

## Family, Procreation, and Continuity in Two Selected Nigerian Novels

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### Abstract

This article examines the linkage between family, procreation and human development as depicted in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017). The analysis places meanings the literary texts in respective historical and cultural contexts much in New Historicism assumptions. The attraction to New Historicism arose because of its inclination towards understanding intellectual history through literature and literature through its cultural context. The article argues that *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* examine a triad of procreation, women's culture of silence, and economic empowerment in their respective depictions as the driving force of "any marriage" crucial in socio-economic development. In the two novels, women get blame for childlessness even when male characters are metaphorically to blame. Moreover, the silence of women characters on infertility of their husbands in the novels undermines them while elevating the status of the otherwise dysfunctional and emasculated male characters. On the other hand, both novels empower women economically which ultimately debunks the traditional gender role, which make women dependant on men. Overall, the two novels suggest the need for further social, economic, and political reforms in African marriages with a changed way of how married African women behave.

### Keywords:

Family, Procreation, Continuity, Culture of Silence, Women's Empowerment

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### Introduction

The question of family and procreation is often discussed in almost all disciplines because the community and society are rooted in the family (Male-Kayongo 1984; Therborn 2004). Like other disciplines such as sociology, gender, and political science, literature also unequivocally addresses the question of family and procreation and their linkage in the whole process of human development. 'The Birth of Shaka' by Mtshali Oswald, for example, describes the birth of Shaka, one of the

greatest Southern African military strategists and kings. The poem alludes to Shaka's bravery and an illegitimate child whose exploits propel him to a legendary king of the Zulus (Golan 2014, pp. 95-111). Likewise, African dramatists in their plays have shown the role of mothers especially in procreation<sup>1</sup>. Both "patriarchal social systems" and "matriarchal communities women" emerge as 'procreators' for the genesis of the family (Chesaina 1987, p. 16). Globally, many writers have varyingly placed the family at the centre of life. <sup>2</sup> Implicitly, the varied depictions of the family and procreation as inseparable further reinforce the value of these two intertwined aspects – family and procreation.

### **Argument**

In furtherance of this praxis, this article focuses on Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Lives* (2010) and Adebayo Ayobami's *Stay with Me* (2017) in its examination of the representation of procreation in traditional African societies. It explores the representations of predicament African woman characters face in the two novels. In Africa, a woman struggles with different cultural pressures in her marriage. The struggle of women against patriarchy system manifests in different ways. Fitria and Asri (2020, p.131) explain some of the forms of resistance women undertake against patriarchy:

Open resistance on that illustrate the attitude... rejection by means of verbal and physical violence against those women, denigrate women both in domestic and public areas...the marginalisation of women, the subordination of women, negative stereotypes towards women violence against women, the burden of double work against women by family or community...

The seemingly lopsided dependence of women on men appears to relegate them to the status of shadows of men. Apparently, women are not autonomous and whatever they do appears dependent on men.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the plays which deal with procreation are Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), Sutherland's *Foriwa* (1967), Graft's *Sons and Daughters* (1979)

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion on family and procreation one may read the following literary works across the globe P. Lieske (2003, pp. 275-282), A. S. Balena (2007, pp 128-152)

Evidentially, both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* reveal how women characters have no autonomy about their bodies. The dominant theme in the novels is how these women characters are disproportionately and unfairly blamed for their supposed infertility even in cases where the male characters could be the culprits. However, this blame is heaped on them without any medical proof that they are infertile instead of make-belief. Within the traditional African cultural context, women's sexuality tends to be viewed from a patriarchal standpoint, which relates infertility with women. As a result, women are objects who should at any cost procreate in their marriages to qualify as good wives. Studies indicate that there is a 50 percent ratio of infertility between men and women, but usually because of patriarchal system across the globe, men's infertility tends to be overlooked (Assidi, 2022). Therefore, infertility is not only a woman's lot since both sexes can be infertile. Indeed, briefly, the analysis of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* sheds light on how the selected African writers depict family and procreation to provide when it comes to genderised family relationships in Africa.

In its analysis, the article borrows from Feluga's (2003) main ideas informing New Historicism. New Historicists take the position that all cultural activities are equally important texts for historical analysis. Moreover, they more specifically focus on questions of power and culture, particularly the messy comingling of the social and the cultural as well as the supposedly autonomous self and cultural/political institutions that in fact produces that self (Feluga 2003). Implicitly, the position of a woman as depicted in the two novels under review ought to be considered with such views in mind, hence the application of New Historicism in the analysis of the texts in question and the arguments they make on procreation, women's culture of silence, and their empowerment in African societies that largely reduce them to playing second fiddle to men under patriarchal norms and values.

### **Family, Procreation and Fiction**

In the fiction genre, many writers depict the theme of family and procreation to underscore the importance of the two in the survival of the society. In his insightful study on procreation and family, Kyalo (2012,

p.88) asserts that marriage is a pathway to family creation since the existence of humanity across cultures depends on marriage:

It [marriage] is as old as human society, through marriage and childbearing, human is preserved, propagated, and perpetuated. Through them life is also deepened vertically and spread horizontally. Therefore, marriage and childbearing are the focus of life they are at the very centre of human existence just as man is at the very centre of the universe.

Indeed, family begins in marriage. Implicitly, marriage and childbearing are intertwined since the two are the basis of family creation. Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* portray women as bearing the blunt of the load of childbearing compared to men. The question of birth should, therefore, not be a prerogative of one person but of couples as evidenced in these two novels.

In many African societies, a woman is often defined according to her relationship to a man. A woman can be a daughter, a wife, and a mother (Davies 1986, p. 5). In a patriarchal society, a woman is blessed if she has all these three qualities. Being a woman implies being a mother, which in traditional African societies finds true expression in marriage. The African woman is a mother, wife, daughter, and lover based on her relationship to a man and, rarely, as an individual in her own right. African fiction mainly written by men has often reinforced that image. For instance, Chinua Achebe depicts women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to be very subdued, usually playing second fiddle to male characters. Even when a character such as Ezinma, a precocious child becomes the beloved of Okonkwo, the protagonist, she remains with the potential that Nwoye, his disappointing and sensitive child, would never be. Despite her huge potential she can only be second to a male child. Reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals that women are in a desolate situation, which relates to Davis Boyce's (1986, p. 244) contention to the effect that the novels authored by men treat mothers "more as symbols than living suffering individuals." Boyce is against patriarchal society and its features that are hostile to women by perpetuating forced marriages and polygamy that places the man at the centre of women's existence, with a woman's identity and justification of her existence rooted in her motherhood (126).

Motherhood is linked to all womanhood, of being first a daughter, then a wife and lover on the way to becoming a mother.

In fact, motherhood has a special status in African societies. When a woman gives birth, two entities are born, a baby and a mother (Oyewumi 2003, p. 1). The mother's position is linked everywhere, with nothing more important in a woman's life than becoming a mother. Okereke (1994, p. 19) confirms that motherhood is an attachment of the peak of the rites of passage into womanhood. Under this arrangement, a woman gains respect based on the number of children she begets. The status of a good African mother is so strong because the privileged role of a woman as a mother as opposed to an individual/citizen. In fact, the individuality of a woman is lost since the aspect of giving birth which the society imposes on her by is secondary to none. As a result, becoming a mother is a woman's job; as Nnu Ego quips in Buchi Emecheta's (1979) *The Joys of Motherhood* "all I want to be, a woman and a mother" (p. 52). This statement captures the outlook of the whole society.

The respect for mothers is twofold. Whereas giving birth to a son is always a great feat in many traditional African societies, a mother does not get many plaudits for giving birth to a daughter. Indeed, in African traditional societies, the preference for a son is historical, particularly in matrilineal societies, since a son carries genealogical seeds of the family, hence the clan. The popular argument in many African societies is that the female in the future would no longer be part of the family because she would be married off to another clan elsewhere. Discussing the importance of male child in African societies, Jeremiah Methusela (2017) contends:

...[in] Africa, it is not enough for one to have children. No matter the number of children that one may have, inasmuch as they are not male children, the person may not command the respect accorded to another person who may have even if it is one child alone but who is male. By way of a hierarchical arrangement, therefore, not having children at all is anathema, it attracts the lowest level of respect in society. However, a person whose children are female is almost on the same level with the first one mentioned above because there is very little respect accorded the girl child viewing her more as a liability than an asset. On the

scale of 1-3, the highest is three only one achieves it because he has male children, plenty of them (p. 326).

The intention of this paper is not to discuss the importance of male child in African societies nor in African fiction but to highlight how those notions affect the woman as she grows up and in turn becomes a victim when she conceives since she ought to consider the consequences of giving birth to a girl-child. These ideals are implanted in young children and with whom they grow up. The boys later continue to hold the same authority implanted into them early. Arguably, a woman has a double task. To begin with, she ought to think about getting pregnant in her marriage and the aftermath of the pregnancy. This suggests that being a mother is a burden to a woman to satisfy the need of the society. However, the task of an African woman remains the same – to give birth. Being a mother is traditionally crucial in African societies. As Nfah-Abbenyi (2005, p. 274) points out, in her quest for maternal happiness, a child completes the woman's identity and self-fulfilment. She makes a valid point by noting that gender seems to be discontinuous, a woman (character) is not a woman until she gives birth to an offspring, which then confers womanhood and femininity on her.

Nfah-Abbenyi's (2005) views manifest in some African novels specifically written by women. These novels attempt to portray the struggle of women to give birth for family continuity. However, the stumbling block has been the relationship between the man and the woman (husband and wife). In this relationship, the woman/wife is blamed in the whole process of procreation as if she is the only person culpable of ensuring it prevails. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by Shoneyin and *Stay with Me* by Adebayo place procreation at the centre of any African family. In other words, the burden of birth should not be placed squarely on one person but both parties – the couple – as both novels contend in their respective portrayals. From a general African historical perspective, women unduly get blame as sources of childlessness and because of the nature of the patriarchal system. Society – in accordance with patriarchy – has conditioned them remain silent as party of the infamous culture of silence that dominate many an African traditional society. Apparently, many African societies do not allow them to speak out their mind.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Ishola and Iya Segi are married traditionally, much is not said about their marriage and how they met. However, there is a symbolic representation of their obsession with getting a child. After two years of their childless marriage, the husband begins to demand for a child without considering his virility. Implicitly, the wife is to blame. The husband begins to give his wife traditional medicines to enable her to conceive; he consults his friends and a medicine man (pp. 3-4). This male supremacy masks the reality. Under normal circumstances, the husband ought to investigate the matter before taking those actions. Yet, in this case, it is a fait accompli: The Woman is guilty. This view is consistent with many traditional beliefs that dog and even hold hostage many African societies.

In the conclusion of the novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the otherwise hidden or neglected truth emerges. The husband (Ishola Alao) is incapable of impregnating his wife, Iya Segi. Despite her abiding by the traditions of her culture and longing to maintain them knowing the importance of children to ensure continuity of the family, she cannot help herself if her husband cannot help her conceive. The alternative way of getting a child while maintaining the traditional cultural system. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* suggests that no matter what happens in the marriage, procreation has to continue. In the novel, Iya Segi understands what it means to be a childless or on the extreme side 'barren' woman in a patriarchal society. Iya Segi says: "[M]y husband and I tried everything. Then, I had an idea...if my husband did not have seed then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? ... So I found seed and planted it in my belly" (p.231). In other words, she takes things into her own hands to banish the same and humiliation to absolve her name as a woman.

The gravity of the problem is stalked by her husband failing to impregnate Iya Segi, yet she gets all the blame for failing to conceive. She suffers gravely simply because many an African society treats a supposedly infertile woman as a useless deserving social discrimination based on infertility. Iya Segi is an illiterate woman, yet she understands what procreation means, as an important aspect for the survival of the family, community, and society without which there can be no society. Metaphorically, the words of her mother before her marriage on the need for and importance of children keeps on occurring in her mind, hence a

motivation to find a seed outside the wedlock regardless of the odds (pp. 106-107).

The question of marriage and man's virility and infertility in Africa is also apparent in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. However, whereas *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* Ishola has no problems of erectile dysfunction, Akin in *Stay with Me* has such a problem. Whereas Ishola knows that he is fertile, Akin does not. *Stay with Me* narrates the heart-burning story of a passionate and affectionate young couple called Akin and Yejide. This young couple succumbs to problems of childlessness in line with their society's belief system, a society with predetermined expectations from this young couple. Inevitably, they end up in frustration and despair after failing to meet these lofty ideals.

Like in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, *Stay with Me* deals with the same theme of procreation and the need for family continuity. The illiterate Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* wittingly selects a man to plant seeds in her without considering the relatives of her husband as required by her community to absolve her name and prove her society wrong about her supposed infertility. On the other hand, Yejide in *Stay with Me* is educated and chooses to sleep with her in-law who is the young brother of her husband. What Yejide does is aligned with what her community suggests. In many African societies, when the husband is infertile "a woman would be encouraged to have sexual relations with somebody outside the marriage, preferably her husband's next of kin" (Baloyi 2017, p. 5). Baloyi's views are evident in the portrayal of Akin and his young brother Duton when his wife (Yejide) does not conceive.

Under these circumstances, Akin goes to his young brother to seek assistance of impregnating his wife. His young brother initially objects since there are other men who can do the task and not his relatives. As Baloyi explicates, the motive is to retain the secret within the family so that outsiders would not know of the husband's infertility. Akin tells his young brother about keeping the secret in their family (p.187). In contrast, Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* does not follow the rules of her traditions; instead, she acts consciously knowing that failure to find a man to impregnate her would result in her expulsion from the marriage. In the former case of Yejide, it is her husband who seeks assistance from



his young brother whereas in the latter case it is Iya Segi who seek a man outside the matrimonial bed. Regardless of the different experiences they undergo, the question of procreation is what determines what they subsequently do. They both aspire for a child. In either case, they endure the burden of their respective husbands, who cannot put them into the family way and yet they remain the subjects of blame.

Significantly, the two novels address one thing in common – the quest for a child in the marriage against the backdrop of accusatory fingers of the society conditioned to heap the blame on the seemingly hapless women. In this regard, the authors suggest that the family cannot continue or multiply without children. These views are supported by Dyer *et al.* (2004) in their study on the essence of family and procreation in Africa:

In the African culture, the true meaning of marriage is only fulfilled if the couple conceives and bears children. Africans consider their child to be a source of power and pride, and children act as insurance for their parents in old age. The most important aspect of bearing children is an assurance of family continuity (p. 960).

On the other hand, the two novels without exception address one of the tormenting issues related to women's conception when their husbands cannot deliver because of their infertility and impotence. The two novels let their readers come to grips with the life pattern of the protagonists from the time they get married, their struggles to conceive to the time they attain their motherhood regardless of birthing circumstance. What is evident is that their children do not belong to their respective husbands, but exonerate them as fertile, hence ridiculing the taunts that they could have had to endure in their society. It is their husbands who get exposed.

### **Women, Silence, and Family**

Both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* question why Iya Segi and Yejide are silent and do not resist patriarchal stricture that undermines them. Apparently, the two women want to conform to, maintain and perpetuate their cultural system. In the contemporary world, many women resist patriarchal systems largely due the modernisation they have experienced. Yet, in the novels under study, this is not the case since the women are silent as they strive to adhere to their cultural

systems. Evidently, they do not want to destroy their culture, hence the death of the African humanity. As such, they are ready to live with their husbands regardless of their experiences.

In *Stay with Me*, the silence of Yejide occurs when she does not want to share her agonies with other women. In their conversation, women discuss matters related to sexuality, especially sex and sexual orgasm. They narrate how they enjoy sex with their husbands and how they reach the climax. Yet, ever since getting married to Akin, Yejide has never enjoyed sex nor does she know the meaning of sexual pleasure, hence her inability to contribute to the discussion (pp. 164-165). This scenario is also evident in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Throughout the novel, Iya Segi desists from revealing whether she enjoys sex with her husband, which ironically makes the reader aware that she does not. After all, the husband does not prepare her for sexual activity through fore-play. Like Yejide, she does not complain; instead, she remains silent—a typical trait in main African cultures of condemning women to the culture of silence. Implicitly, Yejide and Iya Segi are tied to their respective cultural belief systems, which do not allow women to speak out about sex matters openly. This silence suggests that these two women are aware that sex is meant only for procreation and not the other way around even though in the modern world women want them to go together with pleasure.

On the other hand, the silence of Yejide at the hospital when, together with her husband, when they go for consultation regarding their state of childlessness speaks volumes about what is happening: “When the doctor asked about our sex life, Akin held my hand before he answered and stroked my thumb as he said, *our sex life is normal absolutely normal*” (p.77; added emphasis). Traditionally, a woman is socialised to observe silence. As Gatwiri and Karanja (2016) observe:

In gender discourses, silence is much more commonly associated with women’s disempowerment in reference mainly to their failure to speak out and/or act against gendered, oppressive situation... [M]ales enjoy unbridled social-culturally assigned power and privilege and constructions of masculinity encourage the subordination and control of women by men. Excuses such as the use of violence and other oppressive practices against women are

not only tolerated but also tacitly encouraged as necessary for 'putting women in their place' and maintaining male authority (p. 4)

Indubitably, silence serves as a tool for stripping off women identity. Patriarchal social norms and values to which women have been socially conditioned force them to stay in their traditional space and play their respective roles, implying insubordination. Moreover, the silence of women makes it difficult for them to speak up their minds and, instead, keep on swallowing the difficulties they encounter, hence the deeply engrained culture of silence. Suggestively, men would continue to be dominant unless the status quo is subverted. As an educated woman in *Stay with Me*, Yejide ought to challenge her husband at the hospital when they go for consultation with the doctor about their sexual life. The husband, Akin presses his wife's hand, implying that he does not want her to speak. She obeys and remains silent, which makes her complicity in her denigration. In other words, societal repressive patriarchal norms prevail to the detriment of the welfare of the women subjects.

Under normal circumstances, Yejide could have reacted to getting a clinical solution to her husband's problem. Yet, she chose to remain silent much in line with what her culture demands of her as a female subject. On the other hand, Bolanle in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, who is also an educated woman with a university education, uses her education to speak her mind. When she fails to conceive, her husband forces her to seek treatment from traditional medicine men, she refuses to go to a traditional healer; instead, she forces her husband to seek medical attention to solve the problem. The tests indicate that her husband is infertile (p.206). Evidently, sometime women are blamed for nothing. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* suggests that women should not remain silent and instead raise their voices. Also, some of the problems are caused by women themselves because they fail to speak. For Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, it is understandable that she is illiterate and, therefore, she is not aware of modern knowledge of women's rights.

Silence has implication for the status of women in African societies in the novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This silence is presented metaphorically by Ishola Alao whose actions lead his wives to become silent to protect the image and honour of their husband. In the novel, *The*

*Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Iya Segi, the senior wife advises her husband not to expel them (his wives) after discovering that their extra-marital affairs has lead to the birth of their children, he calls his. Iya Segi's argument is on how they are going to raise the children obtained in Ishola's household. Their husband accepts the proposal with some conditions, including never owning shops in the market and are not allowed to go to salons and need be at home all the times. All the wives accept their husband's rules (p. 263). Implicitly, the husband wants to protect his image as a man who is supposed to be virile and portent fertile, hence, if he does not do so, his image will be tarnished, and can be emasculated. Moreover, the husband wants to ensure family continuity remains in the family. The traditional African context allows for this return to normality under these otherwise questionable circumstances if one were to go by Western reasoning. In other ways, the local context allows him to behave the way he does.

### **Women, Marriage, and Economic Avenues**

Besides focusing on procreation, the novels also highlight another key point related to women's economic empowerment. Traditionally, women had been dependant on men almost in everything. The poverty of women has also been perpetuated by their societies because women have been denied opportunities that could otherwise empower them. In his insightful book entitled *Understanding poverty from a gender perspective*, Desarrollo Mujer underlines:

By assigning the domestic sphere to women, the sexual division of labour causes an "inequality of opportunities for women, as a gender, to gain access to material and social resources (ownership of productive capital, paid labour, education and training), and to participate in decision-making in the main political, economic and social policies." In fact, women have not only relatively fewer material assets, but also fewer social assets (the income, goods and services to which people have access through their social relationships) and fewer cultural assets (the formal education and cultural knowledge that enable people perform in the human environment). All of which places them at greater risk of being poor (Mujer 2004, p.12).

This inequitable social, cultural, economic, and political situation has far-reaching implication for the lives of women. Desarrollo shows how women are oppressed in all spheres of life. In terms of the economic aspect, the focus of this section, women lack access opportunities to raise their standard of life. However, both *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* attempt to negate the traditional systems to empower women economically. Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* wants to procreate and ensure the continuity of her husband's lineage and decides to stick with her husband, even though technically she has betrayed him. Metaphorically, Iya Segi is protecting her wealth. Likewise, in *Stay with Me*, Yejide aspires for procreation; however, the aspect of monetary freedom is in her mind. Here, I argue that though procreation is a locus of marriage, it currently goes together with the economic status of married couples.

*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* present changed women who push against the limits imposed on women by their largely patriarchal societies. The two novels address the way women crave for economic development of their own instead of waiting for male deliverance under the prevailing patriarchal system. Traditionally, the woman's place in many conservative societies in African and elsewhere was at home and, specifically, in a kitchen because of socialisation and social engineering. The two authors challenge the notion kitchen trope in the African context by making their female protagonists work. Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Yejide in *Stay with Me* are moulded to deconstruct this notion. As Simon (2014, p. 1) aptly explicates, "women were portrayed as angels in the house whose role in the family was restricted to childbearing, home-keeping and marriage." Iya Segi and Yejide do not see the home and kitchen as a place for constructing their identity and womanhood. The novels denounce this symbolic placement of woman's place in the kitchen since such a constricted role further perpetuates the bondage to women and reinforces while denying them opportunities for economic growth.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Iya Segi engages in selling 'fufu', one of the traditional foods in her society. Iya Segi narrates: "My money grew until I had to hide it in an old water pot in my room. Every night, I would light my kerosene lamp and sit with my buttocks against the closed

door...my fingers liked the feel of money. My eyes liked to see the piles of money well" (103). Iya Segi manages to acquire a lot of money through her business as a way of liberating herself as a woman financially. Implicitly, a woman can work and be financially stable and economically independent as a way of avoiding the bondage/man's oppression spelled for her since birth as a female child under patriarchal norms and values. Such exploits and engagement occur before she gets married, meaning she can manage to live on her own without depending on anybody particularly 'men'. In fact, she is even ready to build her own house; it is her mother who advises her against doing so because men [the future husband] can destroy it once they know about its existence (p. 103). It is her mother's conviction that she should be married to fulfil the norms of her society. Suggestively, empowering modern women economically is a panacea to subverting the status quo. As a result, Iya Segi is ready to empower herself economically both before marriage and after her marriage, which explains why even in her marriage she has economic assets. As Iya Segi further narrates, "Now I have eight cement shops in Ibadan alone and my wealth swells by the day...It's just that as my money grows, my path to freedom becomes clearer. Everybody wants to be free from whatever binds them" (p.110). This statement attests to her economic independence that belies the idea of relegating the women's place in the domestic sphere of the kitchen.

Ironically, even her husband, Ishola Alao, owes his results from his wife's fortunes. Indeed, the initial capital of the business of the husband depends on the wife (Iya Segi). Earlier as the narrative unfolds when living in town, Ishola is penniless, until his mother calls him back to the village. The mother introduces him to Iya Segi who happens to have the money acquired through selling fufu, which he lacks. Implicitly, the resultant marriage is one of convenience that benefits the man more than the women in terms of monetary acquisition. Nevertheless, and significantly, the novel suggests that men do also benefit from women. Also, women can be dominant. Such portrayals help deconstruct the patriarchal beliefs that women can only be subservient to men.

At the beginning of their marriage, Iya Segi in her heart solemnly declares: "I will follow you anywhere my lord: I raised my buttocks and let him fill me again. I will follow my money anywhere" (p.109). Impliedly, she does

not get married just for the sake of being married and getting children but there is also an economic element in the transaction. To her, money overrides marriage. In this regard, she tells her co-wives how children are made in Ishola's household. In her heart, the children serve as a weapon to avenge against the money her husband takes when he marries her (p.110). Arguably, the novel challenges the traditional normative place of a woman, which is supposed to be in a kitchen by suggesting that the woman can work and become economically independent. This amounts to the questioning of the gender patterns that subject women to inequalities and iniquities. Iya Segi sells 'fufu' to be financially stable and economically independent, hence challenging the patriarchal norm about socially constructed gender roles that unduly oppress women in many African societies and reduce them to the unenviable status of stay-at-home moms.

In the same vein, *Stay with Me* also depicts Yejide as an economically independent woman. This characterisation of Yejide helps to deconstruct the patriarchal gender roles imposed on women in many traditional African societies, which marginalise them and keep them in the periphery as low-profile subjects. Like Iya Segi, Yejide owns a salon that serves as a source of income (p. 62). Her involvement businesses help to supplement family income. Like Iya Segi, Yejide also supports her husband by sharing the payment of house rent. Such a step is symptomatic of changes traditional postures are undergoing, which women's participating in income generation signalling the future of marital relationships. Overall, the two novels tout women's economic empowerment as a vital necessity in improving gender relations in the traditional African contexts. The characterisation of both Iya Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Yejide in *Stay with Me* attest to the much-needed change of cultural systems, which have been prevailing albeit at a gradual speed in Africa, including adapting to a new trend of culture including empowering women. The new woman in the novels emblemises the lives of women freed from the shackles of male hegemony to depend on what they can produce as empowered women.

### **Conclusion**

The two novels offer a profound testimony of the centrality of procreation and the paramount need to empower women in marriage. Both

Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, to a large extent, share the same ideas related to procreation, the rather un-coveted women's silence as well as the issue of women in marriage and economic empowerment. The two novels have shown the repercussions of a childless marriage in an African society. As Maponya (2021, p. 82) asserts, procreation is "the primary reproductive coercion that exists within African traditional marriage" to ensure lineage. In essence, the novels reaffirm this belief including the use of undercut methods for the women to meet the societal expectations of procreation. On the other hand, silence makes women unable to protest men's masculinity and therefore remain in their subservient traditional position. As the novels under review have illustrated, the infertility of men is hidden under the veil of the women's culture of silence. However, it does not mean that they are passive actors since they do not only struggle to empower themselves economically and, hence, overturn the traditional cultural system but also make up for what their men lack, hence no longer subservient subjects.

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