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**EVERYDAY STORIES AND UNTOLD TALES OF INFERTILITY:
A LITERARY EXAMINATION OF AYOBAMI ADEBAYO'S
*STAY WITH ME***

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Abstract

Matters concerning infertility mostly hinge on societal narratives. This has led to a lot of misconceptions which have had great influence in the lives of people and society at large. Several literary works have given space to issues of infertility and have highlighted pertinent issues that have received too much or little attention from society. In this paper, using a qualitative methodological approach, disturbing discoveries concerning how the issue of infertility is handled in African societies have been made from Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, highlighting the fact that all accusing eyes turn to the woman when the home is void of a child and the position men assume in such instances. Leaning on the theories of feminism and masculinity, this study seeks to expose the neglected aspect of infertility by highlighting the gaps in the ways infertility issues are handled in African societies and contributing to the knowledge bank of academia.

Keywords: African societies, feminism, infertility, masculinity

Introduction

Infertility is a topic that is mostly explored and interrogated in African literary works yet begs for a conversation in African society. Yeboah, Otoo, Gyimah Manu and Freitas (2022) assert that novelists “write to reflect the socio-political cultural conditions of their societies” (p. 206) hence “the need for corrective measures” (Yeboah et al., 2023, p. 8) on issues that are mostly glossed over. There have been many misconceptions about infertility which have led to the oppression of the female gender in African societies and our literary works bear testament to this fact. Received view has it that in ancient mythology, the colour green represents fertility of the earth and women. The earth is addressed with the pronoun, “she/her” because it is believed that she mothers mankind and all living things. From this, a conclusion can be drawn that society, since time immemorial, has made childbirth and fertility a women's issue without paying attention to other factors. For instance, when a piece of land does not produce vegetation, it is assumed to be barren. Environmental



factors and, in some cases, conditions of the seeds planted on them are ignored. The same applies to women after they have been married for a year or more and are unable to give birth. Their partners rarely suffer any blame because it has become women's duty to carry all of it since childbirth is considered the primary responsibility of women. Thus, all issues of fertility—especially, the negative ones—are traced back to them. Harrison (1991) in *The Libation Bearers* opines that “Yea, summon Earth, who brings all things to life and rears, and takes again into her womb” (p. 45). Just as Earth has been addressed with its responsibility of reproducing, it would have to bear the consequence of its reverse outcome. The same thing happens to every woman. Clearly, what the world thinks is that the one who carries the womb automatically deals with all issues of infertility. Barnes (2014), a medical practitioner, in her article about why women bear the brunt of childbirth, opines that men are blurred out of the picture when infertility crises arise. She states:

As I discovered during the research for my book, *Conceiving Masculinity: Male Infertility, Medicine, and Identity*, men are rendered invisible in our collective imagination when it comes to reproduction. When a woman can't get pregnant, she assumes something is wrong with her. How could she not when so many books and websites about conceiving are geared toward women? (p. 1).

From Barnes' perspective, women are made to feel inadequate for not being able to conceive and this truth has been well established. No one considers the men—not the women, not society. Male infertility sounds so strange to the African community whenever it is mentioned. It always almost appears to seem impossible to them. Barnes (2014) further discusses how society plays a role in making it seem unheard of to associate a man with infertility, “as other scholars have pointed out, when a woman gets pregnant, the man gets the credit. When a woman can't get pregnant, it's her fault. We live in a culture dedicated to celebrating male virility and protecting masculinity.” (p. 1). Here, Barnes explicitly states the inarguable truth about infertility and the extent to which it has been ingrained in the minds of people making it possible to be deemed as a “culture”. This gives credence to the assertion that “in Africa, childbirth is recognized as a woman's number one duty” and not particularly the man's. (Yeboah, 2012, p. 24).

After pointing this out, Barnes reveals that women and men alike can have infertility problems. In the medical world, she considers this ailment common in both genders. However, she indicates that women are always in the spotlight because society has made it so. She posits that:

Cultural assumptions about women's reproductive responsibilities have shaped medical science and the medical system. Although male infertility is as common as female infertility, we live in a world where there are more practitioners and technologies focused on treating women than assessing and treating men. (p. 1).

Hence, Barnes gives further proof of the pressure that women are subjected to, directly or indirectly when childbirth is concerned. The injustice meted out to women when they are unable to conceive is heartbreaking. More so, the fact that

science, the only body that could have served as their place of refuge and a haven to free them of society's bondage, has taken comfort in the dictates and expectations of society makes it a losing battle.

In addition, Greil et al. (2010) posit that in developing countries, a category in which most African countries fit in, “biomedical interpretations of infertility coexist...with traditional interpretations”. (p. 152). Much thought is not given to women: whether their bodies are strong enough to house a baby or not, whether their living conditions permit that they reproduce, and whether giving birth is something they are passionate about or not. All that is expected is for them to have a baby pushed out of their womb and since men are not naturally known to possess this ability, women have to shoulder this task all by themselves. After all, the notable duty of a woman as required by society was stated by Justice Bradley in *Bradwell v. Illinois* (1873) that the “paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother.” Society, mostly women, does not see beyond the act of bringing forth a child from one's womb. They do not consider any other factor that contributes to childbearing. They are mostly concerned about getting a baby to grow inside their womb because that is what society expects of them as partial fulfillment of their rights to being women. This false notion has succeeded in leaving innocent women depressed and stigmatized because they are considered to be a “waste” and a disgrace to their families and society. The men's role in childbirth often goes unnoticed. It is sometimes assumed that in a marriage where couples deal with the delay in having children, the men are blameless and the fault is somehow the women's doing. In some extreme situations, the existence of the woman is seen to impede the man's life and she is sacked or treated as a disease, an omen even. The possibility that men can also be infertile is mostly overlooked as has been addressed in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. This recent study, therefore, seeks to examine how issues of infertility and their setbacks are laid at the doors of only women without any recourse to men.

Theoretical framework

Feminism and masculinity

Gamble (2001) posits that over the years feminism has been an evolving concept with different approaches. This explains the many misconceptions that have arisen as a result of the movement. Aside from the uneasiness associated with these misconceptions, in an interview with Bust Magazine, Bell Hooks on *The State of Feminism And How To Move Forward Under Trump* acknowledges that the society we find ourselves in does not favor feminism because patriarchy is what society knows, what society is used to and they are not ready to embrace the change that feminism advocates for, thus, the need to be interrogated.

It can, therefore, be seen that feminists endeavor to break what society considers to be the norm in patriarchal societies, focusing on the marginalized and subjugated women by becoming a voice for them. Patu and Antje Shrupp (2017) posit that “depending on the region of the world, the prevailing ideology, and the era: women may have, for example, fewer rights, less money, minimal experience of public life, and limited access to positions of power. Or—in emancipated societies—if they are considered to be ‘equals,’ they are still measured against a male norm.” (p. 35). Hence, feminism is targeted at breaking or dismantling the patriarchy. The aim of the “feminist voice” is to break down the patriarchal instincts

in society and free women from being continually subjected to being second fiddle to the man. Thus, literary works that have been written—mostly by female writers—in line with the feminist ideology give attention to women and address issues that concern women. Nasta (1991) confirms the importance of these female writings:

The postcolonial woman writer is not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centered ideologies and language, or in discovering new forms of language to express experience, but she has also to subvert and demythologize indigenous male writings and traditions that seek to label her. (p. 15)

The postcolonial woman writer also elevates women by placing them shoulder to shoulder with the male gender, who is mostly presented as society's prized possession. Female African writers therefore create a world where the female gender is not governed by prejudiced dogmas made by men to favour men. They create a world where the female gender is given the liberty to make rules and live by those rules without being influenced by any societal inclinations.

Semenya (2001) on *Joys of Motherhood*, asserts that “Emecheta strives to sensitize the readers to the exploitation of mothers. With increased mastery of structure and irony, she describes the humiliation and small joys of a poor, unappreciated Ibo mother. Emecheta analyses the state of mind of women valued for biology rather than their individuality.” (p. 6). Also, Yongue (1996) writes a review of Emecheta's works concerning this:

Like the staple of the Nigerian diet, the yam, which females of a household spend many hours of their lives pounding vigorously into meals for the families, the woman is pounded by the culture into a distortion of her womanly and differentiated self and, like the yam. Ironically, becomes an inadequate source of nourishment for herself and her family. In the ordinary Nigerian household, it is, of course, the mother who teaches the skill of yam pounding to her daughters; so in Emecheta's continuing irony, it is the mother who grooms daughters for this other substantive truth. She instructs her daughters how to pound themselves into a smooth pap, their bodies—the feminine principle embodied—served up to and devoured by patriarchy. (p. 76)

From Yongue's review, it is evident that female writers, particularly Emecheta, write to accurately portray the happenings around them. Female writers show how subjugated women are and provide them ways of escapism since unlike the male writers, they can relate to the issues that affect these women. Adebayo heavily relies on feminism and masculinity to educate the patriarchal African societies about the inhumane acts meted out to women.

However, we simply cannot deny the effect that these strong patriarchal sentiments in society have on men themselves. For some time now, viewing patriarchy from the feminist lens has almost presented it as an advantageous means for men to dominate and glorify themselves on a pedestal reserved for them as a birthright—a prerogative Moril (1985) describes as “men's unearned privileges” (p. 11). A keen observation and interrogation into the received perspective of the

widely accepted standard for men has revealed horrendous consequences that the elevated perception of men's excellence and state have had them. This has birthed an emerging concept, masculinity, which seeks to question the power, the rules, and the ideas that seem to be the embodiment of manliness.

Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This suggests that society plays a crucial role in defining what must or must not be considered as the makeup of a man. These definitions are mostly culture-centered and not biologically oriented. Because of these rigid categories and expectations that society has directly or indirectly stipulated for the male gender, individuals who do not fit or meet certain criteria find it hard to embrace their deficits and accept themselves as they are. This is reaffirmed by (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001) that masculinity and male behaviors are not the simple product of genetic coding or biological predispositions. All societies have cultural accounts of gender. In African societies, males are burdened with the task of being breadwinners, sterile, strong, and assertive to have the befitting masculine qualities to assume their positions as the "heads" of the female gender. Hence any trait that cannot be found in the ideal traditional masculine view forces men in African society to exhibit traits that are mostly toxic to the wellbeing of women and even detrimental to themselves as a means of defending their manliness and letting go of their frustration. Evidence of troubles men are made to face due to societal principles governing their masculinity will be examined in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* and how they contribute to the instability at home and infertility as a woman's issue would be revealed.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Babbie (2005) as quoted by Yeboah et al. (2022) defines this approach as one that allows researchers to critically observe and examine data and offer a detailed description of it. Also, the paper focused on finding the "why" rather than the "what" of the social phenomenon that motivates the study. The novel, *Stay with Me* (2017) by Ayobami Adebayo was the primary source of data for this paper. Other significant information was gathered from the internet, academic journals, and articles that relate to the focus of the study. In the analysis of the concept of infertility, feminism, and masculinity theories have been employed to further situate the soundness of the arguments.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Synopsis of "Stay with Me"

Goyal (2017) succinctly describes the novel, *Stay With Me* (2017) as "a mother's plea for her dying children, and a husband's plea for a dying marriage." (p. 1). The two main characters, Yejide and Akin, experience a sense of longing as both of them plead with their loved ones to remain by their sides despite the many complications in their lives. The beautiful marriage of a middle-class couple with reputable occupations ends in shambles after enduring four years of childlessness.

After being forced to take extreme measures to bring forth children, Yejide and Akin get separated after the intrusion of the seemingly well-meaning women, societal pressure, and norms. Akin is indifferent about their childless situation but society forces him to make tough decisions just to make sure his family's lineage is preserved.

Discussion

Infertility and patriarchy in the family and society

In *Stay With Me*, Adebayo remarkably tackles the issue of fertility and patriarchy by leaving no stone unturned in her quest to bring the attention of society to a very crucial factor that is rarely considered when the question of infertility is raised in childless homes. Adebayo breaks the status quo by presenting a male character, Akin as infertile in her novel, *Stay With Me*. She brilliantly exposes how biased society is about fertility and condemns the unjust treatment women are subjected to. This twist in the everyday stories about childlessness is revealed in the latter part of the novel. Before readers dive deeper into the story to find out the root cause of the dilemma that destroys the undiluted love between Akin and Yejide, Adebayo skilfully exposes the ignorance of society with the use of plot in her novel. She arranges the sequence of events in a way that takes us from the known to the unknown or better put, the overlooked aspect of fertility.

Right from the first chapter, Adebayo introduces Yejide as a barren woman and mentions how unperturbed Yejide's audience is when she tells them about the unjust aspect of her story. No one is interested in the life of a woman who has been neglected by her husband because she is unable to conceive after some years of marriage. Society finds it normal for a childless woman to be ignored so Yejide's account of her story gets accepted without questioning or any show of concern, "I only tell a slice of the story: I was barren and my husband took another wife. No one has ever probed further, so I've never told them about my children." (p. 10). Unlike the stories of infertile men, stories of infertile women are so familiar that they do not arouse any kind of curiosity. This is so because society finds it strange to hear of a man who cannot reproduce and mainly men who have complications with reproduction are barely talked about and made known. If Yejide had told her audience about how she had left her marriage after finding out about her husband's inability to reproduce, a lot of questions would have been asked. Just like how Yejide's children are hidden from her audience, Adebayo reserves the startling twist of her story in the latter part of the novel. Akin's infertility only gets discovered when one reads further and does not conclude with the knowledge they gain from the first part of the novel. With this, Adebayo appears to send across a message that women always get tagged as infertile because no one makes an effort to dig deeper to find the source of childlessness in many homes. When Yejide finally sets off to find answers, she says, "The road stretches before us, shrouded in a darkness transitioning into dawn..." (p. 12). Adebayo employs such a figurative expression to show how bittersweet the quest to know and find out more about a situation can be. Though the path of discovery is not promising, "shrouded in a darkness..." its result can be enlightening and positive just like the beginning of "dawn". This is a reflection of the journey Adebayo's plot in her novel, *Stay With Me* takes readers.

Adebayo explicitly illustrates how easily women voluntarily take up the blame for childlessness. When Yejide's stepmother and Akin's uncle come to their

home without notice of Yejide, she admits that she expects a conversation that will direct all the blame for their childless state to her, she says, “I had expected them to talk about my childlessness.”(p. 16). Her acceptance of bearing the fault for a problem that involved Akin shows how women are socialized to think of themselves as culprits in a home without children, victimizing their husbands by putting their virility in doubt. The careful use of the personal pronoun “my” completely exonerates Akin of any blame and puts all of it on Yejide. She recounts how keen she was in being at the receiving end of the blame every time they visited, she narrates, “I was ready to listen to them to tell me I must do something about my situation.”(p. 17). Their childless state is regarded as a situation that belonged to her, with her husband's role comfortably neglected since society directly or indirectly protects men to keep their superiority on the pedestal that has been reserved for them. This is seen in the different treatments given to Yejide and Akin. When discussions about their condition are held, their in-laws’ anger is seen to be one-sided. This is seen when Yejide recounts, “A discussion consisted of them talking and me listening while on my knees. At those times, Akin pretended to listen and jot notes while doing his to-do list for the next day.”(p. 14). Although it takes two to bear children, Yejide has to kneel as a form of punishment for not giving birth while Akin enjoys the luxury of writing “his to-do list”. Yejide always has to be the one to bear all the pain while Akin escapes from the ordeal unscathed. She laments, “My husband often planned his entire week during such visits, while I got terrible cramps in my legs.”(p. 15). The distinction in the treatment given to them is because one is seen as the source of the problem and the other, as the victim. This is why Yeboah (2012) asserts that “patriarchy cheats women and reduces them to second-fiddle status.” (p. 42). Here, the role of the man in childbirth is completely ignored.

After Yejide comes to terms with the fact that she will always be the one to be accused, she fully equips herself to face the harsh treatment she suffers. She does not fight it since society does not provide her with an option, she only makes sure it is bearable enough to condone. She recounts:

I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look-onto-God smiles – name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick – and I had them ready. I was ready to hear them tell me I must do something about my situation. I expected to hear about a new pastor I could visit; a new mountain where I could go to pray; or an old herbalist in a remote village or town whom I could consult. I was armed with smiles for my lips, an appropriate sheen of tears for my eyes, and sniffles for my nose. I was prepared to lock up my hairdressing salon throughout the coming week and go in search of a miracle with my mother-in-law in tow (p. 15).

From the excerpt above, it can be seen that Adebayo uses the singular pronoun, “I” whenever she writes about the discomfort Yejide bears for being childless. There is no mention of Akin in this context. This is a clear indication that the issue of infertility is never associated with the male gender. It is always the woman whose fertility is questioned in such situations. Therefore, Yejide devises

several coping mechanisms to soothe her pain. Adebayo uses the hyperbolic statement, “millions of smiles” to convey the numerous strategies Yejide relies on to help her deal with her pain: I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look unto-God smiles...” These strategies are well accentuated to throw light on the plight of such women since they are always the ones who bear the blame and are tasked to seek healing. By comparing Yejide’s dilemma to an “open sore”, Yejide makes glaring the vulnerability and helplessness of women in her situation. It also shows how society seems unconcerned about the plight of such women. She is the one who has to give everything up including her dignity to try all sorts of alternatives, which in Yejide’s case are visits to “a new pastor”, a “new mountain” or “an old herbalist”, just to make sure that she gets pregnant. Also, she showed no anger, hurt, or pain when questioned and advised on her childless state, she rather adopted a defense mechanism of smiling through it all. The use of the word “armed” reveals how Yejide weaponized smiles to fight and hide her despair in the face of unkind interrogations.

More often than not, women who find out that their husbands are responsible for their many years of childlessness tend to protect the man. They do not subject them to the mockery and rebuke of society as a way of paying them in their coin. They do not feel the need to prove their innocence to society. Most of such women keep quiet about the man’s weakness and treat their knowledge about it as though it is a precious treasure. Adebayo uses Yejide and Funmi to suggest some of the reasons for women’s choice in making the hard decision not to spread the news that may end them being acquitted of the charge of being responsible for childlessness in their homes. After finding out about Akin’s situation, Yejide silently battles the anger boiling in her and chooses to channel her energy into taking care of Sesan. She recounts, “His deception was cutting me open, but I did not have time to deal with it or confront him. Susan needed me, needed everything in me that could keep him alive. Fighting Akin over Dotun’s revelations would have been an unnecessary waste of energy.”(p. 196). Here, Adebayo depicts how women view the fight to expose the unfair treatment meted on them: a “waste of energy”. Even though the pain Yejide feels is extremely intense like the use of a sharp object on her skin, “cutting me open”, she decides to silently endure it. Also, Adebayo’s use of the expression “deception was cutting me open” paints a gory image that makes readers get a clear picture of Yejide’s pain and the emotional damage women suffer in cases like this.

Also, Adebayo implies the reluctance of women to reveal the flaws of their partners as a personal decision using Funmi’s point of view. Funmi, the second wife of Akin, keeps quiet about Akin’s condition although he fails in deceiving her as he did to Yejide. She confronts Akin, “Do you think I’m a fool? Your lies and the fake nonsense you’ve been doing in bed, you think I don’t know? Is it because I’ve not decided to expose you?”(p. 260). She rightly detects the lies Akin says to cover up his impotence, but she plays along with it till she cannot take it any longer when Yejide gets pregnant and gives birth to Olamide. The successive use of rhetorical questions does not only interrogate Akin or depict Funmi’s absolute knowledge of Akin’s problems and her personal decision to keep them private but also, interrogate society at large—a society that seems to shelve the inadequacies of men but oppresses women with its many discriminatory prescriptions. However, Funmi dies shortly after her confrontation with Akin. Akin narrates her death as an accident,

“Besides, I’d never intended to kill Funmi.”(p. 260). However, Funmi meets her untimely death because Akin tries to stop her from talking about his flaws. He recollects the manner of her death:

I’ve never been sure if Funmi whispered those words or shouted them. But that night it sounded as though the words were being bellowed, it felt although they were echoing through every room in the house. She’d already let go of my trousers when I turned around to cover her mouth with my hand. And my palm did touch her face, cover her mouth for a fleeting moment before she staggered, fell backward, and tumbled down the stairs (pp. 206-207).

Adebayo presents Funmi's death as metaphoric by using it to establish another reason for women's fear of exposing the truth about their childless state. The patriarchal system is designed by men and for men so it finds a way to repress or prevent the progress of any entity that becomes a threat to its firmly established rules. Akin, an instrument of patriarchy, covers Funmi's mouth to discourage her from speaking about his impotence. This indicates the conscious effort put in place to make the woman voiceless in order not to make known the rot in the system, “...she staggered, fell backward, and tumbled down the stairs.” Adebayo's use of picturesque words with double syllables like “staggered”, “backwards” and “tumbled” forces the reader’s attention to be drawn to various actions that happen before Funmi's death. Her deliberate choice of words corresponds to the calculated steps of society to kill the fighting spirit of the female gender from voicing the truth that impedes their freedom. Even when the system does not directly thwart the efforts of the woman, it indirectly crashes her no matter how hard she tries to get a voice that publicizes her grievances, “And my palm did touch her face, cover her mouth for a fleeting moment”. It only takes “a fleeting moment” for the woman to be knocked down and eliminated by the patriarchal system. The man will do almost anything to keep the secret of his impotence from outsiders.

With the use of dialogue, Adebayo also portrays the kind of attitude shown towards women who are unable to conceive. The spoken lines of Moomi and Yejide add context to the narrative by establishing the tone used when issues of infertility are under discussion. When Yejide visits Moomi, how Moomi speaks to her makes it obvious who Moomi thinks is delaying the birth of her grandchildren. She gives Yejide cold shoulders because, to her, her son does not have a child due to Yejide's delay in conceiving one. When Yejide greets her, she replies, “Are you pregnant now?” (p. 53). Moomi’s attitude towards Yejide is indicative of how sometimes women in society perpetuate patriarchal ideals. Consequently, they frustrate the efforts of women who try to break free from this chain of oppression. Yejide does not complain about Moomi's crass behavior. She only scratches her head—an act that reflects her vulnerability and defeat. She accepts to once again carry the yoke of shame that society forces on her. Aware of Yejide's vulnerability, Moomi goes on to add more salt to injury, “Are you barren and deaf too? I say, are you pregnant? The answer is either, yes, I am pregnant or no, I still haven’t been pregnant for a single day in my life.”(p. 53). Adebayo reveals Moomi's frustration by following a rhetorical question with another in addition to the expected answers Yejide must choose from. This plainly shows how the patriarchal society channels all its

sentiments to the woman, leaving her with no escape route. Like Yejide, women are forced to admit that they are the cause of the lack of children in their homes, more painfully by their shared gender who are expected to empathize and share in their grief. They are not given a chance to think of any other justification that may factor in the man's involvement in their childless state therefore with their hands tied, they follow the dictates of society.

Yejide is blinded by her trust in society's assumption that issues of infertility concern only the woman. Hence, she does not question her husband's actions but works herself out to clear his doubts and have him accept that she is indeed pregnant. Akin's reply to the news of Yejide's false pregnancy is, "How could you cheat on me, Yejide?" (p. 66). This shows that the only conviction that Akin has to make him believe in Yejide's pregnancy is the possibility that she might have slept with another man. When he realizes that this is not so, unlike the naive Yejide, he does not consider their sexual encounters as an option. He constantly persuades Yejide to seek treatment and talks her out of her belief in being pregnant. Despite Akin's strange protests against Yejide's false pregnancy, it never occurs to her that he is so much against it because he knows he is incapable of impregnating her. Unable to see through this facade, Yejide makes up excuses for him instead of seeing the truth beneath his lies clearly showing that Akin has an underlying reason for his unwavering doubts. Even before Yejide's false pregnancy, she still burdens herself with so much to the extent of hoping for a problem when she was not finding faults with herself, "I had hoped at one point that doctors would find something wrong, anything to explain why my period still showed up every month, years after my marriage. I wished they would find something they could treat or cut. They found nothing." (p. 52). Adebayo, adequately expresses how desperate Yejide is with words like "hoped", "anything", "wished" and "nothing" which inarguably show how frustrated Yejide is about her situation. Not being able to find anything substantial to blame, she hopes for something, just anything, to go wrong. So, she could simply be at peace with her conscience and have a tangible reason for her infertility. Her desire is so strong that she "wished" for misfortune to happen to her. A misfortune that will serve as a gap that needs to be filled to rid herself of her infertility.

Through characterization, Adebayo demonstrates how the topic of infertility in the male and female gender is addressed in African societies. She delivers the everyday outcome and untold stories of infertility from the angle of both genders. Adebayo subtly touches on the deceitful nature of Akin, right from the onset of the novel. Since a very significant conflict in the story is built on this weakness, Adebayo does a good job of informing readers about how questionable and unreliable Akin's character is. Because society has made infertility a problem that belongs to only the woman, Akin—knowing very well of his inability to produce children—does not only look on as his wife takes charge of all the burden that comes with their childlessness, but he also encourages all the wrong acts done against her and the ones she allows herself to undergo. Akin's reluctance to reveal his impotence to Yejide is captured in Cowards' (1999) list of the crisis that masculinity causes in men. Unlike women, they become adamant about accepting physical and psychological flaws. Akin does not share Yejide's shock at the introduction of a new wife to their home. He agrees to the decision to take in a second wife to affirm the implied cause of childlessness in their marriage—a fault

of his wife's. When Yejide visits her mother-in-law, Moomi explicitly states the reason for getting Akin married to Funmi. She explains, "If you cannot have children, allow my son to have some with Funmi." (p. 53). This reinforces Oduyoye's (2004) assertion that in African communities, "the most important factor governing and ensuring the survival of marriages is procreation." (p. 141). Here, it can be seen that Moomi believes that Yejide is the cause of their childlessness. Akin uses Yejide's helplessness to his advantage and makes his inadequacy her problem. When Yejide asks him for support, Adebayo reveals how weak men in such situations are by depicting how societal standards rendered Akin speechless, "I turned to look at Akin in the eyes, hoping that somehow he was not part of the ambush. His gaze held mine in silent plea" (p. 19). Here, Adebayo presents the man as a helpless instrument in the hands of society who can only bend to its will in order not to incur its wrath or make him the victim of its prejudiced practices. This puts the woman in no better position other than swallowing up all the condemnation directed at her while the man goes scot-free. Uwakweh (1995) notes that indeed silence has a crippling effect on women since it incapacitates them and breaks the wings on which they can soar and search for freedom. He explains:

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women's social beings, thinking, and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure (p. 75).

Uwakweh's observation buttresses Opokuya's remark in *Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story*: "No matter what anybody says, we can't have it all. Not if you are a woman. Not yet." (p. 50). Here, Opokuya states a bitter truth to show that women are indeed defined by certain terms in society and even though there has always been a call for liberation, total liberation is yet to be attained.

Additionally, Adebayo exemplifies the habit of men keeping silent about their flaws and when Akin spends the night outside, he tells Yejide that he spent the night at the sports club. Yejide's outburst of accusatory remarks makes it difficult to have total trust in Akin. His sincerity becomes uncertain and readers' trust in him gets shaky. Yejide asks him, "You are deceiving me, *abi*?" (p. 48). This question goes unanswered. Adebayo's decision to make Akin ignore the question intensifies the doubt readers have about him. Yejide does not back down in getting the answer that would satisfy her curiosity and that of readers. She tells him, "Akin, God will deceive you, I promise you. God will deceive you the way you are deceiving me." (p. 48), but even with the extra effort to make Akin prove his innocence, Akin remains tight-lipped. Adebayo reveals his guilt in his gestures as observed by Yejide:

He shut the door and I watched him through the glass panes. He was all wrong. Instead of holding his briefcase in his hand, he gripped it to his side with his left arm so that his body tilted a little to the left, and he looked as though he was about to double over. His jacket was not slung over a shoulder but clutched in his right hand; the edge of a sleeve touched the ground and slid down the porch steps and through the grass as he walked towards his black Peugeot (p. 48)

From Yejide's observation, there is vivid evidence of Akin's guilt in his actions. The unusual attitudes he showcases, "...his body tilted to the left", "looked as though he was about to double over", and "the edge of a sleeve touched the ground" expose his faults. Again, this adds to the belief of Coward (1999) that the crises that masculinity brings to men may even lead to depression. Akin's disoriented behavior confirms Coward's assertion since the constant portrayal of his pattern could affect his mental health. Akin's masculine instincts push him to run away from his problem instead of owning up to his actions. By this, Adebayo foreshadows how Akin deals with his impotence by making him exhibit the same traits: lack of communication and cowardice whenever he faces a challenge that threatens to expose his shortcomings. He could have been bold enough to discuss his condition with his wife after both of them tested at the hospital but "Akin...came back saying the doctors had found nothing wrong with him." (p. 52). Here, Akin denies himself the possible cure of his impotence and once again, allows society to saddle the blame on Yejide because he knows as a patriarch, he will never be made a victim or considered weak.

Furthermore, Adebayo shows a vast difference in how the male and female gender is approached with issues about childbirth and fertility. Whereas Yejide's situation is freely talked about to the extent of being a topic for discussion, "Several in-laws had been in our home previously to discuss the same issue." (p. 14), Akin does not have a lot of people to discuss his impotence with. Dotun is the only person aware of his condition. When things get tough, Akin admits his helplessness and frustration, "Dotun, you are the only person I can come to. You are the only brother I have. Do you want me to call a stranger?" (p. 193). The many well-wishers who had been present in their home to discuss Yejide's infertility surprisingly become absent when Akin battles with his impotence. He tells his brother that he is the only confidante he has, "Dotun, you are the only person I can come to." Adebayo uses the words, "only" and "can" to show that Akin's options are limited. When Dotun is hesitant to be an ally to Akin's plan, he blackmails him emotionally by asking if he should seek the help of a third person. Indirectly Adebayo suggests that society does not allow the male gender to make known their shortcomings so Akin resorting to doing so means stripping himself of the respect entitled to him, especially as the elderly male child. Dotun's violent reaction to this suggestion shows how trapped he felt by that simple question, "He hit several surfaces – his thigh, the wall, the blank television screen. His burst of conscience surprised me. I hadn't expected him to jump at the idea, but somehow I'd never thought he'd be so torn, so afraid." (p. 193). Dotun, likewise Akin, becomes prey to societal expectations and principles. Although Dotun seems tough on the outside, he could not muster the courage to accept the truth. Besides being "so torn" and "so afraid", society expects that he gets himself together and "be a man" (p. 191) just as Dr. Bello kept reminding Akin to compose himself so that he does not act in a way that does not meet the societal standards of his gender. This brings into focus societal disapproval of non-hegemonic masculinity that does not adhere to the strict tenets of masculinity. Also, Adebayo uses the adverb, "so" to modify "torn" and "afraid" to show the extent of Dotun's frustration and fear which are further highlighted in his violent actions. Again, Adebayo vividly portrays the difference in society's attitude toward handling male infertility with the lone struggle of Akin in dealing with his impotence. Comparing the number of people involved in Yejide's struggle, Akin can relatively

be termed as a loner in his battle against infertility. Akin hides his health condition from everyone including his wife and mother although he is aware of the efforts both women are making to make sure a child is born in his home. Here, Adebayo showcases the concept of masculinity in Akin's character—“a loathing for anything weak” as a repressive ideology. When Dr Bello discovers that Sesan is not Akin's child, he does not admit his knowledge of the truth. He decides to put up a show in front of the doctor to escape the shame of acknowledging his flaw—even to the doctor who is supposed to be a trusted person as far as issues concerning one's health are concerned: “I made sure I seemed angry enough to Dr Bello. Behaved the way I imagined a man would when discovering that a child wasn't his. I punched a wall, yelled and slammed the door as I left the office.” (p. 191). Through the use of Akin's diction, Adebayo shows that Akin did not express his true emotions upon hearing the news. Expressions like, “seemed angry enough” and “behaved the way I imagined” show that all the actions Akin took: “punched a wall”, “yelled” and “slammed a door” were merely to impress the doctor and validate his manliness. Akin makes a conscious effort to protect his “dignity” and manliness.

Since society leaves no room for the virility of a man to be questioned, it silences him and prevents him from admitting his shortcomings. When Funmi tries to get the truth out of Akin, he does not see the need to confide in his second wife. Akin narrates, “Whether I was too drunk to respond or I trusted that my silence would be interpreted in a way that favored me, I can no longer tell for sure.”(p. 260). Adebayo implies that either the power drunkenness of men—due to the position society bestows on them as a birthright—makes them determined not to reveal their scars or they trust that their “silence would be interpreted in a way” that favors them is the reason for keeping mute about their struggles. She shows her ineptitude in taking a stance through Akin's confusion, “I can no longer tell for sure.” The male gender is treated with the greatest respect in society, so for fear of being regarded as less of a man and treated with impunity, most men turn into cowards when it becomes necessary to solicit society's help at their lowest points in life. Whether this is the reason for men's failure to acknowledge their faults or beneath everything lies an ego that cannot be broken, Adebayo leaves the answer to readers to decide. However, a hint of the underlying cause for such behaviors in men can be traced to an instance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna in order not to appear weak in the patriarchal society he finds himself. Achebe explicitly states men's refusal to admit any sort of weakness when he writes about the events leading to Ikemefuna's death: “Okonkwo looked away. He heard a blow...Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.”(p. 49). This attests to the conviction that men are forced to act in a particular way for their manliness to be endorsed by society. For fear of being seen as less of a man, they are willing to exhibit all sorts of toxic traits to be in the good books of society.

Meanwhile, throughout Yejide's narration, it is evident that the struggles of the female gender to procreate is not a hidden agenda. Rather, it is supported and endorsed by society because of its expectations of women. Moomi takes her daughter-in-law to all sorts of places and offers her encouragement for her to triumph over her fight against barrenness. Moomi acts as Yejide's pillar of strength throughout the drastic steps she takes to get a child. When all efforts to help Yejide go down the drain, Moomi chides Yejide by comparing her stomach to the side of

a wall. She lifts Yejide's blouse and says "flat as the side of a wall...you have had my son between your legs for two more months and still your stomach is flat." (p. 54). Moomi's comparison of Yejide's stomach to "the side of a wall" is to taunt her with the fruitless nature of her womb. Moomi freely makes such an insulting remark about Yejide's body to her face without flowery or sugar-coated words because society allows infertile women to face the consequences of their inability to reproduce. This is a typical example of women actively involved in promoting the institute of patriarchy. Akin's words of consolation to Yejide, when he accepts to take a second wife, show that the woman is always tortured when married couples delay giving birth. He tells her, "Trust me, it's for the best. My mother won't pressure you for children anymore." (p. 24). This stems from the fact that when a woman appears to be infertile, her situation no longer becomes personal. It becomes the talk of her family, that of her husband, and society at large. The man, on the contrary, does not have to deal with such circumstances since he is protected by society. When Akin first tells his brother that he has never had an erection, his reaction shows his denial of the truth: "At first he laughed, but realizing I was serious he scratched the back of his head and told me not to worry because it would happen when I met the right girl." (p. 279). Dotun's first reaction was to laugh because he doubted that Akin could have such a condition. After realizing that it is indeed true, he ends up comforting Akin by giving him hope to expect a change in his situation. Dotun does not make Akin feel less of a man or even bother about his condition. This is what society does for the man; however, an entirely different scenario is played out when it is the woman. This confirms the assertion made by Siguake (2015) that "an infertile woman is treated shamefully, like someone with leprosy." (p. 1).

In *Stay With Me*, everyday stories versus untold tales of infertility are fully addressed by Ayobami Adebayo, a renowned African female writer, who passionately handles the issues that society ignores or pays too much attention to, thereby resulting in a lot of problems in the lives of people, particularly women. This justifies Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) assertion that "the woman writer has two responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective." (p. 205).

Using literature as a vehicle to transport pertinent issues, Ayobami Adebayo adequately discusses the issues of infertility, paying attention especially to how women are at the receiving end of all unfortunate instances as buttressed by an assertion made by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) that "It seems that the woman is seen as subordinated in her very essence to the man, in quality and specifically in marriage, which is a major site of women's subordination; her status and roles being multifaceted and varied outside marriage" (p. 209).

Conclusion

Misconceptions about fertility are prevalent to the extent that a lot of literary discourse regarding this topic has been had, yet there is so much to say that this concept cannot be ruled off as an overworked area in the academic field. Consequently, this paper has examined some of the truths and delusions of infertility. Infertility is not only a woman's problem and should never be considered as such. The various beliefs underlying the misconception that a woman is the sole reason for the delay in childbirth or vice versa have been assessed and concluded

to be flawed. Also, although women are mostly at the receiving end of harsh treatments caused by infertility, men suffer silent battles in their bid to escape from societal pressure to fit into the conventional definition of manliness. In Yejide's case, Akin is discovered to be infertile and can therefore not impregnate a woman.

Based on this, it can be said that Adebayo tries to make literature a medium for women and society to know that it is very necessary for the fertility and compatibility status of couples to be checked before they are pronounced husband and wife. Furthermore, Adebayo encourages that the test should be done in the presence of both partners to be completely sure and not leave chances for the truth to be manipulated. No matter how much a couple loves each other just as Yejide and Akin shared an enviable first-love bond, if these measures are ignored, it can lead to the forfeiture of their future peace and joy, and in unfortunate cases, the collapse of their bond and love as evident in the case of Yejide and Akin. Because the issues of infertility militate mostly against women, Adebayo uses this medium to teach and instruct society to do better by women and so does this study. Adebayo proves that literature is a social institution that uses language as a medium to highlight and address societal problems.

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