



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Theory and Criticism*

Depiction of polygamous marriage as an absurd social institution in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Nyathi's *The Polygamist*

Oira Joan¹, Jane Wakarindi¹ & Victor Ouno²¹Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya²Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Pwani University, Kenya

Correspondence: joankwambokaoira@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Polygamous marriage remains culturally sanctioned across many African societies, yet contemporary African fiction often presents it as an institution marked by contradiction, repetition and emotional strain. This study comparatively analyses Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Nyathi's *The Polygamist* (2012) to show how both texts represent polygamy as an absurd social institution. Drawing on Absurdist Theory, the study examines how Shoneyin and Nyathi use characterisation, irony, satire, multiple narrators, silence and fragmentation to expose the gap between institutional promise and lived experience. Using a qualitative, comparative and interpretive approach, the study finds that rivalry, silence and emotional endurance are structurally produced rather than incidental, and that polygamous marriage is shown to generate insecurity and unresolved conflict for both wives and patriarchs. The study argues that Absurdist Theory offers a useful framework for reading the philosophical and narrative incoherence of polygamy in contemporary African fiction.

KEYWORDS: absurdism, absurdity, repetition, silence, normalisation of suffering and polygamous marriage

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1. Introduction

Human beings continually seek order, meaning and fulfilment in the world they inhabit, yet life often unfolds in ways that resist such expectations (Camus, 1955). In many societies, individuals are drawn into institutions that are meant to offer stability, identity and belonging, but which instead become sites of contradiction and emotional strain (Esslin, 2001).

Polygamous marriage is one such institution. Although it is often upheld as a legitimate and culturally sanctioned marital arrangement in many African societies, its representation in contemporary African fiction frequently reveals a different reality: one shaped by rivalry, secrecy, emotional pain and unresolved tension (Adam, 2021; Kopf, 2022). Rather than offering harmony, it often becomes a field of competing desires and disappointed expectations. In this sense, literature presents polygamous marriage not simply as a domestic structure, but as a human experience marked by instability and contradiction.

A striking feature of polygamous marriage in fictional representation is its tendency toward repetition. The same patterns of conflict, suspicion, silence and emotional disappointment recur as though the characters are trapped in cycles that do not move toward resolution (Camus, 1955; Esslin, 2001). What begins as hope for companionship, status or family continuity often turns into a repeated experience of frustration and endurance. Women in such marriages are frequently shown negotiating the same injuries in different forms, while the patriarchal centre of the household often remains unchanged (Shoneyin, 2010; Nyathi, 2012). This repetition does not merely reflect domestic routine; it exposes the persistence of an unstable arrangement that continues despite its evident failures. The result is a domestic world where the same pain is lived, survived and inherited in different forms.

Silence is another defining feature of polygamous marriage as represented in African fiction. It appears in the unspoken grievances between co-wives, in the withheld truths within the household, and in the emotional restraint required for survival (Adam, 2021; Kopf, 2022). Characters often remain silent not because they have nothing to say, but because speech offers no protection and may even deepen their vulnerability. Silence therefore becomes both a response to pain and a sign of that pain itself. It marks the limits of communication within the domestic space and reveals how much suffering is normalised to keep the household functioning (Esslin, 2001). In this way, silence does not signify peace; rather, it reflects the emotional cost of maintaining a marriage structure that cannot fully acknowledge its own contradictions.

The normalisation of suffering is closely tied to this silence. In many polygamous households, pain becomes ordinary, and endurance becomes a measure of strength, maturity or womanhood (Camus, 1955; Uwakweh, 2017). What would otherwise be recognised as emotional damage is often absorbed into daily life and accepted as part of the marital condition. This normalisation is especially visible in fiction, where individuals continue to live within the very structures that wound them, often because of economic dependence, social pressure, children or cultural expectation (Giddens, 2004; Nyathi, 2012). The household therefore becomes a place where suffering is managed rather than resolved. It is this condition that gives polygamous marriage its tragic force in literature: the institution persists not because it is free of contradictions, but because those contradictions have been made liveable, familiar and socially acceptable.

2. Theory and Methods

This study is grounded in Absurdist Theory, a philosophical and literary framework that examines the tension between human beings' search for meaning and the irrational or indifferent systems within which they live (Camus, 1955). Emerging from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), the theory is built on the insight that human beings continually seek coherence, order and fulfilment, even when the structures they inhabit repeatedly frustrate those aspirations. Camus identifies this disjunction as the absurd condition, a state defined by the contradiction between expectation and reality, and by the persistence of individuals within systems that fail them (Camus, 1955). In literary studies, this idea was further developed by Samuel Beckett's circular dramatic vision and Martin Esslin's argument that absurdist texts expose institutions that claim to offer order while producing repetition, silence, fragmentation and unresolved conflict (Esslin, 2001). These principles make the framework especially useful for reading socially contradictory narratives.

Within this theoretical orientation, the study draws on key concepts that are central to the analysis of polygamous marriage in the selected texts. The absurd refers to the irreconcilable gap between expectation

and reality; persistence points to the continued inhabitation of irrational systems despite their evident failures; repetition captures the cyclical return of conflict without resolution; endurance describes the sustained participation in conditions that yield no fulfilment; normalisation refers to the transformation of suffering into ordinary domestic experience; and alienation marks the psychological dislocation that arises when personal dignity cannot be reconciled with institutional demands. These concepts are not treated as abstract philosophical terms detached from the texts, but as interpretive tools for examining how polygamous marriage is structured, narrated and emotionally lived in contemporary African fiction.

The study further applies the framework through five interconnected analytical tenets, and each tenet is central to the analysis of the novels. The contradiction between expectation and reality explains why polygamous marriage is presented as a source of harmony yet experienced as a site of rivalry and emotional strain. Repetition and cyclical suffering help trace the recurring conflicts, concealed affairs and unresolved tensions that structure both texts. Endurance within irrational systems clarifies why the women continue to remain in marriages that repeatedly wound them, while normalisation of suffering shows how pain becomes ordinary through silence, compromise and emotional restraint. Alienation and emotional fragmentation reveal how interiority, irony and narrative voice expose the struggle for coherent selfhood within an institution that denies it, while the fifth tenet, persistence within irrational systems, explains why the characters continue to inhabit and reproduce the very institution that frustrates them. Together, these tenets make the absurdity of polygamous marriage visible in the texts and support a comparative reading of both theme and narrative craft.

In the selected novels, polygamous marriage is represented as an institution that promises social order, familial continuity and domestic harmony, yet repeatedly produces rivalry, silence, emotional suffering and unresolved conflict. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Baba Segi's obsession with fertility, the wives concealed affairs, the hospital revelations and the armchair episode all expose a household held together by contradiction rather than harmony. In *The Polygamist*, Joyce's uncertainty, Essie's obscurity, Matipa's grief and Jonasi's repeated infidelity reveal the same pattern of emotional strain and institutional failure. The relevance of the framework lies in its capacity to explain why such contradictions persist and why characters remain within systems that continually fail them. Rather than viewing the domestic crisis in the two novels as an isolated marital malfunction, the study reads it as a structurally sustained condition in which harmony is continually deferred, and emotional damage becomes part of ordinary life. This makes absurdity not simply a thematic concern, but a defining logic of the marital worlds represented in the novels.

The comparative use of the framework also allows for a nuanced analysis of both convergence and difference in the representation of polygamous marriage across the two novels. While Shoneyin and Nyathi depict a shared structure of domestic incoherence, they do so through distinct narrative strategies and cultural inflections, which the study reads comparatively rather than reductively. Importantly, the framework is used as an analytical lens rather than a total explanation. It is therefore supplemented where necessary by attention to agency, emotional attachment, and material conditions, so that the texts are not flattened into a single philosophical category. In this way, Absurdist Theory provides a rigorous and productive basis for examining how contemporary African fiction represents polygamous marriage as a socially sanctioned institution whose internal contradictions generate tension, fragmentation, and enduring emotional dislocation.

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative literary research is appropriate for examining textual meanings, narrative patterns, and thematic structures because it relies on close reading, interpretation, and systematic coding to generate context-sensitive insights relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary data are drawn from *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist*, while secondary data consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical works on polygamy, absurdity, gender, and African literary studies. These secondary sources support contextualisation, theoretical grounding, and interpretive depth, while also enabling scholarly triangulation of the findings (Silverman, 2017).

Data collection proceeds through several structured stages. First, the two novels are read closely and independently to establish a comprehensive understanding of their narrative structure, characterisation, language use, and thematic concerns. This stage enables immersion in each text before comparison begins, preserving the distinctiveness of each novel and avoiding premature generalisation. Such immersion is central to qualitative inquiry because it strengthens contextual sensitivity and interpretive depth (Patton, 2015). A

thematic coding guide is then developed to organise the analysis around categories derived from the study's focus, including contradiction, repetition, silence, emotional endurance, rivalry, and psychological dislocation. A data extraction framework is also used to record relevant excerpts, codes, and interpretive notes, thereby enhancing transparency and consistency in the analytical process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

In the second stage, relevant textual excerpts are identified and extracted from both novels according to their relevance to the research questions and analytical categories. These excerpts include dialogue, narrative description, internal monologue, and symbolic representation. Attention is paid to the textual construction of silence, whether through omission, withholding, restraint, or unresolved speech, since silence functions as an important narrative mechanism in both texts, though in different ways. The study also tracks rivalry between co-wives, examining how it appears through confrontation in some instances and through tension, avoidance, or unspoken competition in others.

The third stage involves thematic coding and comparative interpretation. The researcher applies the coding guide through repeated readings of both texts in order to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and narrative strategies. Thematic analysis is used because it offers a systematic yet flexible way of identifying patterns within qualitative data while remaining sensitive to literary and contextual nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage makes it possible to compare shared features, such as emotional endurance as a survival strategy, alongside differences in narrative voice, agency, and interiority. Shoneyin's characters frequently speak directly about their emotional lives, whereas Nyathi's characters are often represented through behaviour, gesture, and silence, requiring the reader to infer emotional experience from narrative cues rather than explicit confession.

Overall, the study relies on close reading, structured coding, and cross-textual interpretation to generate credible and analytically rich findings. Because the primary sources are published literary texts, no fieldwork or human participants are involved. The method is therefore suited to examining how the two authors represent polygamous marriage as an institution sustained despite its emotional and psychological contradictions, and how their literary strategies converge in some respects while diverging in others.

3. Analysis

Data are drawn from close critical reading of both novels, guided by the five tenets of Absurdist Theory. The analysis examines how polygamous marriage is represented as an absurd social institution, compares the narrative strategies each author employs to depict its irrationality, and demonstrates how rivalry, silence and emotional endurance function as narrative expressions of institutional contradiction. Textual evidence is presented within quotation marks and discussed in relation to existing scholarship on African literary criticism and absurdist theory.

3.1 Narrative Expressions of the Contradictions Inherent in Polygamous Marriage

In contemporary African fiction, polygamous marriage is often represented as a domestic institution that promises harmony, continuity and collective belonging while simultaneously producing rivalry, silence and emotional strain. This contradiction is central to the fictional worlds of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist*, where the domestic space is shaped by unequal distributions of affection, authority, economic support and recognition. In such settings, co-wives are often positioned in subtle or overt competition for a husband's attention and for access to material and emotional security. The resulting tensions are not merely interpersonal; they are structurally embedded in the polygamous arrangement itself, which makes it difficult for all members of the household to experience equal belonging or stable intimacy.

A recurring consequence of this structure is rivalry, which emerges when wives, children or sub-households compete for limited resources, favour or inheritance. In many polygamous families, children may also become implicated in these struggles, particularly where educational opportunities, emotional support, or financial assistance are unevenly distributed. Such disparities can generate resentment not only among wives but also among siblings, thereby fragmenting the household into competing loyalties rather than a unified family identity. The novels under discussion expose this dynamic by showing that the family, instead of functioning as a coherent unit, often becomes a site of internal division in which individuals are compelled to negotiate their position within a hierarchy of privilege and neglect.

Silence is another key expression of contradiction in polygamous marriage. In both novels, what remains unsaid is often as significant as what is spoken, especially where issues such as jealousy, infertility, infidelity, neglect or favouritism are concerned. Family members frequently suppress open confrontation to preserve appearances, protect children, or avoid the social shame associated with marital breakdown. Yet this silence does not resolve conflict; rather, it preserves it, allowing emotional injury to persist beneath the surface of domestic respectability. In this way, silence becomes a mechanism through which the institution sustains itself, even as it continues to generate unresolved tension and psychological discomfort.

The persistence of emotional endurance further reveals the contradictions embedded in polygamous marriage. Wives may remain in emotionally unsatisfying relationships because of economic dependence, cultural obligation, religious commitment, or concern for children, while husbands may continue maintaining multiple households in spite of financial strain and recurring domestic tension. This endurance is not simply passivity; it reflects the difficult reality of inhabiting an institution that offers limited alternatives and often normalises suffering as part of marital life. The result is a domestic arrangement in which individuals repeatedly invest in a structure that continually disappoints them, thereby making endurance itself a defining feature of the marital experience.

It is this contradiction that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist* deliberately foreground through their depictions of rivalry, silence and emotional endurance. Both novels expose polygamous marriage as an institution whose promise of stability is repeatedly undermined by the very tensions it produces. By representing these recurring patterns, the texts show that the domestic conflicts within polygamy are not accidental but structurally generated. In doing so, they reveal the deep incoherence of an institution that seeks to preserve family order while repeatedly creating the conditions of domestic fracture.

3.2. Rivalry as a Narrative Expression of Institutional Contradictions

One of the most visible contradictions in polygamous marriage is its failure to deliver the stability, harmony and companionship it promises. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (Text I) and *The Polygamist* (Text II), the domestic space is repeatedly depicted as one marked by rivalry, insecurity, silence, and emotional strain rather than mutual support. In Text I, the opening of the household after Bolanle's arrival immediately reveals this instability: 'Bolanle should have known how much her arrival would change our household. I remember the very day she stepped foot in this house because it was our sharing night...' and 'Iya Femi's head was hot. She wanted the blood of this new wife...' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 40). The 'armchair' episode further exposes this incoherence, when 'Baba Segi had broken his rule for Bolanle,' only for Iya Segi to manipulate events so that 'Bolanle's armchair was returned to the store the next day' (Shoneyin, 2010, pp. 44-45). These moments show that even ordinary domestic objects become sites of contestation in a structure that should have produced shared belonging.

Nyathi's *The Polygamist* presents the same instability through the lived experience of the wives, each of whom inhabits a separate household yet remains bound to the same emotional and structural uncertainty. Joyce's narration makes this clear when she says, 'Four wives later and yes I was still married to Jonasi Gomora... I guess it depends which way you look at it' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 5), a statement that captures the uncertainty at the heart of the institution. Her later admission that 'We were happy in that one-roomed home' before material success became emotional decline (Nyathi, 2012, p. 8) reinforces the irony that polygamy's outward signs of achievement do not translate into domestic fulfilment. The same incoherence appears in her response to Jonasi's betrayal: 'The scent on his body filled my nostrils. The mark of another woman imprinted on him' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 13), followed by the painful realisation that she must endure what she cannot change.

This contradiction becomes more explicit in the way both texts represent emotional endurance. In Shoneyin's novel, the wives survive through concealment, compromise and strategic silence, while in Nyathi's text Joyce endures because of emotional attachment, children and the weight of years invested in the relationship. When Jonasi tells her, 'Somebody has to make the money around here... you would be out on the streets crawling' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 15), the emotional and economic coercion sustaining the marriage becomes unmistakable. Likewise, the eventual exposure of repeated deception in Text I, 'I misled them... they were desperate to be fruitful' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 168) reveals that endurance in polygamous marriage is not a natural virtue but a response to an institution that has made honest fulfilment impossible.

The pattern of repetition is equally important. In Shoneyin's text, Baba Segi moves from 'herbalists and prophets' to the 'hospital' in an endless attempt to solve Bolanle's childlessness, while the older wives repeat secret affairs in response to a structure that cannot satisfy their emotional or bodily needs. Iya Tope's confession, 'Even when my belly was rounded, I continued to go to him. I couldn't help myself' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 67) and Iya Femi's outcry, 'All these years, wasted!' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 126), show how the same frustrations recur without resolution. In Nyathi's novel, repetition appears through Jonasi's recurring infidelity, as seen in Matipa's admission that 'that was how it all began' after 'the picture of Joyce flying off' the desk (Nyathi, 2012, p. 20), and in Lindani's encounter, where he slips 'his business card into my gaping cleavage' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 68). These repeated patterns confirm that the institution reproduces its own instability rather than correcting it.

Ultimately, both texts present polygamous marriage as an institution whose internal logic creates the very problems it claims to prevent. Rather than functioning as a space of unity, it becomes a structure of rivalry, secrecy and emotional exhaustion. Text I exposes this through the rivalry among co-wives, the politics of domestic objects, fertility anxieties and concealed sexual relationships; Text II does so through Joyce's emotional endurance, Jonasi's repeated betrayals, and the separation of wives into unstable domestic units. Together, the two texts demonstrate that the contradictions of polygamous marriage are not incidental but structural, and that the institution remains sustained even as it continually generates the suffering it promises to avoid.

3.3. Silence as a Narrative Expression of Institutional Failure

Silence in the selected novels functions as more than the absence of speech; it is a strategic form of concealment through which characters manage the contradictions of polygamous marriage. In both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist*, silence becomes central to the survival of the household because it protects truths that would otherwise expose the incoherence of the institution. The suppression of knowledge, grievance and emotional truth is therefore not incidental but structurally significant, allowing the domestic order to persist even while it remains deeply fractured.

In Text I, silence is most powerfully represented through the long concealment of Baba Segi's infertility and the true paternity of the children. For years, the wives preserve this secret because the institution makes truth unspeakable, and when Iya Segi finally speaks at the hospital, even her confession remains indirect: 'Yam cannot cook itself. It needs a careful hand that will slice it and expose it to raging heat' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 162). The metaphor captures the extent to which the household has normalised concealment, making direct speech difficult even at the point of revelation.

The silence surrounding the poisoning plot reinforces this same institutional logic. After Segi's death, the wives' concern is not moral reckoning but containment of disclosure: 'How do we know that she will not tell her father what you said? Since she's been back from the hospital, she refuses to eat unless her father is seated before her. And who knows what she may tell Bolanle? Or have you forgotten that they sleep together?' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 158). Here, silence operates as a survival strategy, a way of managing risk within a household where truth would destabilise the fragile structure that sustains it. Even when Baba Segi finally confronts the revelations, his attention remains selective, focusing on infertility rather than on the conspiracy among the wives, which shows how silence continues to shield the institution from total exposure.

In Text II, silence is more individualised but equally revealing of institutional failure. Essie's position is particularly significant because her very existence is marginalised within the hierarchy of the marriage: 'Not many people know about me. Even Joyce doesn't know about me. I am the fat second wife who lives in obscurity in the location away from the high life' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 48). Her silence is not voluntary; it is imposed by a structure that makes her peripheral and socially invisible. She recognises that Jonasi has never taken her beyond the township: 'He wouldn't. Jonasi had never taken me anywhere outside this township. I guess I could have taken myself somewhere...' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 47). This resigned reflection shows silence as the language of a woman who understands that speaking would not alter the institution's logic.

Matipa's experience gives silence its most disturbing form in the novel. After Jonasi beats and rapes her, she does not confront him directly or demand accountability; instead, she turns to prayer: 'Every night I got down on

my knees and prayed he would not come around again and my prayers were answered' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 98). Her silence reflects the lack of a safe or meaningful channel through which she can name the violence she has suffered. The institution, reinforced by patriarchal authority, leaves her with prayer and disappearance as her only available responses. Silence here is not weakness but the consequence of an order that renders direct speech dangerous and ineffective.

Across both texts, silence emerges as one of the clearest narrative signs of institutional failure. In Text I, it is collective and conspiratorial, sustaining a household built on deception; in Text II, it is isolated and self-protective, marking the invisibility and vulnerability of women whose pain cannot be publicly voiced. In both novels, silence does not preserve harmony; it preserves contradiction. The institution survives not because it resolves its tensions, but because it teaches those within it how to conceal them.

3.4. Emotional Endurance as a Narrative Expression of the Absurd Condition

Emotional endurance, in the context of this study, refers to the continued inhabitation of an institution that repeatedly frustrates human expectation, even when its failure is fully recognised. It is not ignorance that sustains such endurance, but the structural difficulty of leaving an arrangement in which the costs of exit are greater than the costs of remaining. In both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist*, endurance is therefore not presented as virtue alone; it is also the human burden of living within a system whose internal logic makes suffering persistent and exit complicated.

In Text I, emotional endurance is visible from the earliest moments of the household and deepens as the contradictions of the marriage are exposed. Iya Tope endures fear, humiliation and domestic hostility, fully aware of the hostility directed at her: 'Iya Segi spoke sourly of me and referred to me as *apoda*, the stupid, slothful one, behind my back. Tope, my daughter, told me so. It would not surprise me if they were plotting to throw me and my daughters into a well' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 68). Despite this knowledge, she remains in the household, absorbing the threat because the institution offers no safer or more dignified alternative. Baba Segi's dismissive statement that a 'daughter can never be like a son... Only a son can become a true heir' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 68) intensifies that endurance by making her domestic value conditional and fragile.

Iya Femi's endurance is even more clearly tied to emotional deprivation. After Tunde relocates to the United States, she loses the private emotional refuge that had helped her survive the household's instability: 'I am alone in this world, and it is now that I know that I am an orphan. I have no one. Who will I speak to? Who will I walk with? Iya Tope does not want to know me and Iya Segi is mad with grief' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 126). The word 'orphan' is especially significant because it captures not only loneliness but the sense that the institution promised family and has delivered abandonment instead. Yet she remains within the household, continuing to endure what she knows to be emotionally ruinous.

Baba Segi himself becomes a striking figure of endurance after the revelation that the household is built on deception. Instead of dissolving the arrangement, he reinforces it: 'He promptly banned them from leaving the house without his permission. Iya Segi was instructed to close all her shops and relinquish every kobo she had saved to him. Iya Femi was forbidden to wear makeup, and there would be no more church' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 184). His response is absurd precisely because it shows a patriarch who, confronted with institutional collapse, chooses to intensify control rather than question the system. The institution survives by absorbing the revelation and continuing under stricter conditions.

Bolanle's departure offers a necessary counterpoint to this endurance. She tells Baba Segi that there is no point in remaining if she cannot give him children, yet her internal reflection reveals a deeper crisis of selfhood: 'Of course, I could not tell him that I felt as if I had woken up from a dream of unspeakable self-flagellation. It started a few days after Segi died. I would walk through the house and feel like I was amid strangers, people from a different time in history, a different world. I did not feel soiled anymore' (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 184). Her leaving demonstrates that endurance is not the only possible response, but the fact that she must carry guilt for consequences produced by the institution shows how deeply its damage reaches.

In Text II, emotional endurance is distributed across the women and even Jonasi himself, each character

embodying a different aspect of institutional suffering. Matipa's grief is immediate and intense: 'They say big girls do not cry, but I promise you I howled the night of that anniversary party. I think I must have cried so hard I woke up the neighbours' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 37). Her crying exceeds the private boundaries that the institution tries to impose, yet she remains in the arrangement. Joyce's endurance is expressed more productively, through self-construction: 'That is when I decided to go back to school. I had my O-level certificate, so I decided to do my A levels. So I registered at Speciss College and became a student' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 82). She cannot control Jonasi's behaviour, but she can create an identity outside his betrayals, even though the marriage itself remains unchanged.

Joyce's endurance becomes even more poignant when she remains to care for Jonasi in his final illness: 'Sometimes when I was alone I would cry. It was hard not to. Our story was not supposed to end this way. 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, p. 132). Her endurance is not passive submission; it is a painful persistence shaped by love, memory and accumulated investment. Yet the phrase 'our story was not supposed to end this way' also captures the absurd gap between expectation and reality that the institution has maintained from the beginning.

Essie's endurance is marked by material deprivation once Jonasi's decline removes even the limited support he had offered: 'My life had become extremely difficult. I no longer received a salary. My car was no longer serviced. Jonasi even stopped paying school fees for Blessing. On some nights I had almost gone to bed without food, and you know I am on medication and I cannot afford not to eat' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 142). Her experience shows that the institution never offered secure belonging, only conditional provision. When the provision disappears, the fragility of her position is fully exposed.

Jonasi's own reflection in the epilogue provides the novel's most direct acknowledgement of the cost of endurance within the institution: 'Men envied me when I had her on my arm, which was good because towards the end there was nothing enviable about me. I had lost everything I had worked for. My business had gone down the drain. My family life had followed suit. Even my own kids did not respect me. To top it off, Joyce had stopped loving me' (Nyathi, 2012, p. 147). His words confirm that the institution consumed rather than fulfilled him. The status it promised became the vehicle of his collapse, leaving him with loss rather than meaning.

Across both texts, emotional endurance emerges as the human response to an institution that repeatedly produces disappointment, insecurity and pain. In Text I, endurance takes the form of fear, silence, adaptation and guilt; in Text II, it appears as grief, self-reconstruction, conditional belonging and final exhaustion. The women endure because the institution makes leaving costly, while the patriarchs endure because the institution has become the only structure through which they can continue to define themselves. In both novels, therefore, endurance is not a sign that the institution works; it is the clearest evidence that it does not.

4. Conclusion

Polygamous marriage in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *The Polygamist* emerges as a fundamentally incoherent institution sustained by contradiction, repetition, silence and emotional endurance. In both novels, the promise of domestic harmony is continually undermined by rivalry among co-wives, unequal distributions of power and affection, concealed truths, and the repeated failure of the marital structure to produce stability. Baba Segi's infertility, the wives' deceptions, Jonasi's repeated infidelity, and the women's ongoing emotional labour all reveal an institution that survives not because it fulfils its promises, but because those within it are compelled to remain despite its failures.

Absurdist Theory offers a productive lens for reading these contradictions because it exposes the gap between what polygamous marriage promises and what it produces. The two texts show that the institution cannot be reformed from within, since its problems are not accidental but structural, reproduced through the same cycles of expectation and disappointment. Silence conceals failure, repetition sustains it, and endurance becomes the human cost of remaining inside it. Read together, the texts present polygamous marriage as an absurd social form whose internal logic continually generates the very suffering it claims to organise.

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