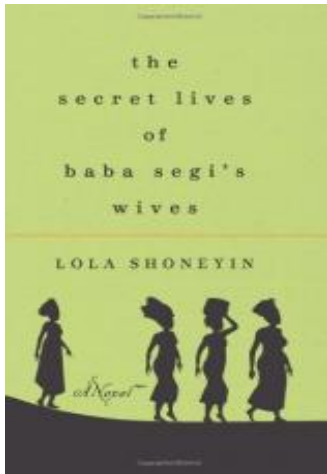


The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

by Lola Shoneyin



About the Book

When Baba Segi awoke with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife's childlessness.

Meet Baba Segi... A plump, vain, and prosperous middle-aged man of robust appetites, Baba Segi is the patriarch of a large household that includes a quartet of wives and seven children. But his desire to possess more just might be his undoing.

And his wives . . .

Iya Segi --- the bride of Baba Segi's youth, a powerful, vindictive woman who will stop at nothing to protect her favored position as ruler of her husband's home.

Iya Tope --- Baba Segi's second wife, a shy, timid woman whose decency and lust for life are overshadowed by fear.

Iya Femi --- the third wife, a scheming woman with crimson lips and expensive tastes who is determined to attain all that she desires, no matter what the cost.

Bolanle --- Baba Segi's fourth and youngest wife, an educated woman wise to life's misfortunes who inspires jealousy in her fellow wives... and who harbors a secret that will expose shocking truths about them all.

Discussion Guide

1. It is normal practice in Nigeria for wives to be known as 'Iya' followed by the name of their first child. 'Iya' in this context means 'mother of'. What does this say about the identity of women in a traditional Nigerian setting and how do

you think this might impact on women who are unable to produce children?

2. From the outset, the wives decide not to let Bolanle in on their secret, largely because her educational background makes them feel inferior. This turned out to be a disastrous decision on the wives' part. From your assessment of Bolanle's character, how do you think she would have reacted if she had been told?

3. Baba Segi insists on everyone in his household being present during 'family time'. Is this a normal occurrence in Western homes? Why do you think Baba Segi introduced this as part of the daily routine?

4. The circumstances that lead the different women to become Baba Segi's wives are very different. How much say did they have in the matter and what alternatives do you think were open to them? Did any of the wives make the right decision? What would you have done if you were in their situations?

5. The novel explores the issue of gender and how society defines a woman's role from childhood. To what extent does Iya Segi defy these set roles? And in what ways does she wield power over her family. Why do you think, after making more money than she could imagine, Iya Segi remained married to Baba Segi?

6. In the chapter, 'Rat Head', Baba Segi attempts to strangle Bolanle. This is out of character for a man who, in the beginning of the novel, said 'we must not manhandle our women'. What was it about this particular situation that led him to behave so irrationally? What does this tell you about the role of superstition and the fear of the supernatural in Nigerian society?

7. Although many people find Iya Tope to be passive, we learn from 'Iya Tope' that it is she in fact who goes through the most liberating internal changes. Do you agree? How important would you say sexual pleasure is for the different wives?

8. Iya Femi comes across as bitter and vengeful, even after her religious encounter. Would you say some of her actions are justified? To what extent did the death of her parents change her destiny?

9. In the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Bolanle did not love Baba Segi. Do you think her feelings towards him changed through the course of the novel? If the other wives had been more accommodating, do you think Bolanle would have endured the marriage? Would your answer be different if she had been able to 'give' Baba Segi a child?

10. Baba Segi loved his children dearly. He doted on every one of them, sent them to good schools and ensured that they lived comfortably. After discovering the 'secret' however, do you think his feelings towards his children changed? His reputation, ego or the physical presence of children in his household are all very important to Baba Segi but which is most important?

11. Some reviewers have stated that everyone 'won' in the end. Do you agree with this? Who, in your opinion, are the true victors?

Author Bio

Lola Shoneyin was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, but spent most of her childhood at boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland. She studied English at Ogun State University and lives in Abuja, Nigeria, where she teaches English and drama at an international school. She is married to Olaokun Soyinka, the son of Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka. They have four children and four dogs. Shoneyin reckons she could survive an entire year eating nothing but pineapples.

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