



The Secret Lives of the Four Wives

By Lola Shoneyin
ISBN: 9780061946387

Questions for Discussion

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 that 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 lives. 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?