



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE POETICS OF DIALOGUE IN LOLA SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Karen S. DOGOH, Maasuur Demian DEAKAA

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Corresponding Email: karentor08@gmail.com

Received: 16/02/2026; Accepted: 29/06/2026; Published: 30/06/2026

Cite As:

Dogoh, K. S. & Deakaa, M. D. (2026). *Religious Pluralism and the Poetics of Dialogue in Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Journal of the University of Burundi – Humanities and Social Sciences Series, 23(1), pp 136-146. <https://doi.org/10.71105/rub.shs.2026.v23.n1.10>

Abstract

This paper, titled “Religious Pluralism and the Poetics of Dialogue in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*”, represents the interaction of multiple religious traditions within Nigerian society. The study investigates how the novel portrays religious pluralism and employs dialogic narrative techniques to depict the coexistence, tensions, and negotiations among Islam, Christianity, and indigenous spiritual beliefs. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis and thematic interpretation of the primary text. The study is anchored on a postcolonial theoretical framework, drawing particularly on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. These theoretical perspectives enable an examination of how multiple narrative voices reveal the cultural and ideological dynamics of religious interaction within the novel. The findings indicate that the novel portrays Nigerian religiosity as a hybrid cultural system shaped by historical encounters between indigenous traditions and imported religions. Religion functions both as a source of spiritual meaning and as a mechanism of social authority within the patriarchal household. The multi-voiced narrative structure creates a dialogic space in which diverse religious perspectives coexist, elevating the relationship between religion, gender relations, and strategies of survival in a patriarchal society. The study also reveals that Shoneyin employs religious pluralism as a literary strategy to critique social hypocrisy and expose contradictions between religious ideals and everyday realities. The study concludes that contemporary Nigerian fiction provides an important platform for examining religious diversity and cultural negotiation in postcolonial societies

Keywords: *Religious Pluralism, Postcolonial, Dialogism, Nigerian Fiction*

PLURALISME RELIGIEUX ET POÉTIQUE DU DIALOGUE DANS *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES* DE LOLA SHONEYIN

Résumé

Cet article, intitulé « Pluralisme religieux et poétique du dialogue dans *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* de Lola Shoneyin », met en lumière l'interaction entre diverses traditions religieuses au sein de la société nigériane. Cette étude examine la manière dont le roman dépeint le pluralisme religieux et utilise des techniques narratives dialogiques pour illustrer la coexistence, les tensions et les négociations entre l'islam, le christianisme et les croyances spirituelles indigènes. La recherche adopte une méthodologie qualitative fondée sur une analyse textuelle approfondie et une interprétation thématique du texte source. L'étude s'appuie sur un cadre théorique postcolonial, s'inspirant notamment du concept d'hybridité de Homi K. Bhabha et de la théorie du dialogisme de Mikhaïl Bakhtine. Ces perspectives théoriques permettent d'examiner comment la multiplicité des voix narratives révèle les dynamiques culturelles et idéologiques de l'interaction religieuse au sein du roman. Les résultats indiquent que le roman dépeint la religiosité nigériane comme un système culturel hybride façonné par les rencontres historiques entre les traditions autochtones et les religions importées. La religion fonctionne à la fois comme source de sens spirituel et comme mécanisme d'autorité sociale au sein du foyer patriarcal. La structure narrative à plusieurs voix crée un espace dialogique dans lequel coexistent diverses perspectives religieuses, mettant ainsi en lumière les liens entre la religion, les relations entre les sexes et les stratégies de survie au sein d'une société patriarcale. L'étude révèle également que Shoneyin utilise le pluralisme religieux comme stratégie littéraire pour critiquer l'hypocrisie sociale et mettre en évidence les contradictions entre les idéaux religieux et les réalités du quotidien. L'étude conclut que la fiction nigériane contemporaine offre une tribune importante pour examiner la diversité religieuse et la négociation culturelle dans les sociétés postcoloniales.

Mots-clés : *pluralisme religieux, postcolonialisme, dialogisme, littérature nigériane*

Introduction

Literature occupies an important place in society because it preserves cultural memory while interrogating social realities and human experiences. Beyond reflecting society, literature shapes public consciousness by questioning dominant ideologies and imagining alternative possibilities for social transformation. Ogundokun (2014) observes, literature derives its relevance from its close relationship with the society that produces it, while Ker (2004) argues that literary creation is inherently a moral and political act through which writers engage critically with their social environment. Consequently, literary texts provide valuable platforms for examining complex social issues, including religion and identity.

One of the most pressing issues represented in contemporary literature is religious pluralism. Increased globalisation, migration, and cultural interaction have intensified encounters among different religious communities, creating opportunities for dialogue as well as tensions arising from competing beliefs and identities. Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of diverse religious traditions within a society and the promotion of dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect among them. According to Eck (2006), pluralism is not simply diversity but the active engagement of diversity, while Appiah (2006) maintains that peaceful societies depend on the ability of people to coexist despite their differences.

The relevance of religious pluralism is particularly evident in Nigeria, where Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions have profoundly shaped national life. Although this diversity enriches the country's cultural landscape, it has also contributed to recurrent conflicts in which religious identities intersect with ethnic, political, and economic interests.

These realities have heightened the need for dialogue as a means of promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding.

Contemporary Nigerian writers have increasingly explored these concerns through fiction by portraying interactions among individuals from different religious backgrounds. Such representations frequently employ what Bakhtin (1984) describes as dialogism, where multiple voices and perspectives interact without allowing a single ideological position to dominate. This poetics of dialogue enables writers to challenge religious intolerance while emphasising shared humanity and ethical engagement. As Suhr-Sytsma (2022) notes, recent Nigerian fiction often depicts interreligious encounters in ways that foreground relationality and mutual understanding across religious divides.

Among the writers who engage these issues is Lola Shoneyin, whose novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* examines the intersections of religion, culture, gender, and identity within contemporary Nigerian society. The novel provides an appropriate context for investigating how dialogic strategies represent religious pluralism and promote intercultural understanding in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on an interpretive textual analysis of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the study examines representations of religious pluralism and the poetics of dialogue as they emerge through characters, narrative structure, and conversational exchanges.

The analysis is anchored in postcolonial theory, specifically Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural and ideological effects of colonialism, particularly the ways in which colonial histories continue to shape identities, beliefs, and social relations. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is especially relevant because it explains how different cultural and religious traditions interact, negotiate, and produce new forms of meaning within the postcolonial context. This framework is well suited to the Nigerian setting, where Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion coexist and frequently intersect.

The study also draws on Bakhtin's (1984) concept of dialogism to analyse the novel's multiple voices and perspectives. Together, hybridity and dialogism provide a framework for examining how the text represents religious diversity, cultural negotiation, and dialogue as means of challenging intolerance and promoting mutual understanding within Nigeria's pluralistic society.

Religious Pluralism and the Poetics of Dialogue in Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

Synopsis of The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives is a contemporary Nigerian novel that explores themes of polygamy, gender relations, patriarchy, sexuality, religion, and social hypocrisy within a Yoruba household. The story revolves around Baba Segi, a wealthy but semi-literate businessman living in Ibadan with his four wives and their children. The narrative unfolds through multiple perspectives, allowing each character to recount personal experiences while gradually exposing the hidden tensions and contradictions within the household.

The story begins with Baba Segi's marriage to his fourth and youngest wife, Bolanle, an educated university graduate whose arrival disrupts the established hierarchy among the wives.

Unlike the senior wives, Bolanle represents education, modernity, and a different social outlook. Consequently, Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi perceive her as a threat to their influence within the household. As the narrative progresses, each wife's hidden history is gradually revealed. Iya Segi's struggle against poverty transforms her into a calculating household leader; Iya Tope's traumatic experiences shape her dependence upon the family structure; while Iya Femi's outward religious devotion conceals resentment, insecurity, and hypocrisy. The central revelation that Baba Segi is infertile ultimately exposes years of deception, forcing each character to confront the realities that have sustained the family.

Bolanle's eventual decision to leave the household symbolises liberation from oppressive patriarchal structures and social hypocrisy. Through its multi-voiced narrative, the novel provides a rich exploration of the intersections between religion, culture, gender, and power in postcolonial Nigerian society, thereby offering an appropriate framework for examining religious pluralism and the poetics of dialogue.

Dialogue as a Medium of Cultural Negotiation and Social Harmony in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

Shoneyin employs dialogue as an important narrative strategy through which cultural values, social hierarchies, and interpersonal relationships are articulated and negotiated within the family. In the interaction between Baba Segi and Iya Segi, dialogue functions as more than a simple exchange of affection; it becomes a performative act that reinforces communal bonds and shared cultural expectations. Baba Segi affectionately remarks that: "Iya Segi, wife of my youth. Would I have breath if I had not married you?" Iya Segi responds: "May your breath be long, my lord. Where would I be if not for you?" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 9). The reciprocal nature of this conversation reflects the dialogic structure that permeates the novel, where meaning emerges through interaction rather than monologue. The narrator further observes that the couple were "ritually joined in this reciprocal admiration", emphasising how dialogue serves as a cultural ritual that sustains family cohesion. Within the context of religious pluralism, such moments demonstrate that social harmony in the novel is founded not merely on shared religious beliefs but also on communicative practices that enable individuals to recognise and affirm one another's social positions.

The exchange further illustrates Bakhtin's (1984) conception of dialogism, whereby meaning is generated through encounters among multiple voices rather than through a single authoritative discourse. Dialogue therefore becomes the mechanism through which relationships are continually negotiated within the household. Although the exchange appears harmonious, it simultaneously establishes the conditions for conflict, revealing that dialogue is capable of exposing tensions as well as sustaining communal life. This complexity becomes evident when Iya Femi interrupts the affectionate interaction because she cannot tolerate what the narrator describes as "their display of old-fashioned affection" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 9). Her interruption introduces another ideological voice into the narrative, illustrating that multiple perspectives coexist within the same domestic space. Rather than silencing dissent, the novel allows competing voices to interact, thereby reflecting the heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society.

Consequently, dialogue transcends ordinary conversation and becomes a literary strategy through which religious, cultural, and social differences are negotiated. Shoneyin (2010) demonstrates that peaceful coexistence depends not upon eliminating difference but upon sustaining communication among competing perspectives. Through these dialogic

encounters, the novel proposes that coexistence within plural societies is achievable only when individuals remain willing to engage one another despite ideological differences.

Religious Hybridity and Dialogic Negotiation of Belief System in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

Religious pluralism in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is further illustrated through moments of communal crisis where religious boundaries become porous and conventional doctrinal distinctions collapse before shared human emotions. The revelation of James Jerome's ritual murder of children provokes a collective response from members of Baba Segi's household, exposing the coexistence and interaction of multiple belief systems within the same social environment. Although Iya Femi publicly identifies as a devout Christian, her response departs from Christian teachings on forgiveness and instead invokes indigenous forms of spiritual cursing. She points at the television screen and declares: "May you not miss your way to Hell! May sleep possess you on the day Mercy is passing! May you leave your front door open on the day Death is on the prowl!" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 12). This utterance combines Christian imagery of Hell and Mercy with indigenous notions of wandering spirits, death, and supernatural punishment. The fusion of these religious expressions exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) describes as hybridity, whereby new cultural meanings emerge through the interaction of different traditions rather than through their strict separation.

The responses of the other wives further reinforce this religious hybridity. Iya Segi cries out: "Why? Why kill innocent children?" while Iya Tope clutches her stomach in visible distress (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 12). These reactions create a dialogic space in which moral outrage supersedes denominational boundaries. Ethical concern for justice and innocent human life becomes a shared language connecting characters from different religious orientations. Rather than emphasising religious divisions, the episode foregrounds common humanity and collective compassion. The interaction therefore demonstrates that religion in the novel functions not as a rigid system of isolated beliefs but as a dynamic arena where Christianity, Islam, indigenous spirituality, and communal ethics continually intersect. Through such dialogic exchanges, Shoneyin (2010) advances a poetics of dialogue that privileges empathy and shared humanity above sectarian identities. The novel thus reflects the realities of postcolonial Nigerian society, where religious identities frequently overlap and coexist through everyday social interactions.

Religious Pluralism and the Poetics of Dialogue in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

The novel further illustrates the relationship between religious pluralism and postcolonial hybridity through the tensions *between* indigenous Yoruba cultural practices and the lingering influence of colonial Christianity. Rather than presenting these traditions as mutually exclusive, Shoneyin (2010) portrays them as intersecting systems of belief that continually negotiate meaning within the lives of her characters. This interaction reflects Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, where cultural identities emerge through negotiation rather than through cultural purity. A significant example occurs when Bolanle accepts Baba Segi's marriage proposal despite his status as a polygamist. Her decision immediately generates opposition from members of her family, whose responses reveal competing understandings of religion, culture, and modernity. While Bolanle sees Baba Segi as a compassionate man, her family interprets her decision through Christian moral expectations and Western notions of respectable family life. Bolanle reflects: "You look at him in another light and see a large but kindly, generous soul" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 17). This observation demonstrates her willingness

to evaluate Baba Segi beyond prevailing social prejudices. Her perspective reflects an openness to indigenous cultural practices despite her educational background.

Her sister Lara immediately rejects the decision, exclaiming: "You want to marry a polygamist and be part of a big, ugly family? Mama will go crazy!" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 17). The statement illustrates how Christianity and Western notions of monogamy have become internalised as standards of social respectability. Polygamy is represented not merely as a cultural practice but as evidence of backwardness, thereby exposing the ideological tensions produced by colonial religious influence. The conflict becomes more explicit through Mama's reaction. Shoneyin (2010) writes:

Mama's reaction was predictable. She listened impatiently to my intentions and then said she would like to claw out the eyes of this man who had misled me. Just to hear him wail, she added. When she saw that I was unmoved, she tried her unique brand of persuasion. Your future will be futile and uninteresting, she said. Polygamy is for gold-diggers and bush-dwellers, not educated children brought up in a good Christian home. I thought this was funny because we'd never been churchgoers. Mama said it was shameful for a woman to go to church without her husband and Daddy said Sundays were supposed to be days of rest, as the Bible itself stipulated. (p. 17)

This reveals the selective appropriation of Christian discourse within a family that does not consistently practise Christianity. Mama invokes biblical authority and Christian respectability in order to reject indigenous marital practices, despite acknowledging that the family rarely attended church. Shoneyin (2010) therefore exposes the contradictions that often accompany postcolonial religious identities. From a postcolonial perspective, this clearly illustrates Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. Colonial Christianity has not replaced indigenous culture entirely but has become interwoven with existing social traditions, producing identities characterised by contradiction, negotiation, and ambivalence. Bolanle's refusal to abandon her decision demonstrates individual agency within this hybrid cultural space.

The narrative also exemplifies Bakhtinian dialogism through the coexistence of competing voices. Bolanle, her mother, and Lara each articulate different ideological positions regarding marriage, religion, education, and modernity. None of these perspectives is granted complete authority, allowing readers to engage critically with each position. Through this polyphonic structure, Shoneyin (2010) transforms domestic conversation into a broader reflection on religious pluralism and postcolonial identity. Consequently, the passage demonstrates that religious pluralism within the novel is not simply peaceful coexistence but an ongoing process of cultural negotiation shaped by colonial history, indigenous traditions, and contemporary social realities. Dialogue becomes the medium through which these competing perspectives interact, conflict, and occasionally reconcile.

Abrogation as a Subversive Strategy in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

The study further reveals that Shoneyin (2010) employs the postcolonial concept of abrogation to illustrate resistance against dominant systems of knowledge and authority. According to Ashcroft et al. (2007), abrogation involves rejecting the assumed superiority of colonial or dominant cultural values. Within the novel, this strategy is represented through the actions of the senior wives towards Bolanle, whose education symbolises Western modernity and elite knowledge.

Bolanle perceives herself as capable of enlightening the household. She laments the "dark side of illiteracy" and believes she can "bring light to their darkness" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 22). Her language unconsciously echoes colonial narratives that associated education with

civilisation and indigenous knowledge with ignorance. The senior wives reject this implied superiority through deliberate acts of resistance. Bolanle narrates: "They smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. I have often found missing pages from my novels in the dustbin, the words scribbled over with charcoal" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 22). These actions symbolically reject the authority of Western education. The books no longer function as sacred repositories of knowledge but become ordinary domestic objects stripped of their intellectual prestige.

The rejection becomes even more explicit when Bolanle offers to teach the wives to read. Rather than accepting her offer, Iya Femi tears the pages of the exercise books "to line the kitchen cupboards", mockingly suggesting that Bolanle could "crawl into the cabinets and teach the insects" if she wished (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 22). These responses exemplify abrogation as conceptualised by Ashcroft et al. (2007). Rather than accepting the superiority of formal education, the wives assert the value of their own lived experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. Their resistance demonstrates that dialogue within the novel is not always harmonious but frequently becomes a site of ideological contestation.

From the perspective of religious pluralism, this conflict illustrates how education, religion, and culture intersect in postcolonial society. Bolanle's modern educational values are associated with Christian-influenced notions of progress, while the co-wives defend practical knowledge rooted in traditional communal life. Through this conflict, Shoneyin (2010) exposes the limitations of dialogue when unequal power relations shape communication.

The episode therefore demonstrates that dialogue can reveal conflict as effectively as it promotes understanding. Nevertheless, the coexistence of competing voices remains central to the novel's poetics of dialogue, since every ideological position is allowed expression without complete narrative closure.

Mimicry and Otherness in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

The analysis further reveals that Shoneyin (2010) employs Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry alongside Edward Said's notion of otherness to expose the complexities of religious pluralism and social interaction within the novel. Rather than presenting religious identity as stable or absolute, the novel demonstrates that religion may be appropriated strategically to reinforce social hierarchies, legitimise exclusion, and negotiate power. Consequently, dialogue within the novel is not always a vehicle for reconciliation but also becomes a medium through which competing identities and ideologies are asserted.

Bhabha (1994) describes mimicry as the ambivalent imitation of dominant cultural forms, an imitation that simultaneously reproduces and destabilises authority. Within *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this concept is vividly represented through Iya Femi's adoption of evangelical Christianity. Having experienced poverty, betrayal, and emotional trauma, she embraces born-again Christianity and publicly performs the identity of a devout believer. The narrator observes that she had "proclaimed Jesus as her Lord and saviour" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 153). On the surface, this declaration suggests complete religious transformation. However, subsequent events expose a significant contradiction between her professed beliefs and her conduct.

When news of James Jerome's ritual killings is broadcast, Iya Femi immediately abandons the language of Christian forgiveness and compassion. Instead, she invokes a series of curses:

Iya Femi, who proclaimed Jesus as her Lord and saviour, didn't sound at all like a believer. She pointed at the spot where James Jerome's face had been and cursed, 'May you not miss your way to hell! May sleep possess you on the day Mercy is passing! May you leave your front door open on the day Death is on the prowl! (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 153).

This quotation demonstrates that her religious identity is profoundly hybrid. While her language incorporates Christian concepts such as "Hell" and "Mercy", it simultaneously invokes indigenous African spiritual traditions characterised by ritual curses, supernatural punishment, and ancestral cosmology. The coexistence of these expressions illustrates Bhabha's (1994) argument that colonial encounters generate hybrid identities rather than pure cultural replacements. Christianity has not erased indigenous beliefs but instead exists alongside them within the same individual consciousness.

At the same time, Iya Femi's performative Christianity functions as mimicry because it imitates the discourse of evangelical morality without fully embodying its ethical principles. Rather than promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, she employs religious language as an instrument of judgement and condemnation. Her imitation therefore becomes ambivalent, simultaneously affirming and undermining the authority of the religious system she professes to follow. The study further establishes that mimicry intersects with processes of otherness within the household. Said (1978) explains that otherness is produced through the construction of difference in ways that reinforce existing power structures. In Shoneyin's novel, Bolanle occupies precisely such a position. Her university education, urban background, refined manners, and inability to conceive children distinguish her from the senior wives, making her appear as an outsider whose presence threatens the stability of the household.

Consequently, the co-wives construct Bolanle as the "other." Rather than embracing her differences as enriching the family, they interpret her education and modern outlook as signs of arrogance and danger. Their hostility towards her is intensified by fears that she may expose their long-concealed deception concerning Baba Segi's infertility. Religion becomes one of several instruments through which this exclusion is legitimised.

Iya Femi's religious posturing therefore reinforces boundaries between herself and Bolanle. Her outward display of piety enables her to assume moral superiority while simultaneously excluding Bolanle from full acceptance within the household. Dialogue, instead of fostering understanding, becomes an arena where competing claims to moral authority are performed and contested. This episode also demonstrates the limitations of religious dialogue within plural societies. While the novel repeatedly emphasises communication as essential for coexistence, Shoneyin (2010) acknowledges that dialogue may also be distorted by prejudice, fear, hypocrisy, and unequal power relations. Genuine dialogue requires openness to alternative perspectives, yet many interactions within the household remain constrained by suspicion and competition.

Nevertheless, the novel's broader narrative structure ultimately resists monologic authority. Through its multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, and competing voices, the text allows readers to evaluate each ideological position independently. In this respect, Shoneyin (2010) remains faithful to Bakhtin's conception of dialogism. Although individual characters frequently fail to achieve genuine understanding, the narrative itself creates a dialogic space where conflicting religious, cultural, and ideological perspectives coexist without being reduced to a single authoritative truth.

In a nutshell, the analyses demonstrate that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* represents religious pluralism as a dynamic process of negotiation shaped by dialogue,

hybridity, mimicry, abrogation, and otherness. The novel neither idealises religious coexistence nor presents diversity as inherently conflictual. Instead, it portrays pluralism as a complex social reality in which communication remains indispensable despite persistent tensions arising from history, culture, religion, gender, and power.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* offers a sophisticated representation of religious pluralism through its deployment of dialogic narrative strategies and postcolonial cultural negotiation. Unlike many studies that foreground gender and patriarchy as the novel's primary concerns, the present analysis establishes that religion functions as an equally significant framework through which characters negotiate identity, power, morality, and communal belonging.

The textual analyses collectively reveal that dialogue constitutes the organising principle of the novel. Whether through affectionate exchanges between Baba Segi and Iya Segi, ideological disagreements surrounding Bolanle's marriage, communal responses to violence, or conflicts arising from education and religion, communication consistently becomes the medium through which competing values are expressed and negotiated. This finding strongly supports Bakhtin's (1984) conception of dialogism, which argues that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple voices rather than through the imposition of a singular authoritative perspective. Shoneyin's polyphonic narrative therefore reflects the complexity of contemporary Nigerian society, where diverse religious and cultural identities coexist within shared social spaces.

The analysis further confirms the applicability of Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity to the study of religious pluralism in Nigerian fiction. Throughout the novel, Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African religious traditions are represented not as isolated systems but as overlapping cultural formations continually reshaped through historical and social interaction. Characters simultaneously invoke biblical language, Islamic expressions, and indigenous spiritual beliefs, thereby demonstrating that religious identity in postcolonial Nigeria is fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent. This challenges rigid understandings of religious affiliation and highlights the lived realities of cultural coexistence.

Furthermore, the concepts of mimicry, abrogation, and otherness deepen understanding of the tensions that accompany religious pluralism. Iya Femi's performative Christianity illustrates how religious discourse may be appropriated to establish moral authority without necessarily transforming individual behaviour. Similarly, the co-wives' rejection of Bolanle's educational values demonstrates resistance to dominant systems of knowledge associated with colonial modernity. Bolanle's marginalisation further illustrates the processes through which difference is constructed and sustained within plural societies. Collectively, these findings indicate that religious dialogue does not occur in isolation but is continually influenced by broader questions of power, gender, class, education, and colonial history.

The study also demonstrates that Shoneyin (2010) neither romanticises nor dismisses religious pluralism. Instead, she presents dialogue as an ongoing process requiring continuous negotiation. Although prejudice, hypocrisy, and competition frequently undermine communication, the novel consistently suggests that shared human experiences family, suffering, motherhood, justice, and compassion provide common ethical grounds upon which genuine coexistence may be built. Consequently, the novel advances a poetics of dialogue that

privileges empathy, mutual recognition, and ethical engagement over dogmatism and sectarian exclusivity.

Overall, the study establishes that the combination of Bakhtin's dialogism and Bhabha's hybridity provides an effective theoretical framework for understanding the representation of religious pluralism in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Through these complementary perspectives, the novel emerges as a significant literary intervention in contemporary debates concerning religion, identity, and peaceful coexistence within postcolonial Nigerian society

Conclusion

This study concludes that Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* presents religious pluralism as a complex social reality in which Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous African beliefs continually interact and shape individual and communal identities. Through Bakhtin's dialogism and Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the novel demonstrates that dialogue serves as the principal means through which religious, cultural, and ideological differences are negotiated. The analysis further establishes that religion in the novel functions not only as a site of power, identity formation, and social contestation. Generally, Shoneyin advocates dialogue, empathy, and mutual recognition as essential for peaceful coexistence, while affirming the capacity of literature to foster intercultural understanding and challenge intolerance

Overall, this study argues that Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* makes an important contribution to contemporary Nigerian literature by presenting religious pluralism as a lived social reality characterised by negotiation rather than confrontation. Shoneyin (2010) demonstrates that despite persistent tensions arising from religious difference, colonial legacies, patriarchal structures, and cultural contradictions, peaceful coexistence remains possible when individuals engage one another through dialogue, empathy, and mutual respect. This study therefore contributes significantly to contemporary literary discourses on religion, postcolonial identity, and intercultural understanding, while reaffirming literature's capacity to imagine more inclusive and harmonious forms of communal life.

Conflict of Interest: None

Artificial Intelligence Use: None

References

- Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning yet on creation day*. Heinemann.
- Adogame, A. (2013). *The African Christian diaspora*. Bloomsbury.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. W. W. Norton.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. University of Minnesota Press
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge
- Eagleton, T. (2011). *Literary theory: An introduction* (Anniversary ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Eck, D. L. (2006). *A new religious America: How a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation* (2nd ed.). Harper One.

-
- Fanon, F. (2004). *The wretched of the earth* (R. Philox, Trans.). Groove Press.
- Kalu, O. (2007). *African Christianity: An African story*. University of Pretoria Press.
- Ker, D. I. (2004). *Literature and society: A writer's perspective*. Aboki Publishers.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.
- Nnaemeka, O. (1997). *The politics of (m)othering: Womanhood, identity and resistance in African literature*. Routledge.
- Ogundokun, A. B. (2014). Literature as a reflection of society: A sociological perspective. *International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–8.
- Ogundokun, S. A. (2014). Literature as a reflection on socio-political realities: An examination of three Nigerian writers. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(1), 167-175.
- Peel, J. D. Y. (2000). *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press
- PewResearchCenter. (2025, November 11). 5 facts about religion in Nigeria. www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/11/11/5-facts-about-religion-in-nigeria/pewresearch.org
- Shoneyin, L. (2010). *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*. William Morrow.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1985). "Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow sacrifice". *Wedge*, 7/8, 120–130.
- Stratton, F. (1994). *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Routledge.
- Suhr-Sytsma, N. (2022). Forms of interreligious encounter in contemporary Nigerian fiction. *African Studies Review*, 65(3), 542–560. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.24>
- Wa Thiongo, Ngugi. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heineman.