. She vows that Ouleymatou's labour pains should not be in vain and that 'a woman must give herself to a man who recognizes her worth' (Bâ 1989:129). One wonders what differences exist between Mireille's and Ouleymatou's labour pains. Clearly, Yaye Khady cares for Ouleymatou mainly because of her hatred for Mireille. Ouleymatou is a suitable weapon that has conveniently availed itself for use against Mireille.

In polygamous relationships mothers-in-law use favouritism to encourage a spirit of competition between their daughters-in-law. As long as Ouleymatou regards herself as the apple of Yaye Khady's eye, she offers herself as her assistant, relieving Yaye Khady of most of her domestic chores, a relief Yaye Khady would not appreciate if it came from Mireille. Yaye Khady encourages Ousmane's love for Ouleymatou.

Though Ousmane decides to keep his relationship with Ouleymatou a secret, Mireille's curiosity leads her to discover that her husband has betrayed her love and trust. This discovery is more than her sanity can bear. She kills her son, nearly stabs Ousmane to death and is from then on confined in a mental institution (1989:168).

In African fiction not all wives display extreme reactions to the abusive situations they find themselves in when their husbands decide to be polygamous. Some silently suffer the torture indefinitely as Ramatoulaye does, while others, like Aissatou, make attempts to escape their frustrating situations.

In Emecheta's Kehinde (1994), the protagonist, on her return to Nigeria from London, finds herself harassed by her sister-in-law Mama Kaduma, who had relocated to the North to get away from the harassment of her own in-laws after her husband's death. Mama Kaduma openly humiliates Kehinde in front of Rike, the junior wife, claiming that as the relative of the head of the family, she takes the place of honour. She announces that Kehinde as a wife, especially a senior wife, should give Albert room enough to be a man. Since Rike is favoured by Mama Kaduma, Kehinde feels cheated and under-valued and experiences a kind of paranoia, especially when she is forced to occupy the back seat of her husband's car while Mama Kaduma occupies the front seat:

'So, who do you think you are? Don't you see your mate, Rike? Don't you see her sitting at the back with her maid and baby? When we, the relatives of the head of the family are here, we take place of honour by

our Albert. When you visit your brother's houses, the same honour will be accorded you. So, go to the back and let us move on'. (1994:88)

Kehinde is ashamed, especially when she sees the maid, covering her mouth in an attempt not to laugh. Only young brides with poor training made such mistakes. (1994:88)

Even though Albert does not approve of his sister's behaviour, he makes no attempt to protect Kehinde from his sister's lashing tongue:

Once or twice Albert caught Kehinde's eye in the mirror, but looked away quickly, so the other would not notice. Kehinde knew that in his heart of hearts he was not enjoying all this. (1994:88)

Kehinde feels like an outcast in her own family and she does not have the strength to fight her way back. Her position is weakened by the fact that she is presently unemployed and financially dependent on Albert. The neglect and humiliation she experiences in this marriage eventually make her life unbearable and she decides to return to London and start all over again.

In-laws like Kehinde's contribute significantly to the failure of marriage. They seem to forget that respect is earned and not demanded. Mama Kaduma makes no attempt to show any kind of respect for Kehinde yet she herself expects to be acknowledged and respected.

Similarly, in Rebecca Reyher's Zulu Woman (1999), mothers-in-law collectively demand respect and service from their daughters-in-law. Such behaviour shows their

egocentricity. A wife not favored by Solomon's mothers would suffer affliction at childbirth since this was administered by the mothers:

All the sadistic and cruel tendencies, the pent-up hatred and enmity of the older woman break out when one of the younger brides is about to have a child. The woman crowd around her, pin her taut upon the ground, bruising her arms and legs in a stranglehold, until the laboring mother becomes suffocated, and the child passes through her rigid body in final agony. (Reyher 1999:49)

In contrast, if a wife enjoyed the favour from the king, as Christina did, she gained some respect from the mothers. When giving birth, she was treated differently. The mothers 'anointed her with hot fat, bathed her stomach, and crooned little whispering admonitions of courage to her' (1999:50).

As we have seen, husbands often condone the ill-treatment of their wives by their own relations. This ill-treatment is intended to humble the woman and, in a way, restore a sense of authority to the husband, whose sense of guilt might deprive him of total control over a betrayed wife. Albert allows Kehinde to be the victim of circumstances and her suffering at the hands of Mama Kaduma gives Albert room enough to revive his manhood. Kehinde cannot deal with Albert as befits her pain. He enjoys the protection he gets from his sisters who have to prescribe the manner of behaviour for Kehinde. She is not even allowed to call him by his name:

I'm not allowed to call him that-o, because I didn't give the name to him(He didn't give me the name Kehinde), yet he is free to shout my name even in the open marketplace. (Emecheta 1994:93)

However, if a husband is protective enough he sets the tone for his wife's treatment. Unlike Albert, Solomon proves to us that when a wife is protected by her husband, the in-laws are obliged to treat her with respect.

CHAPTER 4

Children's attitudes towards polygamy

In the novels under examination in this study, child characters display varying attitudes towards polygamy. When their needs are well catered for, they usually enjoy the benefits of an extended family set-up and they easily adjust with apparently little trauma. This adjustment is clearly displayed in Emecheta's Kehinde (1994). Joshua and Bimpe are very accepting when their father Albert marries Rike as his second wife. Before they arrive in Nigeria from London, Rike has become so enmeshed in Albert's life that on their arrival they think she is one of their aunts.

When they find out the truth, they soon become reconciled to it because Rike showers them with favours in the absence of their mother Kehinde, who is still in London. They are enrolled in one of the best boarding schools in Nigeria and they are regularly visited by Albert and Rike, an act that makes them 'easy and familiar with Rike and affectionate with her baby' (Emecheta 1994:91). But this acceptance of a junior wife and her offspring by the children of a senior wife does not often appear in these novels.

Although this goes against the traditional form of African polygamy, in both fiction and reality, men tend to leave their senior wives and their children in order to live with their latest wives and these wives' children. In these cases the father may not participate in the upbringing of all his children, and those left behind may experience feelings of grief and abandonment, as well as lower levels of parental supervision.

One of these cases is evident in Miti's The Prodigal Husband (1999) when Musa leaves Tisa and all seven of their children in Northern Rhodesia and returns to Southern Rhodesia where he enjoys the pleasures of his newfound love. He contributes nothing towards the upbringing of his children. Tisa struggles alone.

Musa regularly writes to Tisa and makes empty promises. He has placed her and the children under the care of his younger brother Shuzi, a guardian who does not believe that children need to go to school. When Tisa decides to send her sons Isaki and Yosefe to school there is great conflict between her and her brother-in-law. The young and brilliant Isaki has to force his way to school in pursuit of his career as a medical doctor. After he has passed his primary education, Tisa struggles to pay school fees for him:

The annual school fees were nine pounds and fifteen shillings. Isaki's mother could not raise that money. She had not written to her husband for some time. She had not seen any reason to do so for he had given her false promises. (Miti 1999:65)

Tisa agrees with Isaki that he should write to his father, but in response to Isaki's letters Musa becomes furious that Isaki is now at school. He sends no money but blames Tisa for sending his children to school without his permission. Musa does not write to Tisa for a long time. Since his marriage to Rhoda he has become more preoccupied with issues related to her and her immediate family than with Tisa and her children. His marriage to Rhoda and the subsequent arrival of their first child has

increased his expenses and taken a lot of his time. The coming of Rhoda's second daughter increases the expenditure.

Money gradually becomes more and more scarce. Musa dreads getting letters from Tisa or Isaki. What hurts him most is that Tisa still assumes that he has a lot of money. Isaki, who still hopes for money from his father, is disappointed to learn that he will not be getting any financial support. He walks twenty-five miles from his village to school since he has neither transport nor school fees. Unlike all the newly registered Form One boys with new suitcases full of new clothes:

All Isaki had were his two khakhi paper bags. One contained old uniforms from Angoni Primary School and sweet potatoes which he had taken from home the previous day. (Miti 1999:89)

Isaki finds himself at the mercy of the Principal who at first has mixed feelings of anger and confusion:

He did not know what to say to the boy. How could he ask him to show him two brand new pairs of black shoes when he could see that the boy did not even have an old pair on his feet. (Miti 1999:91)

The Boarding Master also regards Isaki as an embarrassment:

He was not going to allow any of the new boys to embarrass the Black race by demonstrating poverty in front of the White man. (1999:92)

It is ironic to see Isaki suffering such humiliation with a father like Musa, whose polygamous instinct was triggered by his acclaimed financial stability. To raise the children's school fees:

The family got down to the business of shelling groundnuts in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening until their fingers developed blisters. (1999:137)

Despite all kinds of suffering and humiliation, both Yosefe and Isaki are staunch in the pursuit of their future careers through education. Suffering teaches them perseverance. Fortunately the emotional support of their mother and grandparents and the family's unwavering faith motivates the children through their hardship, struggle and pain. When Musa returns after seventeen years, he cannot even recognise his sons. He has to be introduced to his youngest, whom he left as a baby but is now almost nineteen. He shows no remorse for his negligence; his mind is still concerned with Rhoda's wellbeing and the question of whether or not she has found a new husband in Southern Rhodesia.

In Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood (1979) Nnaife's polygamous marriage creates an overwhelming personal problem that eventually causes him to spend less and less time with his children. After inheriting Adaku from his late brother, he finds himself

burdened by the responsibility of feeding all his children, who keep on coming each year:

In Nnaife's family there were many mouths being added to those to be fed. Nnu Ego and Adaku became pregnant almost at the same time. Nnu Ego came into labour first and had a set of twins, both girls. (Emecheta 1979:126)

Nnaife is bothered by the birth of these twins. His attitude is that of an observer from outside his own family, since he has the audacity to blame Nnu Ego for giving birth to the twins as if he was not the one who impregnated her. Nnu Ego, who has always thought that a woman's fruitfulness secures her position in marriage and in society, now painfully realizes that:

Many men can make love and give babies easily but cannot love... loving and caring are more difficult for her own men. (Emecheta 1979: 75)

Instead of celebrating the birth of his twins Nnaife is greatly disturbed by the fruits of his sexual desire. His major concern is the floor space and the meagre salary he gets from his domestic work. He asks Nnu Ego: 'Where will we all sleep? What will they eat?' (1979:126). He starts spending endless hours away from home, claiming that he needs to forget about the increased cost of food, the necessity of more housekeeping money, and other complaints from his wives.

Nnaife does not spend quality time with his children. The children feel neglected since they are left to be a burden to their mothers. When Nnaife does come home, he drowns himself in palm wine: 'What he spends on a keg of palm wine can buy his family a meal' (1979:134). Responsibility causes conflict between Adaku and Nnu Ego and the children normally take sides in favour of their biological mothers. Nnu Ego's eldest son Oshia grows to hate Adaku. He values and spitefully uses his status as the eldest son to torment her. He bears false witness against Adaku, claiming that she is a witch who troubles him in his dreams. He openly claims:

I don't like her. She gives me frightful headaches. I saw her in my dream last night. She was trying to push me into a ditch. I don't like her. (1979:129)

And he finds great pleasure when Nnaife beats Adaku. Such anti-social and deceitful behaviour is unbecoming especially for a twelve-year old. Since his parents are engrossed in their personal problems, Oshia gets away with it. Consequently, he is repeatedly disrespectful towards Adaku. When she calls him and asks him to fetch water, he publicly defies the instruction:

'I am not going. I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's job', Oshia yelled back and went on playing with his friends. (1979:128)

One might consider Oshia's defiance as a childish act or an expression that defines his manhood, following the example of people who listened to Oshia on this day:

All people sitting around in the compound laughed. 'Just like a boy', they murmured amusedly. (1979:128)

Oshia enjoys the attention he gets and he finds further pleasure in seeing Adaku shed tears, partly because people are mocking her for having no son. Though Nnu Ego might not approve of her son's behaviour, she nevertheless feels obliged to protect him: 'stories of younger wives harming the sons of senior wives were common' (1979:129). Oshia loves manipulating Nnu Ego and being instrumental in waging the war between the co-wives. He is fascinated by the native medicine man who confirms that Nnu Ego has to protect her sons against the jealousy of the younger wife. Oshia is anxious to establish his importance because, in addition to his father's neglect, Nnu Ego has also been giving a lot of attention to her newly born twins.

Neglect of children on the part of most polygamous fathers may be the root cause of their children's misbehaviour; this is further demonstrated in Sue Nyathi's novel The Polygamist (2012). Essie, Jonasi's mistress, has three children, Freedom, Sarah and Blessing. Jonasi occasionally visits his children and provides for them financially. Essie has never worked in her life since Jonasi supplies all her material needs. Nevertheless Jonasi's providence does not prevent Essie from engaging in various relationships with men to satisfy her emotional needs. Such behaviour prompts disrespect, especially from Freedom, who calls his mother a whore whenever it suits

him. Essie struggles for a time alone in bringing up such an unruly child but later requests assistance from her parents.

At the age of ten Freedom is taken by Essie's parents because Essie does not 'trust him around Sarah' (Nyathi 2012:116). We note that:

[Freedom] dropped out of school at sixteen so he could roam the streets sniffing glue and doing petty crime. Now at 26 he's graduated to car-jacking and smoking *mbanje* [drugs]....He stank of cheap alcohol. (Nyathi 2012:116)

Essie is convinced that her miscellaneous activities have contributed to Freedom's character:

I guess the mistake I made with Freedom was he used to bear witness to my shenanigans. He saw me being picked up by other men. He saw me being shagged by other men. He saw things that he should never have seen as a child. (Nyathi 2012:116)

On one occasion when Jonasi visits Essie to celebrate his forty-first birthday, Freedom refuses to make the fire unless his mother promises to give him some money. Essie gives him three hundred dollars but he throws the money into the fire, claiming his mother should 'go and fuck Jonasi and then give me proper money' (2012:117) and then walking off.

During the birthday celebration Jonasi is touched when he sees Sarah and Blessing bringing him a cake 'which had 41 written in whipped cream'. They also sing for him. Jonasi gives them money; 'that was the only way Jonasi could show his appreciation, with money' (2012:118).

Immediately after Sarah and Blessing leave to spend their money, it is surprising to hear Jonasi, who is seldom there for his children, expressing his concern about Sarah's wellbeing. He strongly disapproves of Sarah's staying out late, claiming that he does not want Sarah to hang around with boys. He threatens Essie:

if I even hear about a boy in Sarah's life I will beat you both. I am not paying school fees so that Sarah can major in boys. (2012:118)

Ironically, Jonasi himself finds great pleasure in pubs, places usually patronised by 'overgrown men with adolescent kids on their arms' (2012:121). His third wife Lindani is a prostitute, a very young girl almost Sarah's age who sold her body to the 'highest bidder' (2012:191). Jonasi is old enough to be Lindani's father but it never bothers him because he believes they have both used each other:

For me I was an old man trying in vain to relive my youth through her.... Men envied me when I had her on my arm, which was good because towards the end there was nothing enviable about me. (2012:191)

Lindani's main goal in life was to upgrade herself from girlfriend to wife and Jonasi was a suitable candidate.

In Sembène's *Xala* (1976), El Hadji has many children from his two wives and plans to marry a third wife. Unlike some polygamists who claim that their polygamous instincts are triggered by either a wife's barrenness or the desire to have a son, El Hadji seems to see his children as part of his general social and financial success:

El Hadji's second wife, Oumi N'Doye had given him five children. So, to date El Hadji had two wives and a string of progeny. Eleven in all. Each of his families had its own villa. Being a practical African, he had provided a mini-bus for their domestic use and to take the children to their various schools in town. This third marriage raised him to the rank of traditional notability, it represented a kind of promotion.
(Sembène 1974:4)

El Hadji's ambition for societal recognition makes him a suitable candidate for Yaye Bineta's manipulative seduction. Yaye Bineta's brother, Old Babacas, is a retired man who is finding it hard to support his large family 'of seven children on his quarterly pension' (1974:8). In order to relieve her brother of this burden and to secure the future of N'Gone, her brother's daughter, who:

had twice failed her elementary certificate; she was now nineteen years old and her parents could not afford to go on paying for her schooling. (1974:5)

Yaye Bineta sets out to convince El Hadji that N’Gone ‘had the savour of fresh fruit which was something his wives had long since lost’ (1974:8).

El Hadji’s lustful desire for N’Gone drives him to yield to temptation:

He was drawn by her firm supple body, her fresh breath. With his two wives on the one hand and the daily demands of his business life, N’Gone seemed to him like a restful oasis in the middle of the desert. She was good for his pride too – he was attracted to a young woman. (Sembène 1974:8)

Unfortunately his existing family does not view this third marriage the way El Hadji does. Rama, Adja Awa Astou’s eldest daughter, is consumed with anger and reproach when she hears that her father is considering marrying N’Gone. This third marriage of her father’s has taken her by surprise and deeply disappointed her. Even though she has been born and bred in a polygamous family, she personally disapproves and will never condone polygamy. She is very vocal with her criticism when she claims:

I will never share my husband with another woman. I’d rather divorce him. (Sembène 1974:12)

Her anger is worsened by the fact that N'Gone, the wife-to-be, is of her own age and then further aggravated by the fact that her mother Adja Awa Astou has to attend the marriage ceremony. Rama pities her mother's vulnerable situation. Adja Awa Astou is totally dependent on El Hadji. As a senior wife of her age she can never consider divorce as a solution to her present situation. She has to consider the following questions before taking a stand:

Where would I go at my age? Where would I find another husband? A man of my own age and still a bachelor? If I left your father and with luck and Yalla's help found a husband, I would be his third or his fourth wife, and what would become of you? (Sembène 1974:12).

For her children's sake, as is the case with most senior wives, Adja Awa Astou has to stick to her marriage. Rama is sensitive to her mother's suffering. Mactar, Rama's brother, shares Rama's sentiments towards this third marriage but he does not openly air his views like Rama:

He avoided his mother's eyes. The sharp pangs he felt in his heart grew worse.(Sembène 1974:12)

Thus we see that children in polygamous relationships are often very sympathetic and protective of their mothers. Unfortunately, tradition deprives them of the opportunity of challenging their fathers. When Rama expresses her opposition to the marriage:

El Hadji's slap struck her on her right cheek. She stumbled and fell. He moved towards Rama to repeat the blow. Quickly Mactar stepped between them. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. (Sembène 1974:12)

When his desire is challenged, El Hadji, who should be protective of his family, becomes the enemy who inflicts both emotional and physical pain on his children. Indifferent and insensitive to the pain this third marriage is already causing his family, El Hadji further blames his first wife for bringing up his children badly. In a way he acknowledges the fact that as a father he has contributed nothing towards Rama's upbringing:

In town, since families are often scattered, the children have little contact with their fathers. Because of his way of life the father must go from house to house, villa to villa, and is only there in the evenings, at bedtime. He is therefore primarily a source of finance, when he has work. (Sembène 1974:68)

El Hadji spends quality time with his friends and business partners. Each time he visits his wives, the phrase, 'Father can you give me some money' (1974:15), seems to be the only common expression and way of communicating on the part of his children. He provides materially for them but never seems to be holistically concerned about their growth. His providing for the children's needs does not cater for the differences among his children. The mini-bus he has provided for them serves a

common purpose of transportation but it does not strengthen the bonds that should exist between siblings:

The back of the mini-bus was divided in two. Each family had its own bench. The segregation had not been the work of the parents but a spontaneous decision on the part of the children themselves. (Sembène 1974:30)

This kind of segregation, often displayed by children in polygamous marriages, is a manifestation of the conflict between the co-wives. The women often involve their children in marital disputes. Oumi N'Doye, El Hadji's second wife, is the most problematic wife in his family. She is ill-disciplined, a spendthrift and jealous of her co-wives. Despite the fact that El Hadji provides his wives with all their basic needs, Oumi N'Doye refuses to be 'a woman who only saw her man to couple with him' (1974:38). Even on days when it's not her 'moome' (the period a polygamist spends with each of his wives in turn), Oumi N'Doye sends her children to her co-wife's villa in search of their father. She discusses her co-wives and her husband with her children. When she discovers that both Rama and the third wife have been given their own cars, Oumi N'Doye insists on having a car even though she has no problem using taxis.

Adja Awa Astou, the senior wife, is very reserved and well disciplined. Despite her outspokenness about her father's marriage, Rama is capable of following her mother's example. Although she is very concerned and sensitive to Adja Awa Astou's suffering,

she masters her anger for her mother's sake. When eventually El Hadji's impotence leads him to bankruptcy, Oumi N'Doye and N'Gone desert him. To cater for her children's needs, Oumi N'Doye wants her children to go and live at Adja Awa Astou's villa, but Rama fiercely opposes the idea, arguing:

‘We can't afford it. This house belongs to our mother, it is out of the question to have our half brothers and sisters here’. (1974:102)

Rama has taken the initiative to fight her mother's battles because she realizes her mother's vulnerability. Adja Awa Astou is displeased by her daughter's words but deep down she realizes that she is right. Children are often thus caught up in conflicts; usually they are not capable of Rama's presence of mind and are either used as weapons or are victims of circumstances.

Though children are young and inexperienced, they are rational beings. They have the ability to observe, assess and come up with conclusions on what they are exposed to. Like adults they can be affected by their surroundings physically, emotionally and otherwise. They have a right to a proper acknowledgement of their emotional experiences but unfortunately, in polygamous families, their voices are mostly silenced and the effects of their emotional reality are left raging within them. This dissertation has explored the emotions of some children in African fiction and attempted to highlight their denied authenticity.

The fact that their mothers are degraded or saddened by the circumstances of the polygamous marriage does not usually enhance the children's emotional and intellectual development.

African cultures seldom acknowledge the feelings of children, especially on the issue of polygamy. We have seen in earlier chapters that, in polygamous marriages, the feelings of the wives are usually overlooked or hurt; children, as even less influential family members, are even more vulnerable to neglect or abuse. Failure to acknowledge the negative influence of polygamy on children does not dismiss the feelings of neglect, emotional pain and hatred that the children are led to through this kind of family structure.

Should there be any questions about the children's behaviour, their fathers are quick to diagnose symptoms without acknowledging any responsibility of their own for causing this behaviour. Freedom, in Nyathi's The Polygamist is an apt example in this regard. Parents are the most influential persons in the lives of their children and usually in polygamous marriages negligence and lack of parental affection due to the conflicts that dominate in these relationships negatively impact the characters of children. Yet, regardless of the examples set by their parents, the children are still expected to be successful themselves in terms of relationships, character and general life achievements.

In some cases the children suffer abuse from the hands of the fathers in defense of polygamy, as in the case of Rama, or neglect, as in the case of Isaki. In other cases children suffer harm from the hands of their own mothers due to emotional breakdown – the kind of breakdown that is typical of the pathology of polygamous

marriage. For example, after being driven to insanity by jealousy triggered by her husband's new relationship, Mireille in Bâ's Scarlet Song (1981) kills her own son. In another instance, in Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010), a plot against Bolanle, the fourth wife, by the senior wives tragically claims the life of the senior wife's eldest daughter Segi. She dies after eating a poisoned food portion that was meant to kill Bolanle.

The desperation of securing the marriage results in physical harm and even, in extreme cases, loss of the innocent lives of children. Thus, in many polygamous marriages children are victims, if not physically at least emotionally, or in both ways.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that polygamy is a stumbling block in the path of female emancipation and self-expression which cannot be defended in a democratic society. However, its disappearance would clearly not automatically terminate the underlying belief in the entitlement of men to women's bodies, labour, assets and loyalty. As established marriage systems disintegrate, informal arrangements often replace them, but still informed by this belief in male entitlement. Informal versions of polygamy and serial monogamy may be even less just to women than traditional polygamy has been. Clearly, it is not only acceptance of polygamy but also belief in male entitlement that has induced large numbers of men and women in South Africa to condone an important older man, a paterfamilias, married polygamously, in his laying claim to the body of a young woman who happened to be staying in his house. For this kind of belief to be annulled, for a kind of democratic marriage to become possible and for the basic gender inequalities of our society to be adjusted, women themselves will need to assert an autonomy that is at present possible for only a few. Perhaps the bonds of comradeship and mutual support that may be forged between women who are not co-wives represent the forces that will eventually make this possible for the many.

I do hope that, through this research, by uncovering some of the 'silenced' aspects of polygamy as voiced by the novelists, I have helped to bring about changed attitudes on the part of men in South Africa when it comes to engaging in love relationships. I

also anticipate similar transformations in attitude on the part of women as they are also complicit in these unequal gender relationships. They should begin to realize that many women in our society are treated as sub-humans by their male counterparts. This may in part be attributable to early socialization, during which men are made to believe that they are of central significance in society and that they are entitled to become the active forces in society at large, while women are made to believe that their function is merely domestic. I believe that my research will help the people of South Africa, in this period of rapid transformation, to transform for the better in one very important area of life. Such change could bring a sense of human dignity and personal integrity to both sexes. Our society should no longer turn a blind eye to the plight of women in the types of selfish or exploitative love relationships reflected in the fictional works I have discussed in my dissertation.

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