

Portrayal of Childless Characters in Female Authored Nigerian Novels

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Abstract: This study is an appraisal of involuntary childlessness. The feminisation of infertility has created stereotypical images coloured with negative connotations in African literature. The study explored how female Nigerian novelists use literature to articulate the place of childless women so as to expose, debunk and unveil the anomalies about infertility in African societies. The study population comprised nine Nigerian novels thematising involuntary childlessness. The researcher purposively sampled three Nigerian novels: Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017), and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). The findings revealed that due to patriarchal dominance in both Yoruba and Igbo societies, childless women were humiliated by both men and women against the womanist spirit and ideals that advocates for sisterhood and complementarity. The study also established that since infertility was viewed as a sign of weakness, childless men who were infertile suffered in silence. They did not want to be associated with being responsible for childlessness in their marriages. The authors subverted the view that infertility was a female problem by presenting male characters suffering from infertility. Since childless women were traditionally viewed as worthless, the depiction of childless women with positive attributes redeemed their images. The study concluded that the female authors successfully depicted the need for change in how African societies view infertility and childlessness.

Keywords: Infertility, Childlessness, Womanism, Female authors

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I. Introduction

This chapter interrogates the portrayal of childless men and women in selected novels. Adebayo, Shoneyin and Adichie explore several cultural pressures in marriage which are dominant in African communities. The chapter grapples with dilemmas, stigmatisation, discrimination, and unbearable pains women have to bear within a cultural context that often blames women for infertility in marriage in disregard of the fact that infertility is a non-discriminatory medical problem. The study argues that patriarchal prejudice is central in viewing women's sexuality and that the referral of childless women as worthless is stereotypical. The first subsection interrogates the portrayal of childless women, the second part examines the portrayal of childless men while the third subsection explores infidelity in childless marriages. The final part concludes the chapter.

1.2 Portrayal of Childless Women

African literature is replete with images of childless women who are marginalised and traumatised by other women contrary to African womanism that encourages women to exercise genuine sisterhood and female bonding in order to overcome the challenges they face. Hudson-Weems (2006) posits that women should exercise love, friendship, and complementary interactions in order to attain agency, however, childlessness creates a conflict between wives and their mothers-in-law hence hindering the attainment of genuine sisterhood. Due to societal expectations in some African societies, childless women and men are stigmatised. Goffman (1963) views stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting so that the stigmatised will be reduced in the minds of the others from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one. Similarly, Sartorius (2006) views stigma as a characteristic of a person or an institution that evokes negative attitudes and feelings and usually results in discrimination of the person or institution in various walks of life.

1.2.1 Portrayal of Childless Women in Yoruba Society

Childlessness creates tension between a woman and her other relatives. Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017) unravels a troubled family that has to deal with childlessness in an African marriage. Even though the text is set the Yoruba of Nigeria, the challenges raised are prevalent in other African societies as well. Yegide has been married to Akin for four years yet there is no child to show for it. Her mother-in-law, her step mother, and Akin's uncle concur that a childless marriage is a failed marriage and therefore Akin has to take action to redeem the marriage. According to Yegide's mother-in-law, Women manufacture children and if Yegide cannot she is just a man. Nobody should call her a woman (Chapter 5, para. 48). Through these utterances, Yegide's femininity is questioned by her mother-in-law because she is childless. She is seen to have failed to live up to societal expectations. For her mother-in-law, femininity is only defined by the ability to bear children and therefore, in her view, Yegide should not be in Akin's house. Through Moomi's question, Adebayo critiques the society's belief that womanhood equals childbearing, an idea that seems limiting for African women because it overlooks other contributions of women and reduces them to mere objects of procreation.

Mothers-in-law may develop a resentful attitude towards the childless daughter-in-law. Out of anger and hatred, Yegide's mother-in-law takes the initiative to test whether she is pregnant. She places her wrinkled palm on Yegide's stomach 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. Close your thighs to him, I beg you. We all know how he feels about you. If you don't chase him away he won't touch Funmi. If you don't he will die childless I beg you don't spoil my life. He is my first son, Yegide I beg you in the name of God (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 4 para. 51).

Her utterances seem to suggest that Yegide is the guilty one although she has no proof. She represents women who have become part and parcel of oppressive social structures that demean fellow women based on their childless status. Yegide's mother-in-law does not embody the womanist spirit and ideal of sisterhood which is a key pillar of African womanism. She is embodiment of insensitivity towards women who suffer from childlessness. The friction between Yegide and her mother-in-law demonstrates a communal approach to marriage issues in traditional society. Childlessness attracts criticism from the members of extended family because children are treated as belonging to the society and not just to the couple in question hence the concern. Children also serve as companions and descendants and so Yegide's mother-in-law finds herself in a devastating state of mind after four years of her son's marriage remains without issue.

Childless women are viewed as a nuisance and good for nothing in Yoruba society. In *Stay With Me*, Yegide is accused of intending to inflict ill-luck on Akin's family. The fears and anxiety in Yegide's mother-in-law exasperate her mental and emotional stress that she becomes impatient, emotionally unaccommodating and hostile to Yegide. Even though they had a cordial relationship at the beginning of the marriage, childlessness is driving a wedge between them. She becomes verbally abusive. When greeted by Yegide, the mother-in-law responds, "Are you pregnant now?"...When Yegide hesitates to answer she adds, "Are you barren and deaf too? I say are you pregnant? The answer is either yes I am pregnant or no I haven't been pregnant for a single day in my life" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 4 para. 44). By asking whether Yegide is barren and deaf too, the author suggests that barrenness is also viewed as a disability in some African societies.

Women in childless marriages are viewed as ill-fated and accused of transferring the misfortune to their husbands. She wages war against Yegide and accuses her of having caused misfortune in her family. She says, "I beg you in the name of God Yegide. Have mercy on me" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 4 para. 53). Owing to her socio-cultural orientation and ignorance, Yegide's mother-in-law is incapable of seeing the couple's childlessness as a medical condition. She tells Yegide to allow Akin to have some children with Funmi hence insinuating that she is responsible for Akin taking long to impregnate Funmi (chapter 4, para. 47). Even when Funmi the second wife takes long to conceive, Yegide is blamed. In Yegide's community, it is evident that patriarchal norms have conditioned childless women to take blame of ill-luck, misfortune or failure on behalf of their husbands.

Mistreatments coupled with unmet societal expectations affect Yegide's mental health. Just when she thought she had overcome childlessness and ridicule, her two children die due to sickle cell anaemia. She is disappointed when her third-born is also diagnosed with the same condition. In a monologue Akin says:

I blame myself for the way she spoke, as though all possibility of joy had been wrung out of her. I watched her trudge out of the ward, wondering if she just needed a good night's sleep or whether her tiredness had morphed into a permanent weariness (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 36, para.2).

The description by Akin reveals despair and loss of hope due to the imminent threat of another death and the pain of previous tragedies. The death of her children is likely to take her back to the societal discrimination experienced earlier.

The idea of sickle cell disease is understood differently by Akin's mother hence creating more tension since she believes that the children are dying because they are *Abiku* children. She tells Akin, "You see it seems that your wife is destined to have *Abiku* children." (Chapter 36, para.53.) According to the Yoruba customs, an

Abiku is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family. It has a short life span. By means of its occult powers, the *Abiku* destroys itself leaving the parents dejected and frustrated. Yegide is blamed by her mother-in-law for the death of the children. Her mother-in-law, shows a strong belief in spiritual causes of death and she doesn't accept the idea of sickle cell as a health condition. Giving birth alone as a proof of fertility is not good enough for the society. The children have to stay alive or else the mother still carries the blame for their death. Adebayo suggests that culture burdens women with the entire fate of the children both born and unborn.

Adebayo depicts the *Abiku* phenomenon as an absurd superstition by using the medical advancements to refute the concept. The author shows how *Abiku* superstition shapes and influences perceptions towards childhood disease like sickle cell anaemia consequently resulting in child mortality. The cyclic nature of the *Abiku* phenomenon symbolises the recurrence of the problems of childless men and women in African societies. It shows how Yegide and Akin are constantly faced with criticisms from their relatives due to absence of children in their marriage.

Women who ought to understand the condition of childless women better. But in the Yoruba society, women seem to encourage and contribute to the destruction of childless women. Some are agents of destabilization, violence and humiliation of fellow women. This is manifested in the attitudes of mothers-in-law, co-wives and concubines who remain a source of tension and stress and inflict pain on the barren women. Iya Martha in *Stay With Me* on the other hand participates in bringing Akin's second wife Funmi knowing very well that Yegide is against it. The greedy Funmi, who is after Akin's material wealth, also aims at displacing Yegide from her matrimonial home by conceiving before her. Instead of offering consolation like Iya Bolu does to Yegide, they perpetuate more suffering. Through the character Funmi Akin's second wife, Adebayo reveals how lack of genuine sisterhood in some African societies leads to humiliation discrimination of childless women by their co-wives.

Second wives married with the purpose of bearing children despise the first childless wife. Funmi attempts to forcefully gain access into Yegide's house and when she is denied entry into the house she says she will only leave under one condition. She says:

The one thing that will cause me to leave you in peace is for you to lift up your blouse and let me see your stomach. This pregnancy of yours is over a year old now. Let me see what is in there, because we have had the news all over town that it is a calabash you are carrying about under your cloth-yes you have been exposed. But you can prove them wrong, prove the evil people wrong. Let me see your stomach for myself and I will leave you in peace. I swear to God (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 7, para.3).

Through the character of Funmi, Adebayo denounces evil women who mistreat childless women. Through her novel, she envisions a society in which women should desist from being agents of destabilization and humiliation of fellow women.

The womanist ideal of family centeredness in African women is seen in Yegide's efforts to find a solution to her childlessness. In *Stay With Me* (2017) Yegide is depicted as striving to attain motherhood by all means. Her childlessness is not out of choice. She says, "I wanted to be a mother, to have my eyes shine with the secret joys and wisdom like Moomi's" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 2, para. 29). Her endless efforts aimed at bearing a child tells it all. She makes several visits to traditional healers and attends several medical appointments in order to be able to bear children only to find out later that her childlessness was due to Akin's impotence. Yegide's strength enables her to endure exploitation and take part in managing her business despite being discriminated against by her relatives.

1.2.2 Childless Women in Igbo Society

Childlessness causes agony and emotional stress to both the victims and extended family in Igbo society. Such emotional feeling lead to verbal abuse. Olanna is insulted by her mother-in-law for being childless, she is confronted by her mother-in-law and accused of having cast a spell to Odenigbo so as not to have a child. She is constantly referred to as a witch. Her mother-in-law says, "Tell your fellow witches that you did not see him" (Adichie, 2006 p.110). She adds, "Tell them that nobody's medicine will work on my son. He will not marry an abnormal woman, unless you kill me first. Only over my dead body!" (Adichie, 2006, p. 111). Childlessness is seen as a form of an abnormality in Olanna's society. The plight of these childless women is a depiction of the stereotypical image prevalent in childless marriages. Olanna's mother-in-law shouts, "Neighbours! There is a witch in my son's house! Neighbours" (Adichie, 2006, p.111). In another instance, she says, "I know how hard my son worked to get where he is. All that is not to be wasted on a loose woman" (Adichie 2006 p.112). Such verbal abuses are common forms of stigma and discrimination faced by childless women in African societies.

Adichie explores how childlessness leads to misunderstandings between Odenigbo's mother and Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Odenigbo's mother says:

This is why I came. They said she is controlling my son. No wonder my son has not married while his mates are counting children they have. She has used witchcraft to hold him. I heard her father came from a family of lazy beggars in Ummunachi until he got a job as a tax collector and stole from hardworking people...Her mother is no better. What woman brings another person to breastfeed her own children when she herself is alive and well? Is that normal, *gbo* Amala? (Adichie, 2006, p.111-112).

She not only despises Olanna but her whole family. It is however notable that her negative attitude towards Olanna is heavily informed by hearsay rather than concrete facts save for her childlessness. To remedy the situation, she has a plan up her sleeve. She says, "I will not let this witch control him. She will not succeed. I will consult the *dibia* Nwafor Agbada when I return home; the man's medicine is famous in our parts" (Adichie 2006. p.113). Her words are full of hatred and bitterness depicts how childlessness is not acceptable in Olanna's society.

Some African women believe university education and lifestyle is partly responsible for childlessness. Odenigbo's mother accuses Olanna of having engaged in acts of immorality hence leading to her childlessness. She says,

I heard that all the time she was growing up, it was servants who wiped her *ike* when she finished shitting. And on top of it, her parents sent her to university. Why? Too much schooling ruins a woman, everyone knows that. It gives her a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be? These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children. Do you know? Does anyone know? (Adichie, 2006 p.112).

Olanna's mother-in-law keeps bringing along Amala, her house help, as a potential wife for Odenigbo because Olanna has failed to bear a child. Odenigbo's mother prefers Amala to Olanna because she believes that illiterate women are more fertile than educated. Blaming Olanna's infertility on her university education exposes the myths and misconceptions about childlessness in African societies. She believes that Olanna cannot bear children because of the numerous boyfriends she had at the university.

Being a woman, Odenigbo's mother is expected to sympathise and empathise with her daughter-in-law. Instead, her views seem to perpetuate the discrimination and marginalisation of childless women. For her, children are so important that she is willing to replace Olanna, who is a university lecturer, with the illiterate Amala. Her comments on too much schooling also reveal how deep seated patriarchy is in African communities to the extent that women themselves are in support of the negative attitudes and stereotypes that have been used to keep them down for ages.

Mothers-in-law make frequent visits to their son's house to check if the daughter-in-law has conceived. During such visits, they intimidate the daughter-in-law and launch scathing attacks. Odenigbo's mother runs out of patience frequents visits to her son's house. The visits are meant to stir emotions and eventually replace Olanna with Amala whom she believes can bear children. The narrator says:

Odenigbo's mother's visit had ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers, startled her, and snatched something away from her. She felt one step away from where she should be. She felt as if she had left her pearls lying loose for too long and it was time to gather them and guard them more carefully. The thought came to her slowly: she wanted to have Odenigbo's child (p.119).

Here, the author shows how reminding childless women of their predicament makes them feel more unfortunate especially when it comes from a mother-in-law who ought to show genuine sisterhood to their daughters-in-law.

For some women, the feeling of child bearing is not innate. They believe childbearing should be out of choice and not because of societal pressure as some women may not have the feeling of wanting to bear children. When Olanna tells her mother that she did not have the fabled female longing to give birth her mother calls her abnormal (Adichie, 2006 p. 119). Olanna's mother, who represents old generation of women in Igbo culture, sees the absence of desire to bear children as an abnormality. In spite of her apathy towards childbearing, Olanna is not opposed to giving birth. Her numerous attempts to get pregnant with Odenigbo embodies the womanist spirit of family centeredness. She is concerned about her relationship with Odenigbo in a childless marriage. She is worried about her future state of childlessness with Odenigbo. The narrator says, "She wanted certainty and longed for a sign, a rainbow, to signify security" (p.121).

Involuntary childlessness pushes women to go to great lengths in search for a solution to their condition. Olanna's persistence reveals her womanist strength and determination. She makes several attempts to conceive and blames herself for the failed attempt. The narrator says:

Each time after he slipped out of her, she pressed her legs together, crossed them at her ankles, and took deep breaths, as if the movement of her lungs would urge conception on. But they did not conceive a child she knew. The sudden thought that something might be wrong with her body wrapped itself around her, dampened her (Adichie, 2006, p.123).

The general societal belief that women are responsible for childlessness in marriages necessitates Olanna to blame herself for a failed conception. Nevertheless, Olanna does not see childlessness as a reason for

them to stop loving each other. She is determined to ensure that their love withstands the threats and frustrations from Odenigbo's mother. When Olanna went back to Odenigbo's house after a misunderstanding with her mother-in-law, Ugwu tells her that mama will use traditional medicine from the *dibia* to divide them. She reiterates that nothing can divide them (p.120). Her determination to stick together no matter what portrays her as a family centred African woman who is in concert with her husband. Throughout the novel Olanna is not separated from Odenigbo even though she never manages to have a biological child. The author thus seems to deconstruct the traditional understanding that marriage only works when a couple is able to bear biological children. While acknowledging the importance of children, Adichie suggests that marriage is much more than just that.

Childlessness is depicted as an undesirable state that women attempt to overcome in most African societies. Olanna, in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), desires motherhood. She is not contented with being childless and seeks a medical solution from abroad. However she learns that she does not suffer from any medical condition that can hinder her from bearing children. She opts for adoption. Adichie uses her to open up new options for childless women who have been humiliated by patriarchal societies. She becomes a symbol of hope and inspiration for the childless in African societies hence demonstrating the womanist wit.

1.2.3 Childless Women in the Yoruba Polygynous Marriage

The challenges of childless women are compounded in polygynous marriages. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), Shoneyin portrays the oppressive patriarchal forces in the Yoruba society. Childbearing enhances the status of men and because of this, Baba Segi is bothered when Bolanle takes too long to conceive. He tells Bolanle, "Your barrenness brings shame upon me" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 15). Being a symbol of patriarchy, Baba Segi is only worried about what people will say or think about him if Bolanle fails to bear children. For him, public opinion comes first before anything else. He makes abusive utterances and refers to Bolanle as a 'barren maggot'.

Childless women in Yoruba society are tormented, ridiculed, and go through harsh treatments and abuses from their husbands. Such incidences reveal how the institution of motherhood is micromanaged by men. Baba Segi makes disparaging remarks to Iya Tope when she takes too long to conceive. Baba Segi told her, "If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him" (p.88). His utterance reveal how the institution of motherhood in African societies is under patriarchal control. It is the man who decides whether the woman stays or goes. His uncompromising attitude towards Bolanle and his other wives portrays the sheer patriarchal domineering nature of most African men who often shift blames and intimidate women even on issues they might as well be guilty of. Bolanle's self-esteem is demeaned by her husband who is supposed to appreciate her worth and complement her.

Manhood is judged by the ability to sire children and the opposite is perceived as failure of masculinity. Baba Segi is only concerned about his wife's barrenness because from his patriarchal point of view, people might think that he is no longer a man. Baba Segi perceives childbearing as a proof of masculinity and its absence as a threat to the institution of patriarchy. His concern over their childlessness depicts his egocentric nature. He is only concerned about himself and cares less what the wife feels in this situation. Had he cared, he would have worked together with the wife to seek a practical solution to their problem rather than making assumptions. He does not depict complementarity that is advocated for in womanism. Instead of becoming part of the solution, he is part of the problem through his persistent blame game.

Patriarchal societies view women as commodities that can be bought from the market. In one incident, while seeking a medical solution at the hospital, Baba Segi compares Bolanle to rotten guavas. He tells the doctor:

Doctor, when you buy guavas in the market place, you cannot open every single one to check for rottenness. And when you find rottenness, you do not always throw away the guava. You bite around the rot and hope that it will quench your craving (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 42).

Baba Segi's verbal abuse relegates childless women to a lower status because they seem to have failed to proof their worth. By referring to barren women as 'rotten guavas', Baba Segi demonstrates the contempt that Yoruba society has for childless women. His derogatory remarks geared towards demeaning childless women are an indication of the suffering that is faced by barren women in most African countries. Bolanle's worst agony in marriage is not only because she is childless, but also because her husband has also become her chief tormentor. He does not understand her situation.

Men in childless marriages point an accusing finger at their wives without proof. When asked how many children he has, Baba Segi answers, "I would have had more than ten now if this woman's womb was not hostile to my seed" (Shoneyin, 2010, p.40). This utterance depicts male virility as an obvious fact which should not be doubted. Baba Segi has already concluded that she is responsible for their childlessness even before the medical test is done. When Bolanle refuses the proposal from Baba Segi to seek a cure from the prophet. Baba Segi tells her:

Listen to yourself! Does your blood not boil when you see other women carrying babies on their backs? Do tears not fill your eyes when you see mothers suckling infants? You of all the people should be willing to try everything! Offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a barren maggot? (Shoneyin, 2010, p.46).

From his comment, Baba Segi believes that Bolanle is not complete as long as she has no child. That is why he insists they should try to find a solution. By telling Bolanle to try everything, he is insinuating that that she is the guilty one. His utterance suggests that Bolanle's childlessness is intentional. According to him, all women should give birth naturally and one who fails to do so is just malicious. In Baba Segi's view, a barren woman is of no use and comparable to a maggot.

Childless women face discrimination not only from their husbands but also from her co-wives. The wives know that Baba Segi cannot have Bolanle for a wife if she fails to conceive. They plan to use Bolanle's childlessness to terminate her marriage to Baba Segi. Iya segi Says: When she fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out! We know she will not give him children so we should watch from a distance. I don't want to see anyone scratching her door frame with their toenails. (p.53).

Bolanle's presence in Baba Segi's household makes the three wives uncomfortable because she might reveal Baba Segi's infertility and expose the three women's closely guarded secret.

Childbearing is the main reason for marriage in the Yoruba society. Iya Segi's marriage to Baba Segi was planned with childbearing as a major motive. When Iya Segi said she did not need a husband, her mother retorted thus, "You do. You need one to bear children. The world has no patience for spinsters. It spits them out." (p.107) Iya Segi's mother further said that, "It is every woman's life purpose to bear children" (p.107). For her femininity is fundamentally defined by fertility. She asks Iya Segi, "Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living?" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 107). By equating a childless women to a ghost, Shoneyin demonstrates the peripheral position of the childless women and their alienation in African society.

Childless women seem to have been denied the opportunity to express themselves freely. Bolanle in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is saddened by the story of James Jerome on television who has been detained for being in possession of a plastic bag containing three pre-term babies. As Bolanle watched the news, her lips trembled and a steady stream of tears trickled down her cheeks and after a few minutes she got up and fled the room. Her reaction to the story reveals her maternal feelings even though she does not have biological children. It is what Baba Segi tells her that shows how childless women are even denied an opportunity to comment on matters children. He tells Bolanle, "What do you know about what you saw? A woman cannot know the weight of a child until she has carried one in her womb" (Shoneyin, 2010, p.15). Baba Segi implies that childlessness deprives the affected women their basic fundamental rights such as that of their opinion being heard on matters to do with children.

Some women have been brainwashed by cultural demands to conform to patriarchal norms even if it undermines their dignity. Iya Segi, Iya Tope, and Iya Femi's make concerted efforts to conceal Baba Segi's infertility. The voluntarily protect their infertile husband from the stigma that is attached to male infertility. Shoneyin points out that women often shoulder the blame for infertility problems even when the male factor of infertility is evident. The covering of Baba Segi's infertility becomes a weapon to frustrate Bolanle since the success of her marriage depends on her ability to give birth. Even though they know that Baba Segi is infertile and is responsible for Bolanle's childlessness, they failed to show genuine sisterhood and let her suffer. Such societal cultures do not afford childless women the dignity they deserve as humans. Such societies have been shaped in such a way that marriage and childbearing are mandatory and that a married woman with children receives better treatment by the society than one who is married and childless.

1.3 Portrayal of Childless Men

Childless men are depicted as victims of societal expectations and patriarchal systems that they are brought up in. They suffer in silence and are under pressure from their parents and other relatives to conform to societal expectations.

1.3.1 Childless Men in Yoruba Society

Impotence is viewed by Yoruba society as emasculating and is therefore not easily disclosed. In *Stay With Me*, Akin is a highly educated banker. Despite having some level of exposure, his views on childlessness resemble those of illiterate members of his family. Akin tells Dotun that from his childhood days he had never had an erection (chapter 38, para.7). He only confided in his brother Dotun about his condition. Not even his parents knew about it. In Akin's society, it seems impotence is hardly ever disclosed because it is seen as loss of masculinity. In his culture, to be impotent is seen as loss of manhood something he could not easily come to terms with. Through Akin, Adebayo deconstructs what the society says a man should be by revealing how Akin suffered in silence for a long time in an attempt to hide his condition by acting strong.

The depiction of male sterility in women's writing re-inscribes the female voice and redresses the misconception that childlessness is only as a result of barrenness in women. Outwardly, Akin succeeded in covering up his weakness and making people believe that it was Yegide and not him that was responsible for their childlessness. Inwardly he suffers the pain of knowing his condition and not disclosing it to his wife. His egocentrism made him not realise that Yegide had been suffering because of his actions.

Trauma in childless marriages can be unbearable leading to anger and domestic violence. When Yegide tells Akin that he is too busy to make her pregnant, Akin becomes hostile and violent to the extent that he physically abuses Yegide. Yegide says:

He shook me until my head bobbed and my teeth rattled. Then he let go suddenly. I crashed into a chair, grasping the table for balance. He picked up a saucer from the table and held it aloft. In one frightening moment, I could see him breaking the delicate china on my head. He threw it across the room, then he pulled the tablecloth off the dining table. Plates, mugs, saucers and vacuum flasks crashed to the floor. My husband was not a violent man, and the man who lifted a dining chair and hit it against the dining table until the chair broke was someone I did not know (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 8, para.27).

The foregoing scene described by Yegide should not just be seen as an ordinary instance of domestic violence. It significantly depicts a husband experiencing a troubled mind owing to unfulfilled societal expectations of child bearing. The level of violence displayed by Akin depicts high standards of frustrations and loss of patience. Through his character we can see how childless women are physically mistreated by their husbands who are also under the influence of societal pressure to sire children. The fact that he knows he is the cause of the problem but still blames his wife portrays the patriarchal institution as unfair to women. To some extent, his psychological trauma portrays him as a victim of the same patriarchal institution that empowers him to oppress his wife.

Childlessness tests the love between husband and wife. The marital love that once existed between Yegide and Akin in *Stay With Me* fades after going through four years of scorn due to their childlessness. Akin admits thus:

I loved Yegide from the very first moment. No doubt about that. But there are things even love can't do. Before I got married I believed love could do anything. I learned soon enough that it could not bear the weight of four years without children. If the burden is too much and stays for too long, even love bends, cracks comes close to breaking and sometimes does break but even when it's in a thousand pieces around your feet, that doesn't mean it's no longer love (Adebayo, 2016, chapter, 3 para.9).

It is because of the trauma and scorn faced by Akin from the society that their marriage is on the brink of collapse. Akin is weakened by the constant reminder by his mother about his childlessness. Akin's mother compared him to Juwon his half-brother. Akin says, "Then she told me, as if I didn't already know, that Juwon already had four children, all boys" (Adebayo, 2016, chapter 3, para.13).

Some impotent men in childless marriages are willing to do anything in order to cover up their condition. Akin's deceptive character is revealed when he manages to persuade his brother Dotun to impregnate Yegide on his behalf in an attempt to redeem his masculine image that has been tainted by childlessness. This revelation angers Yegide leading to mistrust between them. He realises that this arrangement makes him uncomfortable when he walks in on them having sex. He confesses that the first time Dotun had sex with his wife, he wept. Adebayo uses the character of Akin to reveal how through desperation, men in childless marriages become victims of societal scorn and ridicule. The affected men are willing to set aside issues of morality in an attempt to regain their reputation eroded by childlessness with disastrous consequences to their psychological well-being. Akin says:

Could have turned back when I stood in front of our bedroom door when it became obvious that it was too late to stop what I'd set in motion. I should have gone downstairs, left the house again. But I found that I couldn't move. I felt like my body was suddenly without bones about to collapse. So I clung to the stainless-steel door handle with both hands, pressing my forehead against the door frame. Tears began to slide down my cheeks as I imagined what was happening on the other side of the door (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 32, para.4).

Unrealistic societal expectations can ruin an individual's marriage life. Akin says, "But that Saturday, instead of feeling any emotion for my wife, I wept because I felt humiliated, hopeless, and angry" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 32, para.8). Through this experience, Adebayo questions the role the society plays in childless marriages. Akin is pushed this far by the societal expectations he is supposed to comply with at whatever cost.

In Yoruba society, polygyny is viewed as a solution to childlessness. As a way of solving his childlessness, Akin succumbs to the demands of his relatives and secretly marries Funmilayo as a second wife even though he knows that he is impotent. He probably could not resist the offer because it would have raised suspicion. Unfortunately, polygyny fails to redeem Akin's masculine image because Funmi also fails to conceive. The institution of polygyny in African societies and its entrenchment of patriarchy is depicted as a troubled institution that only exposes the fault lines of African masculinity.

Some women in childless marriages view polygyny as the highest form of betrayal by the husband. This is why Yegide is hurt when Akin marries a second wife. She believes the decision will ruin their marriage. It is ironical when Akin marries a second wife yet he was aware of his impotence from his school days. Why does Akin accept Funmilayo as a second wife? One probable reason is that he is protecting his wife from constant humiliations from their relatives who were piling pressure on him to marry another woman. The author therefore creates a character that complies with the Africana womanist view of being family centred by attempting to indirectly protect his wife from mistreatments.

Secondly Akin protects his masculine image because by marrying a second wife he will not be seen as the one responsible for their childlessness. His action however elicits criticism from the reader because it is double edged, it protects Yegide from constant humiliations and at the same time exposes her since by marrying a second wife, Akin is insinuating that Yegide the first wife is infertile. Consequently he is exposed by his own actions as the one responsible for the childlessness. Adebayo uses this to undercut the institution of patriarchy that is premised on the strength and virility of manhood that is effectively questioned here.

Men in childless marriages can be caught up in between complying with societal expectations and safeguarding his ego. Akin marries Funmi and discovers that she is well versed in conjugal matters unlike Yegide who was a virgin when they met. Funmi is already aware of Akin's impotence and confronts Akin and demands an explanation of how Yegide managed to get pregnant, she says, "Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant? And don't tell me again that it only happens when you are with me. I don't believe that anymore" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 36, para. 29). Funmi's attempt to question Akin's fertility brings up the issue of women agency. She represents strong women who are not silenced by male dominated societies. Apparently Akin had capitalised on Yegide's naivety and duped her into believing that each penis is different and that some got hard and others like his did not. Funmi brings to light Akin's impotence but she pays with her life. She is pushed to her death on the staircase by Akin and therefore polygyny as a solution to Akin's childlessness is subverted.

Revealing male impotence is viewed as a threat to the traditional perception of manhood. Due to this, Akin kills Funmi for revealing his secret, male impotence is depicted as an issue that women should not uncover. But is revealing male impotence worth taking a life? Has the society sunk that low? Why did Funmi remain in this marriage even after knowing that Akin has been impotent for a while? Funmi was probably after Akin's wealth and she didn't care about children that much. She was taking advantage of Akin's childlessness to enrich herself. Adebayo attempts to tell the reader that unlike women's barrenness that is talked about in public, male impotence is not open for public discussion. When Funmilayo dies before conceiving Adebayo's *Stay With Me* attempts to point out that in cases where the man is impotent, polygyny does not save the situation.

At times, impotent men engage in deceptive acts to conceal their condition. Akin in *Stay With Me* deceives Dr. Bello. He pretends to be angry when the doctor informs him that Sesan is not his son, he says:

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 (Adebayo, 2017, chapter, para.19).

He acts this way yet he already knew too well that Dotun fathered Sesan. He does all this to deceive his wife and other people so that his impotence can go unnoticed.

Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017) draws attention to Akin's impotence through the metaphor of Yegide's car that fails to start on several occasions. Yegide says, "When I turned my key in the ignition, I got nothing, just a useless click. I tried again and again without any luck." (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 4, para.19). The car's failure to start signifies Akin's inability to rise to the occasion during moments of intimacy with his wife. A car that cannot start needs fixing to enable it function properly just the same way Akin needs to seek medical attention to be able to sire children. Another reference to Akin's impotence is seen when Iya Bolu asks, "What do we want to do with a soft pestle? Can it pound yam?" (Adebayo, 2017, chapter 22, para. 55). The pestle is a phallic object hence it symbolises the male genitalia. The soft pestle that cannot pound yam refers to Akin's impotence that has led to Yegide's childless. Inability to pound yam signifies incapable of making a woman pregnant. Adebayo creatively uses metaphoric expressions to bring out male impotence in African societies.

1.3.2 Yoruba Childless Men in a Polygynous Marriage

In *The Secret Lives*, Shoneyin reveals how patriarchal dominance in polygynous marriages pushes women to take part in acts of deception in order to protect their husband and secure their marriage. She portrays a polygynous household in which Baba Segi is made to believe by his three wives that he is the father of the seven children in his household. He believes that the main reason for marriage is childbearing and therefore threatens to divorce his wives when they take long to conceive. This explains why he is so much bothered by the childlessness of his fourth wife. Ordinarily, he should have felt no serious pressure to prove his manhood on Bolanle because he presumably had children with the other wives. In fact it is Bolanle who should have been worried about her childlessness. Had Baba Segi left things as they were, perhaps he would never have been

exposed to ridicule as it turned out. Through him, Shoneyin portrays the traditional view of childlessness and debunks the thought that women are responsible for childlessness in marriages. He believes that siring children is a show of manhood and failure to do so is a sign of weakness on the part of men.

In Yoruba society, some women after realising that their husbands are the cause of their childlessness can secretly bear children from acts of infidelity. In *The Secret Lives* Shoneyin uses the character of Baba Segi to unearth how women cover up the secrets of infertile men in childless marriages. It is ironical that Baba Segi boasts of having seven children yet unknown to him, the children had been sired by other men including his own personal driver. Unlike Akin in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017) who knew of his impotence at a young age but refused to tell his wife, Baba Segi never knew of his infertility. He symbolises many men in African marriages who are not aware of their infertility because their wives secretly bear children through extramarital affairs thereby concealing their husband's infertility. Through Baba Segi, patriarchy in African societies is put in a precarious situation.

Without the unacknowledged support of women, male dominance on the continent would crumble. In Baba Segi's polygamous household, his first wife discovers that Baba Segi is infertile but does not tell him. It is probably out of the fear that Baba Segi might experience the shame associated with infertility. She establishes an extramarital affair with Taju to get pregnant. Iya Segi knows too well that Baba Segi values children more than anything else and therefore she initiates the other two wives into her way of getting pregnant. The three wives all know that Baba Segi is infertile but they keep it a secret. Iya Segi says, "If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?" (Shoneyin, 2010 p.231). Due to societal pressures, the author seems to justify the women's acts of infidelity which we shouldn't rush to condemn until we put ourselves in their situations.

Although Baba Segi insists that Bolanle is barren, Shoneyin suggests that such accusations can be verified through scientific advancement in modern medicine. It is possible to detect the cause of childlessness and hence putting the blame that has led to discrimination of childless women to rest. Were it not for the test results of the semen analysis, Baba Segi would not have known about his infertility, he would have continued blaming Bolanle. Shoneyin calls upon the society to change its discriminating belief concerning childlessness and embrace change by adopting modern ways of investigating infertility instead of relying on speculation and traditional beliefs that are not founded on any empirical evidence.

The medical test carried out by the doctor at the hospital confirms that indeed Baba Segi is infertile. He is not the father of the children he purports to be his. This revelation is contrary to the traditional belief held by Baba Segi that Bolanle was the cause of their childlessness. It undermines his masculinity in the household and dismantles patriarchal dominance.

The author's commitment to foreground male infertility in African societies questions and destabilises the presumed fundamental basis of masculinity, it disrupts traditional gender roles, and hits personal masculine identities right where it counts. Although Baba Segi had been thinking that his wives were under his control, the wives still managed to dupe him into thinking that he fathered the seven children. Even after discovering the secret, Baba Segi does not send the wives away because he knows too well that his condition will be exposed. He forgives the wives, an act that is contrary to his patriarchal stance. This is his deliberate ploy to save his dented ego. He had always been referred to as Baba Segi as a form of his identity, after discovering that he never fathered a single child in his household and with Segi dead, his identity is creatively erased. Through this, Shoneyin suggests that it is possible to end traditional beliefs that humiliate childless women.

Even though Baba Segi contributed to the predicament faced by his wives, he does not acknowledge his fault. He shows no remorse and does not recognise that due to the societal pressure, the women wanted to validate their womanhood and cover up his infertility. He says:

I will not pretend the words that struck my ears at the hospital have not preyed on my mind the way hunger preys on the mind of a motherless child. I have been deeply wounded. It is not every day that a man discovers his life is a mere shadow and that there is a gulf between what he believes and reality. Neither is it every day that a man finds that his children are not his own. I want you to know that you can go. The door is open. I will not stop you (Shoneyin, 2010, pp. 259-260)

The women's attempt to protect their husband's image is not appreciated. They are instead viewed as immoral and threatened with divorce. Baba Segi's reaction also suggests that he feels emasculated on learning that his three wives conceived through acts of infidelity. He fears that they will not accord him the respect he deserves because they know that he is infertile.

Sexual intercourse is used by men in Yoruba society to further patriarchal ideologies. It serves two important purposes in marriage. Baba Segi views it as an avenue for exercising male dominance and, most importantly, a means of precreation. Enjoyment and cementing the intimacy of the couple does not seem to feature in the list of priorities in this case. The narrator says,

The door of the shack stood ajar so Baba Segi entered the small room. He frowned. It annoyed him that Bolanle was the reason he had come, when just two years before, he had boasted of his conquest: how Bolanle

was tight as a bottleneck; how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed; and how she took the length of his manhood on her back—splayed out and submissive. He didn't quite know how he would tell the men that all his pounding had proved futile (p.11).

In this excerpt, it is evident that the sexual act as depicted by Baba Segi is punitive and is meant to prove his macho nature hence dominating Bolanle into submission. From all his efforts, he expects results in the form of pregnancy. When this is not forthcoming, he is angry and disappointed. It is significant to note that what bothers Baba Segi more is the opinion of fellow men about his wife's childlessness. A fruitful marriage is therefore good for the man's ego as he gets validated by his peers.

1.3.3 Igbo Portrayal of Childless Men

Some men in Yoruba society do not prioritise childbearing in marriage. Unlike Akin in *Stay With Me* and Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Odenigbo* in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not bothered by their childlessness. He is portrayed as having a strong mutual understanding towards his wife. He does not become violent like Akin and neither does he mistreat Olanna the way Baba Segi and Akin do to their wives. He is calm and supportive. His relationship with Olanna appears to be based on love and not obsession with childbearing. Their childless marriage depicts a positive image and hope for the future of childless couples.

Adichie suggests that some of the traditional views concerning childlessness are outdated and should be ignored by the younger generation because things have changed. Odenigbo sees her mother's views as old school and therefore feels that Olanna who is enlightened should not allow herself to be hurt by her comments. He tells Olanna, "You can see my mother doesn't know what she's doing. She is just a village woman. She is trying to make her way in a new world with skills that are better suited for the old one" (Adichie, 2006. p.116).

Some of the problems faced by childless couples are due to generational gaps that exist in the Igbo society as shown by the actions of Odenigbo's mother.

Nkem my mother's entire life is in Abba. Do you know what a small bush village that is? Of course she will feel threatened by an educated woman living with her son. Of course you have to be a witch. That is the only way she can understand it. The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of the people had no say on whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world (p.116)

Odenigbo's mother's way of thinking has been influenced by her traditional lifestyle from the village life, her lack of education and exposure to modern ways. That's the main reason why she feels she has a say on the kind of woman her son should marry. Even her attempts to eject Olanna from Odenigbo's house are met with resistance because Odenigbo manages to convince Olanna to come back. Odenigbo's action symbolises rejection of the narrow traditional understanding of marriage in preference for a modern approach to the same. He feels that they should think of fixing the country first before dealing with the issue of siring children. He says to bring a child in this unjust world was an act of blasé bourgeoisie (Adichie 2006.p.119). For him it is pointless to give birth to children in a country that is facing political turmoil. He thus views childbearing from a wider perspective that includes responsible citizenry.

Even when Odenigbo proposes to Olanna that they should have a child he says 'Lets' have a child,' he said again. 'A little girl just like you and we will call her Obianuju because she will complete us' (Adichie, 2006, p.122). Odenigbo knows that according to his mother, they cannot be considered a family without a child. By making this proposal, he endorses the view that a marriage without children is incomplete. His proposal however is in form of a polite request and not an obligation. Unlike Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) whose every conversation with his childless wives revolved around getting pregnant, Odenigbo talks of having a child only once in the text and even when Olanna failed to get pregnant, he does not push her any further thus minimising the pressure to comply with the societal demands.

1.5 Conclusion

The general images that emerge from the texts reveal that both men and women from immediate family and entire society contribute to the agonies suffered by childless men and women. The characters such as Yegide' Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017) Iya Tope, Iya Segi and Iya Femi in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) refute societal ridicule that they are barren and worthless and indulge in extramarital affairs that result into pregnancies a situation that proves them fertile revealing that their childlessness is due to their failure to fulfil the societal expectations of being wives and mothers. Adichie, Shoneyin and Adebayo prove that much of the things said about childless men and women in African societies are manifestations of prejudice and misconceptions. They call for a change of attitude and perceptions towards childless men and women whose conditions demand understanding.

The portrayal of childless men shows that the society has placed a high premium on virility such that men who suffer from impotence and infertility are in constant state of denial due to the fear of scorn. Both women and men in childless marriages have fallen victims of societal expectations. They attempt to fulfil

societal demands at whatever cost even if it means compromising their dignity. Through the depiction of Akin in *Stay With Me* (2017) and Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) patriarchal norms do not allow male infertility to be made public. Some men like Akin in *Stay With Me* (2017) Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives* (2010) suggests that infertile men may not know that they are infertile because their wives bear children through extramarital affairs. Traditional perceptions concerning childlessness play an important role in the way both childless men and women viewed in the society. They shape a society's understanding of barrenness and impotence. Through the advancements in medicine, the cause of childlessness in a marriage can be identified hence solving the issue of blame. The authors raise new social awareness and consciousness aimed at changing the mind set of people to reject oppression and redefine masculinity and femininity.

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