

FEMINIST RECONFIGURATIONS OF INFERTILITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN FICTION: A STIWANIST READING OF ADEBAYO AND SHONEYIN'S NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how contemporary Nigerian women writers reconfigure the discourse on infertility through feminist literary strategies, transforming reproductive failure from a site of social death into a catalyst for feminist consciousness. Through STIWANIST's theoretical analysis of Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* (2017) and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), this paper argues that these novels subvert patriarchal conceptions of womanhood as synonymous with motherhood, offering alternative models of female identity and agency. Employing close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism, the research demonstrates how these authors deploy narrative strategies that expose the gendered hypocrisy of infertility stigma while proposing emancipatory frameworks rooted in African cultural resources. The findings contribute to postcolonial feminist literary criticism by illustrating how STIWANISM provides culturally grounded tools for analysing reproductive discourse in African contexts.

KEYWORDS: STIWANISM, Nigerian literature, infertility, feminist criticism, reproductive discourse, and postcolonial feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Infertility, affecting approximately 17.5% of the global population (WHO, 2023), transcends biomedical definitions to embody what Nnaemeka (2005) terms a “cultural paradox” situation where women are simultaneously valued for reproductive potential yet devalued when that potential is unrealised, particularly in pronatalist societies where womanhood remains inextricably tied to reproductive performance. In Nigerian contexts, where childlessness threatens to erase a woman's social identity (Oyèwùmí, 1997), contemporary women writers have emerged as critical voices challenging patriarchal reproductive discourse. This study examines how Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* (2017) and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives*

of *Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) employ feminist literary strategies to reconfigure narratives of infertility.

Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* chronicles the turbulent marriage of Yejide and Akin, a couple subjected to intense social pressure to have children in 1980s Nigeria, exposing the emotional and social consequences of infertility alongside the patriarchal obsession with motherhood and lineage. Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* examines the dynamics of a polygamous family, particularly focusing on the disruption caused by the arrival of the educated fourth wife, Bolanle, whose childlessness gradually reveals the household's hidden traumas and entrenched patriarchal rules.

The paper argues that Adébáyò and Shoneyin utilise specific narrative techniques, including subverted fertility tropes, polyvocal narration, and strategic deployment of medical discourse, to dismantle the patriarchal conflation of womanhood with motherhood, ultimately proposing alternative economies of female value that transcend reproductive capacity. The significance of this study lies in its application of STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as a theoretical framework for analysing reproductive discourse in African literature. Unlike Western feminist approaches that may inadequately address African women's intersectional experiences, STIWANISM offers culturally grounded analytical tools that account for the simultaneous operation of colonial legacies, traditional belief systems, and contemporary gender dynamics in Nigerian society.

A substantial body of scholarship addresses infertility, childlessness, and motherhood in African and Nigerian fiction. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) examines how African women writers challenge the conflation of womanhood with motherhood, arguing that contemporary texts interrogate biological determinism. Stratton (1994) analyses maternal discourse in African women's writing, demonstrating how authors subvert patriarchal expectations of fertility. Ogunyemi (1996) explores the "palava" of childlessness in Nigerian women's novels, identifying narrative strategies that resist pronatalist ideologies. More recently, scholars have examined infertility narratives specifically. Andrade (2011) discusses reproductive agency in contemporary African women's fiction, while Hewett (2020) analyses childlessness as a site of feminist resistance. Oyekan (2018) examines medical discourse in Nigerian fertility narratives, and Umezurike (2019) explores the intersection of infertility and female identity construction in West African literature. Makokha (2013) investigates barrenness tropes in East African women's writing, while Chukwuma (2018) analyses motherhood anxieties in Nigerian fiction.

Existing scholarship on *Stay with Me* has explored various dimensions of Adébáyò's representation of infertility. Tunca (2018) examines the novel's narrative structure, arguing that dual narration exposes patriarchal double standards in fertility discourse. Okuyade (2019) analyses medical authority in the text, demonstrating how biomedical discourse both reinforces and challenges traditional fertility beliefs. Chukwuma (2020) explores trauma and reproductive loss, while Adeyemi (2021) investigates the intersection of political instability and domestic crisis in the novel. Similarly, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* has received critical attention. Kortenaar (2014) examines polygamy and female agency in Shoneyin's text, arguing that the novel subverts patriarchal family structures. Emenyonu (2015) analyses the comedy of revelation in the narrative, demonstrating how humour serves as a feminist critique. Adesanmi (2016) explores education as a resistance strategy, while Hewett (2018) examines childlessness and female solidarity in the novel. However, no existing studies systematically apply STIWANIST frameworks to analyse both novels comparatively, nor do they examine the specific narrative techniques these authors deploy to reconfigure infertility discourse. This research contributes to the field by demonstrating how STIWANISM provides more culturally appropriate analytical tools for understanding reproductive discourse in Nigerian fiction, specifically analysing how polyvocal narration, metaphorical reconfiguration, and strategic medical discourse function as feminist strategies.

STIWANISM AND THE FEMINIST REIMAGINING OF INFERTILITY IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

The relationship between STIWANISM and infertility emerges from a critical feminist re-examination of African women's reproductive experiences within patriarchal sociocultural contexts. STIWANISM, developed by Nigerian feminist scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), offers a multidimensional approach to analysing African women's experiences that accounts for the intersection of patriarchal, colonial, and traditional oppressive structures. Unlike Western feminist theories that emerged from different historical and cultural contexts, STIWANISM explicitly addresses the complexities of African women's positioning within both traditional and modern systems of gender subordination.

The conventional feminist movement, while instrumental in advancing women's rights globally, has historically followed a trajectory of waves that often reflected Western priorities. The first wave (1848–1920) focused on suffrage and

legal rights. The second wave (1960s–1980s) challenged the notions of domestic and reproductive determinism. The third wave (1990s) introduced intersectionality. The current fourth wave continues to push for systemic equality (Hooks, 2000). However, as Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and other African feminists, such as Acholonu (1995), Steady (1981), and Amadiume (1987), have argued, these frameworks often overlook the specific historical, colonial, and cultural factors that shape African women's experiences of gender oppression, particularly in relation to reproduction.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) articulates STIWANISM's foundational principle: "African women must be free to create themselves, to determine their destinies, to define their own reality" (p. 229). This assertion challenges both colonial and patriarchal constructions of African womanhood, particularly regarding reproductive roles. Ogundipe-Leslie identifies six "mountains on the backs of African women": (1) oppression by colonialism and neocolonialism, (2) oppression by indigenous traditions, (3) oppression by male dominance, (4) oppression by racial and class stratifications, (5) oppression by religious doctrines, and (6) women's self-oppression through internalized patriarchal values (p. 37). This multidimensional framework proves essential for analysing infertility stigma, which operates through all six mechanisms simultaneously. Regarding reproductive discourse specifically, Ogundipe-Leslie argues: "The reduction of African women to their reproductive capacities represents a fundamental violence that African feminism must address without alienating us from our cultural contexts" (p. 145). She further contends that "motherhood has been weaponised by patriarchy to constrain women's self-actualisation, yet African feminism cannot simply reject motherhood without understanding its cultural meanings" (p. 178). STIWANISM thus seeks what she terms "transformation from within", challenging oppressive structures while maintaining valuable cultural connections.

Other STIWANIST theorists have developed this reproductive analysis. Acholonu (1995) argues that African feminism must "reclaim motherhood from patriarchal distortion while rejecting compulsory reproduction" (p. 89). Steady (1981) emphasises that African women's liberation requires "economic independence and self-definition beyond biological roles" (p. 32). These theorists collectively establish that fertility and motherhood constitute critical sites where multiple oppressions intersect, making them essential foci for STIWANIST analysis. The theory's relevance to infertility analysis lies in its rejection of biological determinism and its insistence on examining women's reproductive experiences within broader sociopolitical contexts. As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues, STIWANISM seeks to

create "alternative economies of female value" (p. 178) that recognise African women's multidimensional contributions beyond reproductive capacity. This framework proves particularly useful for analysing how contemporary Nigerian writers challenge the reduction of women to their biological functions.

The theory's emphasis on social transformation provides crucial tools for deconstructing the institutional supports of infertility stigma. Religious systems, for instance, frequently reinforce gendered blame through practices like Pentecostal "waiting mothers" prayer groups that target women's bodies for spiritual intervention while maintaining silence about male infertility (Ademola, 2018). Similarly, traditional kinship structures often compound the pressure through mechanisms like polygamous "womb hierarchies" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 45) that render infertile wives vulnerable to domestic displacement. STIWANISM counters these patterns by advocating for what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) calls "alternative economies of female value" (p. 178) that recognise African women's contributions beyond biological reproduction.

STIWANISM's emphasis on social transformation provides tools for moving beyond critique toward emancipatory possibilities. The theory validates diverse strategies African women employ to negotiate patriarchal constraints while maintaining cultural connections, offering a framework for understanding how literary texts can function as sites of feminist consciousness-raising and resistance. This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial textual analysis. The research design integrates close reading methodologies with theoretical analysis, examining how specific narrative techniques function to challenge patriarchal reproductive discourse. The interpretive framework draws from both hermeneutic traditions of literary analysis and the culturally specific insights of STIWANIST theory.

PATRIARCHAL WEAPONISATION OF INFERTILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION IN *STAY WITH ME* AND *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Both novels expose how infertility functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control, transforming reproductive failure into justification for female subordination. In *Stay with Me*, polygamy emerges as an oppressive system deployed specifically to address infertility, as demonstrated when Akin's family introduces Funmi, a second

wife, without Yejide's consent. Baba Lola's authoritative declaration reveals the patriarchal logic underlying this intervention:

Yejide, I as a person, I want to praise you. I want to appreciate your efforts to make sure that our son leaves a child behind when he does. This is why we know you will not take this new wife like a rival. Her name is Funmilayo, and we know, we trust, that you will take her as your younger sister (Adébáyò, 2017, p. 18).

This passage highlights several key patriarchal tactics: positioning Yejide as a passive recipient rather than an active participant in decisions affecting her marriage; reducing her efforts solely to reproductive performance; and assuming she will accept her subordinate role. The language of praise and appreciation conceals the underlying violence of forcing polygamy as a solution to infertility. At the same time, the expectation that Yejide will welcome Funmi as a "younger sister" exposes the psychological manipulation woven into patriarchal family systems. The term "iyale" (first wife in Yoruba culture) carries particular significance in understanding how polygamous systems create hierarchies that simultaneously elevate and degrade women. While the title appears to confer precedence, Yejide experiences it as "a verdict that marked me as not woman enough for my husband" (Adébáyò, 2017, p. 18). This paradox reveals how polygamous systems position women as inherently incomplete, requiring support from other women to meet male needs.

Similarly, in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Bolanle, the educated fourth wife, whose childlessness makes her vulnerable to both domestic violence and social marginalisation, became the centre of attraction. Baba Segi's consultation with friends about her "barrenness" demonstrates how male networks collectively reinforce patriarchal authority: "Baba Segi, I think you should drag her to a medicine man if she doesn't follow you. You are the husband, and she's a mere wife, and the fourth one at that!" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 10). The suggestion of dragging Bolanle "by the hair" normalises domestic violence as an appropriate response to perceived female reproductive failure. At the same time, the hierarchical language of "mere wife" and "fourth one" reveals how polygamous systems create competitive rankings among women based on their reproductive success and marital order.

Furthermore, both novels carefully depict the psychological impact of infertility stigma, showing how patriarchal reproductive discourse becomes internalised by women. Yejide's experience with phantom pregnancy illustrates the severe psychological effects of ongoing fertility pressure: "You have been sent away from antenatal clinics, Yejide, you had five scans, five different doctors, in Ilesa, Ife,

and Ibadan, you are not pregnant. You are delusional!" (Adébáyò, 2017, p. 114). This medical revelation exposes how a desperate desire for pregnancy can manifest in psychological conditions like pseudocyesis, where the mind creates physical sensations of pregnancy in response to overwhelming social pressure. Yejide's multiple consultations represent cycles of hope and despair that consume her sense of self, illustrating what Çelik et al (2022) identify as the psychological violence inherent in pronatalist societies.

In Shoneyin's novel, *Iya Tope*, the second wife who has suffered in silence, illustrates how patriarchal systems create forms of silencing that go beyond mere social constraints to profound psychological inhibition: "Baba Segi asked me if I was happy about being his wife. I couldn't utter a word. I wanted to say something. I should have said something, but I couldn't. It has always been hard for me to speak my feelings" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 68). This inability to articulate inner experiences reflects what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) describes as the intersection of patriarchal and traditional constraints that prevent women from expressing their authentic selves (p. 156). *Iya Tope*'s emotional paralysis, coupled with constant pressure to bear children, results in what can be seen as double silencing, inhibiting both self-advocacy and self-knowledge.

Both novels strategically use medical intervention as a catalyst to reveal patriarchal contradictions and foster feminist awareness. The medical disclosure of male infertility in both texts aims to undermine patriarchal assumptions about reproductive responsibility. In *Stay with Me*, Akin's fertility problems compel him to plan elaborate deceptions, including asking his brother to impregnate Yejide. "I'm not asking you to rape her, damn it, just once, get her pregnant and that's it... Why would it be different from all the girls you go around with? It will just be sex five times at the most, and you are done" (Adébáyò, 2017, p. 195). This passage shows how societal expectations of masculinity distort moral reasoning, leading Akin to commodify both his wife and his brother's sexuality to uphold patriarchal face. The clinical language ("just sex five times") attempts to distance him from the emotional and ethical consequences of his request. At the same time, his comparison of Yejide to "all the girls you go around with" reveals the misogynistic basis of his thinking. Likewise, the medical diagnosis of Baba Segi's infertility in Shoneyin's novel acts as the revelation that dismantles the entire patriarchal structure of the household. The irony that the man who claims to be the source of fertility is infertile exposes the false foundation of patriarchal authority and allows women's voices to surface.

STIWANIST RESISTANCE STRATEGIES: EDUCATION AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN *STAY WITH ME* AND *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994: pp.201-215) recognises five key strategies for STIWANIST resistance: (1) raising awareness through education, (2) collective action and female solidarity, (3) economic independence, (4) political participation, and (5) cultural production as sites of resistance. She contends that "transformation requires both individual consciousness and collective action, both material independence and symbolic reclamation" (p. 213). The novels analysed here primarily utilise the first, second, and fifth strategies, employing education, female solidarity, and literary production as tools for challenging reproductive determinism.

The novel positions formal or experiential education as a vital tool for fostering feminist awareness and challenging patriarchal reproductive discourse. Bolanle's university education in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* serves as more than just personal achievement; it equips her with analytical tools to scrutinise oppressive structures. Her educated perspective allows her to recognise contradictions in her co-wives' behaviour and to reject passive acceptance of mistreatment. "I don't understand. One minute you are giving me generous portions of chicken from your son's birthday celebrations, the next you call me an evil spirit. What am I to make of all this?" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 125). This moment exemplifies what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) describes as "developing critical consciousness through formal and informal education" (p. 198). Bolanle's refusal to accept inconsistent treatment without explanation exemplifies a form of intellectual resistance that challenges the household's established power structures. Her education equips her with language and analytical tools to articulate her experiences and demand fair treatment. Bolanle's educational background also empowers her to insist on medical intervention when the household prefers traditional explanations for her childlessness. When she advocates for fertility testing, she clearly states what her co-wives cannot: "If there is a problem, it is better to know what it is than to keep guessing" (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 102). This rational stance, grounded in her formal education, ultimately exposes Baba Segi's infertility and shifts the household's power dynamics.

The contrast between Bolanle and the other wives highlights the tension between traditional and modern feminist awareness. While Bolanle acts from a perspective of gender consciousness shaped by formal education, the other wives

initially see her education as a threat to their usual survival tactics within patriarchal systems. In *Stay with Me*, Yejide's feminist awareness develops through personal experience rather than formal study, but the process is equally transformative. Her realisation of Akin's deception marks a key moment in her understanding of patriarchal control. "Perhaps he assumed that I knew the things he was going to say, the secrets that Akin had hidden from me while carefully feeding my insecurities" (Adébáyò, 2017, p. 182). This painful but necessary disillusionment allows Yejide to recognise how her husband has systematically manipulated her fertility anxieties to maintain control. The phrase "feeding my insecurities" exposes the calculated nature of patriarchal psychological manipulation, while her ability to articulate this recognition demonstrates the development of critical consciousness. Yejide's ultimate decision to leave both her marriage and child signifies a radical challenge to compulsory motherhood. This act embodies what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) theorises as "the assertion of self-definition against patriarchal role prescription" (p. 234), even when such assertion entails tremendous personal sacrifice.

Both novels end with their protagonists' rejection of reproductive determinism, the patriarchal ideology that reduces women's worth to their reproductive capacity. Bolanle's defiant claim at the novel's conclusion exemplifies this feminist resistance.

Don't think I don't see the challenges ahead of me. People will say I am a secondhand woman. The men will ridicule me, but I won't let them hold me back. I see a woman in the land of the living. I am back now and the world is spread before me like an egg cracked open (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 128).

The metaphor of the "cracked egg" operates on multiple levels, signifying both rupture (breaking free from restrictive structures) and potential (new life emerging from broken shells). Bolanle's recognition of social repercussions ("secondhand woman," male ridicule), coupled with her resolve to continue, illustrates what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) describes as "conscious resistance that neither ignores cultural constraints nor allows them to hinder self-actualisation" (p. 267). Her declaration "I see a woman in the land of the living" stands as a powerful affirmation of female subjectivity beyond reproductive roles. The phrase implies her emergence from a form of social death enforced by childlessness into full personhood on her own terms.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES: POLYVOCALITY, METAPHOR, AND STRATEGIC MEDICAL DISCOURSE

Both novels deploy specific narrative techniques that function as feminist strategies for reconfiguring infertility discourse.

Polyvocal Narration

Stay with Me employs dual first-person narration, alternating between Yejide and Akin, which reveals contradictions in their fertility stories. This method shows how the same events can have very different meanings depending on gendered perspectives. When Yejide describes her experience with phantom pregnancy as desperate hope, Akin's later chapters reframe it as evidence of his deception's psychological impact. The polyvocal structure prevents any single patriarchal narrative from dominating, creating what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) refers to as "narrative democratisation," where women's voices are given equal authority (p. 245).

Similarly, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* uses multiple female narrators, with each wife telling her story in dedicated chapters, creating what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia," multiple competing voices that destabilise patriarchal authority. The revelation that Baba Segi is infertile gains power precisely because we have heard each wife's fertility narrative first, creating dramatic irony that exposes patriarchal deception. Iya Segi's account of her painful childbirth, Iya Tope's story of her secret abortion, and Iya Femi's revelation of her rape all become recontextualised once Baba Segi's infertility is exposed, revealing how patriarchal narratives have obscured women's real experiences.

Metaphorical Reconfiguration

Both authors reframe fertility metaphors to challenge reproductive determinism. Adébáyò transforms pregnancy imagery from hope to horror through Yejide's phantom pregnancy, making visible the violence of fertility pressure. The medical terminology, "pseudocyesis," "delusional", functions not merely as a diagnosis but as a metaphor for how patriarchal pressure literally inscribes itself on women's bodies, creating physical manifestations of psychological violence. Shoneyin's "cracked egg" metaphor reimagines reproductive symbols: rather than representing failed fertility (broken eggs as wasted potential), the broken egg symbolises liberation, new possibilities emerging from shattered constraints. This metaphorical reversal exemplifies what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) describes as

"symbolic reclamation," where African women writers "take patriarchal symbols and remake them for feminist purposes" (p. 289).

Strategic Deployment of Medical Discourse

Both novels strategically position biomedical authority to challenge traditional beliefs while revealing how medicine can reinforce patriarchal control. The clinical diagnosis of male infertility acts as a narrative climax in both texts, using scientific authority to undermine patriarchal reproductive claims. In *Stay with Me*, the doctor's revelation about Akin's low sperm count shifts blame from Yejide to Akin, exposing years of false accusations. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the fertility clinic's diagnosis of Baba Segi's azoospermia (complete absence of sperm) dismantles his patriarchal authority in a single medical statement. However, both authors also critique medicine's limitations and its potential for violence. Yejide's multiple doctors fail to recognise the psychological aspects of her phantom pregnancy, treating symptoms without addressing their patriarchal roots. Bolanle endures medical violation during fertility testing, her body examined and probed in ways that mirror rather than challenge patriarchal objectification. This dual stance, medicine as both a liberating tool and a possible instrument of oppression, reflects STIWANIST recognition that Western institutions warrant critical reappropriation rather than wholesale adoption.

These techniques collectively create what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) describes as "transformative narratives" texts that not only critique oppression but also model alternative consciousness and resistance possibilities. Through polyvocality, both novels democratise narrative authority; through metaphorical reconfiguration, they reclaim reproductive symbolism; and through strategic medical discourse, they utilise modern knowledge systems against traditional patriarchal claims while maintaining a critical distance from biomedical authority itself.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates how contemporary Nigerian women writers employ STIWANIST feminist strategies to transform infertility discourse from a tool of female subordination into a catalyst for feminist awareness and resistance. Through careful examination of Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this study reveals how the metaphorical reshaping of fertility, polyvocal narration, and strategic use of medical

discourse enable the dismantling of patriarchal links between womanhood and motherhood. The application of STIWANISM as a theoretical framework proves especially valuable for analysing reproductive discourse in African contexts, offering culturally rooted analytical tools that address the intersection of patriarchal, colonial, and traditional systems of oppression. Unlike Western feminist approaches that may insufficiently capture African women's specific experiences, STIWANISM provides frameworks for understanding how women navigate various constraints while maintaining cultural ties.

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