

**INVOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: SOCIO-
CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN NOVELS BY CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN
FEMALE AUTHORS**

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN
LITERATURE**

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES, LITERARY AND COMMUNICATION
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DECLARATION AND APPROVAL

DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for an award of a degree in any university or institution.

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APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

To the Almighty God for granting me the gift of life to accomplish this noble mission; to my wife Daphine and children Liam, Brittney, Travis, and to all those women who struggle with childlessness in Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research owes its completion to the help, support and insights of many individuals. I am happy to extend my sincere appreciation to all of them, but I feel indebted to mention the following in particular.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Mosoti Edwin and Dr. Ogone James for the unwavering support and guidance during this study. I acknowledge your critical insights and comments, your patience in my ups and downs during the writing process. Your professional expertise, constructive criticism, honest evaluation and suggestions are highly appreciated.

I am grateful to my wife and children for the moral support, peace and understanding that they accorded me throughout the course of my study. In deed you have endured the long journey with me. My appreciation also goes to my loving mother who not only taught me how to persevere in life but also encouraged me to soldier on. Through your prayers I have been able to make it this far.

ABSTRACT

This study is an appraisal of involuntary childlessness in the selected texts. The traditional belief system based on continuity of lineages places a high premium on parenthood and as a result, the perception of people regarding childlessness is judgemental. Due to patriarchal dominance in most African societies, most men in childless marriages have passed the blame of childlessness to their wives, hence creating a sense of personal loss and tragedy to childless women in marriages. The feminisation of childlessness in African writing has coloured the image of women in childless marriages with negative connotations, which is inaccurate and stereotypical. The study explored how female Nigerian novelists use literature to articulate the place of women and men in childless marriages. The specific objectives were: to interrogate the socio-cultural perceptions of childlessness in the selected novels, to explore how the experiences of childless couples embody agency in the face of patriarchy, and finally, to explore the strategies used in the portrayal of childless characters. The study was inspired by the prominence of the theme of childlessness in print and electronic media. The choice of female authors was due to the curiosity to study the female authors' perspective of childlessness since women seemed to bear the brunt of childlessness. The study demystifies the thorny issue of childlessness by contributing relevant knowledge and insight to literary scholars. Africana womanism literary theory was applied in the study to interrogate how strength and sisterhood, enabled the childless women in marriages to attain self-definition and embody agency despite mistreatments. Analytic research design was used to enable the researcher collect, interpret, analyse and describe the relevant qualitative data. The study population comprised nine Nigerian novels thematising involuntary childlessness from which three novels were purposively sampled: 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). Qualitative data was collected through close textual reading of the primary texts. Coding was done according to key thematic concerns. Qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the data. The study found out that the authors subverted the oppressive forces that discriminated women based on their ability to bear children. By depicting male characters who were responsible for childlessness in their marriages, the novels foregrounded the possibility that some men could be responsible for childlessness in marriages, contrary to patriarchal beliefs. The traditional treatment for childlessness was portrayed as gendered, exploitative and an avenue for patriarchal prejudice. Women in childless marriages redeemed their images by embodying agency and positive attributes. Men in childless marriages were satirically depicted as victims of patriarchy. Women in childless marriages were portrayed through negative images of witches, hence the societal disapproval of childlessness. The study concludes that the female authors successfully depicted the need for social change in how African societies view infertility and childlessness.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Infertility is a global phenomenon that puts some couples in perpetual agony and even disintegrates marriages especially in Africa. The definition of infertility may vary across professions as different experts employ definitions that are convenient for their purpose (Larsen, 2005, p.208). The World Health Organisation (2011) defines infertility as inability of a couple to conceive within two years of regular unprotected sex. Forsythe (2009) explains that infertility can be primary or secondary. He posits that primary infertility is the inability to conceive at all while secondary infertility refers to inability to conceive again after a previous pregnancy. Infertility is a life crisis that affects both sexes and poses a range of socio-cultural, emotional, physical and financial problems. In African settings, infertility is a socially unacceptable condition. Mosweeney (1995) comments that couples affected by infertility are treated with contempt and dishonour by the society, which views their infertility as a punishment for social transgression. In as much as infertility is an individual problem, it is also embedded in the socio-cultural contexts.

Infertility is perceived in various ways by different communities depending on their cultural beliefs. Despite the view that infertility affects both men and women, women relatively endure the worst of the blame for infertility problems (Odinga, 2011). It is a common belief in Africa that the responsibility of having children rests solely with the woman, failure is her problem and shame, and it has nothing to do with the man as far

as the community is concerned (Agina,2010). Agina further explains that where there is a childbearing problem, it is a foregone conclusion that the woman is barren. The woman is automatically tagged guilty of reckless sexual lifestyle before marriage and among the most common speculations is that she had committed too many abortions. This negative feminisation of infertility has led to societal victimisation, humiliation, ostracism, misjudgement, and misrepresentation of childless women in African societies and has inspired literary writers.

Children are highly valued in most cultures. However, some people choose to be childless in some parts of the world hence voluntary childlessness. This could be due to socio-economic factors. Chamie and Mirkin (2012) argue that around the globe, many couples delay childbirth or may decide not to have children due to economic reasons, unemployment, education and career ambitions. They explain that in developed nations, one in ten women have no children. Steinhauer (2013) posits that in Switzerland, the German speaking women who are working and educated tend to choose to be childless. According to Mariette (2012), nearly a half of the Canadian couples are not having children due to economic and social reasons. From the foregoing studies, there is a trend of being childless by choice especially in developed nations.

Involuntary childlessness has profound social effects. Most developing countries experience negative consequences of childlessness to a greater degree when compared to Western societies (Sundby et al, 1998). In Cameroon, infertility is a reason for divorce among the Bangangte tribe, causing a woman to lose her access to land

distributed by her husband (Feldman, 1994). In Southern Ethiopia, some infertile women were divorced due while others reported that their husbands had lost interest in them (Deribe, 2007). Orji et al (2002) conducted a qualitative study on the impact of infertility on marital life in Ile-Ife of Nigeria and found out that some respondents had divorced and remarried because of infertility. A study carried out in Zimbabwe found out that a man who was unable to have children was not considered a real man but a boy (Runganga et al, 2001). Another study in South Africa by Dyer et al, (2004) postulates that a childless man was insulted as ‘woman’. In Southern Nigeria childless women were referred to as “men” by their husbands and in-laws (Hollos et al, 2009).

Among the Ekiti of South Western Nigeria, infertile women are treated as outcasts, when they die their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town with those of people experiencing ill mental health (Ademola, 1982). From these forgoing studies, infertility is a traumatic condition that stigmatises the woman as barren and the man as impotent in most African societies even without solid proof. It marginalises infertile women and puts them in a precarious situation. The status of a woman in most African societies depends on her ability to bear children. Marriage and motherhood are instruments used to gauge a woman’s success and social development. According to Okome (2001), women who have given birth are accorded higher status and respect than their barren counterparts. This study avers that in most patriarchal African societies, a married woman occupies a marginal position until she bears children and especially boys.

Motherhood has a distinct position in African culture. Oyeumi (2003) opines that motherhood occupies a special place in African culture and society. According to his study mothers are seen as the essential building block of social relationships, identities and society. He also explains that young women are expected to grow up, get married and bear children especially sons who will continue the family name. In some African cultures, barren women are denigrated either by male writers looking to uphold tradition or by women writers seeking to reflect the suffering of women who are not able to bear children. The privileging of women with children has involved the erasure of identities and subjectivities of childless women holding them to an assumption of female inferiority for conditions beyond their control.

The Nigerian experience of infertility is however unique in that it has attracted a formidable literary tradition. According to Forster (1974), the novel is an instrument of understanding the individual at a socio-cultural level. As such, writers such as Nwapa, Adichie, Emecheta, Osofisan, Adebayo, Shoneyin, and Atta have attempted to show the mistreatment of childless women in the society by portraying the realistic picture of trauma that barren women go through in patriarchal societies. Works of these writers narrate the tragic circumstances faced by characters who are unable to attain the desired socially empowering role of motherhood. According to Egede (2015), African female writers thematising infertility raise a pertinent question on why infertility resonates so much in African literature. Egede's view indicates that infertility as a thematic concern has attracted a lot of attention from prominent African writers. This is probably because the society has always blamed women and overlooked men in cases of infertility due to

patriarchy. African women in childless marriages have been stigmatised by the society and this has attracted literary attention from female novelists. Nwapa (1998) a prominent African novelist explains the reason as to why the theme of childlessness features in their works. She postulates that:

African women writers have been accused of dwelling too much on barrenness. They are told by their critics to concentrate on 'more important' themes...the problem that a woman faces in the world is the pain of not being able to bring forth a child from her womb...a wife is more often than not betrayed and abandoned by her husband if she does not have a child. Therefore, the desire to be pregnant, to procreate is an overpowering one in the life of a woman. She is ready to do anything to have a child (p.89).

Nwapa's view can however not go unchallenged because by concentrating on barrenness Nwapa, Emecheta, Atta, Osofisan and other female writers have left the other half of the story untold because infertility affects both men and women. The male infertility is concealed at all costs and the male experiences of childlessness are silenced. However, in an attempt to correct this anomaly, Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* seem to address this issue by demystifying infertility and presenting the male complexities of childlessness. Both Shoneyin and Adebayo present the view that men in childless marriages can also have fertility problems and in such cases, women are the ones who bear the infertility label to protect the image of their husbands. These authors attempt

to deconstruct subjective experiences faced by characters who seem not to conform to the normative constructs of the society. Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017) examines the effects of social expectations about a couple's fertility on men and is a conversation between two people coming to terms with how their marriage failed. These characters attempt to force their lives to fit their societies prevailing narrative about what makes a successful marriage; the children they eventually have also pay the ultimate price.

Male infertility is however shrouded in mystery in many African societies. Discussing it is regarded as a taboo. It is a problem that many men are not willing to admit its existence. This is probably because masculinity is typically linked to fertility (Horbst, 2008). This implies that male infertility is synonymous with loss of masculinity and due to this, most African societies have made a deliberate effort to mask it and treat infertility as strictly a female problem (Horbst, 2010). However, this practise of covering up male infertility is thematised in fiction. Ebiere, in Clark's *The Three Plays* (1976) masks her husband's impotence by using metaphors and symbolic allusions when asked about her problem. Their conversation with the town doctor explicates the inability of Ebiere to conceive. After the conversation, the town doctor deduces that Zifa, is impotent and the problem is not with Ebiere. She probably wants to spare her husband the public shame and ridicule by masking his inability to impregnate her. Her action depicts how the patriarchal African society has socialised women not to discuss male infertility in public.

Other attempts to cover up for men as the cause of childlessness are evident in Egyptian society. Inhorn (2003) posits that, Egyptian women in childless marriages typically experience procreative blame in cases where Egyptian men are impotent, their wives gloss it as ‘weak worms’ in order to preserve the husband’s masculinity. The study reveals how women bear the brunt of infertility while men suffer in silence due to patriarchal ideologies within the society. Motherhood is revered and valorised in most African cultures even through songs. Motherhood bestows the highest form of respect to a woman. It is the crowning act of fertility in marriages. Songs are used to portray what is going on in the minds of ordinary members of the society. Blacking (1977) opines that music and dance as a means of communication are not free from the constructions of reality that predominate in different societies. Songs play a vital role in passing the beliefs about procreation. Ajibade (2005) posits that Yoruba nuptial songs portray women as the agency of fertility and procreation and are meant to encourage women to give birth. Ajibade also explains that the Yoruba believe the nuptial songs have the ability to send away the spirit of barrenness. Makinde (2004) argues that in Yoruba, motherhood is socially empowering and elevates the women to a position in which the mother can be referred to as a precious stone in some songs. In light of this, it is a tragedy for a Yoruba woman not to have a child and this is reflected in some Yoruba songs where children are equated to beads worn by kings and chiefs as symbols of royalty and authority. The birth of a child enables the mother to acquire high status and value in the society. Because of such perceptions, a woman in a childless marriage is therefore seen as incomplete and unfulfilled. The value attached to

childbearing in the Yoruba songs make those unable to bear children feel incomplete and worthless.

In Kenya for example, the role of songs in social commentary in the song *Mtoto si nguo, utaomba mtu...* (A child isn't a piece of cloth that you can borrow from anyone) by George Mukabi and Johnstone Mukabi is a lamentation to express the emotions of a childless man who keeps crying due to the shame and stigma. The song suggests that anyone who desires a child can actually sire or conceive one, however this is not the case. There are women and men in childless marriages who have attempted several options to no avail. The selected texts present cases of married men and women who desire a child but due to circumstance beyond their control, they are not able to. The song depicts childbearing as a simple affair yet the texts portray a complicated situation in which characters are in constant struggle with childlessness.

There are different and varied traditional beliefs concerning childbearing. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the traditional belief system based on continuity of lineages places a high premium on parenthood and as a result the perception of people regarding childlessness especially women is judgemental (Donkor & Sandal, 2009). His study suggests that childbearing is prioritised due to the need for individuals to ensure that their family lineage is perpetuated. According to Osaso (2006), children are the only visible way to prove that a family has a future (immortality). It is therefore the need to ensure immortality that childbearing is emphasised.

Blankson (1999) affirms that in Ghana, children are referred to as 'the cloth of the body' without which one is naked. In Kenya, a popular Luo saying: *Nyodo okonyo*

Omboga (Bearing children has helped a vegetable called *Omboga*) demonstrates the importance attached to childbearing. *Omboga* is a leafy vegetable that produces many seeds. When a farmer delays to harvest the leaves of the vegetable, it soon produces many seeds that outnumber the leaves so it becomes difficult to get to the leaves and the farmer soon gives up. This saying refers to the ability of children to help their parents in old age to prevent outsiders from possessing the parent's property. As suggested by the saying, those without children have no future. If the *Omboga* plant had not produced many seeds, the farmer would have harvested all its leaves leaving it leafless. Dyer (2007) avers that homes without children are homes without pleasure and happiness. In his view, children in marriage are also viewed as a source of the couple's happiness.

Childlessness in an African marriage comes with a myriad of challenges. Basden (1966) asserts that a childless marriage is a source of disappointment and sooner or later leads to serious trouble between man and wife. Violence, permanent separation, divorce, or sometimes remarrying are some of the challenges (Fledderjohan, 2012).

Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), recounts to her childhood friend that:

I thought erroneously at first that marriage involved two people. I thought the emphasis was on this unique relationship between man and woman that children did not even matter. I was wrong. A childless marriage cannot last in Nigeria of today. So, if a wife is unable to have children by her husband, she should leave and try elsewhere (p.34)

Amaka re-affirms that marital bonds are strengthened by the ability to bear children and that divorce is inevitable if a woman cannot bear children. Nwapa attempts to show how childlessness is a gendered phenomenon in African culture and that childbearing is the main purpose of marriage in the African context. Amaka is sent away from her matrimonial home due to her inability to bear children. In her second marriage, she bears children. In her writing, she portrays a picture of a society that frustrates and undermines childless women. She uses literature to advance the opinions of African women and thus effect change. Her works narrate the tragic circumstances and trauma faced by involuntary childless women. Nwapa not only identifies the emotional tragedy of involuntary childlessness but also points to social and economic disenfranchisement that a woman may experience in the family structure if she is unable to bear children.

The female protagonists in Nwapa's novels such as Idu in *Idu*, Amaka in *One is Enough* and Efuru in *Efuru* are all faced with involuntary childlessness. These characters are seen as social misfits, ridiculed and even told that they are not women. Kimathi (1994) states that every normal woman is expected to bear children, otherwise the woman is rendered abnormal. His view is supported by Mbithi (1970) who opines that a barren woman is seen as the 'dead end of human life', not only for genealogical level but also for herself. Mbithi further explains that a childless wife bears a scar which no one else can erase, she will suffer for this, her own relations will suffer for this, and it is an irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life. To this extent, childlessness does not only affect the woman, it even affects her family.

In Ousmane's *Xala* searing mockery of childlessness is used to pass political messages. El Hadji is afflicted with a curse of impotence and squanders all his money attempting to remove this curse. He borrows a lot of money, becomes broke, and is fired from his position for embezzlement. His second and third wives leave him. The only way to remove the curse is for El Hadji to stand naked while the band of beggars spit on his naked body to purify him of his past transgressions. These beggars are of lowest status but it is through their spitting that El Hadji can be cured. Because of impotence and the attempt to find a solution, his political power is lost.

Childbearing is a concern of the whole community. After marriage, the couple is expected to become parents. Enitan in Atta's, *Everything Good will Come* muses that it is better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren. This is echoed by the crowd that rescues Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* from committing suicide after the death of her only child. The crowd agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman. Childlessness is viewed with contempt. Selasi (2011) remarks that in the peculiar hierarchy of African households, the only rung lower than motherless child is childless mother. These characters are deliberate attempts by the writers to depict the lowly position of childless women within the African society.

In most African cultures motherhood is a very important aspect of a woman's life. Lesthaeghe (1989) avers that among some Sub-Saharan communities, fecundity of the woman was of paramount importance that a woman assumes the status of an adult only

when she has achieved motherhood, and that even the last instalment of her bride-wealth is only paid after the birth of her first child. According to Okome (2001), motherhood is very important in all African societies and respect for the woman, however, is understood by her fecundity, fertility, and fruitfulness which invests on her motherhood and many other entitlements. Motherhood in Okome's view elevates women to higher status in some African societies and is also a source of her identity.

Nyawo and Reddy (2015) present the Swazi perspective of women with fertility problems. In their study some women with only girl children are considered incomplete women because they do not have sons. These scholars argue that male dominance extends to control over women's reproductive abilities and that the Swazi family is pro-natal hence the ultimate purpose of marriage is procreation. According to Nyawo and Reddy (2015), the women's fertility is highly regarded and it provides a sense of security.

They contend that in Swaziland, progeny is of such importance in traditional societies that the inability to bear children is considered a great tragedy. Women who are unable to bear children in the Swazi society suffer humiliation, ridicule and abuse. Failure to fulfil the expectation of procreating renders an infertile woman a nonentity in her marital family, home and the entire society in general. Nyawo and Reddy (2015) argue that that women with fertility problems live in indescribable agony; they feel incomplete, worthless, cursed, and as failures. From their argument about the Swazi, it

seems that women are only valued for their ability to bear children and if unable, they are of no significance.

In a nutshell, socio-cultural beliefs about childlessness vary from one society to another however in many cases infertility is treated as a female problem and male infertility is downplayed. Wiredu (1992) postulates that adulthood in Africa is not attained by mere physical maturity; it is achieved in stages through human relationships and the most important prerequisites are marriage and motherhood. Sterile individuals (men and women) are thus not respected as responsible adults. The main purpose of an African marriage is childbearing and couples are under pressure to conform to the societal expectations. Children are highly valued and inability to attain motherhood threatens many marriages. Motherhood is revered in many African cultures and is seen as an ultimate fulfilment of womanhood. This study aimed at investigating the role of literature in exposing the misconceptions and realities surrounding childlessness and motherhood in African societies.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Involuntary childlessness is a traumatic condition that affects both married men and women. It disrupts the continuity of family lineage and threatens the very existence of the family structure and the community as a whole. Due to patriarchal dominance in most African societies, men in childless marriages have passed the blame of childlessness to their wives hence creating a sense of personal loss and tragedy to childless women in marriages. Such women bear the brunt of societal misconception

about childlessness. Consequently, the feminisation of childlessness in African writing has coloured the image of women in childless marriages with negative connotations which is inaccurate and stereotypical. The tendency to consistently blame women for childlessness has triggered vibrant literature that delves into the experiences of childless couples and the societal misconceptions about childlessness. This study aimed at interrogating how literature attempts to debunk, expose and unveil the complexities of childlessness in contemporary African societies.

1.3 Research Objectives

The general aim of the study was to interrogate the dynamics of childlessness in African societies as portrayed in selected Nigerian novels.

The specific objectives were to:

- (i) Interrogate the socio-cultural perceptions of childlessness in the selected novels.
- (ii) Explore how the experiences of childless women embody agency in the face of patriarchy as depicted in the selected novels.
- (iii) Explore the strategies used in the portrayal of childless characters in the selected novels.

1.4 Research Questions

- (i) How do the authors address the socio-cultural perceptions of childlessness in the selected novels?

- (ii) How are the experiences of childless couples used to embody agency in the face patriarchy?
- (iii) How do the strategies used in the novels portray childless characters in the African context?

1.5 Justification of the Study

This study is inspired by the prominent theme of childlessness in a significant number of African novels. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country according to World Population Prospects (2019). The prevalence of infertility varies from one part of the world to another. Hollos (2003) opines that the problem of infertility in Nigeria until recently was obscured by the country's high fertility rate. Infertility has a psychosocial impact on couples especially women (W.H.O, 2001). Boerma and Mgalla (2001) posit that the impact of infertility is more obvious in high fertility settings where children are highly desired and parenthood is culturally mandatory. To be childless in a country where motherhood is valorised has inspired a lot of literature that thematises infertility. This literature provides interesting perspectives of how childlessness is construed. The choice of female writers has been motivated by a curiosity to investigate the female point of view on infertility since they bear the brunt of misconceptions about infertility. The three selected novels published in the first quarter of the twenty-first century are also considered to embody contemporary consciousness. Hudson-Weems (1993) posits that feminism has limitations in the study of African male-female relations and calls for

a theory whose agenda is unique and separate from White feminism and Black feminism. This study therefore applied Africana womanism to examine how men and women in childless marriages navigate their identities amid the societal expectations of childbearing.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study presents a new perspective of understanding the concept childlessness. Contrary to the stereotypical portrayals of childless women, the authors depict childless women who are not relegated to the periphery. In doing so, the study contributes new knowledge and insights about childlessness to literary scholars and critics. It explores the use of literature as a tool to raise awareness and inspire social change about issues such as childlessness that have been stereotyped due to patriarchal dominance.

1.7 Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The study focussed on selected female authored Nigerian novels with the dominant theme of involuntary childlessness. The study leaves out other genres such as poetry, drama and short stories. The novel gives adequate scope and time to engage with the experiences of characters thus allowing us to put the theme into proper perspective. This study concentrated on major characters affected by childlessness in the selected texts.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

This study applied Africana womanism literary theory. This theory was put forward by Hudson-Weems. The other proponents of the theory are Walker (1983), and Ogunyemi (2006). They postulate that the feminist theory is Eurocentric and misrepresented the realities of African women in African feminist fiction. Africana womanism provides an African-centred point of view and articulates matters of identity, realities and multifarious dimensions in family life, social organisations, and history. It refers to an Afro-centric form of feminism. Hudson-Weems (1998) postulates that the term 'Africana' identifies the ethnicity of the woman and this reference to her ethnicity establishes her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and the land base Africa. She further explains that 'womanism' represents the battle with the dominant forces in the life of a struggling Africana woman questioning the accepted idea of womanhood. The study interrogated whether the culturally accepted idea of womanhood is upheld or deconstructed by the novels. The theory paves a new way to look at the literature of African writers based on the basic problems and issues of African society. Hudson-Weems (2000) posits that this theory rejects physical brutality, sexual harassment and subjugation perpetuated both within and outside race. The theory is grounded in African culture and Afrocentrism. It focuses on the unique experiences, the struggles, needs and desires of Africana women.

The use of Western Feminism to analyse the works of African women has received a lot of criticism. The first criticism is the assumption of women's shared oppression.

When women's oppression is generalised, it fails to account for the specific experiences and the range of different experiences among various groups of women, neither does it account for assertive and self-affirming women. Mohanty (1991) posits that:

A homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed... producing the image of an average third world woman. The average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender. The image of the third world woman is one of oppression and by extension, the third world woman is seen in contrast to the Western woman who is educated, modern and as having control over their bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions (Mohanty 1991).

In Mohanty's view, Western Feminist representation of the third world woman is fallacious because the third world woman is not merely to be seen as oppressed and subjugated. This therefore calls for the need of a theory that takes into consideration the unique experiences of African women.

The second criticism against Western feminism is that by bonding as victims, Western feminism places women in stereotypical position of powerlessness (Mohanty 1991). This view according to Mohanty is a misconception. Another objection against Western feminism has been the assumption of the inauthentic native. Chow (2003) argues that Western feminism does not comprehend women of colour's experience if they do not fit into the native's image stereotype. Walker (1979) refers to a wife, a common woman, who can never quite be a feminist and yet can perform acts of resistance against the

injustices she faces in her everyday life. She defines a womanist as outrageous, audacious, strong-willed behaviour... being grown up and responsible, in charge and serious. In Walkers view womanism addresses race and class issue from a socio-political perspective involving both men and women in the struggle for race class and gender equality.

According to Ntiri (2001), Africana womanism decides that Africana women are respectively marginalised due to their race, socio-economic conditions and gender. Ntiri suggests that Africana womanism operates on the assumption that race is of paramount importance in any discussion related to black women. The racial and gender antagonisms of white women are disdained by black women who reject being inferior to the white race and consider their men as an integral part in their struggle to dismantle the shackles of enslavement, marginalisation and poverty. Ntiri sees Feminism as separatist and non-inclusive and therefore not suitable for articulating the issues of black women.

Ogunyemi (1996) advocates a complementary theory. She insists that black women writers are not limited by issues defined by heir femaleness but attempt to tackle questions raised by humanity. In Ogunyemi's view, a womanist writes to generate public awareness and understanding. This suggests that through the writings, she is not merely concerned with highlighting sexism but committed to addressing concerns the whole community faces around questions of race and class. Thus, a womanist's work takes on a multidimensional awareness of the different layers of problems African men and women face (Arndt 2000).

Notably, there are differences between African womanism and feminism, Hudson (1993) posits that no matter what form of feminism one identifies with, the term feminism is firmly etched in the ideology that replicates dominant Eurocentric perspective. In her view, feminism is insufficient in conceptualising the experiences of African women because it is assimilationist. According to Hudson-Weems (1993), the feminist theory emerges from the privileged who live at the centre, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men; who live in the margin. To this end, feminism excludes non-white people and is not a suitable theory for analysing the experiences of the black race.

Ogunyemi (1996) argues that only when the oppression and problems men face are also analysed at the grass root levels, can you actually get to the root cause of women's subjugation. She believes that a young girl inherits womanism after a traumatic event such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a result of the experience of racism, rape, death in the family or sudden responsibility. Through coping with this experience, she moves creatively beyond the concern of self to that concern for the needs of others characteristic of adult womanists.

Ogunyemi is particularly interested in the development that women characters undergo in fiction. Womanists choose to highlight the process of transformation because it shows the progression of the women in the context of the wider community. The issue of wider community provides the key to womanism, because female liberation cannot occur without involvement of all members of the community in transforming the wider range of issues that underpin sexual discrimination. The womanist commitment to self-

help through life experience and self-education can be applied to works of Nigerian women writers. This is reflected in the transformation of female characters like Olanna in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Bolanle in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Yegide in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*.

These female characters struggle to achieve fulfilment and independence. The female metamorphosis advocated in the womanist theory can be discovered in works by these writers as they create new images of female characters, liberated and actively seeking freedom from patriarchal family rule, gender bias, from role stereotyping and from various damaging consequences of Nigerian socio-cultural politics. Change and growth are seen in the depiction and development of female characters in the selected texts. The female characters tend to be resilient and empowered to face challenges and break away from the fetters of their patriarchal society.

Womanism refers to an Afrocentric form of feminism that takes into consideration gender, race, class, neo-colonialism and religious intolerance. It emphasizes understanding of sexist relationships affiliations rather than domination, and dialogue rather than division. Womanists figure womanhood and motherhood in culture as symbolic means of understanding our world. They stress the centrality of the African family and uphold the role of mothering in the womanist ideology. The current study examines how the characters embody womanist consciousness or lack of it and whether they possess the agency to enable them overcome the barriers that limit their personhood.

While Africana women do have legitimate concerns regarding Africana men, the concerns must be addressed within the context of the African culture. In the womanist view the problems must not be solved using an alien framework such as feminism. Hudson-Weems (1998) explains that Africana womanism is not an addendum to feminism, black feminism, African feminism or Walker's womanism because the Africana womanism does not see the man as her primary enemy as the white feminist does. Ladner (1972) supports this view adding that black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men but rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men and women and children. Patriarchy in African societies is one of the oppressive forces that humiliate childless women. The study explores how the authors dismantle such forces. The eighteen tenets of Africana womanism theory are: Self-Naming, Self-Definition, Family-Centeredness, Wholeness, Role Flexibility, Adaptability, Authenticity, Black Female Sisterhood, struggling with males against oppression, Male Compatibility, Recognition, Ambition, Nurturing and Mothering, Strength, Respect for elders and spirituality. This study applied the values of self-definer, sisterhood, strength, family centeredness and struggling with males against oppression. The study interrogated how the characters in Africana womanist novels are depicted in the texts as possessing these values, missing them or in search of them.

Verners (1994) exemplifies the values of the Africana woman. She says that Africana women love men, like being mothers, value life, want families and harmonious relationships. To love men infers that the Africana woman does not see the male

counterpart as the primary enemy but as an ally in striving to liberate the society. Motherhood is an important aspect in this theory. According to societal expectations, to attain wholeness is to attain motherhood which is considered by the society as a form of identity for women. It should be noted that Africana women do not oppose motherhood. Although they may encounter challenges such as involuntary childlessness that is highly condemned by the society as portrayed in the selected texts, they strive to overcome the difficulties together with their men who had been influenced by patriarchal beliefs concerning childlessness. This study examined how the characters in the selected texts attempted to subvert oppressive patriarchy. Hudson (1998) opines that Africana women seek harmonious relationships although they face challenges from oppressive forces both inter-gender and intra-gender with patriarchal ideologies. The pertinent question that arose from the theory is the relationship between the Africana woman and her family, her community, and her career in today's society that emphasizes in the midst of oppression, human suffering, and death the empowerment of women and individualism over human dignity and rights.

The Africana woman as a self-definer comprises an element of identity. Hudson-Weems (1998) opines that self-definition describes realities that Africana women face through a Pan-African lens. Floyd (2006) opines that self-definition explores gender inequalities, stereotypes in modern patriarchy and helps to discover one's identity through their own point of view of their world that goes against that dominant culture. Self-definition illuminates the humanity of Africana women as it explores the diversity

of black female's experiences both the negative and the positive. The current study also examines how childless characters who are not able to meet the societal expectations negotiate their identities in order to become self-defined and how being self-defined enables the childless characters to subvert humiliation and the oppressive patriarchal forces.

Patriarchy in the texts compels female childless characters to believe that their inferior position in the society is natural and irredeemable but the writers use the womanist ideology in their writing to challenge to challenge such beliefs. They rework the images of the African woman projected by the patriarchal order and figure female characters with voices and who show self-definition. This is in line with what Munara (2008) calls 'reworking power and subverting dehumanising centres of authority'. The African woman writer's goal thus is to redefine the woman's exercise of authority and seek entry into the public sphere since women's voices have been largely marginalised.

Male compatibility in Africana womanism is concerned with cooperation between Africana men and women to survive the onslaught of their society. It advocates for a revolutionary force for the advancement and development of the community. The pairing of the major male alongside female characters in literature is a deliberate design to underscore the inevitability of cooperation between men and women in the African society. According to Stratton (1994), writers that transcend stereotypical portrayal attempt to show that a community cannot be built by men without the help of women. Both men and women are expected to work hand in hand. The characters collaborate to

effect social transformation and change within their societies. The study interrogated how both the male and female childless characters collaborate to survive in a society that has condemned them and relegated them to the periphery due to their childlessness.

The pursuit for wholeness and authenticity is marked by connectedness to family, career and community. The Africana men and women participate in activities that reward them with respect and recognition. Whole and authentic Africana womanists conduct their lives in accordance with the standards of their cultural heritage, consequently, their comportment reflects their cultural beliefs. Hudson (1998) recognises the vital role of women as mothers and nurturers. Their dual roles as mothers and nurturers begin with their own children and extend to all mankind. They love and nurture biological relatives as well as members of their extended families. They recognise that their individual commitment to family is a method of ensuring the survival of Africana families. Hudson (2000) posits that the survival of the entire race can only be achieved through Africana men and women working together.

Africana womanist writers subscribe to the ideologies of Africana womanism. Hudson (1998) posits that Africana womanist writers are tasked with the responsibility to speak the truth--the whole truth and present both the male and female characters in all dimensions by exploring the dynamics of their relationships. The writer must realistically and objectively examine the dominant forces at play, forces that dictate the very nature of the conflicts and the way they are handled. In a society that privileges women who are able to bear children, the identities of childless women are erased

holding them to an assumption of inferiority. African women writers have countered this injustice by employing strategies to reconstitute the cultural erasure and reclaim the status of childless women. These women writers have created narratives that speak to the concerns of an African female aesthetics. Through the Africana womanist approach the study explores how oppressive structures are transcended and how the writers use their literature to bring the victims back into social visibility. In Adebayo (2017), Yejide's marriage faces obstacles because they have failed to have a baby. Due to this she is seen as a worthless being but Shoneyin uses Yegide's self- definition and strength to restore her dignity when she becomes pregnant. Likewise, Shoneyin (2010) through Bolanle depicts how childless women are seen as failures. Her determination and strength to find a solution to her condition enables her to overcome stereotypes and patriarchal forces. Bolanle's dignity and womanhood are restored when a medical test reveals that Baba Segi is infertile and is the responsible for their childlessness. The protagonists in the selected texts use their courage and strength as attributes of Africana womanism to attain visibility.

The selected texts portray women determined to keep their house holds despite betrayal from their husbands. The authors are anti-patriarchy but not anti-men. The authors through their characterisation suggest change in societal beliefs in the texts. In this context womanism as a tool of reading African women writing attempts to show how women partner with men to tackle societal prejudice and stereotypes. Kolawole (2004) affirms that Africans should have theories which remove the gorges without glossing

over cultural specificities in order to build meaningful coalitions. The women writers use their texts to protest against harmful patriarchal beliefs that relegate childless women to the margins.

The theory was used to examine how the portrayal childless characters' efforts to pursue wholeness which according to the communities' expectations is achieved through motherhood. Hudson-Weems (2000) postulates that Africana women focus on things that help with the elimination of oppression, which is considered to be the most important thing in order for the Africana community to survive. Africana womanism puts priority on human dignity of Africana women, children, and men. Even childless characters deserve to be accorded the dignity that they deserve instead of being viewed with contempt. This study, through the theory interrogates how the marginalised heroines are uplifted from the restrictions of patriarchal domination. Since Africana woman is family-centred, the study explored the presentation of infertility as a dominant force that threatens the family ties and how the protagonists dismantle the forces in order to break free. Africana Womanism is not only about the negative experiences of women, particularly childless women but also their effort to create safe spaces and positive experiences. Africana womanist theory helps to contextualise the Nigerian writer's fight against patriarchal oppression and discrimination of women, addressing issues of agency and self-determination. This study hinges on the womanist goal of eradicating sexist and patriarchal oppression in the process of discovering self-definition and self-determination in the Nigerian women's writings.

1.9 Operational Definitions

Agency—Refers to the capacity of women in childless marriages to act independently and to make their own free choices based on their will.

Polygyny—A marriage set-up where a man marries more than one wife simultaneously.

Involuntary childlessness—refers to absence of children in a couple's life against their will.

Infertility—a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months of unprotected sexual intercourse.

Primary infertility—refers to the inability to conceive at all.

Secondary infertility—refers to the inability to conceive again after a previous pregnancy.

Childless characters—refers to couples in the selected texts who do not have biological children after several attempts to conceive.

Contemporary—refers to the first quarter of twenty-first century.

Subversion-attempt to weaken or destroy established standards.

Patriarchy-a social organisation in which men have authority over women.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Infertility being a global phenomenon has attracted studies from various scholars and disciplines. This chapter outlines and critiques such studies. The review examines relevant information on infertility from a socio-cultural point of view although there are psychological, religious and medical studies that look at infertility from a different angle. The chapter will review literature on the socio-cultural perceptions of infertility and the experiences of childless women, childlessness and agency in the face of patriarchy and use of style in portraying childless characters.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Perceptions of Infertility

Socio-cultural perceptions refer to the communities' views and understanding of infertility. Greil (1991) points out that infertility as a reproductive impairment is a medically diagnosed physiological characteristic of individuals, whereas the socially constructed phenomena of infertility involve a complex set of beliefs and values within a specific societal structure. Infertility is socially shaped by knowledge, attitude and perceived importance of childbearing (Audu, et al, 2013). The importance of children for some African people has been prioritised above many other reasons for marriage (Baloyi, 2009). In some traditional African society, woman derived her social status and her indispensable value from child bearing (Imbiza, 2013). This suggests that women who were not able to have children were relegated to lowly status in the

respective households. Infertility is not only unacceptable but also a disgrace and an abnormal state. The understanding of infertility about the causes and treatment may differ from one community to another but there are some shared beliefs such as the pervasive notion that women are usually to blame for involuntary childlessness. Infertility is surrounded by many mistaken beliefs about its causes.

Traditional explanations of infertility are still socially important in Africa. Pearce (1999) concurs that these beliefs and practices still remain strong to date. Infertility is by and large attributed to non-medical factors in most African communities. It is commonly associated with supernatural or evil powers, voodoo, curses by ancestors or deities and witchcraft and a breach of taboos. The meaning assigned to infertility is mediated by sociocultural factors that vary among regions (Van Balen, 2000). There are varied cultural constructions depending on particular communities. Ngubane (1997) posits that many African women attribute their infertility to sorcery and witchcraft. Such societies do not view infertility as a medical condition. Among the Macua of Ghana both men and women believe that infertility is caused by incompatible blood of the couple. MacCarthy et al (2012) avers that there are various rituals performed in a Ghanaian community regarding infertility thus:

During puberty rites, a childless woman is not supposed to serve a boiled egg into the mouth of the young girl who is undertaking the rite. Normally women who have children are allowed to serve the egg in the belief that she could deliver in future. When the egg is put into the mouth of the girl, she is not

supposed to bite into it. Instead, the girl is supposed to swallow the egg whole. Biting the egg signifies that she has bitten her womb and might not deliver in future (p. 32).

From his account, infertility is given a complicated ritual in order to avoid shame. The performance of such rituals suggest that infertility is condemned in such societies. The ritual suggests the gendered nature of such practices because it is undergone by women only. This study examines whether the selected texts uphold the beliefs concerning the causes or deconstruct them.

Cultural explanations regarding infertility suggest the gendered nature of infertility. Korster Oyekan, (1999) gives two accounts on the perceived causes of infertility that:

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is believed that all women have fibroid (*iju*) which is natural and allows conception to take place. It only causes infertility when the fibroid becomes big, blocking the sperms or causing hotness, thus preventing the sperms from fertilizing female eggs. Secondly it is believed that Yoruba women have a worm called *aranginisa* which has some teeth but causes no harm. The worm at times might get cruel and eat the baby causing infertility (p.19).

The Yoruba point of view suggests that infertility is a feminine condition. Such perceptions are motivated by the patriarchal nature of most African societies which attribute some health condition to women. To a large extent, patriarchy has contributed to the oppression and mistreatment of childless women in most societies. Consequences

of infertility include ostracism, domestic violence and divorce. Infertility causes alienation which would bring about rituals which may be done to appease the ancestors (Dutney, 2007). The rituals are meant to act as solutions to infertility and enable the individuals affected to bear children. However, these rituals in some cases may not offer the desired outcomes hence leaving the concerned parties without solutions. The study interrogates how the selected novels deconstruct the use of such rituals as solutions to infertility.

Both men and women in childless marriages cope differently. Mason (1993) avers that in terms of coping, infertile men appear to engage in denial, distancing or avoidance and these strategies exacerbate marital tensions and prolong the pursuit of alternative solutions to the couple's childlessness. In another study, Valentine (1988) found out that men in childless marriages characteristically assume that their wives are the source of the couple's infertility, and they are often quite disbelieving when shared or male factor aetiology is diagnosed.

Women, however, exhibit different responses. A study by Leiblum (1997) posits that women experience considerably psychosocial distress, more somatic difficulties, lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression and greater interpersonal sensitivity related to their infertility. Women appear to attribute the cause of infertility to their own biological failure, or past behaviours or perceived transgressions, such as relinquishing a child for adoption, having abortions, or having extramarital affairs (Daniluk, 1991). Daniluk's assertion confirms the notion that African women bear the blame of infertility and face

more consequences than their male counterparts, most likely due to their socio-cultural orientation. Mason (1993) observes that the self-attribution of responsibility appears to be evident, even when the couple receives an exclusively male factor diagnosis. According to Daniluk (1991), women perceive their inability to conceive as a reflection of their incompetence as women. Daniluk however does not explore the view that completeness comes in different ways and should not be tied only to the ability to bear children. This study interrogated the various strategies adopted by the writers to remove the childless couples from the margins and give them space within the society.

The remedies sought by infertile persons vary from one community to another. KorsterOyekan, (1999) reveals that infertile women prefer to seek treatment from local herbal and spiritual specialists and churches. Dekok (2008) confers that the strong natural pressure to bear children leads infertile people to visit traditional healers who are assumed as having the ability to cure infertility. Igbo women who were barren would visit native doctors (*dibias*) to help them solve the problem (Obianuju, 2009). These are done in cases where bareness is perceived to be caused by supernatural powers.

Other solutions include clandestine arrangements. Among the traditional Ndebele marriages of Zimbabwe, a husband's brother is ordered to help his brother conceive by having sex with his sister-in-law until conception takes place if it is believed that the husband is infertile. In contexts where it is assumed that the wife is infertile, polygamy is suggested, or a young sister or niece is instructed to come and help her aunt bear

children for the husband. The treatment is sought in order to enable childbearing and restore the image of the childless couple so that they can fulfil the societal expectation of having a family.

Another solution of infertility is remarrying. Nwoye (2007), states that some polygamous unions are remedies to childlessness. Sterility of the man in some communities is solved by his brother impregnating the sister-in-law (Bujo, 2009). This is also supported by Mbithi (1975) that a relative or a friend is asked or allowed to sleep with the wife in order that she may bear children for the family. Among the Northern Sothos, an infertile woman is allowed to marry a wife who can bear children on her behalf (Mthekga, 2002). From the foregoing remedies, the solutions to childlessness are non-medical and cast many doubts on their credibility. Most of the solutions are tailored for the African woman who is believed to bear the brunt of childlessness. This study investigates how the novels under study question, dispute and demystify these beliefs and how they attempt to re-shape the societies way of thinking about involuntary childlessness.

2.3 Childlessness and Agency in the Face of Patriarchy

Motherhood has a special status in African cultures. The highest value is given to a woman as a mother. Oyeumi (2003) posits that when a woman gives birth, two entities are born, a baby and a mother. Child bearing seems to elevate an African woman to a special status where she is revered. Consequently, a barren woman is despised, discriminated and treated as something inexplicably futile. A mother is a figure who

nurtures, protects, possess secret knowledge and power. According to Makinde (2004) motherhood among the Yoruba is presented as very precious in the saying; *Iya ni ura, Baba ni dingi (Mother is gold, Father is mirror)*. Mother is symbolically equated to gold and is highly valued among the Yoruba.

Childlessness causes disharmony in marriages. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist Nnu Ego is deprived of every comfort and peace in her first marriage to Amatokwu because she is not able to give birth. The humiliation she experiences at Amatokwu's house makes her to submit to Nnaife, her second husband, because she is pregnant for him. She rescues herself from the stigma of childlessness. Though the marriage is not out of love, it lasts because it has enables Nnu Ego to attain the status of motherhood. It accords her honour in her society.

The same circumstances are faced by Efuru the protagonist in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. She faces numerous challenges in her two marriages on account of her barrenness. She suffers psychological and cultural humiliation because she is childless. Despite her beauty, fortune and values, she is abandoned by her two husbands. The second husband even accuses her of adultery. She faces these humiliations and false accusations because she has failed to bear children in a society that values childbearing. Both Emecheta and Nwapa portray characters that exist in a society that defines the identity of women by their abilities to give birth. They reveal how society disregards childless women. This study examines how writers in the selected texts attempt to create a world of possibilities and give childless women hope.

In the same vein, Pokuwaa in Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* (1967) contends with unhappiness in her marriage because of her inability to give birth. Due to her barrenness, she suffers the stigma, agony and humiliation that are associated with childlessness in her society. Equally, she suffers reproach from the neighbours and her relations because she lacks the pride of womanhood. In her desperate attempts to get children, she divorces her first two husbands and marries the third one, Fordwuo, a man whose first wife already has two children but she fails to conceive. She consults various deities and even offers sacrifices to the great god, Tano but her problem persists. She becomes frustrated and gives up hope. She rejects her mother's interferences. She abandons the herbs and accepts her fate. Through her depiction, Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* suggests that not all cases of childlessness can be solved.

Physical abuse is a common occurrence in childless marriages. In Osofisan's *Wuraola Forever* Wura faces agony and emotional stress that childlessness brings on both the victim and the extended family. Wura's marriage to Segun is devoid of happiness because there is no child to show for it. Despite her virtuous qualities of love and fidelity to her husband, she is despised and made to know that she has no place in her husband's house. Wura is beaten by Segun. Segun who was once a caring and loving husband turns inconsiderate and harsh. He maltreats his wife and sees her as a nuisance and the source of his misfortunes. He starts drinking and having affairs with other women. When confronted by his wife about his infidelity, he beats up his wife and calls her a witch. He says he has been wasting his food and semen on Wura. After a diagnosis,

Wura is found to be fertile while Segun is found to be impotent, which makes him avoid medical check-ups. Segun's attitude towards his wife depicts the patriarchal oppressive nature of many African societies which malign women and inflicts pain on her for any misfortune in marriage. Wura's physical abuse goes unpunished and the husband does not pay for his mistake.

Similarly, in Ausbeth's *Nwanyibuiife* (2003), the agony of childlessness is portrayed through Chineze who is married to Ogbuefi. She is thrown out of her home because she cannot bear a child. When she calls on God as a source of comfort, her mother-in-law says, "Did I hear you mention God? The only god our people recognize is the God that opens the womb of a woman to produce children in abundance" (p.8). The assumption here is that God has destined every woman to have a child, when the reverse is the case, it is assumed that God has cursed the woman or her *chi* (destiny) has refused to favour her. Mama and Ogbuefi manage to get another woman to replace Chineze and relegate her to perform only house hold chores. It is such kinds of humiliation that Azodo (1992) challenges the society to have a shift in their obsession with child bearing saying with reference to Nwapa's works, that women should feel free to engage in motherhood when it pleases them or withdraw from it anytime, through will or awareness. Azodo's (1992) posits childless women who are mistreated in matrimony should exercise agency in order to overcome the mistreatments. This study intends to explore how agency enables relegated women to overcome some of the challenges they face in their childless marriages and how they forge new identities in the patriarchal societies.

In Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* (2002), the patriarchal notion of motherhood is articulated. The text challenges the conventional male representation of women as mothers by depicting a woman who embodies agency by willingly refusing to be pregnant. In the text, the king expresses his delight in his role in the patriarchal structure saying, "Whistling is not a difficult task in the mouth of a parrot" (p.16). In concluding his speech, the king outlines the role of women in a marriage institution. He says, "A man's children are his assurance of greater tomorrow. His wives provide these children. That is their use" (p.16). His remarks indicate that a woman's worth and identity is constructed around her childbearing.

Childbearing gives cultural legitimacy to female power. It is one of the parameters designed by patriarchal ideology and the women have learnt to live with such male defined parameters for their survival even if it hurts them. For the queens in harem, in *The Queen Sisters* (2002) motherhood is so ingrained in their psyche that they see no alternative to being denied their matrimonial bed by Ubi. They see motherhood as central to their identity. When Ubi refuses to become pregnant, she subverts the tradition that has enslaved and entrapped her co-queens. The refusal of the role of motherhood can be understood within the context of sexual politics of Nigerian tradition, in which bearing children is inscribed and valued in the harem. For Ubi, women should be allowed to make their choices about childbearing. Her refusal to bear children is seen as a transgression against Nigerian traditional gender norms. In celebration of motherhood, Tiroso expresses with reference to Ubi's refusal to bear

children: “If urine is so easy to pass, why do chickens not urinate? She must be barren” (p.41).

From the utterance, motherhood is a natural and not out of choice. Only barrenness hinders its fulfilment. Ubi’s pretence of infertility is the author’s attempt to depict a form of resistance to male domination and reclaim women’s subjectivity. She is conscious of the fact that childbearing might interfere with her proposed mission to the harem. Ubi doesn’t find fulfilment in the traditional mode of ideal womanhood. Agunloye (2002) problematizes the dominant narratives that all women must be mothers. Women ought to confront this challenge, exercise their agency in order to resist dominant construction of femininity and womanhood. She suggests through the text that every woman’s reproductive contribution to the society must be cherished irrespective of whether they have children to show for it or not.

Several studies have been done on the selected novels. However, some of them leave out pertinent issues. Denkyi (2017) focuses on how feminism is espoused in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). The study examines marginalisation, women and corruption, war, corruption, marriage and education but fails to interrogate how childlessness is used to marginalise women in the text. This study examined how through strength, childless women like Olanna exercise questioned the oppressive forces that contribute to her suffering.

These authors attempt to reveal how society intimidates barren women, dehumanizing them and making them lose confidence in themselves and their inability to become

useful in the society. They suggest that instead of mourning over childlessness and struggling to fulfil societal requirements, childless women ought to put their energy into other aspects of life that will be of benefit to her and the society. From these reviews, the ability of a woman to procreate in marriage is what legitimizes the marriage because childbearing defines a woman's femininity in the Nigerian context. This study examines how the experiences of the childless characters are creatively used in the selected texts to critique the societal belief that motherhood equals womanhood.

2.4 Strategies Used in the Portrayal of Childless Characters

Language plays an important role in describing infertility. Llamas and Watt (2010) describe socio-cultural linguistics as a broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture and society. Childless men and women are stigmatised through the use of derogatory language. Pearce (1999) points out that an exploration of the corpus of literature on the social stigmatisation of involuntarily childlessness in Africa suggests that there is a social-cultural language of infertility. Communities' concepts of childlessness as a misfortune and a curse affect their general attitude towards childless couples. They are held in great contempt, disregarded, humiliated and accorded lower status in the society as people who are cursed through the use of derogatory language to refer to the childless couples (Dyer, 2002). This societal scorn, indifference and isolation of childless women and men provokes depression and hopelessness.

Language plays a critical role in determining the social identity of people. According to Odinga (2011), an interrogation of literature on social stigmatisation of involuntary childlessness in Africa suggests that there is a socio-cultural language of infertility. The language of infertility is in most cases disparaging against women (Okome, 2002). Okome alludes to the idea that language has been used to lower the social status of barren women in various African societies. Olarinmoye (2013) comments that linguistic narratives cutting across different African societies, establish that involuntarily childless women are socially portrayed in many dialects as having a lower social status than their counterparts who are able to reproduce.

The cultural language of infertility in most African societies is demeaning. Dyer (2007) explains that South African childless women have to deal with being called *idlolo* (barren) and *stjoekoe* (failure) and the women feel ridiculed and stigmatised when referred to using the names. In Northern Ghana men had to battle with being branded as *lankpolosoba* (a man with rotten testicles) or *yokuusoba* (a man with dead penis) for failing to impregnate their wives (Tabong & Adongo, 2013). Fido and Zahid (2004) corroborate this idea adding that the Akans call childless women *obonini* or *osaadwe*, the Ewes call them *kono* while the Gas call them *kena*, these names are synonymous with barrenness, emptiness or worthless and are considered insulting. The names make one look like an outcast and remind the childless people of their predicament and unfortunate situation.

In other parts of Africa, the language of infertility has been deployed to symbolise a state of being pitied, shunned or feared. As such, infertility in popular parlance has been defined as a state of being unfruitful and fallow while fertility is positively defined as the highly priced state of being fruitful and productive (Ombelet & Van-Balen, 2010).

In the Luo community of

Kenya, barren women are referred to as *lur* (fruitless) and men *bwoch* (impotent) or *long lilo* (without manhood) these names are considered derogatory and are perceived as signs of incompleteness, failure and weakness. The names are considered signs of verbal abuse. In the Zulu language a married woman unable to have children is described as *inyumba* (barren or fruitless) a derogatory term while in Tanzania they are known as *Tassa* (barren) (Buthelezi, 2004). The language of infertility is not only stigmatising to women. Dyer (2004) postulates that the language of infertility is also socially stigmatising to men who are described as *incabi* (castrated cow) or *stjoekee* (failure). Among the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria, the term *agon* (to hold in contempt) is sometimes used to refer to women who are unable to have children (Ember, 2004). The Igbo describe childless women as *mgbaliga* or *nwany-iga* (barren or sterile woman) or in a more derogatory way sterile monster who has maternal organs for mere decoration (Okereke, 2012). Okereke's observation points to how childless women are viewed as lesser beings within the Igbo society.

The image of childless women is coloured with negative connotations. They are associated with contempt and hatred. Mead (1998) gives the descriptive image of a childless women in a pitiable manner as:

The figure of a witch who kills living things, who strokes the throats of children until they die, whose very glance causes cows to lose their calves and fresh milk to curdle as it stands, is a statement of human fear of what can be done to human kind by a human who denies or is forced to deny child bearing and child cherishing (p. 2).

From Mead's statement, a childless woman has no place in the society and is loathed in the community. Mead suggests that the society should change its attitudes towards childless men and women for a peaceful co-existence. It is such like attitudes that threaten family ties that is of great concern to Africana womanism.

The theme of infertility and childlessness has no doubt permeated the film industry. Ademola (1997) observes that the Nollywood (Nigerian) genre has focused on infertility and childlessness as a common theme in the films. Ademola admits that in several of the films, in the public or social face of infertility and involuntary childlessness, it is the woman who is portrayed as a 'tragic social figure' who must take all measures to tackle her condition of 'barrenness' so she can find social acceptance among her community. Ademola's observation points out that the Nigerian societies view the woman as the first suspect in cases of involuntary childlessness, even without medical proof. This ideology is perpetuated by patriarchy which equates masculinity to fertility. This study examined how the authors used literary style to rebuke patriarchal forces.

Some cultural practices are also demeaning to childless women. Practices such as the one in the Xhosa community of wearing the bridle scarf until first child is born labels, alienates, and brings ridicule and shame to a childless woman in the community (Dyer et al, 2002). Among the Yoruba, a childless woman was not given a proper burial. After her death, her body was thrown into the bush or forest for animals to devour (Wolff, 1979). Wolff further explains that these women were accused of witchcraft and having ‘devoured’ their own children resulting in avoidance and social isolation.

From the foregoing reviews, the language of infertility from different African dialects is disparaging, relegates one to lower standing than the fertile counterparts and could have dehumanising and stigmatising effects on those affected. The cultural practices that childless women go through are humiliating. The infertile are viewed as defective and deviant. The study examines the strategies used in the portrayal of childless characters.

2.5 Conclusion

Traditionally, infertility in marriages is perceived as an impairment because childbearing is the main purpose for marriage. A lot of pressure is therefore put on childless women in marriages because they are seen as having not fulfilled their core mandate. The reviewed literature also reveals that infertility is a gendered phenomenon since it is perceived as a feminine condition. The causes and solutions to childlessness are also perceived based on the traditional beliefs hence contributing to the suffering of childless couples. This study interrogates whether the authors of the selected novels

uphold or subvert such traditional beliefs about childlessness. From the reviewed literature, infertility deprives childless women in marriages agency because childbearing gives cultural legitimacy to female power.

Women in childless marriages seem to occupy a lowly status in their households. Because of their marginal position, the childless are mistreated and downgraded by both men and women. Due to such experiences, this study explores how the childless characters reconstruct their agency amidst the oppressive patriarchal forces. The language used to refer to those suspected of infertility in various communities is disparaging. The terms used are considered insulting because they are synonymous with emptiness and worthlessness. This partly contributes to the stigma and alienation to those suspected of being infertile. Because of such disparaging names, this study explores how the strategies used in the portrayal of childless characters embody the need for social change on how the couples in childless marriages are viewed.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the systematic steps that will be taken by the researcher in studying the research problem. It outlines the research design, study population, data sampling, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research Design

The researcher applied analytic research design. Kothari (2004) posits that in analytic design, the researcher has to use facts or information already available, and analyse them in order to make a critical evaluation of the material. Tayie (2005) explains that analytical research design enables the researcher to examine inter-relationships among variables and to draw explanatory inferences. The design enabled the researcher to collect, interpret, analyse and describe the relevant qualitative data from the selected texts in relation to research questions.

3.3 Area of study

The area of study was thematic. Thematic area of study emphasises identifying, analysing and interpreting pattern of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006). The study concentrated on common ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. The main idea for the study was the portrayal of involuntary childlessness in the selected Nigerian novels.

3.4 Study Population

According to Bhattacharjee (2012, p.65), a population can be defined as all people or items (units of analysis) with the characteristics that one wishes to study. The study population comprised nine Nigerian novels thematising involuntary childlessness. The texts that make up the accessible population are Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* (1982), Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017), Osofisan's *Wuraola Forever* (2006), Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), and *Efuru* (1966).

3.5 Data Sampling

This study utilised purposive sampling technique. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), purposive sampling targets information rich cases for in-depth analysis related to central issues being studied. Similarly, Ritchie and Lewis (2009), argue that in purposive sampling the units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which enables detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles the researcher wishes to study.

This sampling technique relies on the researcher's own judgement in selecting information rich cases to form the primary texts. Characteristics of the sample were defined and texts that did not meet the conditions were left out. The texts were selected based on characteristics of the population and the objective of the study. The researcher

read the texts in the study population and selected texts that were relevant to answering research questions. Three primary texts selected for the purposes of this study were Adebayo's *Stay with me* (2017), Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow sun* (2006). These texts share thematic boundaries and relatively contemporary.

3.6 Data Collection

Data was collected through close textual reading of the selected texts. Brummett (2010) explains close reading as the mindful disciplined reading of a text with a view to a deeper understanding of its meaning. During close reading, the researcher focused on significant details such as tone, literary devices and narrative voice in order to understand the texts form, craft and meanings. The study explored the authors' utilization of characterisation as a tool of representing involuntary childlessness in the novels. The researcher carried out multiple readings of the text, annotate the text and look for patterns and thematic strands that are relevant to answering the research questions.

3.7 Data Analysis

The study applied qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a method used to analyse written, verbal or visual communication messages (Elo & Kynga, 2008). Newman (2000) posits that content analysis enables the researcher to reveal the content (messages and meanings) in a source of communication (a book or article) and lets the researcher probe into and discover content in a different way from the ordinary

way of reading a book. The researcher analysed both the manifest and the latent content by examining the characters affected by childlessness and underlying themes. The content was broken down using the research objectives of the study and themes derived from the research topic. Coding was data driven. Coding enabled the researcher to breakdown, examine, conceptualise, and categorise data. It was guided by the research questions. The researcher located themes and assigned initial codes to condense the mass of data into categories. The codes were developed after reading the collected data. Commonly occurring themes across the texts were identified and analysed based on the patterns related to the objectives of the study. Africana womanism literary theory was applied to critique the data. The analysed data was presented in prose in subsequent chapters.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study focussed on fictional characters in the literary texts. Appropriate academic language was used because childlessness is an emotive issue. The researcher ensured that all sources of information are properly cited in order to avoid plagiarism. The study took into account the APA style of citations and referencing. It complied with the requirements of the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY

4.1 Introduction

Infertility in most African societies is generally viewed as a failure to conform to cultural norms. The understanding of infertility is deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural beliefs and practises of African societies in the texts. Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Adebayo's *Stay With Me* portray different societies in which the communities' traditional understanding of infertility tends to differ from the modern perspective of infertility hence creating conflicting views amongst the characters. The aim of this chapter is to examine the varied ways in which infertility is perceived in various cultural contexts and how the texts respond to these socio-cultural perceptions of infertility.

4.2 Patriarchal Perceptions of Infertility in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*

Societal views regarding infertility are grounded on patriarchal norms that humiliate and demean childless women. Marriage is seen as an agent of life continuity, forming an assurance of continuity of inheritance and a good social standing even economically as it has some form of responsibilities and status (Tabong & Adongo, 2013). As such, the state of childlessness therefore places the characters in the texts in a state of dilemma. Through the character of Akin in *Stay With Me* failure to uphold patriarchal standards of siring children depicts him as a social misfit with a negative image that everyone in his family does not want to be associated with. This is seen when his mother

and uncle try to convince him to marry another wife who is capable of bearing children in order to redeem his image (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter, para. 22).

The collective involvement of extended family members in Akin's marriage reveals that infertility concerns every family member in Yoruba society. Akin's mother reinforces oppressive patriarchal values that lower the dignity of fellow women by advising him to take another wife because according to her Yegide is destined to have *Abiku* children. Due to the *Abiku* superstition, Yegide is bound to remain childless forever. Contrary to what she expects, Akin seems not to concur with his mother's proposal. He defies his mother's proposal and warns her not to involve herself in the matter anymore and to avoid calling him for such discussions. Unlike the first time when Akin succumbed to his mother's proposal to take a second wife, he seems to have had a change of mind by disregarding his mother's suggestion. His decision not to take a second wife carries the day. Akin's refusal to heed to his mother's advice subverts the socio-cultural beliefs that contributes to the suffering of childless men and women in his society. Through him, Adebayo suggests that men in childless marriages should champion for change in socio-cultural beliefs that tend to marginalise childless women in order to eradicate such mistreatments.

The relentless nature of oppressive forces is demonstrated through the character of Akin's mother depicts her determination to ensure that societal expectations are fulfilled and her family lineage perpetuated. Both Akin and Yegide are scorned and rebuked for their childlessness to make them give in the demands of marrying a second

wife. Akin's mother is not pleased with her son's reaction because she never expected him to reject her proposal. She says: *Me? Abi, you don't know who you are talking to ni? Akin? Akinyele? Abi, you are walking away, Akin come back here. Akin, I am still talking to you. Are you not the one I am calling? See this boy. Akinyele!* (Chapter 36, para. 77).

Akin's walking away symbolises protest, rejection and a call for childless men and women not to conform to the socio-cultural beliefs and practices that marginalise childless women in African societies. This is because taking a second wife would imply that Yegide is infertile and hence responsible for their state of childlessness in the marriage.

The selective way in which Akin tells the oral narrative of the childless Mr and Mrs Tortoise also symbolises the call for social change. He selects the relevant parts of the oral narrative to tell his daughter and discards what he deems unfit and irrelevant. He only tells the parts of the narrative he believes are progressive, relevant and embody what he believes in. Akin says:

The story Moomi told me doesn't stop there. Apparently, the tortoise and his wife couldn't just stay as Mr. and Mrs Tortoise, that wouldn't be enough. It goes on to tell how the tortoise's wife has a baby so that everyone can live happily forever and ever. I didn't bother to tell my daughter that part. It was the lie I'd believed in the beginning. Yegide would have a child and we would be happy forever (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 36, para. 19).

Oral narratives represent age old philosophies of a given society. The beliefs expressed in the narrative about childlessness reflect societal worldviews. Akin's experience as a father seems to contradict the oral narrative. Even after having children through extramarital affairs, he goes through a series of sorrows and grief due to the deaths of the children. His experience overturns the societal perception that children bring happiness in marriage because contrary to his belief, his children have become a source of his suffering. Through Akin's character, *Stay With Me* (2017) attempts to reshape the society's beliefs that child bearing is leads to a happy marriage. The happiness he expected to experience after Yegide giving birth seems not to exist due to the sickle cell disease. The sickle cell disease shows how circumstances beyond human control can disrupt the happiness that is expected to come as a result of childbearing.

Having children is also equated to owning the whole world in the oral narrative, however, Adebayo suggests that such ideas are inaccurate and should not be passed to younger generations. Akin believes that younger children should be told the truth about childbearing and therefore he chooses not to begin the story with the saying *Olomo lo l'aye* (He who has children owns the world) as told by the mother. To him the saying is misleading. He says:

I'd believed her once, I'd accepted like the tortoise and his wife that there was no way to be in the world without an offspring, I had thought that having children who called me Baba would change the very shape of my world, would cleanse me even wipe away the memory of pushing Funmi down the stairs. And

though I told Rotimi the story many times, I no longer believed that having a child was equal to owning the world (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 35, para. 48).

While the narrative views having children to owning the world to emphasise the perception that children are everything that one needs for a successful marriage. Akin seems not to support it. Such beliefs pushed Akin to engage in acts of deception that created conflicts in his marriage. His efforts to have children and conform to societal expectations proved futile since it brought him sorrows than happiness. Due to the sickle cell condition that the children suffered from, he realised that children came with their own fair share of challenges.

While having children is championed for in *Stay With Me*, the text also presents situations in which Oluronbi the business woman is willing to give out her child in order to make more sales. Yegide narrates the oral narrative of Oluronbi and the *iroko* tree selectively to her child. She says:

My favourite story was the one about Oluronbi and the *Iroko* tree. Initially it was difficult for me to believe the version my step mothers told. Their Oluronbi was a market woman who promised to give her daughter to the *Iroko* tree if it could help her to sell more goods than other traders in the market. At the end of the story, she lost her child to the *Iroko*. I hated this version because I did not believe that anyone would trade a child for anything else. The story as my step mothers told it did not make sense to me, so I decided to create my own version.

I added new bits and pieces each time one of my step mothers told the tale (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 17, para. 5).

Oluronbi's failure to adhere to societal demands by agreeing to surrender her only child to the *iroko* if it helped her sell more goods goes against the societal expectations. Instead of adhering to the dictates of her society, Oluronbi willingly becomes childless contrary to the demands of the Yoruba society thereby subverting the patriarchal norms. This depicts Adebayo's deliberate call for the Yoruba society to change its perceptions on childbearing. Many versions of the same narrative are symbolic of the possibility of perceiving the issue of childbearing in marriage in myriad ways. It is not the case of a single story as the society would want us to believe. The oral narrative seems to fuel societal suspicions regarding childless couples who are at times viewed as responsible for their own situations. Shoneyin's *Stay With Me* (2017) attempts to reveal that despite child bearing being the main reason for marriage, some women are willing to give out their children in exchange for material wealth.

In cases where married women are suspected to be the cause of childlessness, polygyny is suggested in some societies as a solution to childlessness. However, it seems not to go well with some childless women in such marriages. Yegide seems not to welcome *Iya Martha's* and *Baba Lola's* idea of bringing Funmilayo to be married by Akin as the second wife. Instead of giving them good food, Yegide mixed three-day-old beans with fresh pottage (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 2, para.55). They ate the food and, on their way, back home, they had diarrhoea. The image of the stale food she serves the visitors who

brought a second wife depicts the hate that she harbours against those who mistreat her due to her childlessness.

After eating the food, Funmi who was supposed to be Akin's second wife soiled her dress because she could not make it to the bush. The soiling of her dress reveals how polygyny is likely to interfere with Yegide's marriage to Akin. If she is accepted as a second wife, she is likely to drive a wedge between Akin and Yegide. Funmi's marriage to Akin as a second wife leads to constant quarrels. Through her contempt for those upholding oppressive patriarchy that demeans childless women, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* shuns polygyny as a solution to childlessness. Polygyny only becomes a solution to childlessness in cases where the wife is barren. When the man is impotent as is the case with Akin, it only complicates the situation because the two women in the house hold would still be childless.

The author's vision to advocate for change in *Stay With Me* (2017) has an ironical twist. Although Yegide fails to adhere to idealised norms of wifedom and motherhood. She struggles to attain motherhood through unconventional means because without children, the society is likely to consider her a failed woman. Through the deaths of her two children, Adebayo suggests that women should not be viewed only in terms of their reproductive status but rather as human beings because even after giving birth like Yegide did, one could still be childless due to situations beyond their control. Adebayo's creation of a female character whose image deviates from her assigned maternal role symbolises a rejection of oppressive patriarchal values and a dismissal of societal limitations imposed on childless women.

The stigma that is associated with infertility prevents Akin from opening up to his wife. It is due to this that Akin. The reader might be tempted to condemn Akin's failure to disclose to his wife the health condition but Yegide is partly responsible for her fate. She purports to naïve at the time they got married and did not know that Akin's failure to rise to the occasion was a red flag. It is such acts of silence that cost Yegide a lot of suffering. At some point, they both knew he was the cause of their childlessness but kept it a secret and continued complaining. She probably wanted to protect Akin's image to avoid shaming him. Through his portrayal, Adebayo could be suggesting that in some communities, patriarchy has conditioned men to be secretive and hence not revealing their sensitive health status to their wives especially if it threatens their masculine identity.

Probably because infertility is associated with failure and men brought up in such cultures do not admit their failures. Instead, he chooses to tell his brother Dotun hoping he will save him from the wrath of the relatives who are eagerly waiting for children. Akin's choice of not revealing his condition to his wife also suggests that male impotence is handled with secrecy. Through him Adebayo reveals how some men suffer from infertility in silence in order to safeguard their status so that they are not condemned by the society.

Infertility treatment for men is done in secrecy to protect the male image. In the case of women, the treatment is done with the knowledge of other relatives. In Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017) Yegide visits traditional healers and hospitals with Akin's knowledge

and in some instances accompanied by her mother-in-law but Akin seeks treatment for his infertility under the guise of going for business meetings. Only Dotun knows about the treatment. Adebayo's portrayal of Akin's way of seeking treatment shows how patriarchal ideologies conceal men's health conditions even if the condition is getting out of hand. Akin's attempt to secretly go for treatment is due to the fear of how people might react on learning that he is responsible for the childlessness in the marriage. The belief that men could be responsible for childlessness in marriages in Akin's society seems emasculating and therefore the need to be secretive while seeking treatment.

Infertility treatment is depicted as gendered because the society assumes that the wife is responsible for childlessness. Because Yegide is presumed to be the cause of childlessness, her mother-in-law recommends that she visits spiritualists for treatment while for Akin, the relatives recommend that she marries a second wife. In a dialogue between Yegide and Baba Lola, Baba Lola says to Yegide:

Well, our wife, this is your new wife. It is one child that calls another one into this world. Who knows, the king in heaven might answer your prayers because of this wife. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 2, para. 24).

Baba Lola's utterance suggests that women are communally owned. Hence the concern by members of the extended family. Because of his patriarchal inclination, he is of the view that Yegide is at fault. It is for this reason that he plans to bring in a second wife.

His belief that polygyny is a solution to childlessness does not take into account that in cases like Akin's, men could be responsible for childlessness in marriages.

Traditional healing as a solution to childlessness is advocated for through the character of Yegide's mother-in-law, however it is depicted as ineffective. Through Yegide, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* seems to suggest that traditional healing as a solution to infertility has no place in the modern world because of its unreliability. The healers perceive those seeking treatment as objects of exploitation. After several attempts both Akin and Yegide fail to find solutions from traditional healers they constantly visited. Akin takes several herbs and miracle drinks in an attempt to find a solution to his impotence but his efforts amount to nothing (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 36, para. 7). Such failures subvert the perception that traditional healers can cure infertility.

Akin seeks solutions to his impotence from different sources. He is not deterred by the failure to find a solution to his impotence. Regardless of his high level of education, he is willing to undergo all these torturous experiences because of the desire to conform to societal expectations and norms that require a man to sire children. He also does this to make his relatives happy. He epitomises strength and determination to find a solution. His male pride is depicted as his motivation to keep searching for a cure. Through him, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* portrays how societal expectations outweigh individual desires thus making men like Akin in childless marriage objects of desperation. After visiting the herbalist, he says:

I'd assumed that all herbalists were old men. But Baba Suke was young; he was probably in his twenties. He gave me a tar black concoction to drink and charged five naira. As I drove back to Ilesa, a movement started just above my groin. I parked by the roadside, wondering if the slow rumbling, the tightening and the relaxing of my stomach muscles meant the portion was working. It was sudden. And until the stench filled the car, I couldn't bear to believe it. I didn't have a cure-just diarrhoea like I'd never had before (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 38, para. 14).

In *Stay With Me* childless men and women are discouraged from seeking solutions from suspicious traditional healers because they seem to lack the right knowledge and skills to offer accurate diagnosis. Instead of offering a cure, Akin's condition is made worse by the diarrhoea he suffers from after taking the concoctions Baba Suke. The herbalists like Baba Suke capitalise on the desperations of childless men like Akin to enrich themselves.

Infertility is also viewed superstitiously as a punishment for wrong doing in *Stay With Me*. Yegide visited a priest whose theory was that she had been cursed by her mother before she died minutes after giving birth to her. The priest advises her to pray for several days on a prayer mat. Even after complying with the demands of the priest, she never finds a solution to her childlessness (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 2, para.28). The priest also failed to identify that Yegide's childlessness was as a result of Akin's impotence instead, he suggested otherwise. In this regard, religion that ought to

impartial seems to further patriarchal agenda by insinuating that Yegide was responsible for the childlessness in their marriage even though that was not the case. The outcome of the priest's suggestion also deconstructs the ill-fitting traditional perception that infertility could be caused by spiritual powers. The priest links Yegide's case to witches and evil spirits, he uses ritualistic means to treat it but his efforts amount to nothing. In this regard, the text attempts to view infertility as a medical condition that should be accepted by members of the society in case a cure isn't forthcoming to avoid undergoing humiliating practices that yield no fruits.

Traditional beliefs of aiding conception and solving the issue of childlessness are depicted as one of Yegide's options in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017). Such beliefs and practices perpetuated by the older generation of women like mothers-in-law. Yegide says:

Moomi had suggested months before that I look for a child, a toddler who could live with me until I conceived. She'd said that children had a way of calling other children into the world. Having foster child's voice around me constantly would call up my own children; hurry them along into the world. The only problem was that I had no full siblings and I hadn't spoken to my half-siblings in years. I had no relative who would entrust me with their child (Chapter 13. Para.3).

None of the relatives was willing to entrust Yegide with their child because of negative attitude and stigma towards women suspected of infertility. Such attitudes have

contributed to the marginalisation of the childless since barrenness is viewed as a curse and a woman who suffers such is treated with disdain. Because of such perceptions towards childlessness in Yegide's society, childless women go through dehumanising acts.

The use of the term *Iya* (mother of) to refer to a childless woman in *Stay With Me* (2017) sounds sarcastic to childless women like Yegide. She perceives it as a reminder of her unfortunate situation. When Funmi greets Yegide, "Good morning our mother" (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 15, para. 38). Yegide feels offended because she is not yet a mother. Yegide says, "Her words pierced me. I was not her mother. I was not *Iya* this or *Iya* that. I was still merely Yegide. That thought tied my tongue and made me want to pull hers out of her mouth" (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 15, para. 38). Referring to Yegide as *Iya* is perceived offensive and scornful because in the eyes of her society, she is allegedly barren and has not yet attained the status of motherhood. Even though womanism views motherhood beyond the biological, Yegide's society seems to give biological motherhood prominence.

Infertility creates a hostile environment in marriages. Kamau (2011) observes that a childless marital union is plagued by tensions resulting from numerous man-made problems, social stigma and psychological pressure from the husband's relatives. The marital love that once existed between Yegide and Akin fades away after going through four years of scorn and ridicule. This is because in Yegide's society, the main purpose of marriage which is childbearing has not been fulfilled. Akin says:

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 come 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, 2017, Chapter 3, para. 9).

Evidently children are an important factor in cementing love between couples. Children make the marriage complete and their absence sets the stage for the 'death' of love between the couples. Love alone is never enough in a conservative African society. Childlessness in a marriage becomes an impediment to the womanist ideal of family centeredness. It is the absence of children that creates disharmony between Akin and Yegide. After Akin had married a second wife, Yegide says, "I simply had to get pregnant as soon as possible, and before Funmi did. It was the only way I could be sure I would stay in Akins life" (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 4, para. 34). She foresees the possibility of being sent away by Akin because barrenness constitutes "good grounds" for being divorced by the husband.

The manner in which fertility is celebrated suggests that infertility is perceived with reproach. When Yegide breaks the news of her alleged pregnancy, she is congratulated by the nurse. She is overwhelmed by the pregnancy she says, "I was in a generous mood. I could give away everything in my shop that afternoon. I was pregnant at last

(Chapter 8, para. 51). She feels vindicated from the constant blames she experienced. Her stylists went crazy; they hugged her laughed and sang praise songs because to them she has proved her womanhood. Even her mother-in-law who had become hostile to her becomes friendly on hearing that Yegide is pregnant. When asked by her mother-in-law what she would like to eat she said that the news of her pregnancy is more than enough to keep her from going hungry for days. The show of happiness reveals how childbearing in Yegid's society is viewed as a fulfilment of femininity. Yegide's stepmother says, "Wait, wait, let me rejoice with you, I can see you are now two in one? You are pregnant" (Chapter 8, para. 56). The stigma associated with infertility is diminished through Yegide's revelation of the pregnancy. Her alleged pregnancy leads to an establishment of friendly relationship between Yegide and her mother-in-law

4.3 Perceptions of Infertility in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*

Socio-cultural perceptions of infertility seem to vary from one society to another. In Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010), the institution of patriarchy is viewed with contempt because it perpetuates unfair practices that demean childless women. Shoneyin attempts to portray how fertility bestows power on women who have children. Baba Segi identifies his wives by the names of their first-born children. Contrary to Africana womanist belief that an Africana woman should be a self-definer, the wives in the household, are defined by their children thereby lacking the womanist ideal and consciousness. Baba Segi only values his three wives because they have given birth, him women are defined by their ability to reproduce. It is ironical that the wives seem

to derive a sense of pride in being treated as second class beings in Baba Segi's household where priority is given to children. Shoneyin depicts childbearing in a polygamous household as a source of pride among the wives even though it diminishes their identity. The narrator says:

Midway to the sitting room Baba Segi paused at the bogus archway, as if it had suddenly occurred to him that the children couldn't have delivered themselves. Then, like he always did he swung round and turned to his wives. And with unabashed flirtatiousness, he greeted them: Iya Segi. Iya Tope. Iya Femi. Bolanle. Each woman curtsied, proud to be defined by her first-born child, except Bolanle, who was *iya* to none (p. 9).

Baba Segi attends to women as an afterthought, children are his first priority. To him the children are more important than their mothers. Baba Segi also views children as a proof of his fertility and hence grant him a high social status in the society. He therefore uses the names of the children to identify their mothers. The valour with which Baba Segi calls out the wives with names of their first born reveals how childbearing earns women recognition in his household. Bolanle, being childless, is identified by her name while the other wives by the names of their children.

In Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*, the institution of marriage earns women respect and dignity but even in marriage, the respect is conditional; that is until a child is born, a woman will not be respected fully as '*Iya*'. Although *Iya* is a mark of respect, Baba Segi displays insensitivity by using it to show contempt to Bolalne for having not given birth.

That is why Bolanle is addressed by her name whereas other wives are addressed by the names of their children. The term 'Iya' also seems to carry with it power dynamics. In Baba Segi's household the wives who have proven their fertility by bearing children feel privileged and elevated to be called *Iya* in the presence of the childless Bolanle. It denies childless women the essence of being human with full rights and dignity. The term depicts how Baba Segi uses the wife's fertility to empower and disempower them. To him female identity exists only when one complies with the cultural expectations of childbearing.

Women are submerged by societal expectations and traditions; they are trapped within the confines of patriarchy that their names are not revealed in the novel. Throughout the text, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* fails to reveal the names of Iya Tope, Iya Segi and Iya Femi. Through them the need for self-definition as a womanist ideal is depicted in the text. Only Bolanle's name is revealed and that is because she is childless. Although this sets her apart as a modern woman who should not be necessarily defined by her ability to bear children, it is ironical that she falls into the trap of proving her fertility. Because she makes several attempts to conceive as required by Baba Segi the text emphasises the need for childbearing as the main reason for marriage.

Unlike his wives, Baba Segi's name is revealed in the text, suggesting the biasness in patriarchal African societies where women are identified by their ability to bear children as is the case with Iya Femi, Iya Segi and Iya Tope who are defined by their firstborn children. However, Bolanle breaks away from the oppressive and demeaning tradition

and proves that one is a woman by birth and not by certain rules prescribed by oppressive patriarchal norms. In referring to Bolanle by name, Shoneyin attempts to dismantle and reject societal beliefs that identify women by their ability to reproduce.

Fertility in marriages grants women status and privileges. This is revealed during Bolanle's first visit to Baba Segi's house. She says that she perched on a stool while the other wives sat in large armchairs (p.25). The armchair in Baba Segi's house is viewed as a symbol of power and privilege. It is a preserve of women who have proven their fertility through childbirth. Bolanle is not entitled to an armchair in Baba Segi's house because the comfort of an armchair had to be earned through childbirth. Unless one was pregnant, with oedema, breastfeeding or watching over toddlers, one was not entitled to an armchair (p.57). Since Bolanle is childless, she has not fulfilled any of the conditions and has no right to sit on an armchair in Baba Segi's house. Contrary to the wishes of the other wives, Baba Segi later offered Bolanle an armchair to impress her but when later he started to grumble about Bolanle's belly Iya Segi seizes the opportunity to advise Baba Segi to take the chair back to the store because it made Bolanle complacent. Baba Segi heeds to the advice and takes the armchair back to the store (Shoneyin, 2010, p.57). When she is stripped of the privilege granted by Baba Segi by taking back the armchair, her status is diminished and has to conceive to regain it.

The withdrawal of the armchair incited by the other wives portrays lack of sisterhood in the polygamous household. It reveals how childless women in Bolanle's society are

underprivileged and marginalised by both men and fellow women. The three wives who ought to understand Bolanle's case seem to advocate for her downfall by proposing for the withdrawal of the armchair. They tend to view her as an enemy whose presence in the house is likely to bring problems.

Infertility is perceived discriminatively by Baba Segi in *Secret Lives*. In so far as both men and women can suffer from infertility, the text suggests that Baba Segi perceives infertility as affecting women only. The gendered approach to fertility tests and treatment is depicted through the incident in which Bolanle has to find a way of convincing Baba Segi to go for a medical examination. She has to put it in a way that does not make Baba Segi feel offended and emasculated. When she tells Baba Segi that Dr Dibia has asked to see him, she is careful not to disclose to him that he is going to undertake a semen analysis to determine if he could be responsible for their childlessness. The name *Dibia* in traditional Igbo dialect refers to a traditional healer. It is however ironical that Dr. Dibia uses modern medicine instead of applying traditional medicine as his name suggests. This irony could suggest the possibility of shifting from traditional forms of infertility treatment to modern methods.

Men like Baba Segi in *Secret Live* believe that men are naturally fertile and need not to be subjected to any fertility tests. When Baba Segi is informed about the test, he responds, "I hope you're not trying to say that I might be the cause of these difficulties" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 200). Even before the fertility test, Baba Segi exonerates himself from being thought of as responsible for the childlessness and refers to the tests as a

waste of time because he believes infertility is only a feminine thing. For Baba Segi, men's fertility should not be questioned, it is women who should be checked in cases of childlessness. To Baba Segi, questioning men's fertility could also mean disrespect. His reasoning contributes to the suffering of women in childless marriages because if such lines of thought are to prevail, it might not be possible to find out cases where men like him are responsible for childlessness in marriages.

His gendered utterance suggests that infertility testing is biased and specifically designed for women. It is because of this that he attempts to resist the doctor's proposal to undertake semen analysis to determine the cause of their childlessness. Perceptions of masculinity as being superior to femininity seem to influence infertility testing. Baba Segi's belief that men are naturally fertile and cannot be the cause of childlessness in their marriages is manifested in his thoughts at the hospital, making him uncomfortable with the test. He is deeply concerned of how other people will view him when they hear that he went for the fertility test. In a monologue he comments:

What would teacher say if he saw me here, heaving like a pursued duiker? What would Taju say if he heard that I Chief Alao, was filling a plastic container with my body water? What would Iya Segi say if she saw me whipping myself? One by one the looks of disappointment on the faces of family, friends and employees tormented him (Shoneyin, 2010, p.204).

He sees being suspected of infertility and undergoing a test as an embarrassment that he should not be subjected to. In Baba Segi's view, the test is likely to dent his public

image. His masculinity will be put to question by his family friends and employees. They will see him as a man who has deviated from the expectations of his society. The names he utters are those of the people he deems hold him in high esteem. Unknown to him is that both Iya Segi and Taju already know that he is infertile only that they haven't revealed it to him because they want to safeguard their relationships with him. Baba Segi is worried about what teacher will say but unknown to him is that teacher is also infertile but is silent about it. His views reveal how infertility testing and treatment for men is rarely disclosed in his society.

There are societal beliefs that attribute infertility to evil spirits (Forsythe, 2009). Contrary to such beliefs, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* reveals that other underlying health conditions are capable of causing infertility. In Baba Segi's case, his infertility is attributed to the mumps he suffered during his childhood (p. 206). This view, however, deviates from the cultural perspective which attributes infertility to evil forces and supernatural powers. Through this, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* dismantles the common beliefs regarding causes of infertility and suggests social change in the way the society perceives the causes of infertility.

The common societal belief that infertility is caused by evil forces contributes to exploitation and oppression of involuntarily childless women and men. This is why the suggestion that Bolanle should visit a prophet is met with resistance. She believes they are conmen who are up to no good (Shoneyin, 2010, p.15) unlike Iya Segi who accepted the proposal even though she knew Baba Segi was responsible for their childlessness.

She is aware that the prophets will exploit Baba Segi financially in the name of exorcising the evil spirits without offering a solution to their childlessness. She embodies the womanist ideal of resisting exploitative structures and instead opts for a modern medication which she believes could be credible.

Varied infertility treatments based medical and non-medical models suggests that people in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* hold complex sets of beliefs about the causes and treatment of infertility. However, Bolanle does not support the belief that the prophet is capable of curing infertility. She sees such practices and beliefs as absurd and part of misconceptions that lead to exploitation of those seeking solutions for childlessness. Bolanle questions the view that some traditional remedies to infertility could be effective by refusing Baba Segi's suggestions.

Fertility is perceived as central to femininity in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*. Without the ability to have children, Baba Segi perceives women as unfeminine, deviant and abnormal. Because to him they seem to have violated the prevailing norms of acceptable conduct in the society. He contemplates sending the childless wives back to their father's homes if their childlessness persists. However, when it is revealed that Baba Segi is infertile and is the reason for Bolanle's childlessness, his wives do not leave him. He proposes to send them away but on a second thought decides to let them be. Iya Segi tells him not to allow the world to see their shame because they will be mocked (p.261). He fears the decision to send them away might be counter-productive by impacting negatively on his image. Both the genders have to cover their traces for fear

of losing their image. Through this experience Shoneyin depicts the gendered consequences of infertility in which infertile men and women are not treated equally. Women are sent away for infertility while men are not. Because of the gendered nature of the consequences of infertility, childless women in most African marriages suffer more than men.

In *Secret Lives* infertility is associated with a sense of guilt. For proponents of patriarchy like Baba Segi, infertility is a sign of weakness that no man would want to be part of. Even Iya Segi is consumed by guilt when she takes long to conceive after getting married. For her, the sole purpose of marriage is childbearing. She says, “I was a young wife and when I found myself in a cloud of sadness. I was childless and restless. Every time I saw a mother rocking a baby on her back, my nipples would itch to be suckled” (p.231). This is probably because the nexus between fertility and being a woman is enforced by society that any deviation from this leads to a negative perception of the self. Because she failed to conceive, she never felt like a woman as dictated by her patriarchal society. The view that femininity and masculinity are proved through fertility seems to have profound effect on the self-perception of both men and women in childless marriages. This contributes to the trauma experienced by both men and women in childless marriages.

Fisher (cited in Hayes, 1998) observes that the cultural ideal of femininity implies that a woman’s failure to become a mother means her failure to become a woman. It is due to such beliefs that women like Iya Segi seek a solution to her childlessness even if it

means compromising her morality. The cultural ideal of femininity as depicted in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* has a negative impact on the lives of women in childless marriages because it contributes to emotional pain that leads to self-blame and a feeling of not being feminine even in cases where men could be responsible for the childlessness in the marriage as is the case in Baba Segi's polygynous marriage.

Although Bolanle is humiliated by her co-wives, she demonstrates sisterhood by not avenging the mistreatment meted out on her. She helps Iya Tope even though they ganged up against her contrary to their belief that she is an evil woman. She buys her medicine when she is sick unlike Iya Segi and Iya Femi who pretend to be friends with Iya Tope yet they do nothing when she is sick. Iya Tope says:

Just two weeks ago, my stomach was as hard as a fresh drum. For four days, I had not relieved myself. The more I ate, the harder my stomach became. Iya Segi saw me that morning but she did not ask me about the pain that drew tears from my eyes. She looked away and walked past me. Iya Femi saw my blood shot eyes too but she just hissed like she always does, as if I was an animal by the roadside. If not for Bolanle, may be my stomach would have split open that day (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 58).

The positive assistance offered to Iya Tope should have been an indication that Bolanle was not as bad as they had been made to believe by Iya Segi. However, the gesture does not make Iya Tope open up to Bolanle about Baba Segi being the cause of her

childlessness due to the fear of what Iya Segi might do. Because of the closely guarded secret, Bolanle continues to suffer.

Women in childless marriages experience societal pressure to conceive. In Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* Iya Tope, Iya Segi and Iya Femi compromise their dignity in order to fulfil patriarchal demands. The three wives get children from extra-marital affairs to prove their womanhood, they are left with a secret that they have to guard in order to stay in Baba Segi's household. It is this secret that unites them against Bolanle. Through the actions of these women, Shoneyin shows flip side of societal expectations that pushes the women to throw caution to the winds. In the end Baba Segi's household remains divided because the children who were presumed to be a source of happiness and security for their marriage become the main reason why the freedom of movement of the three wives is curtailed by Baba Segi after discovering that the women cheated on him. Bolanle says, "He promptly banned them from leaving the house without his permission" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 262). Shoneyin suggests that however much women in childless marriages try to conform to the societal expectations of bearing children they will always be doomed if they do and doomed if they don't. Baba Segi fails to consider that his three wives had limited options, they wanted to protect him from public humiliation. He demonstrates that oppressive patriarchal society will always be ungrateful even if it is the man's image the women are attempting protect.

Amidst patriarchal oppression in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*, some women choose not to fight for their freedom but instead become complacent. Such women seem to remain

enslaved by oppressive patriarchal standards. It is through the characters of Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi who plead not to be sent away by Baba Segi that Shoneyin depicts women who do not see the need to leave oppressive patriarchal households. After Baba Segi had made his pronouncement, he gave the women a chance to respond. Bolanle says, "Iya Segi sobbed silently and said she was just grateful for Baba Segi's graciousness. Iya Tope smiled; his words greatly satisfied her. Iya Femi launched into prayer and asked that God bless Baba Segi with the reaches of Solomon" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 263). Only Bolanle chose freedom and said she would go back to her parent's house. Through Bolanle's characterisation, women in oppressive childless marriages attempt to free themselves from the bondage of patriarchal mistreatments and chart a new path.

The manner in which educated women in childless marriages are viewed in the Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* differs from the uneducated women. Even though Bolanle is childless, she receives some respect as opposed to Baba Segi's other wives. Bolanle's achievement in education saves her from being dragged to a medicine man like Iya Segi as proposed by Atanda to Baba Segi (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 5). Olaopa responds, "Atanda! You want to land Baba Segi in jail? Who would dare to drag a graduate? When she opens her mouth and English begins to pour from it like palm oil, the corporal will be so captivated. They will throw our friend behind bars" (p.5). Bolanle is accorded some decorum as opposed to the other three wives. Education has been depicted as vital tool in dealing with oppressive patriarchal standards.

Socio-cultural perceptions of infertility favour the man and marginalises the woman. Contrary to Baba Segi's move of telling other people about his wives' barrenness, his three wives did not reveal to other people that Baba Segi was infertile. They kept it a secret amongst them. If it were not for Bolanle, Baba Segi would not have discovered his infertility. The society vilifies childless women and protects the men from public criticism. Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010) is an indictment for the society to effect social change in its perceptions regarding infertility and childlessness. Bolanle says, "It was more important to him as Iya Segi had understood, that his manhood be protected" (Shoneyin 2010, p. 262). The societal perceptions on infertility have accustomed Baba Segi's wives that they have the responsibility of ensuring they do not make Baba Segi's condition known so as to avoid public criticism.

4.4 Perceptions of Infertility Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy brings out the traditional perception that infertility could be caused by the acts of jealous co-wives or angry mothers-in-law visiting a spiritualist commonly referred to as a *dibia* (traditional healer). Ugwu says that he saw Odenigbo's mother rubbing something on Amala's back and he suspects that it was meant to make Olanna barren (p.145). Similarly, the narrator says that Ugwu knew of many stories of people who had used medicine from the *dibia*: the childless first wife who had tied up the second wife's womb (Adichie, 2006, p.113). His view depicts women as being responsible for fellow women's childlessness. Through Ugwu, Adichie reveals how the traditional beliefs about infertility as being

caused by spiritual powers sent by other women is contrary to the Africana womanist ideals that advocates for genuine sisterhood among Africana women. Ugwu's utterances suggest a call for women to establish positive relationships instead of taking part in activities that contribute to the suffering of other women.

The belief that infertility could be caused by supernatural powers sent by jealous co-wives seems unacceptable by the modern and educated woman. Olanna deconstructs the belief that her mother-in-law could use supernatural forces to render her childless. She terms them 'rubbish' (p.278). In Olanna's view, such beliefs have no place in the modern world because they perpetuate oppression of women and are designed to perpetuate patriarchal ideals. When she fails to conceive, a second wife will be brought as a solution to the childlessness. The author therefore persuades the society to understand infertility as a medical issue rather than being superstitious about its causes.

The patriarchal view that only women are responsible for childlessness is depicted in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This is revealed through Odenigbo's way of dealing with childlessness. Unlike his wife who undergoes a medical examination and is declared fit to bear children, Odenigbo relies on his mother's dubious methods of marrying a second wife to prove his fertility despite his high level of education. By complying with his mother's patriarchal schemes, Odenigbo exonerates himself from being suspected of being responsible for the childlessness but this only exposes Olanna for ridicule by her mother-in-law. Amala's pregnancy seems to confirm to Odenigbo's mother that indeed, Olanna was the reason for the childlessness. Although Odenigbo's

mother is a woman just like Olanna, she is hell-bent on contributing to Olanna's sufferings instead of establishing genuine sisterhood.

Odenigbo's mother is depicted as a manipulative character who is willing to do everything to clear her son's name from being suspected of being responsible for the childlessness in the marriage. She ensures that Odenigbo is drunk before executing her plans. Odenigbo says, "Mama planned this from the beginning. I see now how she made sure I was dead drunk before sending Amala to me. I feel as if I've been dropped into something I don't entirely understand" (p. 266). The fact that Odenigbo's mother is willing to go that far to exonerate her son is an indication that childlessness in marriage is not taken lightly. It becomes a communal concern since it tarnishes the reputations of the extended family.

Amala's pregnancy generates pride and excitement for Odenigbo's mother. She says, "When this baby boy comes, I will have somebody to keep me company and my fellow women will no longer call me the mother of an impotent son" (Adichie, 2006, p.274). Odenigbo's proof of fertility is celebrated by his mother because the society will view her positively. Her son's image will also be redeemed. To Amala, the pregnancy enabled her to gain higher status in Odenigbo's house. The narrator says that Amala sat in the living room and that her pregnancy had elevated her, so she could sit idly listening to the radiogram, no longer Mama's house help but now the woman who would give birth to Mama's grandchild (p.274). Her proof of fertility earns her respect and privileges in Odenigbo's house. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts how patriarchal societies view women as objects of procreation. Regardless of the high level of

education that Olana has, she is despised because women in her society acquire high status only when they are able to bear children. According to Olanna's mother-in-law, Amala though uneducated ranks higher than Olanna because of the conception.

Olanna's lamentations in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), on hearing that Amala has conceived after a one-night act of intimacy with Odenigbo depicts how the state of childlessness generates sorrow. She finds it difficult to come to terms with the simplicity presented in the act. She seems to be in a state of denial after being informed of the pregnancy because her marriage to Odenigbo seems doomed. She says:

You said it happened just once? Just once and she got pregnant? Just once?

She wished she had not raised her voice. But it was so implausible, so theatrically implausible, that he would sleep with a woman once in a drunken state and get her pregnant (p. 265).

Olanna's reaction on hearing that Amala is pregnant with Odenigbo's child coupled with her several attempts to conceive presents the ironical twist. It is a depiction of how patriarchy compels even the educated in the society to comply with its demands even though they are expected to be agents of change. To avoid being alienated, both men and women in childless marriages are involved in endless struggles to enable them better their reputations in patriarchal societies.

Odenigbo's mother dances to patriarchal tunes by suggesting that Odenigbo marries Amala as a second wife as a viable solution to childlessness. By giving in to such proposals, Amala is also seen to be in support of the oppressive patriarchy that mistreats

women in childless marriages. The intended marriage is subverted through the birth of a baby girl contrary to the expectations of Odenigbo's mother hence deconstructing polygyny as an institution of oppressive patriarchy. Odenigbo's mother believed Amala would give birth to a baby boy who would one day buy her a stove (p.275). Mama's preference of boys over girls is clearly based on patriarchal beliefs that see the girl child as a lesser being.

Traditional misogyny like the preference of male babies over female ones engenders subordination of women. Orabueze (2004) observes that it is a great disappointment for a woman's first fruit of the womb to be a girl. In Adichie's society, girls are relegated to lower subordinate levels and giving birth only to girls is seen as an abnormality hence Amala does not want to be associated with her baby girl. Anulika in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) tells Ugwu that she wants to have a baby boy first because the baby will place her feet firmly in Oyeka's house (p.137). Anulika implies that failure to give birth to a baby boy as a first born may lead to ill-treatment in her marriage. She gives an example of Onnuna from Ezeugwu's compound who had a baby girl and her husband's people went to the *dibia* (traditional healer) to find out why (p.137). Olanna's adoption of the baby girl rejected by the mother suggests that women should shun such forms of misogyny in patriarchal societies and champion for equal treatment of both the boy child and the girl child.

Mama's attempt to use childlessness as a reason to scuttle the marriage between Odenigbo and Olanna fails to materialise. To her, the marriage is not valid because

Olanna has continued to be childless even after staying with Odenigbo for a long period of time. The validity of a marriage depends on the ability of the woman to bear children and when it takes longer than expected, mothers-in-law become uncomfortable. Despite what Mama's interference, the couple continue with their relationship despite Olanna's inability to bear children. After discussing their differences, they reconcile and forgive each other thus portraying a womanist thrust of male compatibility. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* a character like Mama who attempts to uphold oppressive patriarchal ideals like Odenigbo's mother do not succeed in their actions hence puncturing the forces of mistreatment.

Olanna avoids the toxic relationship with her mother-in-law by exiting the house whenever she visits to reduce the confrontations. After several accusations from her mother-in-law, Olanna leaves Odenigbo's house and goes to her residence in protest to show her disapproval of oppressive culture that belittles women in childless marriages. Olanna's characterisation is an encouragement to women in childless marriages not to give in to societal pressures that subjugate women.

The attempt by characters like Mama in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is scuttled through fellow women like Olanna who embody courage by speaking up and questioning unfair behaviour from their spouses. Olanna shuns voicelessness and silence by speaking up. On suspecting that Odenigbo might have slept with Amala, Olanna asks him, "You touched Amala?" (p. 257). In a similar incident when Olanna suspects an ongoing affair between Alice and Odenigbo, Olanna asks Odenigbo, "Did

you do anything with Alice?” (p. 443). Olanna’s courage to question Odenigbo’s behaviour is an attempt to voice the concerns of women in childless marriages in societies dominated by patriarchy. She views Odenigbo’s acts of infidelity as signs of disrespect that should not be condoned.

The death of Odenigbo’s mother in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* symbolises an end to oppressive patriarchal culture that frustrates childless women in African societies. Her death also punctures the patriarchal norms that she supported by humiliating Olanna for being childless. She was of the opinion that Olanna was of a bad character that had come to destroy Odenigbo’s life. By constantly attacking Olanna she became the champion of oppressive patriarchal practices which subjugated women in childless marriages and perpetuated patriarchal order. Her death therefore signals a new beginning and a society freed from forces of oppression.

4.5 Conclusion

The perceptions of infertility are largely controlled by patriarchal forces that view women in childless marriages as nonentities. As a result, women who cannot bear children are constantly under attack from relatives of the husband because a marriage without children is doomed. Infertility in the selected texts is more than a medical problem; it is presented as a multi-faceted condition encompassing reproductive impairment canvassed with socio-cultural beliefs. However, the cultural, and mythical components seem to colour the aetiology of childlessness in the texts thus creating challenges to both men and women in childless marriages. Some characters like Ugwu in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Baba Segi in *Secret Lives* and Yegide’s mother-in-

law in *Stay With Me* seem to attribute the causes of childlessness to superstition such as witchcraft and evil spirits. However, such perceptions are subverted because they tend to contribute to the suffering of couples in childless marriages. Infertility being a gendered phenomenon is perceived negatively due to the patriarchal systems in traditional societies and the authors suggest that this has contributed to the suffering of both women and men in childless marriages.

Childless women with low levels of education like Iya Segi in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* blamed their infertility on supernatural causes and practices such as evil spirits, witchcraft and God's retribution. Because of such beliefs, they seek treatments for their childlessness from traditional healers. The authors have successfully used subversion as a literary technique to expose the weaknesses of patriarchal beliefs and suggest the need for the social change on how couples in childless marriages are perceived. The authors reveal the need to reverse the negative perceptions on infertility so as to minimise the suffering associated with infertility. The texts demonstrate that women can attain identity and belonging through several ways and not only through childbearing.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CHILDLESSNESS AND AGENCY IN THE FACE OF PATRIARCHY

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore how the female authors use the experiences of women in childless marriages to critique the patriarchal society and portray the quest for agency among childless women in the novels. It also interrogates how the authors enable the characters to attain the womanist consciousness by dismantling oppressive patriarchal cultures in order to redeem their image. The first subsection examines how the experiences of childlessness in Yoruba society embody agency, the second part interrogates how characters transcend childlessness and oppression in a Yoruba polygynous family. The third subsection explores the Igbo perception of adoption as a solution to childlessness, the final part concludes the chapter.

5.2 Childlessness and Agency in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*

Womanist characters embody strength that enables them to exercise agency and overcome the challenges they face in African societies. In Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017), Yegide's treacherous journey to the Mountain of Jaw Dropping Victory to meet Prophet Josiah for a solution to her childlessness depicts her strength and resilience within the male dominated African society. She does not just accept the verdict of barrenness without doing anything about it. Although she does not believe in miracles from the prophets, she tries every possible solution recommended to her by her mother-in-law and other people. She says that she could not wave aside her mother-in-law's

suggestions. She also stopped thinking that women like her, who opposed traditional treatment were uncivilised and a little crazy. She became open to many alternatives since it seemed apparent that she was not getting what she wanted in one place (Chapter 4, para. 38). Because of the pressure to conform to societal expectations, she is forced to endure all kinds of hardships.

Women like Yegide who are in childless marriages also reveal their strength and a fighting spirit even though they are discriminated against by patriarchal forces. She attempts to find a solution to her childlessness despite the fact that some of the recommended options may seem unreliable. Mrs. Adeolu advises her to seek the services of a prophet at the mountain that that is not easy to climb. On her way to the mountain top, she encounters an escort sent to her by the prophet and she says:

He must have noticed that my steps were slowing. The steep mountain was bare, with no trees to offer momentary shade from the sun. I was thirsty, my throat was dry and there was hardly any saliva in my mouth. There would be no reprieve for me. I had been asked to come fasting. No food, no water and, as the escort had informed me when he met me at the foot of the hill, if I stopped to rest as we climbed up the hill, I would be sent back home with no prayers and no meeting with the High Priest (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 6, para. 3).

Her journey to the hilltop depicts the torture and difficulties that women in childless marriages go through as they attempt to comply with societal demands in the male dominated society. Her dry throat, thirst and not stopping on the way up the mountain

reveals the challenges she faces in seeking the remedy for her childlessness. Adebayo uses the mountain to depict the obstacles that childless women have to overcome. Yegide's strength enables her to face the challenges along the way to the mountain. She keeps forging ahead and manages to reach the top of the mountain in order to receive treatment for childlessness. Through her, Adebayo suggests that childless women have the strength and resilience to overcome the oppression perpetuated by patriarchy and emerge victorious.

In Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, pregnancy validates a woman's status in her marriage and elevates her above a childless co-wife. As a result, Yegide fears that if Funmi gets pregnant before her, Akin will officially be in a polygynous marriage. Although Yegide is the first wife, she is likely to be disregarded if Funmi, the second wife conceives before her. In a monologue she says: The only way I could save myself from polygamy was to get pregnant before Funmi; that way Akin might let the girl go. But as I pulled a small goat up the mountain, the only miracle I really wanted was that of water gushing from a rock so that I could quench my thirst. The way my escort stared at my chest was alarming. I was trembling not just from exhaustion but with foreboding. Each time my eyes met his blatantly roving ones, I wanted to run down the hills back to my car; yet I pressed towards the crest. Funmi was still living in her flat in town, but I did not need a prophet to tell me that she would move into my home once she got pregnant (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 6, para. 4)

The episode reveals that one of reasons why Yegide endured the torturers journey was to stop Fummi's marriage to Akin as a second wife. For her polygyny would drive a wedge in their marriage. Once Funmi gets pregnant, she will be granted a special position in Akin's house because childbearing in her society grants women identity and recognition. Yegide declares her hatred for polygyny and views it as an institution that only perpetuates patriarchal domination in marriages. Not even the suspicious look from the escort could dampen her spirit in her search for a cure.

Although women bear the brunt of childlessness in African societies, the spiritual treatment is depicted as male dominated. While at the mountain top, Yegide realises that those who are to administer the spiritual treatment are all bearded men (Chapter 6, para. 14). Through this, *Stay With Me* suggests that patriarchy that has contributed to the suffering of women in childless marriages has also infiltrated traditional treatment for infertility as well hence women seeking solutions to childlessness should be cautious.

The credibility of the treatment is put to question by the manner in which the men carry out the process. One of the men refers to the goat that Yegide brought as her child. The goat is swaddled in a green piece of cloth and Yegide is then forced to breastfeed the goat. At the end of the whole process, Prophet Josiah says, "Even if no man comes near you this month, you will be pregnant" (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 6, para. 28). Josiah's statement beats logic because it is not possible for a woman to become pregnant just by breastfeeding a goat. His reasoning is only meant to manipulate and take advantage of

childless women who are in desperate need for a cure. Despite the green colour of the piece of cloth symbolising hope, growth and rebirth, the prophet only grants hope. His actions only make Yegide hopeful that she will conceive.

Childless women in search for a solution to childlessness are depicted as victims of obnoxious and humiliating practices. The manner in which Josiah carries out the treatment leaves the reader to wonder whether he is capable of treating Yegide's childlessness. It can however be argued that the pressure to prove her fertility and take away the shame associated with childlessness made her go that far. She could not endure her pariah status occasioned by the stigma of childlessness. During the spiritual treatment, the prophet fails to detect that Yegide's childlessness is as a result of her husband's impotence. Contrary to what the prophet said, Yegide fails to conceive but only exhibits signs of pregnancy after an encounter with Prophet Josiah at the mountain. She misses her periods and vomits every morning due to a false pregnancy.

Yegide's reaction towards the false pregnancy reveals her mothering and nurturing nature. As an African woman childbearing is a source of pride because it signifies the attainment of womanhood. She gets excited and examines her stomach from different angles while in the bathroom. Her excitement is occasioned by the view that the 'pregnancy' is likely to elevate her status and end her suffering as a childless woman in a discriminative society.

Even the proponents of patriarchal dominance seem to doubt the reliability of the treatment at the mountain. Yegide breaks the news of her 'pregnancy' to Akin but

instead of him showing happiness, he dismisses and warns her to stop going to such places. In Akin's view, such people who claim to be prophets are liars who are up to no good. Akin does not believe that Yegide conceived after an encounter at the mountain. Although he dismisses Yegide's attempts, it is significant that she is trying out something unlike her husband.

There is high value attached to childbearing because children are viewed as a sign of continuity of lineages in African societies. It is because of this that Yegide goes as far as preparing a room in readiness for the arrival of the baby even after being told that she isn't pregnant and that her condition is a phantom pregnancy medically known as pseudocyesis. She converts the empty room beside the kitchen into a play room and creates a special place where she could spend time with her baby. Her condition could be due to the psychological trauma, and the pressure from her relatives to conceive.

In Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, childless women like Yegide overcome some of their sufferings with the help and support of her husband. It is notable that the decision to seek trauma treatment is recommended to her by Yegide's husband. The services of the psychiatrist enable her to finally accept that indeed there is no baby. Her body begins to revert gradually to its normal size. Her physical healing also symbolises societal healing from the ills meted out on childless women. Through Yegide's experience Adebayo's *Stay With Me* suggests that seeking treatment services from exploitative individuals like Prophet Josiah can do more harm than good to childless women. In a

way, her failure to conceive after her experience at the mountain undercuts overbearing patriarchal attitudes that assume they can control all perspectives of women's lives.

Childlessness in Yegide's society is such a sorry state that even if one has a questionable academic background but promises to have a cure, his services will be sought even by graduates. During the phantom pregnancy, Yegide goes back to the mountain to thank Prophet

Josiah for the 'miracle'. She arrives at the crest and finds no living creature in sight. After wandering around she comes across a wooden slate on which someone had scrawled: *Prophet*

Josiah on travel. Plis come back in next month four your miracul (Chapter 12, para. 88). The spelling mistakes reveal that Prophet Josiah has a questionable academic background and his methods of treatment lack efficacy. However, with his public show of illiteracy, he still manages to dupe graduates like Yegide into believing that he cures childlessness. The reader then wonders why a graduate like Yegide would believe that just by breastfeeding a goat, she would conceive. Adebayo could be suggesting that it is out of being desperate to measure up to societal expectations and find a solution to their childlessness that women like Yegide would try all options available to them. Yegide's visit to the mountain help unearth several shortcomings associated with Josiah's attempt to treat childlessness. The visit to the mountain lays bare the ills committed by heartless men like Josiah in the pretence that they have a cure to childlessness.

Childless women in *Stay With Me* are exploited both sexually and financially by religious men of questionable character. Adebayo depicts Prophet Josiah as a charlatan who takes advantage of childless women because they are desperate to find solutions to their situation. While at the mountain, Yegide feels thirsty and goes round in search of water, she finds a shade made from four wooden posts arranged to form a rough rectangle, and palm fronds covered it at the top (Chapter, 12 para.88). She is shocked by what she sees. She says:

In the shade, Prophet Josiah and Mrs Adeolu were having sex. I could see her face; her eyes were closed in what could have been ecstasy. The Prophet's distinguishing chef cap was about to fall off; his robes were bunched up around his waist exposing his thrusting buttocks. His bare legs were so skinny (Chapter 12, para.89).

This episode reveals the social and moral decadence involved in the search for a solution to infertility. Prophet Josiah is portrayed as a sexual predator who disguises himself as a prophet so as to prey on desperate childless women. He is the archetype of modern religious exploitation whose main aim is to gain from other people's misfortunes through sexual pleasures. Ironically, he calls himself a prophet capable of performing miracles but in Yegide's case, he fails. His dirty dealings are revealed through Yegide's second visit serves as a warning to other childless women who had hopes of receiving miracles from men like Josiah.

Childbearing as perceived by patriarchal societies propels childless women into sexual immoralities thereby contrasting with the African cultural norms. Yegide's visit to the mountain reveals how Mrs. Adeolu who had been childless engages in infidelity with Josiah so as to redeem her image. Her action too depicts agency however immoral. She is simply seeking a solution to her problem of childlessness so as to secure her marriage by avoiding being divorced.

Yegide's act of leaving the mountain where Josiah commits his acts of adultery suggests Adebayo's commitment to dismantling oppressive forces that use religion as a springboard and a strategy to lure unsuspecting childless women into their traps. Unlike Mrs Adeolu who knew the Josiah's dealing but kept going back, Yegide leaves the mountain and never goes back. Male infertility which is rarely talked about in public is exposed in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*.

Mrs Adeolu's pregnancy after an intercourse with the prophet is just another proof of childlessness occasioned by male infertility in the text. Through her pregnancy, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* attempts to bring to attention that childlessness in some marriages are as a result of male factor contrary to common African views. The name 'Mountain of Jaw Dropping Victory' metaphorically depicts Josiah's dirty tricks meted out on childless women in the name of performing miracles. His way of performing miracles is shocking and surprising hence jaw dropping. Josiah does emerge victorious as the name suggests but only because he manages to impregnate Mrs Adeolu, a duty

that her infertile husband could not perform. The actions of other men are used to prove the infertility of their colleagues.

Women who have suffered from childlessness and managed to overcome it, like Yegide, experience emotional pain when an only child dies. The death of Yegide's daughter sired by her brother-in-law takes her back to being childless after she thought she had escaped the wrath of her oppressive society when the child was born. Even when she is grieving, her mother-in-law continues to humiliate her. She says that Olamide was a bad child and an evil girl who had chosen to die. She also says that according to the Yoruba customs, Yegide is not allowed to know her child's grave and this aggravates her pain. Yegide affirms that walls of pain closed in on her from every side. She tried to push, but the walls were concrete and steel while she was mere flesh and miserable bones (Chapter 20, para.16).

The walls of pain she is referring to depicts mistreatment that she faces in a patriarchal society during the death of her child. Her attempt to push the walls suggest the effort made by some women to overcome societal prejudices. When the second child dies, Yegide blames herself for the deaths because according to her, she made the baby sick by passing her sickle cell gene to him; her body had created the fault in his. Her lamentations reveal how patriarchy has conditioned women to take the blame even in circumstances beyond their control. She takes her sick children to the hospital several times despite being told by the doctor that there is no cure for the sickle cell condition. Her tremendous efforts to ensure the survival of her children portray agency. Each time

the children fall ill, she takes them to the hospital for treatment and pleads with the doctors to find a cure.

In Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, men in childless marriages like Akin resort to lies and deception to keep their marriages going and protect their ego in male dominated societies. Akin has an elaborate plan to hide his impotence but due to Yegide's courage and persistence, he is forced to admit his impotence. When asked whether he is impotent, he responds, "Yegide why should I tell you what you already know?" (Chapter 37, para.23). At this moment he is already being consumed by his own lies and deception and he realises that the secret is out. Unlike Funmi who was pushed to her death for questioning Akin's impotence, Yegide lives on to reveal the family's best kept secret. Yegide displays women agency by probing Akin's impotence without fear. Through her, Adebayo persuades women in childless marriages to always confront the oppressive situations.

To some extent, culture influences the experiences of the childless. In Adebayo's *Stay With*

Me, the ritual that is performed when Yegide's second child Sesan dies depicts how the Yegide's society uses superstitions to explain death. Yegide's mother-in-law comes to ask for permission to be allowed to perform the ritual to avoid further deaths of her children in future. In a monologue Yegide says:

I knew the tradition. There was no need to explain it to me. You whip the *Abiku's* body so that the next time he is reborn, the marks on the new-born

would tell you that the dead child had returned to torment its mother. I didn't want my son ritually scared, because I didn't believe he was some malicious spirit-child. I'd never believed in *Abikus* at all (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 29, para. 43).

Through Yegide, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* demystifies the spirit of *abiku* because she does not believe in it at all. The whipping of a dead body is in fact a symbolic display of cultural exploitation even in death. Through her attitude towards the traditional belief in the *abiku* spirit, Adebayo shows that Yegide does not believe in such traditional practices. She defines her own way of dealing with death rather than attribute it to the spiritual concept of *abiku*. The cyclic nature of the *abiku* spirit symbolise the never-ending nature of problems in a childless marriage. Yegide, being the mother of the regenerative *abiku* is therefore viewed as the source of problems in the marriage. Since the *abiku* child is born to die, Yegide according to her mother-in-law is bound to be childless throughout her life.

In Adebayo's *Stay With Me* there is a belief that when children die one after another in a marriage, assigning specific names can prevent further deaths. When a third child is born in Yegide's household without the marks, incisions, lacerations, scars from a previous life, her mother-in-law still names her Rotim--stay with me, a name that implied that she was an *Abiku* child who had come into the world intending to die as soon as she could. Although the name suggests an appeal, Yegide is not comfortable with the name because to her, it spells doom and grief, she intends to add a prefix so

that it could read Olarotimi-Wealth stays with me. Rotimi to her is a symbol of wealth. Her intention to add a prefix to the name suggests that beliefs and tradition too can be reformed to suit for the good of the people. Her action reveals her deliberate attempt to modify outdated traditions to suit the modern context hence demonstrating her sense of agency.

Yegide's past experiences seem awaken her womanist consciousness that enables her to develop self-determination so as to overcome the obstacles in her life. When Rotimi is diagnosed with sickle cell disorder and is expected to die like Olamide and Sesan, Yegide eagerly waits for the news of her death. She says:

I fell back into a chair. Before that day, I thought I was prepared, distant enough in emotion and location to take the news that Rotimi was dead or dying. But what do we know about ourselves? Do we ever really know what we will do in any situation and until the situation presents itself? Since the day she was born I had been getting myself ready for the worst but a lifetime was not enough to prepare me for the dizziness that hit me (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 39, para.16).

Yegide's constant grief brought about by childbearing brings to the fore how for some women, motherhood comes with its own challenges that are beyond their control. Even as a mother,

Yegide's suffering doesn't end. She does not attempt to get pregnant again. Through Yegide's experience after giving birth to her three children, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* challenges the society's unnecessary expectations. In an ironic twist, Rotimi does not

die as anticipated by many. She manages to scale the heights of education up to university level. Yegide says, “This is a battle I thought I had lost and suddenly it appears I have won--not just the battle but the war” (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 40 para. 20). Her utterance portrays triumph over the expectations that the child would die leaving her childless hence relegating her to the margins.

Self-definition as a womanist ideal is depicted through change of name. Rotimi who is the only surviving child prefers to be called Timi, she says that she is her own person and not a monument to siblings she never knew. The change of name depicts her womanist quality of being a self-definer who does not want to be identified by the past experiences that her parents went through. Through her, Adebayo portrays the womanist consciousness that enables Timi to free herself from cultural practices that erode her identity as a girl child. She embodies agency, a new beginning and societal change of the institutions that perpetuate oppression on childless women. The survival of Rotimi rescues Yegide from the humiliations of being childless in a society that expects women to bear children and she becomes the heroine in the text, against all odds.

The character of Yegide in Adebayo’s *Stay With Me* depicts transformation of women in childless marriages. Against the expectations of those that belittle her like the mother-in-law, she towers above societal limitations rising above societal barriers by establishing a salon business where she also trains other women. The business becomes her source of income hence challenging her mother-in-law’s view that she was up to no

good. The salon is also depicted as an image of financial independence and feminine identity, because she does not rely on her husband for financial support. The salon depicts how women who have been marginalised for being childless in marriages can achieve great fulfilment if they unite against mistreatment. Through the salon we see female solidarity and genuine sisterhood advocated by womanism demonstrated in the actions of women at the salon. Yegide says:

My salon held the warmth of several women. Women who sat in the cushioned chairs and submitted themselves to the mercies and ministries of the wooden comb, the hooded hairdryer, to my hand and the hands of the stylists I was training. Women who quietly read a book, women who called me ‘my dear sister’ women who made loud jokes that still had me laughing days later. I loved the place—the combs, the curlers and mirrors on every wall (Adebayo, 2017, Chapter 4, para.24).

The activities in the salon depict the modern woman’s path to feminine identity and self-empowerment in a society that has no room for childless women. She embodies agency through her prosperity in the business.

5.3 Childlessness and Agency in Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives*

Polygyny presents a myriad of challenges for childless women. Shoneyin reveals the evils and rivalry in a polygynous marriage, depicting the manner in which it undermines the female character leaving her voiceless and devoid of individuality. Baba Segi’s wives exhibit high level of negativity by committing numerous atrocities against each

other due to lack of trust amongst themselves. Unlike Yegide in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* who established female solidarity with other women, female rivalry and jealousy in a polygynous household threatens to ruin Baba Segi's family. Instead of coming together to help each other overcome the problems they face, Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi hatch several plans to ruin Baba Segi's marriage to Bolanle because she is childless and might reveal their secret. They eagerly wait for Baba Segi to divorce Bolanle due her barrenness but when it takes longer than they expected, they come up with plans to evict her. Iya Tope says:

After a few months, the same Iya Segi who said we should watch Bolanle from a distance started to boil. She called me and Iya Femi to a meeting, saying that there were words to be spoken. These words were nothing but curses and insults: the bigger Bolanle puffed out her chest, the smaller Iya Segi became. Iya Segi told us she changed her plan. That it was no longer enough to wait until Bolanle's barrenness made Baba Segi chase her out. Iya Segi said we had to join hands to force her out (p.55).

In *Secret Lives*, patriarchal norms tend to have classified women into two groups; the compliant Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi and the non-compliant Bolanle. The compliant three wives have proven their fertility by bearing children while non-compliant has remained childless against Baba Segi's expectations. In Iya Segi's view, Bolanle is a threat to their secret because she is childless, educated and might reveal their secret. The three wives believe that barrenness is a possible reason for Baba Segi

to divorce Bolanle and it is just a matter of time before she is sent packing for failure to bear children. The unity of the wives against Bolanle depicts how women are complicit in female oppression. They fear that Bolanle's childlessness in Baba Segi's polygynous marriage will lead to the revelation that Baba Segi is infertile, hence questioning their motherhood and putting their marriage in jeopardy. Iya Segi becomes the mastermind of the evil plans to ensure Bolanle leaves the marriage.

The three wives have one thing in common that unites them hence the need to collaborate. Iya Segi says that because they are all lying with their heads in the same direction, they must work together to blow the cloud away! She also believes that because Bolanle is educated she is not a big threat. They just need to issue threats in order to scare her so that she can live them alone (p.56). But she is mistaken because Bolanle is not easily scared by their threats. She demonstrates self-definition when she insists on seeking treatment from the hospital rather than traditional healers. By doing so, she embodies agency through the practical use of her education to unravel the mystery surrounding her childlessness.

Through the three wives who got children from their acts of infidelity, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* depicts how women attempt to meet male prescriptions of ideal womanhood and in so doing end up sowing seeds of discord amongst themselves. They focus on fulfilling patriarchal expectations at the expense of their own morality and wellbeing. Due to hatred and jealousy, Iya Segi comes up with a series of plans to frustrate Bolanle. She banishes Bolanle's friends from the Alao household claiming that

they were bad role models to their daughters (Shoneyin, 2010 p.57). However, Iya Segi's schemes only reveal Bolanle's strength rather than weaken her.

The quest to prove their femininity, to Baba Segi pushed the wives indulge in infidelity but they realise that when they are discovered they might be sent packing. Bolanle on the other hand portrays agency by standing firm and not engaging in immoral acts like the other wives in order to prove her womanhood to Baba Segi. She comes out as a decisive woman who does not compromise her morals to please her husband and the society. On realising that she could not have a child with Baba Segi, she portrays agency by leaving the marriage though childless but with honour. Staying married to Baba Segi after realising he could not sire a child meant that Bolanle would also engage in extra-marital affairs like the other three wives hence compromising her dignity.

Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* depicts how women in polygynous marriages connive and use various strategies in order to safeguard their secret even if it entails hurting other women. Baba Segi's wives falsely accuse Bolanle of attempting to kill Baba Segi. They believe that due to such allegations, she can be sent packing because she is childless and has not proven her womanhood. When Bolanle comes from the market, she spots a small crowd in front of her home because the 'Rat Head' incident attracted much attention and the three wives use the opportunity to show their hatred for Bolanle. The narrator says:

Iya Segi's voice was loudest. "Woe!" She yelled. Iya Femi was screaming in tongues. Iya Tope had an arm around Segi but the arm was limp like wet cloth.

Segi's eyes were red from weeping. Everyone looked around nervously. She wants to kill him! Iya Segi pointed when Bolanle was within a few steps from the commotion (p.60).

Because of such accusations, Bolanle is reprimanded by young children like Segi. When younger children like Segi copy this sort of mannerism and contribute towards humiliating Bolanle, it reveals how childless women are despised even by children. In Segi's view, Bolanle is potential source of problems in the household. Segi says, "What did my father ever do to her? I am not married yet. She wants to kill my father with *juju* before he walks me down the aisle!" (p.61). But when Segi is sick and bedridden, it is Bolanle who takes care of her. Due to the assistance, Segi's attitude towards Bolanle changes. She refers to Bolanle as 'victor' for having endured all the tribulations within the family. Even though Iya Femi was part of the scheme, pretends not to know anything and says Bolanle is of no use because she cannot have children. Bolanle's action of looking after her co-wives children in sickness proves her co-wives allegation wrong thereby confirming that she is not up to any evil.

Shoneyin portrays an emerging female identity that does not have to conform to oppressive patriarchal practices. Through Bolanle, she depicts a childless woman who crafts her own identity. She questions oppressive patriarchal views. From the market, Bolanle proceeds to the house where she finds Baba Segi seated in his armchair. He asks Bolanle, "Where have you been?" (p.61). Baba Segi's question portrays how women in his house have lost personal freedom and have to explain their whereabouts

when they are out of Baba Segi's home. Bolanle responds, "So I can't even leave the house?" Her response embodies agency. Through her, Shoneyin gives voice and power to childless women in African societies. Shoneyin suggests that men should change their patriarchal stance and treat childless women with dignity.

The conflicting views on whether Bolanle should seek permission before leaving the house depict how Baba Segi uses his status to exploit his wives. Whereas Bolanle does not see the need to explain to Baba Segi her whereabouts every time she leaves the house, Baba Segi feels entitled to know Bolanle's every move. When Bolanle resists, Baba Segi does not take it lightly. The narrator says:

In a flash, Baba Segi scrambled up the back of his seat and leapt into the air like a gorilla in a fight. He landed bang in front of Bolanle and gripped her throat with both hands. He squeezed hard and shook her, pressing his thumbs on her windpipe (Shoneyin, 2010 p.61).

Shoneyin depicts acts of gender-based violence experienced by women and partly because when one is childless, she ranks lower in the social ladder. Baba Segi felt angered that Bolanle is childless and still had the courage to talk to him in that manner. But contrary to what he expected, Bolanle is not frightened by what he has done to her. The narrator says that there was no fear in Bolanle's face, but just pain. Bolanle's show of fearlessness reveals agency and the need for childless women not to surrender to attempts of oppressive men like Baba Segi. Through her show of courage, she demystifies the idealised traditional images of the subservient African woman. She uses

her strength to fight oppression orchestrated by heartless men like Baba Segi. Shoneyin carves a new world for women in which they experience courage and freedom from marginalisation imposed on them by patriarchy.

The author dispels the myth of the silent woman through Bolanle's character. She does not accept to suffer for mistakes that are not of her own making. When persuaded by Iya Tope to confess to having put the head of a decomposed rodent in her bedroom to kill Baba Segi, Bolanle's face hardened and she responded thus:

How can I confess to something I know nothing about? Strangle me. Kill me.

But first ask yourself if I would descend this low? Do you really think I would touch something so revolting? Do you really think I would go to *babalawo*, let alone ask for something that would harm you? If I didn't want to be with you, would I not just leave? (p.63).

Though childless, Bolanle is depicted as vocal and strong-willed. She breaks the stereotypical representation of the silent childless women in a polygamous household. By refusing to admit to something she never committed, Bolanle embodies agency and refuses to remain silent and immobilised. She does not fall into the trap set by the other wives and is conscious of the odds against her. She is even ready to die to defend the truth as a way of challenging the status quo. Through Bolanle, Shoneyin depicts the womanist quest to create a space for childless women where they can speak and express their opinions and to stand up for themselves in order to unshackle themselves from oppressive patriarchal traditions.

Even in the face of an oppressive system of deep-rooted norms and practices that foster female subordination, childless women must strive to assert themselves. Bolanle's agency is depicted in her utterance when she is accused of planning to kill Baba Segi. She says she is free to terminate the marriage and does not see any need to kill Baba Segi. Through her, Shoneyin depicts the freedom for childless women to decide whether to stay in a marriage or not, especially if it is dominated by ill motives and violence.

The harsh experiences faced by Bolanle in *Secret Lives* suggest that women in childless marriages have a bad image. The negative image associated with childlessness is used by other women like Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi to settle personal scores. Bolanle's co-wives refer to her as an evil spirit to imply that she is likely to cause problems in Baba Segi's polygynous marriage. Iya Segi continues to incite Baba Segi to send Bolanle away. She says:

Oh, it is unspeakable now you've been found out! Who would have known that all those times you left the house you were visiting a *babalawo*? Who would have thought that a graduate would stoop to something so unspeakable? (p. 64).

Iya Femi also continues to show her dislike for Bolanle. She says that the prophets in her church have seen that Bolanle has an evil spirit (p.70). Despite these accusations, Bolanle displays determination and the will to keep forging ahead. She only leaves the marriage out of her own volition and not because of the other wives.

Intra-gender oppression demeans female solidarity advocated for by womanism in African societies. Iya Femi is in charge of buying attires for the whole household for a neighbour's birthday party. She interferes with Bolanle's outfit as a way of expressing her hatred. She says it looked like it had been knocked together by a roguish hand. Although Iya Femi is not a tailor, she sewed the dress herself (p.70). It portrays how some women come together to hurt fellow women instead of being supportive in times of difficulties. This only contributes to the mistreatment that childless women go through.

Childless women in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* become suspects in a polygynous household. Whenever the children of the co-wives fall sick, Bolanle is accused of having a hand in it. When both Iya Femi and Iya Segi realise that their plan to send Bolanle away may not work, they poison Bolanle's food to kill her but in a twist of fate, Segi eats the poisoned food prepared to kill Bolanle. Through this incident Shoneyin exposes the wickedness of the co-wives. Iya Segi accuses Bolanle falsely.

She says, "What have you done to my daughter? Answer me witch! What have you inflicted on my daughter?" She grabbed Bolanle by the sleeve, knocking the tray to the floor too (p.169). Even after the accusation and subsequent mistreatment, Bolanle does not leave. Iya Segi continues to suggest that Bolanle is responsible for Segi eating the poison, "What did you say to her? What curses did you put on her?" (p.169). The wives believe that Bolanle hates their children because she is childless.

Women in *Secret Lives* connive to commit physical violence against a childless woman in a polygynous household. Iya Segi attacks Bolanle claiming that is because of Bolanle's curses that Segi ate the poisoned food. The attack results into physical injuries on Bolanle's head. The narrator says:

Iya Segi pushed Bolanle with all her strength in her muscular arms. The smaller woman fell backwards and landed bottom-first on a stool before toppling over and knocking her head on the cold tiles just missing the edge of the rug. Although Bolanle heard the sound of the bone grazing on stone, she jumped to her feet in case Iya Segi decided to pounce. Unstable on her feet, Bolanle touched the back of her head and brought her hand within view; it was moist with blood (p.170).

Unfortunately, the outright humiliation of childless women is aided by some fellow women. The attitude of some women in *Secret Lives* seems to support and endorse evil acts committed against childless women. Baba Segi's wives appear to have turned his house into a battlefield where they fight one another over frivolous issues. Through Iya Femi's character, Shoneyin depicts how some women take pleasure in another woman's pain especially if they are childless. The manner in which Iya Femi responds when Bolanle is physically assaulted by Iya Segi is an embarrassment to the womenfolk. It reveals how women in polygynous households compete for love and attention even if it means hurting their counterparts. The narrator says:

At this, Iya Femi pointed at Bolanle, threw her head back and burst into peals of laughter. She held her belly and rocked her seat. Then as suddenly as she had started, she stopped. ‘What she has done to you? How lucky you are that Iya Segi did not decapitate you and pound your head in the mortar! You are indeed an evil spirit. Get thee behind us, Satan! Leave our home!’ Iya Femi flicked her wrist and shoed her” (p. 170).

Bolanle’s co-wives perceive her as a black sheep, they fear that she might reveal their acts of infidelity. It is due to this that Iya Femi refers to Bolanle as a Satan, she suggests that Bolanle is evil and wicked. In the household, Bolanle is seen as the enemy within because she is childless. Iya Femi does not see the need to assist end the fight. Ironically, it is Iya Femi and Iya Segi who are responsible for Segi’s predicament yet they blame Bolanle even when it is not her mistake. When it is revealed that Segi ate the poisoned food, Iya Segi sank into her seat as if she was being softened, feet first, in a pot of boiling water. She only stopped when her back was where her bottom should have been. Then she asks Iya Femi, “Ah! Iya Femi what have we done with our own hands?” (Shoneyin, 2010 p.171) Iya Segi’s confession reveals that they are responsible for poisoning the food eaten by Segi therefore Bolanle is not to blame for the predicament.

Iya Femi who is unhappy with the outcome of their scheme believes that it is because Bolanle is a witch that she managed to convince Segi to eat the food that night (p.171). To both Iya Femi and Iya Segi, Bolanle allowing Segi to eat the poisoned food was

intentional and meant to payback evil with evil. Although Bolanle had already eaten at her mother's house, she is not given time to explain herself her co-wives cannot understand how Segi ate the food meant for Bolanle. They assume that because of her childlessness, she is jealous of other people's children and is out to make the co-wives childless by killing their children, however, this is not the case. It is due to such misunderstandings that they refer to her as a witch.

In a polygynous household, co-wives apportion blame on the childless wife. Iya Femi blames Bolanle when their plan backfires, yet she knows it is their own fault. In Baba Segi's household, Bolanle is blamed whenever anything goes wrong. When Bolanle is referred to as a witch by Iya Femi, she is depicted as threatening the existing order of things in the household and therefore should be banished. Since a witch is said to cause harm to members of her community, she is seen by the other wives as dangerous because their attempts to frame her for the evils have failed. She is blamed for not taking the poison that was meant to kill her. Such ideas perpetuated by Iya Femi only serve to strengthen oppressive patriarchy and weaken sisterhood. Bolanle does not show any fear of being branded a witch. She is portrayed as a self-definer who refuses to be defeated by oppressive forces like Iya Femi.

Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* suggests that when women take part in evil practices amongst themselves, they go against womanist ideal of genuine sisterhood. It is due to this that the poisoned chicken meant to kill Bolanle ends up killing Segi. Through such acts, Shoneyin rebukes women who hatch evil plans against other innocent women. Iya Segi

kills her own daughter due to the fear that Bolanle's childlessness might reveal Baba Segi's infertility hence compromise their marriage. Through Bolanle's experiences, Shoneyin suggests that marriage does not always guarantee social healing, psychological healing or liberation as Bolanle had expected. The war waged on her by her co-wives only increases her suffering even as she attempts to find a solution to her childlessness.

The use of childlessness as a springboard to attack and bring each other down is depicted through Iya Femi and Iya Segi. Because of this, attention shifts away from oppressive patriarchy and therefore they cannot unite through sisterhood in order to resist maltreatment. The rivalry in Baba Segi's house seems to prevent the women from forming supportive friendships amongst themselves so as to overcome hegemonic patriarchy exhibited by Baba Segi. They tend to have internalised patriarchal values of misogyny and this has enabled them to turn against each other. The wives compete over things they think men value such as childbearing and the outcome is hatred within the household. The mistreatments committed by the wives disempower the womenfolk and undermine their ability to embody agency and emancipate themselves from the shackles of mistreatment.

Bolanle's family centeredness in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* is portrayed in her quest to attain motherhood. She says, "One day, I will have a child of my own and everything will fall into place. My husband will delight in me again, the way he did before my barrenness ate away at his affection" (Shoneyin 2010, p. 25). She makes several trips

to the hospital and undergoes several medical tests to find the reason for her childlessness. Due to her persistence Baba Segi who had opposed the test gives in thinking that he cannot be cause for Bolanle's childlessness. By managing to convince Baba Segi to undertake a semen analysis test that revealed his infertility, she becomes a vital symbol of female agency. It is through her that men are seen as possible causes of childlessness. The revelation of the truth through the educated woman perhaps shows that in the fight for women's liberation from mistreatment, education plays a key role. Despite the pressure mounted on her because of her childlessness, Bolanle embodies the womanist spirit of strength and determination to survive.

Education plays a role in how women perceive childlessness. Bolanle is depicted as having high level of education unlike Iya Tope, Iya Segi and Iya Femi. The manner in which she handles her childlessness differs from that of Baba Segi's uneducated wives. Whereas the uneducated women seem desperate to seek any possible solution to their situation in order to conform to the cultural demands, even if it compromises their dignity through acts of infidelity, Bolanle opts for practical solutions and readily accept her fate in case things fail to work out for her.

5.4 Adoption as a Solution to Childlessness in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Child adoption provides an option for childless individuals to get children. In Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna is childless against the expectations of her society. She decides to experience motherhood through adoption of the rejected child, hence re-inventing and creatively transforming the image of the African childless woman. Her

choice of attaining motherhood through adoption, is however different from the conventional one in which women are expected to be biological mothers. Through adoption, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers a positive approach to the problem of childlessness and conflicts that women face in patriarchal societies.

Women who for whatever reason cannot bear children should be free to pursue alternative lifestyles that give them fulfilment without suffering from social alienation in the society. Olanna's depiction shows that childless women can establish and define their own identity by challenging the existing false cultural notions of motherhood. Olanna's choice of motherhood through adoption conforms to the womanist definition of motherhood as articulated by Phillips (2006) thus:

Motherhood is a set of behaviours based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual meditation and dispute resolution. Anyone whether male or female, old or young, with or without children, heterosexual or same gender loving can engage in these behaviours and therefore mother. In so doing, every individual has the ability to contribute to the ultimate goals of womanism: societal healing, reconciliation of the relationship between people and nature and the achievement and maintenance of common will (p. xxix).

Anyone with or without children can take part in mothering hence redeeming the stigmatised image of childless women in African societies. Womanism therefore creates new avenues for women's roles and their sense of worth as individuals in their respective societies.

Some societies prefer baby boys to baby girls as first-born children. Due to this, Amala abandons Chiamaka because she was to get married to Odenigbo only after giving birth to a baby boy. Olanna embodies agency by rising above such beliefs and goes ahead with her plan to adopt Chiamaka. The decision to adopt the girl who was conceived through the illicit affair between Odenigbo and Amala depicts Olanna as a forgiving woman. Because Odenigbo cheated on Olanna and it resulted into the conception of Chiamaka, the reader expects Olanna to be furious but she gladly proposes the adoption of the abandoned child.

Culture poses a setback to acceptability of adoption *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Certain deeply ingrained traditional beliefs tend to influence societal attitudes towards adoption (Nwoga, 2013). Due to such beliefs, child adoption is perceived as a means of giving up the quest to conceive and an admission that a couple cannot have biological children together. Because of such fears, Odenigbo does not support Olanna's plan to adopt Chiamaka. Olanna's view undermines the traditionally prescribed notion of motherhood. Her perspective also shows that motherhood as traditionally prescribed can be addressed so that women in childless marriages can realise their potential and overcome the barriers that hinder their personal development.

Staunch supporters of culture are against the idea of adoption. Olanna's mother does not approve of her plan to adopt Chiamaka. When told about the idea, the narrator says that her voice over the phone the next day was grave, the solemn tone that would be used to talk about somebody who had died (p.290). Her mother tells her, "Nne, you will

have your own child soon” (p.290). Her mother’s response reveals the skepticism towards adoption in Olanna’s society. Her mother adds, “Her people will give you trouble” (p.290). According to her mother, adoption should not be seen as a substitute to biological motherhood. It will only expose Olanna’s inability to conceive and this is likely to cause stigma within their society. Olanna’s mother views biological motherhood as more superior to other constructions of motherhood such as adoption. Her mother’s patriarchal view demonstrates the limiting perception of motherhood.

Younger generations of women seem to have a positive view of adoption. Olanna’s twin sister Kainene, gives an affirmative response to the planned adoption. She says, “I think this is a very brave decision” (p.291). Unlike Olanna’s mother, Kainene is not against adoption. Whereas Olanna’s mother insists on biological motherhood, Kainene is open minded and her view suggests that childless women can experience motherhood through adoption. Through Kainene’s response, Adichie suggests the difference in thinking between the old generation of women like Olanna’s mother and the younger generation of women like Kainene in Igbo society concerning motherhood. Adichie could also be suggesting that the African society need not to be so rigid in its way of looking at motherhood. Motherhood is depicted as dynamic therefore the society ought to give room for other forms of motherhood to flourish. It is through Olanna’s ability to make independent decisions that she goes ahead to adopt Chiamaka despite the resistance. Odenigbo, who had opposed adoption, also embraces the idea, hence suggesting that change is inevitable in a progressive society.

The patriarchal notion of motherhood suggests that it is the happiest positions in the community. On the contrary, Adichie portrays the sad paradox and irony of motherhood that departs from the patriarchal notion of motherhood. Olanna faces numerous challenges during the Biafran War but remains steadfast throughout the difficulties. To some extent, her experience of motherhood through adoption is devoid of joy. Through the misfortunes and hostilities faced by Olanna, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* seems to reject the patriarchal glorification of motherhood and instead presents motherhood as full of its own challenges that women should prepare to endure and overcome. One of the challenges experienced by Olanna during the civil war is childhood diseases. The narrator says that during the rainy season, Chiamaka suffered from coughs (p.303).

Although womanism advocates for complementarity, the act of taking care of children has been fully delegated to women. Women have to go an extra mile to ensure that their children are in good health. When Olanna took Baby to Albatross hospital, she found women sitting with babies on their laps, standing with babies on their hips, and their chatter mixed with crying.

Adichie's depiction of women in Igbo society shouldering the full responsibility of looking after their children during the war reveals the mothering and nurturing capabilities of woman as espoused in womanism. Olanna's show of mothering and nurturing qualities is also revealed during the air raids. She prepares Chiamaka to be able to take care of herself in-case of an emergency. The narrator says that Olanna taught the child how to take cover and run to the bunker during the air raids (p.303)

“Afraid of the air raids, Olanna made Baby practise running to the bunker. Adichie depicts the role of women in a society devastated by war and reveals how the safety of children is the mother’s responsibility. By treating Chiamaksa as her own biological child, Olanna demonstrates that discrimination has no place.

Women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* attempt to reach out to one another in order to overcome the challenges they face during the war. Through such acts, Adichie portrays agency through genuine sisterhood in the text. Solidarity enables female characters to cooperate with Olanna though she has no biological child. They do not discriminate against her and this enables them and their children to survive the war. Hudson-Weems (1993) describes genuine sisterhood thus:

This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one in which each gives and receives. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally as they embody empathetic understanding of each other’s shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards (p.65).

Adichie portrays the need for women to eliminate oppressive barriers like marginalisation based on childlessness and to come together for mutual benefit in African societies.

Childless women can take part in the upbringing of other children contrary to what some societies believe. Such acts depict agency in Africa societies. Adanna who happens to be Olanna's neighbour was lying on a mat her eyes half-closed Olanna touched her face with the back of her palm, to check for a fever, Adanna's belly was swollen and her skin was a sickly tone, much lighter than it was only weeks ago (Adichie, 2006 p.390). "She has kwashiorkor," Olanna said quietly (p.390). In an effort to find a cure for Adanna's illness, Mama Adanna was cooking anti-kwashiorkor leaves in the kitchen. Olanna took a tin of sardines and some dried milk from the carton Ezeka sent and gave them to her (p.391). Olanna shows deep concern for the sick child although she does not have a biological child. Her act of giving Mama Adana a tin of sardines and dried milk is an act of kindness and a show of genuine sisterhood. Olanna's agentive nature is seen in her active role despite her state of childlessness. Adichie attempts to encourage women to assist each other during the difficult times in order to overcome the challenges they face as mothers.

Acts of generosity in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* are deliberate attempts to depict agency. Even though food is hard to come by during the war, Olanna shares the little food she has. The narrator says that the first day Olanna and Ugwu cooked in the kitchen in their new home, Adanna's mother came in with an enamel bowl to ask for some soup. Olanna gives her some soup (p.377). Other acts that reveal female solidarity are depicted when Mrs Muokelu takes the initiative to teach Olanna how to make soap when the price of soap became unaffordable during the war (p.314). In a similar case, Olanna gave Alice a bag of salt when Alice ran out of salt (p.384). Adichie's female

characters forge helpful relationships to ameliorate their situation. Women help each other to surmount the effects of war and starvation. Adichie uses such episodes to propagate bonding among women so as to overcome problems of mothering during the war. Strong female characters and female bonding are strategies that women and female writers utilize to enable women overcome unfriendly situations in their respective societies.

In an effort to find food for her adopted child Baby, Olanna endures long queues in the relief food centres. Adichie suggests that in Olanna's society, it is not enough to bear a child, one has to shoulder the responsibility of providing for the basic needs of the child. Through Olanna's portrayal, Adichie depicts a strong mother who demonstrates courage and determination to sustain her family.

Apart from barrenness and impotence, childlessness can be as a result of human factors. Adichie reveals some of the causes of childlessness in Igbo society during the war. Such factors are beyond control and therefore women should not be blamed for every case of childlessness.

When Olanna is on board a train, a woman opened a calabash and told Olanna to take a look. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ash-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled back eyes (p.171). The little girl had succumbed to injuries during the war.

Even though children are much revered in Igbo society, they pay the price during the war as some of them are killed. The soldiers use the relief food meant for children as a weapon of war.

Mama Oji asks Olanna, “And did you not hear that all the children in Nnewi died after drinking relief milk? The vandals had poisoned it” (p.391). Alice explains to Olanna the reason for her state of solitude. She says that she had a child with an army colonel who lied to her that he was not married but the child died in Enugu leading to her childlessness just before the war (p.386).

Olanna comforts Alice and this enables her to overcome her state of solitude.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on how the experiences of childless characters depicted agency by exploring ways in which the characters negotiate their identities to liberate themselves from the sufferings. It examined various strategies used by the authors to denounce oppressive practices. The chapter reveals that some of the strategies used by the authors to enable women in childless marriages overcome oppressive cultures. Through courage, resilience, sisterhood and dismantling intra-gender and inter-gender oppression, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Yegide in *Stay With Me* and Bolanle in *Secret Lives* are able to rise above societal limitations. The authors depict the female experiences of subjectivity and agency against various forms of victimhood. The texts demonstrate the efforts of childless women to earn independence and freedom from society’s traditional expectations. Through characterisation, Adichie, Shoneyin and

Adebayo draw on the experiences of childless women to deconstruct oppressive patriarchal forces. An exploration of the female childless characters also revealed their metamorphosis from victimhood to heroines. Despite the bottlenecks faced by the characters, they manage to rescue themselves and regain their voices and visibility hence becoming emancipated and liberated.

**CHAPTER SIX:
STRATEGIES USED IN THE PORTRAYAL OF CHILDLESS
CHARACTERS**

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is an analysis of effective use of style as a strategy to portray childless characters in the selected novels. It explores how various elements of style are deployed by the authors to depict both men and women in childless marriages.

6.2. Biting Satire

Satire, the art of using humour or exaggeration to critique society has always been part of literature. Satire is featured prominently in the selected texts to denounce social vices and advocate for change. According to Ngugi (1972), the satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. The men and women in childless marriages are therefore satirised for departing from the norms set by their respective societies. Olaniyan (1988) posits that satire focuses its lens on the failings of the society by using scorn, ridicule, derision, bitter irony and laughter. This section also explores the use of satirical techniques such as irony, sarcasm, vivid description and exaggeration to expose the failures of different characters in the texts.

6.2.1 Irony of Patriarchal Power

In Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*, Baba Segi is a symbol of oppressive patriarchy and male chauvinism. He is full of self-pride and believes that he cannot be the cause of childlessness in his household. Outwardly, he seems to wield a lot of power in his

household because he dictates how his wives are supposed to behave in the house. He exercises patriarchal power in various ways. The narrator says that only Baba Segi's armchair faced the TV directly; his wives (except Bolanle who hadn't earned the right to an armchair) kept their seats at the angle their husband insisted on (p.12). His chair facing the TV directly denotes authority and command of the family. He deprives his wives of such privileges because he believes they are of lower status hence their chairs should not face the TV directly. He believes he is always right, even when he suspects that his wives were responsible for childlessness, they should not question him. However, Shoneyin deflates his ego through a dramatic irony in the text when it turns out contrary to what he believed that he was the reason for childlessness in his household. His open display of authority is downplayed by his inability to sire children. Through this ironical turn of events, his self-pride is ridiculed and the idea that men can also be the cause of childlessness in a marriage is foregrounded.

Childlessness is frowned upon in Shoneyi's *Secret Lives*, due to this, Baba Segi detests being a husband to a woman who cannot bear children. He is well aware that Iya Segi's childlessness is likely to lower his status. He takes it upon himself to ensure that his first wife is treated for barrenness. In his effort to find a solution to his first wife's childlessness, the narrator says:

Teacher had suggested that he visit a herbalist and Iya Segi had lapped up the dark green powder her husband sprinkled on her palm. The medicine worked

swiftly. Baba Segi cried with both grief and gladness at his mother's burial, six weeks after the birth of his daughter, Segi (p.4).

From the foregoing excerpt, Baba Segi celebrates. He is overjoyed because he believes that the medicine he administered worked, yet, the dramatic irony reveals that Iya Segi conceived out of her act of infidelity with Taju, the driver. Due to his gullibility, he kept advising his other wives to visit such herbalists for a solution to their childlessness. Even though he cried with gladness when Segi was born, he is not the biological father of the child and Shoneyin deploys this dramatic irony to mock Baba Segi's gullibility and self-pride.

Having many children is seen by Baba Segi as a sign of masculinity and power. It is for this reason that he keeps on boasting of having sired many children. He says, "I would have had more than ten now if this woman's womb was not hostile to my seed" (p.40). He also tells the doctor, "Listen Doctor, I have many children. I have sons; I have daughters" (p.200). Ironically, the medical test shows that his semen sample does not have a single sperm cell. After analysing Baba Segi's semen sample, Dr. Dibia says, "It would have been a different matter if he had a low sperm count, but there's nothing! Not a solitary sperm swimming around!" (p. 206). Through this revelation, Shoneyin mocks Baba Segi's self-pride and reduces his stature by exposing him to ridicule. Being a symbol of patriarchal power, lack of a sperm cell strips him of the masculine authority he purports to possess.

At the hospital, Baba Segi's image is further diminished by his own wife. Iya Segi says, "I know the reason why Bolanle has not conceived, and it is not one that a thousand doctors can cure. Yam cannot cook itself. It needs a careful hand that will slice it and expose it to the raging heat." (p.231) Iya Segi's utterances, reveal that he had already known that Baba Segi was the cause of Bolanle's childlessness but both Bolanle and Baba Segi were kept in the dark. In fact, Iya Segi does not wait to be tested, she reveals the secret that shocks everyone, and leaves no reason to carry out the test. To explain herself she says, "If my husband did not have seed, then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?" (p.231). Baba Segi's action portrays defeat from a man who had openly displayed arrogance towards his wives. The narrator says that Baba Segi turned to look at his wife through one eye, his arm was raised in defence as if to shield himself from the odious suggestions hidden in her parables (p.232). Although Iya Segi speaks in parables to avoid embarrassing Baba Segi, her revelations rebuke the patriarchal dominance that has always been exercised through her husband, who does not have seed. The suggestion to go to the hospital was Baba Segi's idea. He thought that the hospital would find Bolanle responsible for the childlessness in the marriage. It is ironical that while at the hospital, his first wife reveals to him his infertility even before she is tested.

The worth of men, according to Olaopa in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives*, should be seen in their ability to impregnate their wives. During Baba Segi's consultation with his friends, Olaopa tells him, "Yes but whose wife's belly is as flat as a pauper's footstool? I may be slight but I get the job done" (p.5). The use of simile to describe Baba Segi's failure

to sire a child with Bolanle puts him in a compromising situation in which he feels embarrassed belittled. The narrator says that Baba Segi's friends stared back at him with sympathy in their eyes (p.5). To them, Baba Segi had failed to prove his worthiness and he does not deserve to be in their midst. To scorn Baba Segi more, the narrator says that an old night guard in the gathering scratched away at the point on his T-shirt written, '2001 is my year of increase' (p.6). Baba Segi is reminded by the night guard that he has failed to increase the number of children in his household as expected.

Sarcasm is employed as a satirical device in *The Secret Lives* to foreground Baba Segi's naivety. When Bolanle meets children in Baba Segi's home, she remarks, "Baba Segi, they are the very image of you" (p.21). To which Baba Segi responds, "Who will leopard cubs resemble if not the leopard?" (p.21). Although he takes the comment literally, Bolanle is attempting to raise an alarm that the children Baba Segi claims are his do not resemble him. This sarcastic remark is meant to convey the discrepancy in the physical appearance between the children and the father and hence register contempt and hatred in Baba Segi's self-pride. Even Taju, the driver is aware the children don't look like Baba Segi, he says, "Iya Segi's second child was a boy. He does not resemble his father. Sometimes when I look at him and close my eyes, I think my young son will grow up and look like him" (p.241). Baba Segi displays his naivety when he does not recognise that the children don't resemble him as he purports.

A leopard has impressive reputation, powerful jaws that enables them to take down a prey much larger than themselves. Leopards symbolise strength, power and courage,

all of which are lacking in Baba Segi's character. He compares himself to a leopard yet he lacks virility that is seen as a sign of masculine strength. It is later revealed that indeed he could not have been the biological father of the children through Iya Segi (p.232). The declaration that Baba Segi did not sire the children tarnishes his image, since he had authoritatively informed Bolanle that he sired his seven children.

Through Iya Segi's character, Baba Segi's vanity is mocked. Baba Segi tends to think he has dominated his wives but ironically, he is tactfully manipulated by Iya Segi who manages to get attention and whatever she desires from him through pretence. She says that after giving birth to a baby boy that Baba Segi wanted so much, she pretended to be sad to make him think that he was an imperfect husband. She smears her eyeballs with onion juice so that she can be allowed to operate a stall business. Due to her deceptive methods, she is granted her wishes (p.79). To mock Baba Segi, Iya Segi says, "Men think they sit in the centre and the world turns around them" (p.79). Her utterances belittle her husband's position in the household and diminishes his open display of dominance.

Iya Segi confirms that it is through her manipulative skill that she started her business and learnt how to drive. She then says, "Men are like yam. You cut them how you like" (p.79). She portrays a society in which men tend to think they are in charge yet it is actually the women who pull the strings from behind the scenes. It is the wives who are in charge and Baba Segi is just a puppet despite being a symbol of power.

6.2.2 Irony of Sexual Prowess

Intimacy as depicted in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* symbolises patriarchal dominance from the male perspective. It is Baba Segi's method of exercising control over the wives. It is due to this that the narrator says:

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 his pounding had proved futile (p.4).

From the excerpt, Baba Segi is not at peace because he expects that his pounding should result into a pregnancy so as to validate his manhood. Through the wives, Shoneyin degrades the highly rated sexual prowess in order to deflate Baba Segi's self-pride. None of the wives is satisfied by Baba Segi's acts of intimacy. They seem to derive more pleasure from their acts of infidelity than from their husband hence diminishing Baba Segi's image.

In a flashback, Taju who happens to be Baba Segi's driver recounts intimate encounters with Iya Segi that resulted into pregnancies. He says:

Instead of chiding me, she asked me to remain in the chair and laughed. Next, I knew, she was sitting on top of me, ridding me like a horse. I cannot say I resisted, but remember, my boss's wife is not a woman of modest proportions.

She pinned me down with the strength of three men. I thought maybe I should tell her to stop but she covered my mouth with her hand. Or maybe I covered my own mouth (p.240).

This excerpt reveals that Iya Segi made the first sexual advance and was more interested in the act than Taju, despite Baba Segi boasting of his bedroom prowess, his first wife views him as a failure. It became a common occurrence because Taju says that whenever his boss sent him on errands, he found himself being ridden like a new saddle (p.240). Although Baba Segi thinks so highly of himself, such occasions seem to belittle his status in the household because the servant who is supposed to rank lower in social ladder is granted a special status in the household for having impregnated Iya Segi. Through a flashback, the high premium put on virility as a measure of masculinity in African society is revealed. Being allowed to sit on the armchair could as well symbolise the possibility of him replacing Baba Segi. Taju explains thus:

My boss is not that generous, after he gives me my salary, he removes his eyes until the next month. He doesn't know that I eat freely from his kitchen. I eat his beef, his stripe, his kidney, his liver, his tongue all the things that my wife's pots dream of but never cook (p.241).

Irrespective of one's social or economic class, if they cannot have children then even the members of the lowest social cadre rank high above them in the eyes of the people. Taju who eats freely from the kitchen. He eats Baba Segi's beef. These euphemisms depict the act of intimacy that Taju has with Iya Segi. This is depicted in the driver

taking over Baba Segi's marital responsibility hence supplanting his masculinity. Taju is granted free access to everything in the household. Shoneyin pokes fun at Baba Segi because in as much as he may view himself as the master, his potent driver ranks high above him in the hierarchy.

Another flashback that ridicules Baba Segi's self-pride is depicted through Iya Tope. She glorifies the act of intimacy between her and the meat seller, despite Baba Segi bragging about his sexual prowess, Iya Tope is addicted to cheating with the meat seller. Iya Tope praises the meat seller's sexual prowess at the expense of Baba Segi's. This tends to diminish her husband's social status hence evoking satire. She says:

I will never forget that day or any other day I spent with him. He made my body sing. He made me howl when he bent me over; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly. And when he took me standing up, it was as if there was a frog inside me, puffing out its throat, blowing, blowing and blowing until whoosh- all the warm air escaped through my limbs (p.90).

The mocking tone depicted in this excerpt lowers Baba Segi's self-pride because the utterances are from a woman whose husband exercises dominance and is fond of boasting about his sexual prowess. Iya Tope's description symbolises protest against Baba Segi's dominance.

The reader expects Iya Tope to terminate the relationship with the meat seller after conception, however she says, "Even when my belly was rounded, I continued to go to him. I couldn't help myself. There was something he gave me that I wanted constantly,

endlessly” (p. 90). Such utterances from the wife of a man who brags of his sexual prowess are satirical and scorns Baba Segi’s self-pride. Even after giving birth, the craving for the meat seller doesn’t stop. Iya Tope says:

Three days after I gave birth to my first daughter, I waited for Baba Segi to leave for his new building materials store. As soon as Taju drove him away, I tied the infant to my back and sat on a boulder outside the meat seller’s home. When he arrived, he asked if the child was a boy or a girl. I completely forgot that I even carried a child on my back (p. 90).

Iya Tope engages in the act of infidelity with the meat seller for over four years until she is reprimanded by Iya Segi. She is told, “I have not known anyone to worship a penis the way you do” (p.91). Shoneyin’s contemptuous depictions of such incidences of intimacy demeans the institution of polygyny that Baba Segi tends to believe is a symbol of power.

In Shoneyin’s *Secret Lives*, Baba Segi is scorned for using intimacy as an instrument of dominance. His semen that is supposed to have sperm cell that should lead to pregnancy is referred to as body water by Iya Femi. His frequent pounding fails to amount to a pregnancy hence belittling him. Bolanle describes the encounter thus:

It must have been my vulnerability that aroused him because he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible it was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn’t make light his of his husbandly duties. He wanted to fuck me

pregnant. If there was ever a moment when the memory of being raped became fresh into my mind, that was it (p.47).

Likening it to rape is an attempt to foreground the domineering nature of Baba Segi. He wants to be in control of everything. Iya Tope tells Bolanle, “After a night with Baba Segi, the stomach is beaten into the chest by that baton that dangles between his legs” (p.54). The euphemistic reference to Baba Segi’s manhood as a baton belittles his dignity and reduces his masculine power.

Through hyperbole, Shoneyin ridicules Baba Segi’s manhood. Iya Femi says that Baba Segi’s penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed (p.139). The size of his manhood is however of no significance because he is responsible for the childlessness in his household. He boasts of having many children yet unknown to him is that he is not their biological father. This belittles his high social status hence reducing his ego as a proponent of patriarchal power. In another flashback, Iya Femi says:

That night, Baba Segi came to me. He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts. I thought it was all quite amusing until he jumped between my legs and tried to force his penis into me. ‘I am still wearing pants,’ I told him (p.137).

Through Iya Femi’s utterances, the rough manner in Baba Segi handles his wives is revealed. Baba Segi’s roughness reflects the authoritativeness that his wives go through in the household. Iya Femi also says that Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into her and collapsed

into her breasts (p.137). To Baba Segi, power and control can only be exercised through being rough. With all the roughness and vigour displayed by Baba Segi, it is ironical that the likes of Iya Femi, Iya Tope and Iya Segi still cheat on him. To show contempt, Baba Segi's wives criticise his roughness.

The clamour for proof of fertility dominates Baba Segi's mind that he does not resist the call by the doctor to undergo a medical test to find out who is responsible for the childlessness. Although he had proposed the idea of going to the hospital, the medical results seem not to favour his expectations. His first attempt to collect a semen sample fires a warning shot. The narrator says that Baba Segi examined his testicles and gave them a little prod, hoping that something would make its way out but there was nothing but a clear trickle (p.204). Such images of a clear trickle and failure to ejaculate emasculates Baba Segi hence reducing his patriarchal authority within his marriage.

Determined to prove that he is not responsible for childlessness, Baba Segi makes another attempt to collect semen sample. However, he misses the container and most of it lands on the wall. The narrator says that Baba Segi who had never had the need to aim, added his own splodge to the far wall while the container lay patiently beneath his testicle (p.204). This recurrent image of failure mocks his pride and reduces him to nonentity hence lowering his oppressive patriarchy. These failures foreshadow his failure to sire the children he claims to be his. The failures also symbolise the lack of power to dominate the women in his household.

In *Secret Lives*, Shoneyin uses seed as a metaphor for male patriarchal power. The presence of seed symbolises the presence of patriarchal power and oppressive forces that mistreat childless women. Towards the end of the novel, Baba Segi is portrayed as not having seed contrary to what he had believed. Iya Segi says, “If my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to look for it elsewhere (p.231). The lack of seed portrayed through the character of Baba Segi represents a new beginning for childless women to thrive in an environment devoid of prejudice and male chauvinism.

In Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is revealed through a flashback that Olanna committed infidelity with Richard to get even with Odenigbo. Her act of vengeance symbolises independence and the ability of women to choose to be in control of their own lives. Even though nobody sees them, Olanna decides to tell Odenigbo about it to make him feel what she felt. She tells Odenigbo, “I slept with Richard” (Adichie, 2006, p.285). Olanna does not regret having slept with Richard instead she finds it liberating and comforting. The narrator describes the incident thus:

Everything changed when he was inside her. She raised her hips, moving with him, matching his thrusts and it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself with the loud cries that burst out of her mouth. Afterwards, she felt filled with a sense of well-being with something close to grace (Adichie 2006, p.269).

It should however be noted that Olanna's act of infidelity is not aimed at childbearing like those of Baba Segi's wives in *The Secret Lives* and Yegide in *Stay With Me*. Her case is not as a result of some cultural pressure but an out of protest and defiance.

Intimacy as symbol of protest and defiance is also depicted in a flashback through Yegide in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*. Childlessness is such a shame that Akin has to plead with his brother Dotun to impregnate Yegide. For some time, Yegide thought the act of intimacy between her and Dotun was a secret but when it is disclosed to her that Akin is the mastermind of the act. Yegide is angry and saddened by the revelation. When Akin walked in on Dotun and Yegide having sex, the reader expects Yegide to stop and show some remorse but this is not the case, she is not disturbed by the incident.

She says:

Sometimes I think that if I had been in Dotun's room downstairs, I would have heard the car pull up in front of the house. I might have dressed up hurriedly and left his room. But I always wanted it to happen the way it did. Somewhere inside me, I wanted Akin to walk in on us. I wanted to look into his eyes when he did. I wanted to see him explode in some kind of passion. That Monday, I got exactly what I wanted (Adebayo 2017, chapter 30, para. 6).

Yegide's response reveals defiance and rebellion towards Akin's endless acts of lies and deceptions to cover up his impotence. She feels Akin has let her down by taking her love for granted so she shows contempt by openly disregarding Akin.

6.3 Degrading Images

This section explores the use of degrading images to portray men and women in childless marriages. A lot of scholars have defined imagery. According to Miller (2001), imagery refers to the pictures or images that a writer helps to create in the minds of readers through the language used in the text. Cuddon (1979) posits that imagery is the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thought, ideas states of minds and any sensory and extra sensory experience. Cuddon's definition infers the use of language for representation of both the concrete and abstractions. Imagery refers to figurative or metaphoric language invoking comparison or likeness (Pope, 2002). Pope's definition focuses on the formation of figures through a comparison between the terms and concepts. From the foregoing definitions of imagery, the writers use special technique of language to create imagery to describe what they have imagined. The readers contribute to make the use of imagery significant by translating it into images hence imagining what the writer saw, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted.

6.3.1 Patriarchal Failure

In *Stay With Me*, Adebayo uses the recurrent images of failure to degrade patriarchy and depict deception as a vice that contributes to the suffering of women in childless marriages. Akin, Yegide's husband, who has been in a childless marriage for over three years, represents the citadel of monumental deception. Most of the suffering that his wife, Yegide, goes through is attributed to Akin's attempt to cover up his impotence. Although he is aware that he is the reason for childlessness in their marriage, he keeps

it a secret from his wife. His refusal to disclose his status sustains the failure motif throughout the text. Akin's actions seem to defy the womanist ideal of complementarity between men and women, hence Shoneyin's call for the need to cleanse the society of such social injustices.

It is questionable that Akin does not resist his mother's proposal to marry a second wife who could bear children. Although he knows he is not capable of siring a child, he goes ahead to marry Funmi and rents a separate house to keep her away from his first wife. His move is meant to hoodwink his relatives into believing that Yegide is the one responsible for their childlessness. Yegide says she turned to her husband and asked, "Akin you knew about this? You knew and could not tell me. You knew? You bloody bastard. After everything you bloody bastard!" (Chapter 2, para. 45). The rhetorical questions and the offensive utterances from Yegide tend to be disdainful hence lowering Akin's social status and degrading him. The condescending tone rebukes him and signals the discord in their childless marriage. Yegide says that Akin caught her hand before it landed on his cheek (Chapter 2, para. 46). Through this physical act, Adebayo treats Akin's deception with the contempt it deserves.

Such never-ending confrontations seem to take centre stage in Akin's childless marriage. Because of mistrust, their marriage is devoid of peace. Yegide asks Akin, "You brought a new wife into this house and you are angry? When did you marry her? Last year? Last month? When did you plan to tell me? Eh? (Chapter 2, para 73). Akin fails to answer, instead he tells Yegide, "Don't say it woman, don't say that word. You

need a padlock on your mouth.” (Chapter 2, para. 74) He attempts to stop his wife from referring to him as a bastard because he feels irritated and degraded. Indeed, the scorn achieves its intended purpose.

Secrets between Akin and Yegide date back to the beginning of their relationship. Akin failed to open up to her when asked to confess all his secrets, dirty or clean. He responded that he had a few dirty socks and underwear (Chapter 3, para 34). His response of referring to his secrets as dirty socks and underwear are symbolic of his impotence that he was not willing to reveal for the fear of being looked down upon.

Another symbolic image of failure is depicted through the dysfunctional part of the roof in Akin’s house. Yegide discovers a collapsed section of their roof through which the rain water poured into the bathtub. The imagery of the collapsed roof foreshadows the dysfunctional childless marriage that is already headed for the worst. However, Akin fails to fix the damage on the roof the same way he fails to find a solution to his impotence (Chapter 4, para 18).

The use of dysfunctional phallic images in *Stay With Me* foregrounds men as possible causes for childlessness in marriages. 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.” (Chapter 4, para. 19). Akin’s lie to Yegide that not all penises were hard and that some like his were soft is well captured in this situation where the car fails to start. However, his failure to get an erection was not a one-time event. From this symbolism, it was a regular occurrence because Yegide says she tried again and again without any luck. Iya

Bolu's utterances depict another phallic object which denotes that male honour is derived from the ability to have an erection. She says, "It is that hardness that gives it its value and honour, *jare*. What do we want to do with a soft pestle? Can it pound yam?" (Chapter 22, para. 55). Through the utterances, only an erect penis can make a woman pregnant. Iya Bolu's remarks make Yegide uncomfortable because she knows that Akin is the soft pestle that cannot pound yam hence her inability to bear children.

Akin's confession in a flashback to his brother Dotun that he had never had an erection is an indication that even before he met Yegide, he already suspected he had a medical condition. This discovery suggests that his marriage to Yegide is already doomed, no matter the amount of love they had for each other. Although he attempts to seek a solution, Adebayo criticizes the kind of solution he sought. Despite having a considerable level of education, it is ironical that Akin believes that watching pornographic videos could cure his failure to have an erection (chapter 38, para.7). Through his utterance, his desperate attempt to find a solution is ridiculed.

His secret missions to seek treatments from herbalists are also ridiculed through the challenges he faces. Through a flashback after visiting Baba Suke for herbal medicine, Akin says, "It was sudden. And until the stench filled the car, I couldn't bear to believe it. I didn't have a cure—just diarrhoea like I had never had before. I sat dazed, the watery stool soaking through my jeans, while cars sped by" (chapter 38 para. 36). The filth in this scene symbolises deception as a vice that should be expelled from the

childless marriage because it is partly responsible for some of the challenges in the marriage.

In Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, several attempts are made by Akin to avoid being suspected as the one responsible for their childlessness. When Yegide says that she is free to get a baby from any man she wants, Akin breaks utensils by pulling the tablecloth of the dining table to pretend that he is angry (chapter 8 para. 27). He does this yet he has already planned to convince his brother Dotun to engage in extramarital affairs with Yegide

Lies are regularly used as tools of deception by Akin to cover up the suspicion that he could be a possible cause for their childlessness. He lies to Yegide that he has travelled to Lagos to see Dotun about some investments. In reality, he has gone to plead with his brother Dotun to impregnate Yegide because he is impotent (Chapter 7, para. 31). It is ironical that Akin becomes a victim of his own lies. He says, "The first time Dotun had sex with my wife, I stood in front of the bedroom door and wept." (Chapter 32, para. 1) Although he is the architect of the plan, he suffers when he finds Yegide and Dotun in the act. He says:

Could have turned back when I stood in front of our bedroom door, when it became obvious that it was already 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 like without bones, about to collapse. I clung to the stainless-steel door handle with both hands, pressing my forehead against

the doorframe. Tears began to slide down my cheeks as I imagined what was happening on the other side of the door (Chapter 32, para. 4)

This flashback is a revelation of how sometimes deception can consume and hurt its mastermind. Tears shed by Akin symbolise his display of weakness that is a rare occurrence in societies dominated by patriarchy. The feeling of his body having no bones and collapsing are images that depict the possibility of self-defeat and the failure of oppressive patriarchy. When the plan becomes counter-productive, Adebayo ridicules Akin's acts of deception hence denouncing the vice.

Although Akin had pioneered the act of intimacy between Yegide and Dotun, his flashback reveals that he beat Dotun to pulp after catching them in the act leading to sibling rivalry between them. He says that he punched Dotun's mouth, nose, and eyes until he coughed blood. He grabbed Dotun's limp penis and twisted it. Dotun screamed (Chapter 32, para 18). Through the bloody scene, Adebayo lashes out at Akin for being angry in a situation of his own making. When asked about the reason for the fight they lie to their parents that it was due to the money that Dotun had gambled. Akin's childless marriage is founded on lies and deception to the extent that even their parents have become victims.

The dysfunctional marriage between Akin and Funmi is destined for failure because it fails to bear any fruit. It was meant to enable Akin sire children but it outlives its purpose. Akin knows that Funmi is aware their marriage will not be fruitful because he is impotent. He is just waiting for the right moment to send her away. He says, "I

decided then to watch out for the right moment to get her out. Not just out of the house but out of my life (Chapter 11, para 26). Akin is afraid that telling Yegide to leave could make her shout at the top of her lungs about his impotence. When his plan is about to flop, he becomes cautious to safeguard his ego. During the naming ceremony, Funmi's body is found on the stairs, and unknown to the people, is that Akin is responsible for the death. Akin's conscience is troubled and while at the church he says:

The vicar began his sermon by reading out the Lord's Prayer from the massive Bible that reside permanently on the marble pulpit. He stopped at *Deliver us from evil* and breathed heavily into the microphone. He whispered the words, repeating the line over and over, pausing after each word, his voice rising with each repetition until he was shouting into the microphone (Chapter 16, para. 3).

This biblical allusion rebukes Akin for his deception and pretence that has led to Funmi's suffering and death in the childless marriage. The repetition of the phrase emphasises the magnitude of the vice he has committed.

There are other attempts to disguise Akin's impotence which show that he was willing to do everything to keep it a secret even if meant hurting himself. The doctor informs him that Sesan could not be his daughter, something he already knew, he reacts to show that he is surprised and angered. He says, "You mean that woman has been cheating on me? Are you serious? You mean this? Oh, my God! I am going to kill her. I swear to God." Then he pounds his fist on the table, punches the wall, yell and slams the door to fake anger (Chapter 26, para. 18). He engages in these theatrics yet he knew his brother

Dotun was the father. Akin attempts to deceive the doctor that it is his first time to discover that the child was sired by someone else. It is his failure to accept his condition that leads to his suffering. Yegide confirms that Akin's deception was cutting her open (Chapter 27, para. 4). She expresses the pain that she went through due to Akins insensitivity.

Akin's flawless public façade masked his weakness and made people like Iya Martha and Baba Lola to believe that it was Yegide who was responsible for their childlessness. The relatives contributed to Yegide's suffering by bringing in a second wife to bear children against her wishes. Yegide uses simile to show her disapproval of such oppressive acts through her description of Iya Martha. Yegide say, "Iya Martha had stopped talking, but her mouth still hung open. If one moved close enough, that mouth oozed an unbearable stench, like stale urine. Baba Lola had chosen a seat that was a safe distance from her" (Chapter 2 para. 52). Yegide's hyperbolic description of Iya Martha's buttocks expresses her hatred of the forces that are responsible to the suffering of childless women. She says that Iya Martha's buttocks were so big that if melted, they would have taken up all the space on the concrete steps that led up to their doorway (chapter 2 para. 1). She evokes strong emotions and negative feelings she has against relatives who are out to frustrate her.

The second wife brought by Iya Martha and Baba Lola to bear children is not welcome in Yegide's house. She has no place and is viewed as an imposter. Yegide contemplates beating Funmi to a pulp and compares Funmi's dress to the coffee stain on the rug to

register her dislike (chapter 2 para. 41). After the relatives eating stale food served by Yegide, Akin says, “If it makes you feel better, Funmi couldn’t make it to the bush fast enough. She soiled her dress” (chapter 2 para. 80). The humorous utterances criticise oppressive patriarchal ideals of marrying a second wife as a solution to childlessness even when the man is responsible for the childlessness.

Shoneyin deploys diminution aimed at belittling Baba Segi who thinks so high of himself and believes he is blameless. Homely images aimed at diminishing Baba Segi’s dignity in *Secret Lives*, are depicted through the terms used to refer to him by others. Bolanle’s mother refers to Baba Segi as an overfed orang-utan (p.18). This symbolises lack of refinement revealed through Baba Segi’s mannerisms. An orang-utan is an oversized creature that seems to exhibit primitivism. Through such imageries Shoneyin attacks oppressive patriarchy that oppresses childless women.

Similarly, Bolanle’s friends refer to Baba Segi as a polygamist ogre (p.18). Mugo (1992) posits that in animal tales, various animals denoted certain characteristics in human beings that promote or negate positive forces in life. He gives a detailed explanation thus:

The ogre symbolised destruction and annihilation of life, with the human being as the real target. In appearance, the ogres were huge, shapeless and ugly, having one leg, single arm with extended octopus-like off-shoots, a single bleeding eye or huge hole for a supposed eye, protruding long teeth growing on top of one another. A mouth as wide as a trench, and the ugliest of the voices.

The monstrosity of the ogres' appearance only matched their cruelty, sadism and tyrannical nature (Mugo, 1992, p.24).

The foregoing deformities reinforce the abnormal nature of the ogre. In the animal tales, the ogre is portrayed as a creature that poses a threat. They are half human and half animal. They feed on human beings and have the ability to devour everything that comes to sight. At the beginning they appear as perfect human beings but later change to man eating creatures. An ogre is an embodiment of evil that successfully camouflages as good. Ascribing such animal imageries to Baba Segi criticises the destructive nature of male chauvinism that is depicted through him. These descriptions evoke the contempt and by drawing attention to the discrepancy on how Baba Segi views himself versus how others view him.

Another incident that attempts to reduce Baba Segi's stature is depicted when Bolanle visits her sick mother. She tells her mother that she will live to see her grandchildren. Her mother responds, "Oh really? Tell me, is it the one from that buffoon you call a husband that I should look forward to? Because if it is those you speak of, I pray that God keeps them in his bosom" (p.155). The reader expects Bolanle's mother to have positive remarks regarding childbearing but on the contrary, she despises Baba Segi and doesn't want the marriage to be fruitful. Her prayer comes to pass since the childlessness persists. Referring to Baba Segi as a buffoon is insulting and lowers his status. Such satirical remarks seem to rebuke Baba Segi's pride and invite a relook at patriarchal institutions that he represents.

6.3.2 Childless Women

Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* (2010) is replete with images used to portray childless women. These degrading images reveal Baba Segi's patriarchal view of women in childless marriages. Baba Segi makes disparaging remarks to Iya Tope when she takes too long to conceive. Baba Segi tells her, "If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him" (p.88). While at the hospital, Baba Segi's conversation with the doctor shows his contempt towards childless women. He says, "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). The use of such images as rotten fruit and rotten guava suggests that women in childless marriages are viewed as commodities because they have failed to fulfil societal expectations. They are like goods that can be bought the same way goods are bought from shops.

The failure to bear children in a society that values children earn the childless women a marginal position in which they are viewed as deviants hence alienating them from the other women who have children. Apart from being non-human, Baba Segi, also implies that women who cannot bear children are rotten. A rotten object is of no use. It cannot fulfil the purpose it was bought and therefore it should be discarded by being returned to the sender. Fruits are rich in vitamins and are supposed to make one healthy. When a rotten fruit is eaten, it only spells doom to the eater because it can do more

harm than good. Childless women therefore are viewed as sources of problems to the husband, and as such, they should not be allowed to stay in a marriage.

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).

Maggots are associated with rotteness, death, decay or rejects. When Baba Segi refers to Bolanle as a barren maggot, he openly displays his contempt for her. His utterances also suggest that childless women do not deserve to be respected and should be treated as rejects for not measuring up to the standards set by the society.

In Iya Segi's community, childbearing is depicted as the main reason for marriage. Iya Segi's mother organises marriage between Iya Segi and Baba Segi. When Iya Segi says she does not need a husband, her mother retorts, "It is every woman's life purpose to bear children" (p.107). She implies that femininity is fundamentally determined by childbearing and when Iya Segi rejects the marriage proposal, she will be alienated. She asks Iya Segi, "Do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living?" (p. 107). The image of a ghost used symbolises sadness occasioned by death since ghosts are associated with the spirits of the dead. The image also depicts childlessness as a source

of grief, solitude and a bad omen. The invisibility of a ghost could also suggest that a childless woman is invisible in the marriage. Her presence is not recognised.

Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi believe that childbearing has elevated them to a higher position compared to the childless Bolanle yet they conceive out of acts of infidelity. Bolanle metaphorically promises to bring light to the darkness in Baba Segi's house (p.24). Through her pursuit for a solution to her childlessness, she reveals the secret that her co-wives had kept for a long time. It is through her that Baba Segi comes to learn that his wives had lied to him. She exposes Baba Segi's weakness that the other wives never wanted to reveal for fear of being divorced.

The three wives who conceived out of infidelity scheme against Bolanle to safeguard their secret. They underestimate her strength and resilience by expecting to frustrate her so that she vacates Baba Segi's house. Ironically, Bolanle seems not to be shaken by the threats. Iya Segi says, "These educated types have thin skins; they are like pigeons. If we poke her with a stick, she will fly away and leave our home in peace" (p. 57). When the wives execute their plans, they fail to get desired results hence exposing their folly. They plant superstitious objects in the house and claim it was Bolanle's plan to kill Baba Segi. Their suspicious plan is discovered and Bolanle is not sent away. Iya Segi ends up killing her own daughter by poisoning Bolanle's food. She expects to kill Bolanle but ironically it is Segi that dies. Through their evil schemes, Iya Segi's true character is exposed.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), 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 on 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" (p.110). She adds, "Tell them that nobody's medicine will work on my son. She attempts to make it public by inviting the neighbours. Olanna's mother-in-law shouts, "Neighbours! There is a witch in my son's house! Neighbours" (p.111). Witches are associated with misfortunes. They cause destruction, agony and loss. It is due to this that Olanna's mother-in-law blames the unfortunate situation of childlessness on the malevolent actions of Olanna by calling her a witch. A childless woman in a marriage is up to no good, she is out to cause problems in the marriage and therefore she is juxtaposed with a witch. Contrary to what her mother-in-law say, Olanna does not cause harm to anyone. She is an epitome of strength and resilience.

Witches are also believed to have extraordinary powers that normal human beings don't possess. It is because of these powers that they are able to perform malevolent actions. A witch is therefore a nonperson with peculiar abilities. When Olanna is termed a witch, her mother-in-law suggests that a woman who cannot bear a child is a nonperson hence should be alienated. This however, is contrary to what the reader sees in Olanna. She relates well with other people and does not show any sign of being alienated.

A successful marriage is expected to be fruitful. When Olanna remains childless for long, her mother-in-law views her as an opportunist who is only after Odenigbo's money. 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” (p.112). Because she has not conformed to societal expectations, her mother-in-law suggests that it is due to her promiscuous nature that she still stays with Odenigbo. Ironically, Olanna is well educated and has a paying job at the university. She is not interested in Odenigbo’s money. It is out of love and not financial gains that they are still together. She insinuates that Olanna should have left Odenigbo. To the mother-in-law, a childless woman in a marriage is only after money. The imagery of an abnormal woman is used to portray Olanna’s childless status in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The mother-in-law says, “He will not marry an abnormal woman, unless you kill me first. Only over my dead body!” (p. 111). Childlessness is seen as a form of an abnormality in Olanna’s society. Through such stereotypical images the negativity attributed to childlessness in marriages is highlighted. The image of an abnormal woman elicits pity towards married women who cannot bear children. The mother-law suggests that such childless women should be pitied.

6.4 Metaphor of Filth

The recurrent metaphor of filth reveals that whatever comes out of the oppressive patriarchal institution is filthy. The vivid descriptions of Baba Segi’s bowel movements evoke the feeling of disgust and lack of decency hence belittling his self-pride. After being stopped by the police on his way to the hospital the narrator says:

Baba Segi could not keep things in. He was open-ended. His senses were directly connected to his gut and anything that didn’t agree with him had a way of accelerating his digestive system. Bad smells, bad news and sight of anything

vaguely repulsive had an expulsive effect: what went in through his mouth recently shot out through his mouth, and what was already settled in his belly sped through his intestines and out of his rear end. Only after clearing his digestive system could Baba Segi regain his calm (p.32).

The foregoing description highlights the folly of a man who exercises patriarchal dominance by pointing accusing fingers at Bolanle, calling her all manner of derogatory names for failing to bear children, yet, he also has his own fare of challenges in his mannerism that no one talks about. Since he wields a lot of authority, his wives and children are so scared of him that they do not comment on his misbehaviour.

Whenever Baba Segi hears bad news, he empties his bowels. After being told news of the poor harvest from Iya Tope's father, Iya Tope says that Baba Segi's shiny face did not show any reaction to the news, his toes flapped in leather slippers like the ears of a dog. He looked around and seized a boy by the arm. 'Take me to the toilet,' he begged. The onlookers watched as he barged through the door of the unroofed pit latrine. They heard every rumble, every gurgle, every fart and every splutter,' (p.84). In a humorous way, the narrator lashes out not only at Baba Segi but also the oppressive patriarchy that he represents. This recurrent image of filth in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* could also be symbolic of how childless couples have to cope with indecency in their marriages as depicted in the text. Each of the four wives have a tainted pasts that they seem to guard at any cost.

Baba Segi's mannerism is also satirised through the manner in which he carries out himself after watching the news. He does not exercise decorum. The narrator says:

Baba Segi felt his stomach growling and made to grab the bowl of hand-wash water. He missed the bowl completely and covered the cream-coloured rug with his undigested supper. Iya Sei and Iya Tope ran to his side and fluttered around him like harried hens. They lifted Baba Segi by his arms, guided him to his bedroom and covered him with a light sheet, leaving Iya Femi to salvage the rug with soapy water and Dettol (p.13)

The vivid description portrays Baba Segi's failure to carryout himself with decorum, the chauvinism that he represents is mocked and put on the spotlight through his behaviour. He is expected to be a good role model as the man of the house, but on the contrary, he openly displays lack of good manners. He fails to grab the bowl and therefore soils the table cloth. When Iya Femi cleans the rug with soapy water and Dettol, it could symbolise that women in male chauvinist households should to take it upon themselves to clean the chauvinistic acts for a peaceful co-existence.

The strength and power that Baba Segi purports to have are ridiculed by the act of indecency that takes place while Baba Segi is at the hospital attempting to find out the reason for Bolanle's childlessness. On finding out that the children he thought were his had been sired by other men Baba Segi is angered, the narrator says that Taju heard the sound of vomiting but only realised the source of it when Baba Segi staggered to the open door of the pickup. His breakfast had formed a colourful bib on his gleaming white shirt (p.242).

Through the doctor's examination, Baba Segi discovers that Bolanle had had an abortion. The narrator says that Taju could see that his boss was not in the mood for talking and he couldn't help but wonder why he was carrying the stench of loosened bowels (p.43). Through the recurrent metaphor of filth and bowel movements, Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* derides vices such as Baba Segi's open display of arrogance, male chauvinism and dominance. The text questions Baba Segi's inability to control his bowel movements and mannerisms yet he purports to be in control of his polygynous household. How could he be able to take charge of his family if he is not capable of controlling the call of nature?

Shoneyin lashes out at Baba Segi's method of seeking attention from his wives. He exhibits a feeling of entitlement, and because he is the man of the house, he thinks he is beyond reproach. The narrator says, "Desperate to return to the centre of attention, Baba Segi leaned onto one buttock and let out an explosive fart. The children looked out at one another and giggled" (p.11). He exhibits tyrannical tendencies and knows that neither the wives nor the children are capable of questioning his behaviour. As much as Baba Segi might think that he is exercising dominance, such mannerisms coming from a man who purports to be in charge of his household only tend to lower his bloated ego and diminish his masculine authority in his household.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, it is evident that the authors have deployed style as a strategy to portray childless characters. In *Secret Lives* Baba Segi' who symbolises patriarchal power are

satirised. His arrogance, self-pride, stature, sexual prowess, dignity and mannerisms are mocked to portray contempt for oppressive patriarchal power. Even though Baba Segi boasts of his masculine qualities, he fails to measure up to the dictates of patriarchy, which is to sire children as a proof of his manhood. Similarly, the images of patriarchal failure in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* foregrounds men in childless marriages as possible causes of childlessness. The use of flashbacks uncovers acts of deception by Akin meant to cover up his impotence to protect his image. His act of deception contributes to the suffering that his wife Yegide goes through. It is satirical that the images used to describe women in childless marriages portray them in marginal positions, even though some of them were not responsible for the childlessness. They are referred to as rotten fruit, rotten guava and compared to ghosts in *Secret Lives*. In *Half of A Yellow Sun*, a childless woman is termed a witch. These images suggest that childless women are viewed as non-human objects and are also associated with agony, loss and destruction.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

7.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to interrogate the socio-cultural dynamics of involuntary childlessness in female authored Nigerian novels. The specific objectives were to interrogate the socio-cultural perceptions of infertility, to explore how the experiences of childless characters are used to depict agency in the face of patriarchy and finally to explore the strategies used in the portrayal of childless characters. This chapter summarises the research findings, draws conclusions about the research problem in line with the specific objectives, makes recommendations and suggests areas for further research.

7.2 Summary of Findings

The first objective of the study was to interrogate the socio-cultural perceptions of infertility. The findings of the study in this regard revealed that the female authors used subversion as a strategy to dismantle the oppressive traditional perceptions on infertility. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* subverted the view that infertility is caused by evil spirits and supernatural powers when Olanna termed such beliefs as rubbish. In Shoneyi's *The Secret Lives*, traditional and spiritual healing as a solution to childlessness was subverted through the characters of Akin,

Yegide, and Baba Segi's wives who attempted to seek a cure through such methods but failed. Adebayo's *Stay With Me* refuted the perception that children were a source of happiness and peace in a marriage. Even after giving birth, all Yegide and Akin experienced was grief occasioned by sickle cell disease.

The study also found out that the conflicting medical and traditional worldviews regarding infertility contributed to the taunting experiences faced by childless women in African societies. Whereas patriarchal societies believed that childlessness was occasioned by the female factor, medical results proved that it could result also from male factor. The medical perspective of infertility seemed not to receive much recognition among societies. Because of patriarchal influence, the socio-cultural perceptions of infertility that exacerbated the suffering of childless women were dominant in both Yoruba and Igbo societies. Through the childless women who relied on the medical results, the authors seemed to suggest that the African societies should embrace change in their perceptions of infertility in order to mitigate the mistreatments faced by childless women. The female authored texts seemed not to uphold the various traditional perceptions of infertility which contributed to the marginalisation and maltreatments faced by childless women in African societies.

In *Secret Lives*, *Stay With Me*, and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the findings indicated that the traditional perceptions of infertility shaped the way childless women were viewed. Cultural norms and values encouraged reproduction and celebrated parenthood. Due to such beliefs, childless women were accorded lowly status and deprived of some

privileges because of the negative stereotypes associated with infertility. Bolanle in *Secret Lives* was subjected to ridicule and seclusion by being denied the comfort of an armchair by her co-wives. Her co-wives frustrated her efforts to educate their children.

The study established that patriarchal societies emphasised childbearing such that childless marriages were constantly under attack and criticism from mothers-in-law and other relatives. Due to this, husbands and mothers-in-law under pressure contemplated sending childless wives away. Odenigbo's mother threatened to send Olanna packing, Baba Segi also told his wives who took long to bear children that they would be divorced. Childbearing seemed to be a parameter used to validate marriages.

Another finding was that infertility undermined masculinity in *Secret Lives*. Because of this that Baba Segi's wives decided to secretly bear children through extramarital affairs to conceal their husband's infertility. Although the wives were aware that Baba Segi was infertile, they failed to reveal it to him probably out of fear of emasculating the husband. Baba Segi's condition was only disclosed when Bolanle made him undergo a semen analysis at the hospital. The attempt to keep male infertility a secret is also depicted through Baba Segi's inability to send his wives away even after discovering that they cheated on him and conceived out of wedlock. He probably feared that by sending them away for cheating on him, his infertility would be in the public domain and this might ruin his reputation within the community.

The findings also indicated that childless women were depicted as stigmatised and discriminated by both men and women. Even though Africana womanism advocates

for genuine sisterhood and female bonding, among African women, some women in the novels participated in humiliating fellow women on their childlessness. The female authors portrayed women as part and parcel of oppressive social structures that demean childless women. In *Stay With Me* Yegide's femininity was constantly questioned by her mother-in-law because of her failure to bear children after three years of marriage. In Yegides Yoruba society, one is only considered a complete woman after giving birth. Verbal abuse and derogatory remarks from relatives were portrayed as common occurrences faced by childless women. The remarks portrayed childless women being viewed as lowly in status.

The socio-cultural perceptions of infertility had negative impacts in terms of societal image and identity. This led to psychological consequences that resulted to desperation and the urgent need for the childless women to find a solution to their problem. Women like Olanna, Bolanle and Yegide underwent medical examinations, visited traditional healers and even engaged in extramarital affairs in order to conceive and redeem their image in their respective societies. Through such efforts, the writers questioned the manner in which the societies deal with the issue of childlessness. The burden of proof of fertility lies with the woman whereas men seemed to be protected by patriarchal norms.

The study unravelled that through oral narratives, patriarchal norms relating to childbearing were perpetuated. This ensured that the norms were passed from one generation to another during story telling sessions. The narratives emphasised the

importance of children in marriage. They also stressed the belief that women were the cause of childless in the Yoruba society hence upholding traditional beliefs. In the narrative of Ijapa the tortoise, people laughed and ridiculed his wife Iyannibo wherever she went because she was childless. Such narratives were told to children by their mothers to ensure that the beliefs were instilled at a younger age. Unfortunately, both men and women who narrated such narratives facilitated retrogressive beliefs to thrive by passing them from one generation to the next. However, Adebayo's *Stay With Me* subverted the narratives through Yegide and Akin by selecting the relevant parts to tell their children and discarding others hence depicting them as agents of change. The findings established that mothers-in-law had positive attitude towards their daughters in law but when they took long to conceive, the pressure mounted and the attitude became negative. The greatest stigmatisation emanated from mothers-in-law because the childless daughter-in-law was believed to be facilitating the termination of the family lineage. Consequently, the in-laws encouraged the marriage of a second wife as a remedy to ensure the continuation of the lineage.

It also emerged from the study that the communal approach to marriage in traditional African societies framed child bearing as an obligation thus informing the oppression of childless women. The society thus became tolerant of a wide range of practices that amounted to the mistreatment of women. The relatives of both the wife and the husband got concerned when a child was not forthcoming after a marriage. This is presumably because children were seen as belonging to the society and therefore when one fails to

conceive, it becomes a communal concern. The constant pressure from mothers-in-law and other relatives to conceive resulted from the quest to redeem themselves from the stigma associated with childlessness in African societies.

Under the second objective, the study sought to explore whether the childless women who were viewed as victims redeemed their image and attained agency. The findings from this objective established that the childless women transformed their negative image by embodying womanist qualities. The childless women exposed the rot in the traditional treatment of infertility in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*. The male dominated nature of the spiritual treatment depicted it as an avenue for exploitation which was meant to advance patriarchal norms. By taking a goat as payment, the treatment was portrayed as a complete rip off that did not yield any positive results but a phantom pregnancy. The treatment thrived on the insecurities of childless women. Since only women sought the services of Prophet Josiah the treatment seemed to uphold the patriarchal notion that childlessness was as a result of the female factor. Yegides denunciation of the Josiah's antics revealed her agency.

Another essential finding from the study was that the lies and deceptions by men like Akin in childless marriages were meant to cover up his impotence due to public criticism. It enabled him to create a positive image of his masculinity and evade the stigma associated with impotence. The deceptions protected the man but left the woman vulnerable to constant attacks from the relatives. The lies were depicted as deliberate methods used by impotent men in childless marriages to gain public approval and save

face. However, Yegide uncovered all the lies that enabled Akin mask his impotence hence depicting agency.

The study also revealed that because childlessness was depicted as unacceptable, it could be weaponised by co-wives in a polygynous marriage. Due to this, Bolanle's co-wives celebrated her childlessness and used it against her. They believed she was responsible for any misfortune in Baba Segi's house. However, the weaponization of childlessness turned out to be counterproductive since it led to the subsequent death of Segi and the revelation of Baba Segi's infertility. Childlessness pitted women in Baba Segi's house against each other leading to a dichotomy between the compliant women and the non-compliant one whose marriage was on the verge of collapse. The women who were supposed to unite and dismantle patriarchy became divided. Their fight to outsmart one another undermined female solidarity and their agency became elusive. Women like Iya Segi, Iya Femi and Iya Tope saw themselves as superior to the childless Bolanle. Women were depicted as their own enemies.

It also emerged from the findings that the other wives assumed they had agency because they had fruitful wombs which secured their position in the household and the society. They despised Bolanle by saying her womb was dead. However, she did not allow such maltreatments to diminish her agency. When she discovered the secret that the co-wives conceived through extramarital affairs, Bolanle emerged as a loyal wife to Baba Segi who never had to validate her womanhood by having children through infidelity.

Similarly, Iya Femi, Iya Tope, and Iya Segi used the society's obsession with childbearing to their advantage. They connived to conceive out of wedlock because they knew their marriage would be secure given that they could bear children. Although Baba Segi thought he was in control, it was the wives who were at the helm. They managed to expose the weaknesses of patriarchy and overcome Baba Segi's wildness by making him docile to an extent that even after discovering their immoral acts, he could not send them away. The wives knew Baba Segi did not have 'seed' so they looked for it elsewhere. They used his infertility in a subtle way to subdue and control him hence depicting agency. He could not object to their decision to stay in the marriage even after cheating on him.

Childless women in the texts embodied agency through their actions. This enabled them to overcome patriarchal limitations that seemed to bring them down. Bolanle, overcame false accusations and ill-treatment meted on her by the co-wives. She questioned Baba Segi when he tried to limit her freedom of movement. Yegide transcended her mother-in-law's constant attacks and questions Akin on his impotence. Similarly, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* revealed that biological motherhood was given prominence in Igbo society. Adoption seemed to contravene societal norms and therefore did not receive much support from the proponents of patriarchal norms. Despite this, Olanna demonstrated agency by going ahead with her adoption plans against the wishes of both her mother and Odenigbo. She also established strong female bonds with other women

during the Biafran war and these women did not discriminate her. She confronted Odenigbo when she suspected that he slept with Amala.

Another essential finding from the study was that the practice of polygyny as a solution to childlessness was advocated for in both Igbo and Yoruba societies. Polygyny was also depicted as a viable solution to childlessness in such societies because women are always suspected of barrenness. This seemed to emphasise the false assumption that only women were responsible for childlessness in a marriage and further marginalises childless women. However, the female authors attempted to dismantle the practice of polygyny by depicting it as an oppressive institution whose main aim is to justify patriarchal dominance over childless women. The patriarchal institution of polygyny failed to redeem the image of childless men in cases where men were impotent as in Akin's case.

The findings from the third objective revealed that the satirical portrayal of Baba Segi in *Secret Lives* punctured the forces of oppression that mistreated childless women. Baba Segi is depicted as a symbol of patriarchy yet he failed to live up to the ideals of patriarchy. He could not sire children with his four wives although he bragged of having many children. His dignity is lowered and his mannerisms ridiculed. His servants with the ability to sire children take up his position. His satirical depiction suggests that those who contribute to mistreatment of childless women have no place in society.

Shoneyin foregrounds the need for change of how society deals with the issue of childlessness through the metaphoric representations of filth and homely images used

to describe Baba Segi. These devices diminish him as a symbol of patriarchy. He seems to betray what he purports to represent by emerging as a husband in a polygynous household in which the wives conceive from extramarital affairs. Whereas Baba Segi thought polygyny would make him acquire higher status, it actually exposed him to ridicule on the realisation that three of his wives cheated on him. In the end he accepts change when he denounces polygyny and warns his son to marry only one wife.

A stylistic analysis on the portrayal of childless men revealed the irony of how patriarchy holds sway even among the educated middleclass Africans. This is interesting since they are expected to be lead agents who champion for change in societal attitudes and perceptions. The likes of Odenigbo and Akin who were expected to behave differently from Baba Segi seemed to uphold some aspects of patriarchal norms that were deemed oppressive. Akin in *Stay With Me* failed to open up on his impotence for fear of what the society would think of him. He attempted to cover up his impotence in several ways; first by taking a second wife brought to him although he knew that he was impotent and could not impregnate her. Secondly, he persuaded Dotun to impregnate Yegide on his behalf. Thirdly he killed his second wife Funmi who revealed his impotence. Finally, he also lied that he was going for business meetings while in actual sense, he secretly went for treatment.

Despite the probability that childlessness could be as a result of male or female factors, the study revealed that the reluctance of men in childless marriages to own up is an attempt to protect the male image from ridicule at the expense of the female counterpart.

The irony in Akin's case suggests the silence that still persists when men in childless marriages are suspected of being the cause of childlessness. Being that infertility is associated with failure, Akin did not want to be suspected of being impotent, he therefore deceived everyone into believing that he was medically fit while he suffered inwardly.

The dramatic irony revealed that despite having a high level of education, the childless men's perception of infertility conformed to patriarchal ideals. Odenigbo though educated was duped by his illiterate mother into sleeping with Amala to prove his fertility. He also failed to protect

Olanna from his abusive mother. Both Odenigbo and Akin's actions seemed to be motivated by the belief that impotence was not perceived as a medical condition but a weakness that lowered the status of men in African societies. Despite their high level of education, they failed to show progressiveness in their way of dealing with childlessness. Through their actions, the authors seemed to suggest that patriarchal norms were deeply entrenched in men that not even education could make them change.

It emerged from the study that the female authors used acts of infidelity revealed through flashbacks serve as symbols of protest, defiance and the ability of women to exercise personal autonomy in male dominated societies. Such acts that resulted to female characters such as Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi conceiving call for change on how the causes of childlessness. When these characters gave birth after several acts

of mistreatments and being viewed as non-human and abnormal, Shoneyin suggests that there is hope for women facing the challenges of childlessness.

7.3 Conclusions

Based on the three objectives, the study comes up with the following conclusions. The socio-cultural perceptions of infertility in the texts makes the concept of gender appear very fluid because one is not considered a woman until she gives birth to a child. It is childbirth that confers womanhood and femininity. On the other hand, masculinity is a delicate institution whose successful operation depends ironically on the participation of women directly or indirectly. The society also questions men's manhood and masculinity when they are childless. Both men and women in childless marriages are therefore involved in endless struggles to conform societal expectations, otherwise they face social discrimination and alienation for being deviant.

The authors use the novels to expose the plight of childless women by highlighting the challenges faced and overcome by the characters. The female characters form the progressive voices calling for change in the way society views childless women. The writings criticize different forms of exploitation and oppression that muzzle the human spirit and demean the childless. The texts challenge childless women to have a voice so as to confront their oppression because silence has contributed to their suffering.

The novels encourage women to talk back to their oppressors so that their condition may be redeemed. In such patriarchal societies where people are labelled without knowing the facts, childless women usually take the blame. It is notable that some

childless characters are able to redeem their image and overcome the challenges imposed on them. In so doing, they prove that so many things said about childless women in African societies are laced with patriarchal prejudice and misconceptions.

In cases where men are deemed to be the cause of childlessness as in the case of Akin in *Stay With Me* and Baba Segi in *Secret Lives*, their infertility is masked through extramarital affairs which produce legitimate children who are recognised as heir by the society. Infidelity which is condemned in African societies is permitted in childless marriages to enable infertile men have children. However, both the wife and the husband are expected to keep it a secret unlike when the woman is infertile, the husband marries a second wife and it becomes evident to the public that the cause of childlessness in the marriage is the woman.

The patriarchal institution of polygyny in childless marriages causes tension within the family unit. For childless women, it is a double tragedy since they have to deal with jealousy from cowives and infertility at the same time. It creates pain and suffering that affects all partners involved. Bolanle, Yegide and Olanna have to deal with anger, frustration and hopelessness occasioned by polygyny. Childless women in the novels suffered psychological torment because the co wives used their ability to bear children to raise their own social status above that of the unfortunate wife who might be favoured by the husband as in Baba Segi's case. This promotes jealousy and rivalry among the wives leading to frequent fights.

The society seems to have condemned childlessness in marriages and therefore both men and women in childless marriages are expected to endure the lengthy processes of searching for a cure to infertility to redeem their image. This involves several medical investigations and consultations as depicted by Yegide and Akin in *Stay With Me*, Bolanle and Baba Segi's wives in *The Secret Lives*, Olanna and Odenigbo in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In instances where western medical diagnosis fails to provide remedy, other methods such as traditional healers are used. The attempts have social, economic and psychological consequences on the childless couple.

A close reading of the texts establishes the dissatisfaction with the enslaving patriarchal ideals regarding infertility as perceived by the society. As opposed to the societal view that childless women are of no use, the childless women in novels under study are depicted positively as useful, relevant and essential pillars in their families and the society at large. The study affirms that women employ several strategies to battle with the patriarchal order in their societies. Women literacy, adoption, strong female characters, female solidarity, voicing oppression and challenging oppressive traditional practices are some of the strategies that give childless women the capacity to fight oppression and exploitation.

The women in the novels demonstrated agency amidst the rather negative experiences and challenges faced due to childlessness. They chose to be proactive and did not allow the constant taunting to keep them in bondage by rising above pain and suffering. Although the actions of childless women in the novels showed that infertility is an

experience and not an identity, many childless men and women still feel inferior because of the negative societal images associated with infertility.

The texts criticize societies approach in dealing with childlessness. By exposing how women can be oppressors and still be members of the oppressed simultaneously, the authors question the role women play in their own humiliation and suffering in the society. Patriarchal values turn women against each other by using childlessness to disempower and ridicule. Mothers-in-law turn against their daughters in law and co-wives fight each other using childlessness as a weapon. They erode the spirit of female solidarity.

The writings of Adebayo, Shoneyin and Adichie are contemporary voices from the margins which require serious consideration as the African society grapples with childlessness. They are thus voices of agency that seek to challenge the already established structures of the oppressive patriarchal order. The study concludes that the female authors have succeeded in depicting the need for change in the way some African societies view infertility and involuntary childlessness.

Finally, the portrayal of female protagonists emphasized the need for self-assertion for the African woman as means of actualising their freedom and fulfilment in life. They become tolerant to the failings of their men and this adds to the view that the texts are womanist in nature. The portrayal of men in the texts suggests that the authors have succeeded in satirizing the thorny issue of patriarchy and the socio-cultural perceptions that prevent childless women from actualising their happiness and fulfilment in life.

The female authors do not destroy the male characters despite their weaknesses and their ability to humiliate childless women and in so doing, they advance the womanist idea of male compatibility. Despite the fact that the problem of infertility has transformed over time, some societies portrayed in the novels are still stuck in the old ways and views hence the authors call for social change.

7.4 Recommendations

There is limited African literary works that focus on childlessness. It would be of great value for more female and male authors to delve into the theme of childlessness in various genres in order to present multiple worldviews on the subject.

Literary artists need to establish through their writings a male perspective of childlessness in African societies for purposes of comparison with the female authored novels.

7.5 Suggestions for Further Research

This study proposes that further research be done on the following areas: This study was limited to involuntary childlessness, other scholars could venture into voluntary childlessness as presented in African literature. Since this study focused on texts written by women, it would be scholarly rewarding for the study to be conducted on texts on the phenomenon on childlessness written by male authors. A study that investigates the place of children in society as portrayed in African novels is necessary. There is also

the need to carry out a study about childlessness as depicted in other genres of literature such as plays and short stories and poetry.

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