

THE STIGMA OF BARRENNESS IN AYOBAMI ADEBAYO'S *STAY WITH ME* AND
ASARE KONADU'S *A WOMAN IN HER PRIME*

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CERTIFICATION

I validate that this project with the title : *THE STIGMA OF BARRENNESS IN AYOBAMI ADEBAYO'S STAY WITH ME AND ASARE KONADU'S A WOMAN IN HER PRIME* was written by **FAITH OYINMIEBI JONATHAN** of the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin city.

DR. STELLA IGENE

Date:

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God almighty who has given me the strength, wisdom and favor I needed in carrying out this project to full term. I also want to dedicate this project to my supportive parents and siblings for coming through for me when I needed them during the course of this project. This project is of course dedicated to women who are bending and breaking their backs just to have a child, your struggles are seen and one day victory will be yours.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover page	i
Title page	ii
Certification	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v

Table of contents—————vi

1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of study—————I

1.2 Scope of study—————I

1.3 Methodology—————I

1.4 Theoretical background—————I

1.5 Review of Literature—————I

1.6 Thesis statement—————I

CHAPTER TWO: BARRENNESS

CHAPTER THREE: STIGMA OF BARRENNESS

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Works cited—————I

Abstract

This research delves into the profound stigma associated with barrenness within African society, using the novels "A Woman in Her Prime" by Asare Konadu and "Stay with Me" by Ayobami Adebayo as primary sources. It comprehensively analyzes the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions of infertility and the resulting stigma in African communities.

The study begins by contextualizing the societal importance of motherhood and fertility in various African cultures, where infertility is seen as a personal and communal failing, resulting in feelings of shame and inadequacy.

Through character analysis and narrative exploration in both novels, the research uncovers gender dynamics that unfairly blame women for infertility, despite it often being a shared issue. This unequal blame distribution can lead to marital and familial strains.

Additionally, the study examines how barren women experience community stigmatization, intensifying their feelings of shame and isolation.

The emotional toll of infertility, including sadness, frustration, anxiety, and depression, is highlighted, underscoring the need for emotional support.

In conclusion, the research emphasizes the necessity of awareness and advocacy to combat infertility stigma in African societies, promoting empathy, understanding, and access to medical and emotional support as vital steps toward alleviating the suffering of affected individuals. This comparative analysis sheds light on infertility challenges and underscores the urgent need for societal change and support.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In line with Wilbur Scott's definition of literature that "it is not just the causes of social effect but also the effect of social course". Hence, literature takes from the society, gives back to the society however in a modified and redefined form, and is basically a reflection of what happens in the society.

In African society, Asare Konadu and Ayobami Adebayo works are realistic pictures of the pressures and traumas barren women face in the hands of the society.

1.1 PURPOSE OF STUDY

This essay attempts to critically discuss the issues of barrenness and the stigma that comes with it in an African society.

1.2 SCOPE OF STUDY:

The essay is set to explore the issue of marriage, love, childbirth and barrenness in *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*.

This essay will reveal the message of the writers and their opinions towards the theme of barrenness.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The primary source of this research work is *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*.

Also, the quantitative descriptive research method will be adopted based on the fact that some frequency of occurrence of certain structures and functions will be used to make some generalized opinion in this work.

According to Paul Leedy and Ormrod Ellis's book titled Practical Research, it is asserted that "in qualitative research, we indeed dig deep; we collect various forms of data and examine them from various angles to construct a rich and meaningful picture of complex multifaceted situation" (269)

These primary texts used in this work will be subjected to critical literary analysis supported by secondary materials from notes and journals, articles, materials from Internet pages and library, and e-books..

1.4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theory adopted for this work will be Erving Goffman's theory on Social Stigma.

In his seminal work "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity," Erving Goffman presents his Social Stigma Theory, which outlines three distinct types of stigma. The first type, known as "abominations of the body," pertains to physical deformities. The second type, termed "blemishes of individual character," encompasses conditions such as mental illness or addiction. The third type is referred to as "tribal stigma" and relates to prejudices associated with race, nationality, or religion.

Goffman's theory posits that stigma is essentially a perceived deviation from what society considers normal or typical. Infertility and barrenness, in this context, could potentially lead to stigmatization, as they might be viewed as abnormalities in bodily function. Society establishes

certain attributes and categories that it deems ordinary, natural, and conforming to the expected norm for an individual.

In line with Goffman's perspective, stigma can be understood as a distinct disparity between how society categorizes an individual (their perceived or "virtual" identity) and an attribute they genuinely possess, which contradicts social norms and expectations (their actual social identity).

Numerous individuals dealing with infertility have chosen not to divulge their diagnoses to others. Stacey Mismer's research, conducted in the Midwestern U.S., unveiled that African and Asian American women were three to four times more inclined to voice apprehensions about encountering social stigma when contemplating infertility treatment in comparison to their white counterparts.

In the United States, individuals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds were notably less inclined, with a likelihood ranging from 7 to 18 times lower, to share their infertility diagnosis or discuss their utilization of infertility treatments with their immediate family and friends (Missmer et al., 2011).

Likewise, Muslim women expressed apprehensions about disclosing their infertility diagnoses to family and friends due to concerns about potential stigmatization from their community members and extended family.

Although the interpretations and consequences of stigma can vary significantly across cultures, individuals who share a specific stigma often undergo similar learning processes and undergo changes in their self-perception. This forms a common moral journey that is both a consequence and a cause of their commitment to a consistent series of personal adaptations, as Goffman elaborates (p.30).

This theory will however prove to be a framework on which this research work will be built on.

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the ideas portrayed in this novel, it has attracted some reviews from certain critics and researchers especially in attempts to evaluate, compliment and explicate both the writers and the novels.

Michiko Kakutani gives a review on how the book explores the tussle in Nigeria between “tradition and modernity, old definitions of masculinity and femininity, and newer imperatives of self-definition and identity”.

Yejide, a modern lady is forced into a battle with traditions and constantly pressured to relinquish her modernity and accept tradition.

The childlessness in the marriage of Akin and Yejide places a huge strain on their love life and marriage.

“Akin tells us that he loved Yejide from the moment he met her, but four years of childless marriage blunted his belief that “love could do anything”.”

In addition to the strain on their lovely and happy marriage, Akin’s mother particularly faults Yejide for the couple’s childlessness, and emotionally blackmails Yejide into accepting Akin’s second wife.

“When they married, both Yejide and Akin said no to polygamy, but as years passed without a child, their relatives insisted that Akin take a second wife, Funmi. Yejide is told to accept Funmi as a “younger sister,” a “friend,” a “daughter.” Akin’s mother cruelly says: “Women manufacture children and if you can’t you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman.”

She goes on: “We are not asking you to stand up from your place in his life, we are just saying you should shift so that someone else can sit down.” “

This reveals the traditional illogical perspective where a woman is always at fault whenever a couple is unable to conceive.

Caving into Akin's mother's request and pressure, Yejide is forced to try to save her marriage by getting a child at all costs.

"She gets hospital tests, and the names of doctors, pastors and herbalists. In one sad, comic sequence, she treks up the "Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles" to visit a healer named Prophet Josiah, who has her dance with a white goat she's dragged to the summit as his chanting followers swarm her."

Yejide's desperation soon turns to delusion when she begins to "believe she's pregnant, despite doctors' insistence that there is no baby."

Eventually, after she conceives, she's confronted with the problems of her children having sickle cell disease. This therefore compounds the burden on their marriage, and eventually makes Akin to slip.

"Yejide realizes that Akin has withheld painful truths from her from the start — that she had refused to see "things standing in plain view."

In Diana Evans' review of *Stay With Me*, the traditions and superstitions imposed on pregnant women is archaic and unnecessary. For the case of a childless woman, the case is worse.

"In Nigerian society a childless woman is a tragedy, and considered to have probably brought it on herself. "

In Yejide's marriage, she's faced by the problems of being unable to conceive, and also the problems of being pressured and blamed by her in-laws. They ignore the fact that childlessness affects both Akin and Yejide. Instead, Yejide is constantly faulted.

"You have had my son between your legs for two more months and still your stomach is flat," Moomi tells Yejide. Also, when the new wife is also not yet pregnant. "Close your thighs to him,

I beg you ... If you don't he (Akin) will die childless. I beg you, don't spoil my life. He is my first son, Yejide.”

Sumaiyya Naseem finds the major themes in the novel to include “polygamy, infertility and the value of children or rather what a child represents.”

At the beginning of the Akin's relationship with Yejide, the couple were filled with love. However, the love fails to be enough in stopping Akin from marrying Funmi (a second wife). Unfortunately, Funmi fails to 'give Akin a child ' before her demise.

“As a result of their childlessness, Yejide and Akin's marriage is considered a failure by the society. However, we see just how harrowing Yejide's struggle is and it points to the fact that when it comes to childlessness the social burden of failure falls on the woman disproportionately. This is, regardless of the fact, that 50% of the time it's male infertility that leads to the inability to conceive”.

This however posits the question of “What is the value of a woman without a child? Why is a woman's value placed on her ability to have children?... And is a woman nothing if she's not a mother?”

According to Sarah Jessica Parker, “Stay with Me is a wise and deeply humane debut novel that unpeels the layers of politics in a marriage from the inside. Ayobami Adebayo tells the story of Akin, Yejide, and their families – a powerfully affecting tale of love, loyalty, and betrayal – with both savagery and heart”.

It focuses on how Africans perceive marriage and how certain persons can influence a couple's relationship. Either negatively or positively.

Zoë Apostolides also appraises the concept of Couples being under intense pressure by family members to give birth. Moomi had told Yejide that “Women manufacture children and if you can’t you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman.”

In Apostolides' review with Financial Times, she says:

“This tale of a Nigerian couple under familial pressure to conceive is a subtle and unsentimental triumph . . . A tale of real complexity and humanity, part psychological observation and social study.”

Coupled with Nigerian writers, African writers are branded with peculiar writing styles which enthrall many people to make their stories peculiar.

In the case of Asare Konadu and his novel *A Woman in Her Prime*, he has premeditated the novel, not for fun but for an exclusive description of African culture without ignoring the value, habits and practices of the people of Ghana. (More than ever those in the Ashanti land).

According to Anderson Brown, the novel deals “with the problems of an African woman, Pokuwaa, who is in her 30s and has not had any children, considered a tragic condition by her society, not least by her mother.” This clearly shows the 'fact' that children are the foremost issues expected from an African Woman.

In her bid to conceive, she seeks solace in patronizing shamans and healers. Pokuwaa marries three husbands in her quest to mother a child. Eventually, “She gives up on the magic, on the theories of fate.”

Anderson Brown reveals that it was the intention of the Author to ascertain that a woman does not need a child before she’s termed ‘Fulfilled’.

The author of this novel clearly exposes the beliefs and practices of the people of Ghana with regard to marriage, childbirth, barrenness, funeral celebration and traditional festivals.

Geoff Wisner highlights the qualities possessed by Pokuwaa. "...about her courage and resourcefulness, her faith, the strength of her desire for a child, and the fact that she is good with children and able to gain their trust."

Ironically, Pokuwaa's mother seems to be more bothered about Pokuwaa not having a child than Pokuwaa herself. She takes it upon herself to get a solution for her daughter. Pokuwaa's mother chooses not to believe in fate but in traditional healers and medicine.

Geoff Wisner reveals that pressure being mounted on a woman to conceive is simply unnecessary. "A Woman in Her Prime expresses how disappointment may be balanced by tenderness and peace -- and how we sometimes get the thing we want only after we have stopped striving for it."

Both novels explore the problems rooted in Africa, and the archaic belief that a woman is to be blamed for not conceiving. Biologically, both genders are responsible and necessary for reproduction. Also, in cases of inability to conceive, the Woman is not necessarily the one at fault. Sometimes, the inability comes from the Husband.

Both "A woman in Her Prime" and "Stay with Me" emphasizes the idea that women should not be faulted for every case of childlessness, and that the concept of "Children" does not necessarily translate to marital bliss.

1.6 THESIS STATEMENT

This research work, using Stay with me by Ayobami Adebayo and Asare Konadu's A woman in her prime, examines the theme of Barrenness, the stigma of Barren women in an African society and why women are associated with barrenness.

Chapter 2

BARRENNESS

Introduction

From various African perspectives, it is suggested that infertility is often wielded as a tool of subjugation and mistreatment within traditional contexts. In this chapter, we explore the theme of barrenness as regards procreation, infertility, and the associated stigma of childlessness in African society, focusing on our primary texts. The concept is elucidated through an examination of the characters Yejide, Akin, and Pokuwaa, drawing relevant instances from the novel.

Barrenness

In the realm of agriculture, barrenness characterizes soil or land that lacks the essential nutrients or conditions necessary to support the growth of crops or vegetation, rendering it unproductive. It speaks to the inability of the land to bear fruit.

Similarly, barrenness can permeate the domains of creativity and ideas. When individuals grapple with creative barrenness, they face challenges conjuring novel and innovative concepts or solutions, experiencing a mental drought of inspiration.

Economically, barrenness suggests stagnation and the dearth of growth, whether in a particular region or industry. It paints a picture of limited expansion and development.

On a personal level, barrenness extends to personal development and careers. It indicates a lack of progress, where one's efforts fail to yield the desired results, prompting the need for change or improvement.

In intellectual pursuits, barrenness also reflects the struggle to acquire new knowledge or insights, as one navigates a dry spell of mental productivity. Even in the creative arts, barrenness signifies the absence of inspiration, inhibiting the creation of meaningful artistic work.

In general, Barrenness serves as a metaphor for a state of unproductiveness or sterility, signifying the inability of something to yield expected or desired outcomes. This versatile term finds application across diverse facets of life.

On the other hand, Procreation as a type of Barrenness, is a condition that presents a significant challenge for individuals and couples who aspire to have children. Procreation as a type of barrenness is defined as the inability to conceive a child after engaging in regular, unprotected sexual intercourse. This condition is not merely a medical concern; it carries profound emotional and psychological implications for those affected, as well as broader societal dimensions.

One of the first aspects to consider in discussions about barrenness is its underlying causes.

Infertility can stem from a variety of factors, ranging from medical conditions and hormonal imbalances to lifestyle choices and age-related issues. Identifying the root cause of infertility is crucial for determining suitable treatment options and approaches.

Emotionally, barrenness can take a toll on individuals and couples. Feelings of sadness, frustration, anxiety, and grief are common emotional responses. The inability to conceive can

lead to stress and a profound sense of loss, as the cherished dream of parenthood becomes increasingly elusive.

In addition to the emotional burden, infertility can be accompanied by societal pressure and stigma. In many cultures, there exists a strong expectation that couples should have children, and those facing infertility may experience pressure from family, friends, and societal norms. This societal pressure can exacerbate the emotional challenges associated with infertility.

For those unable to conceive biologically, alternative paths to parenthood include medical procedures, adoption and surrogacy. These options offer a fulfilling way to build a family and provide loving homes for children, even when biological conception is not possible.

It's important to note that the experience of barrenness varies across cultures and societies. Different norms, beliefs, and practices influence how infertility is perceived and managed in diverse cultural contexts.

In the African Culture, Barrenness is generally associated with the woman

'Why won't you allow my son to have a child?' She slapped the tray of groundnuts on the floor and stood up.

'I don't manufacture children. God does.'

'Have you ever seen God in a labor room giving birth to a child? Tell me, Yejide, have you ever seen God in the labor ward? Women manufacture children and if you can't you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman.'

Procreation in Africa is considered important based on the fact that In many communities that follow a patrilineal mode of inheritance, it's customary for children to be bestowed with their father's surname. This tradition is rooted in the expectation that when these children eventually marry and have their own offspring, they will continue the practice of passing on the family name to the next generation.

Also, the quantity of children in a family, particularly sons, is often seen as a measure of the couple's value. This is because a larger number of children, particularly sons, can be perceived as more labor available for agricultural work. With more hands working on the farm, the family can yield more crops, which can be sold to generate additional income. Consequently, this surplus income can be saved, contributing to financial security for the family's future.

Why African Women are Associated with Barrenness

In traditional African society, a woman's role as a child-bearer bestows upon her social status, respect, and value (Imbiza 13). One of the significant aspects of an African traditional marriage ceremony is symbolizing the bride's transition from her father's family to her new family.

Additionally, it is customary for a woman to adopt her husband's last name, relinquishing her father's name upon marriage. Conversely, a male child retains his father's surname after marriage, highlighting the prevailing emphasis on the importance of male offspring over female.

In a marital home, there exists a perceived disparity between the roles of husband and wife. The man is typically considered the father, protector, and the head of the household, while the woman assumes the responsibility of caring for the children and managing the home. These gender roles

are instilled from childhood, as they are culturally ingrained to find fulfillment and accept the duty of reproduction and household chores. This is the driving force behind the enduring appeal of polygamy, where one man takes multiple wives, and it also contributes to Africa's high birth rate compared to other parts of the world.

In African Families, considering the fact that it is the woman who gets pregnant and 'carries the evidence of having intercourse', women are considered to be the ones at fault for lack of procreation.

The presence of children in a household is considered a source of happiness and is viewed as a form of 'intergenerational social security.' As a result, a childless marriage is often seen as an unhappy union by well-wishers. In African culture, a person's blessings are still often measured by the number of children they have, irrespective of their education, wealth, health, or well-being.

Not a father shared with two dozen other children or a husband shared with Funmi, but a child, my child. These thoughts filled me with so much happiness that I was gripped with fear.

The natural circumstance wherein a woman conceives and carries the baby for nine months before giving birth often leads to the perception that fertility is primarily the woman's responsibility. When married couples experience infertility, it can significantly impact their overall well-being, especially for women.

During Yejide's meeting with her in-laws, her mother-law 'commends' Yejide by saying;

I want to appreciate your efforts to make sure that our son leaves a child behind when he dies.

The reality however is that, without a reproductive intercourse between a man and a woman, a child cannot be born. A man's spermatozoa and a female egg is what forms a zygote, then a fetus and eventually a child.

However, the African society understands this biological fact, but still chooses to hold a woman responsible for both parties' failure.

At the end of it all was this stretch of happiness that was supposed to begin only after we had children and not a minute before.

The Impact of Being Barren in an African society.

Barren couples face substantial societal pressure and stigma, particularly in societies like Africa, which place significant importance on having children. Since women are perceived as responsible for giving birth, society often attributes barrenness to curses, bewitchment, past abortions, or questionable lifestyles. Consequently, infertility becomes a more burdensome and distressing experience for women. Unfortunately, regardless of their other contributions to society, women may be deemed worthless until they become mothers, leading to shame and stigmatization until they conceive.

The impact of stigmatizing women and terming them "Barren" includes:

a. Low self-esteem and Depression

As Auli Vahakangas (10) emphasizes, the use of extremely harsh language to describe women who do not conceive brings shame upon these stigmatized wives. In the African context, infertility becomes a concern that extends beyond the individual and affects the entire community. Consequently, experiencing barrenness can lead a woman to feel utterly worthless.

Self-esteem is often defined as valuing oneself highly and having a positive regard for one's worth. Unfortunately, women perceived as barren may suffer from low self-esteem, as they no longer view themselves as valuable. The discouragement and loss of trust in oneself and others become prevalent in such circumstances.

Scanzoni (51) points out that the community can play a pivotal role in damaging a person's self-esteem, particularly when individuals are singled out as the cause of misfortune within the family due to their inability to conceive a baby. The communal pressure and criticism can severely impact a woman's self-perception and overall well-being.

These women are forced to believe they are solely the one at fault for not being able to conceive a child and soon begin to become depressed, delusional and desperate to get a child at all costs.

After Kwadwo Forduo's first wife gives birth, Pokuwaa begins to reflect on a life on how she might be plagued by a curse

“If she herself had wronged anyone or if the sins of her parents or ancestors were being avenged on her, the deities could be besought to spare her the pain of not having a child of her own”

Also, her mother's reminder about how Pokuwaa's childlessness will make their lives miserable also contributed to the constant mental battles with herself.

b. Polygamy and Cheating

In an attempt to overcome the stigma associated with barrenness, women may be pressured to find solutions for their husbands to have children. There are unsubstantiated suspicions that certain family members might influence a man to have sexual relations with another woman, possibly a relative, in secret to bear children and avoid divorce or separation.

Habel (114) clearly illustrates this practice, stating that if a man was found to be infertile, a woman would be encouraged to have sexual relations with someone outside the marriage, preferably her husband's next of kin.

To conceive, Yejide was seduced by Akin's brother, Dotun, resulting in her getting impregnated by him three times. Although she never disclosed her actions with Akin's brothers to Akin, it became a recurring affair and eventually was discovered.

In cases where polygamy is seen as the solution to a childless marriage, it often leads to animosity, shaming, and jealousy between the wives.

When Kwadwo attempts to spend time with Pokuwaa for her rituals, she is already aware that his wife would never agree to him being with her.

“The talk with his wife had only resulted in a quarrel. She had protested vehemently against his spending all that week with Pokuwaa, saying that she would not sell her rights to any barren

woman. Kwadwo had left the house in anger. Even as he told his lie now, he was looking for shadows, fearing that his angry wife might rush in at any minute to make trouble”

Conclusion

The societal pressure and discriminatory attitudes towards childless women contribute to feelings of shame, worthlessness, and isolation. Traditional beliefs and cultural norms often perpetuate harmful stereotypes, leaving women vulnerable to mistreatment and strained relationships within their families and communities.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the pervasive stigma of barrenness in Africa, which profoundly impacts the lives of women and couples struggling with infertility.

CHAPTER 3

STIGMA OF BARRENNESS

Introduction

In African societies, the pervasive stigmatization of barren women constitutes an intricate issue with far-reaching consequences. Fueled by cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and socio-religious

ideologies, this stigmatization casts a shadow on the lives of countless women. The deeply ingrained notion that a woman's worth is inherently tied to her ability to bear children perpetuates a cycle of discrimination, marginalization, and emotional distress.

This chapter delves into the profound repercussions of stigmatizing barren women in African communities. This study also explores the potential strategies and interventions aimed at dismantling this harmful societal attitude, fostering empowerment, and promoting a more inclusive environment that values the diverse roles women play beyond motherhood.

Stigma

Stigma, as an essential concept in understanding the challenges faced by individuals and communities, can be traced back to ancient times. The Greeks, for example, defined stigma as "bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman, 1963, p.1). In contemporary scholarship, Erving Goffman (1963) provided a foundational definition of stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and noted that it creates a "special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype" (p.1).

Barren women can experience a sense of stigma influenced by the behavior of other women around them. Reports indicate that witnessing mothers flaunting their children can leave childless women feeling sorrowful and stigmatized.

In Brenhoma, Pokuwaa reflected that although children are attracted to her, their mothers always come to stop the children from playing with her. This shows how deeply rooted stigmatization is in society and how it fuels unnecessary problems.

Although, *“there was something between Pokuwaa and children. They would always come to her. But whatever she did for them their mothers always came and took them away”*

Kra Adwoa, the child's mother, goes so far as to physically reprimand the child for accepting food from Pokuwaa and speaks to her rudely.

Ways which by which Barren Women are Stigmatized

Isolation

Barren women can face isolation in various ways due to the stigma and societal pressures associated with infertility. This isolation can be both subtle and overt, impacting different aspects of their lives. One form of isolation is social exclusion. In societies where motherhood is highly valued, barren women may find themselves excluded from social gatherings, ceremonies, or events that revolve around children and family life. These situations can be emotionally distressing, leading them to avoid such gatherings altogether, furthering their sense of social isolation.

Furthermore, certain cultures and traditions within African society view a barren wife as an incomplete woman, reinforcing this perspective through the use of demeaning and insulting

proverbs. These proverbs not only undermine the emotions of these women but also highlight the insensitivity and humiliation they face due to their childlessness.

For instance, in Kenya, a saying goes, "The woman whose sons have died is richer than the barren woman," while in Burkina Faso, there is a proverb that states, "A barren woman should not scold a bad child." Similarly, a Swahili proverb asserts, 'A barren wife never gives thanks,' implying that she has no cause or joy to express gratitude, and a Kikuyu proverb echoes this sentiment, stating, 'The woman who has children does not desert her home.' These proverbs perpetuate the social pressure on childless women and contribute to the marginalization and belittlement they experience in African society.

Due to Pokuwaa's childlessness she feared that she *would be doomed to loneliness; no child to care for her, no grandchild to warm her compound and no issue of her blood at all to mourn at her death. She would be buried of course by the relatives and her brothers' children would be there, but there was nothing better than having your own children at your funeral.*

In some customs, whenever a barren woman dies after her husband, she is not laid to rest in her husband's land. It is believed that she is a stranger in such land with no possession. Her corpse is then sent back to her father's house where she will be buried. The mockery and ridicule barren women receive also involves the gossip, petty fights, confrontations and stigma from rivals, family members and the society.

Cultural events often emphasize fertility and family life. Barren women may feel left out or stigmatized during these events, adding to their sense of isolation. This exclusion can extend to their own families, where they may face constant questioning, advice, or even criticism, making them feel isolated even among their relatives.

Yejide, perceived as a barren woman, endured pressure and stigmatization from her husband's family members. Despite consistently showing respect towards her in-laws, they isolated and refused to check on her well-being. Instead, their interactions with her were solely centered around discussing her struggles with conceiving, mainly with Akin, her husband. Each time Yejide meets with Moomi, she is reminded of how patient Moomi has been about Yejide's conception challenges.

To resolve Yejide's problem, Akin is urged to marry Funmilayo as his second wife, and Yejide is compelled to embrace and accept Funmilayo. Unfortunately, Funmilayo perpetuates the gossip and stigma associated with Yejide during her visit to Yejide's salon.

“She went on her knees again. ‘I know people say you are barren, but there is nothing God cannot do. I know that once I conceive, your own womb too will be opened. If you say I should not come here, I will not come, but I want you to know that this bitterness can be one of the things causing the barrenness-ooo. Goodbye, Ma.’

Insensitive Demands

To cope with this challenging situation, barren women are demanded to subject themselves to both physical and spiritual examinations in search of a solution to their fertility issues. They are expected to consult pastors, spiritualists, and diviners in an effort to find remedies for their inability to bear children. The constant pressure on barren women to seek solutions wherever and whenever possible serves as a validation mechanism for society's expectations and beliefs. This relentless pursuit of help is seen as an acknowledgment of their worth in the eyes of others.

Yejide made an attempt to conceive a child on the "Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles," where she was asked to perform peculiar rituals such as dancing, cuddling a goat as if it were a baby, and even breastfeeding it. Despite her efforts, she eventually became pregnant, but unfortunately, it was diagnosed as an ectopic pregnancy.

During the initial stages of Yejide's struggle with infertility, her mother-in-law, Moomi, suggested a prayer and fasting session. However, Yejide was unable to maintain the regimen, which inadvertently gave the impression that she was not taking the matter seriously.

Moomi told me that before asking God to give me a child, I must ask for the grace to be able to suffer for that child. She said I wasn't ready to be a mother yet if I was fainting after three days of fasting.

The fear of falling, and not eventually birthing a child as everyone expects can instill more fears and worry in the woman.

Mbiti (133) points out that in African societies, divorce was sometimes considered a solution when a marriage failed to produce children. He further states that the concept of marriage and childbearing is deeply ingrained in many African cultures as a divine command or teaching from God (104). The unfortunate consequence is that instead of childbearing being a source of joy for the family, it becomes a burden that can contribute to domestic violence.

Alternatively, according to Kimathi, the frustration arising from a childless marriage leads the husband and wife to consider bringing another woman or girl into the family to bear children (83). In some cases, if an agreement cannot be reached, the husband's family may introduce a new wife for their son, forcing polygamy upon the barren woman. This practice further marginalizes and victimizes childless wives within their own families.

Funmilayo's introduction into the love life of Yejide and Akin was aimed at Akin getting a son as soon as possible, with little regard about how Yejide will feel about the new wife.

Our wife, our people say that when a man has a possession and it becomes two he does not become angry, right?' Baba Lola said.

I nodded and smiled.

'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 may answer your prayers because of this wife. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too,' Baba Lola said.

With no medical or concrete proof, the fact that the husband divorces his wife or takes a second wife already points to the woman as the root cause of the childlessness.

Blame and Shame

The blame and shame experienced by barren women in Africa are deeply rooted in cultural norms, societal expectations, and traditional beliefs, and these factors contribute to profound emotional and psychological consequences.

Considering that Motherhood is not just a personal aspiration but carries significant communal and familial expectations. Barrenness, unfortunately, is often perceived as a failure to fulfill these cultural and societal roles, leading to a profound sense of shame for women who find themselves unable to conceive.

Gender dynamics also play a critical role in the blame and shame directed at barren women.

Gender biases and stereotypes frequently result in women bearing the disproportionate burden of

responsibility for fertility and reproductive matters. This unequal distribution of blame can lead to criticism, blame, and even abandonment by spouses and in-laws, further intensifying the emotional distress experienced by barren women.

In *Stay with Me*, Yejide was constantly blamed, ridiculed and perceived to be the reason why She and Akin were unable to have a child. Even after Akin took Funmi as his second wife, and Yejide had a ‘pregnancy’, Funmi still made fun of Yejide, demanding for proof,

“Raise up your blouse and let me see your stomach. This pregnancy of yours is over a year old now. Let me see what is there, because we have heard the news all over town that it is a calabash you are carrying about under your cloth - yes, you have been exposed.” She laughed. ‘But you can prove them wrong, prove the evil people wrong. Let me see your stomach for myself and I will leave you in peace. I swear to God.’

Also, women who are unable to give birth to male children also suffer as much stigma as barren women. Considering the fact that lack of male discontinues the growth of a family, inability to give birth can sometimes be perceived to be an ‘unforgivable crime’.

Emotionally, the toll of infertility, coupled with blame and shame, can result in significant distress. Feelings of sadness, frustration, anxiety, and depression can become overwhelming, affecting both mental and emotional well-being.

Consequences of Stigmatizing barren women on the society

1. Lack of male accountability

Recognizing that infertility can arise from diverse sources, challenging the traditional African notion that exclusively attributes childbearing to women, undermines the prevalent tendency for men to place blame solely on women for a couple's inability to conceive. Despite the societal stigma and pressure faced by women, men often emerge unscathed, positioned as blameless figures immune to the accusations of childlessness.

This dynamic can unfortunately embolden some husbands to mistreat their wives, subjecting them to emotional and physical suffering. This perspective casts men as superior entities, immune to infertility, thereby relegating women to an inferior status.

Yejide bore the brunt of responsibility for Akin and her own inability to conceive. The pressure from her in-laws to become pregnant was unrelenting. In contrast, Akin found himself grappling with the idea of taking a second wife who could potentially bear children for him.

“For years, she didn’t talk about Juwon, and appeared to have lost interest in his life until she wanted me to marry another wife. Then she told me, as if I didn’t already know, that Juwon already had four children, all boys. This time she didn’t stop with Juwon but reminded me that all my half brothers now had children. After I’d been married to Yejide for two years, my mother began to show up in my office on the first Monday of every month. She didn’t come alone. Each time, she brought a new woman with her, a potential second wife.”

In due course, he takes Funmi as his second wife, yet she too remains without children.

Nevertheless, once Yejide eventually gives birth to a child, a confrontation with Funmi exposes the truth: Akin is not the father of the child considering the fact that he is suffering from erectile

dysfunction, and it is him, rather than Yejide, who is to blame for the lack of children in their marriage.

“Tell me,’ she said. ‘Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant? And don’t tell me again that it only happens when you are with me. I don’t believe that any more.” (Adebayo 229)

As conversations surrounding male infertility begin to become rampant, this might provoke a challenge on traditional notions. This can further encourage men to become more empathetic partners, fostering a deeper emotional connection with their spouses as they navigate the challenges of infertility together.

In conclusion, recognizing the role of men in matters of fertility can have a broader effect beyond personal relationships, shaping policies and healthcare approaches. As awareness grows regarding the joint responsibility for reproductive health, there is potential for the creation of holistic and all-encompassing reproductive healthcare initiatives that address the needs of both genders.

Consequently, this could result in enhanced availability of medical interventions, counseling services, and support systems for couples dealing with infertility in the society.

2. Infidelity and Endangering of children’s lives

Blaming women for their childlessness within the context of African societies can inadvertently contribute to an increase in promiscuity and marital unfaithfulness. Considering the immense psychological and social burden placed on barren women, in search of validation and a sense of purpose, some women might resort to seeking affirmation and acceptance outside of their marriages or relationships.

The lack of support or understanding from their communities and partners can lead some women to feel isolated and rejected. Seeking solace and affirmation elsewhere, they might become more susceptible to engaging in promiscuous behavior as a form of rebellion against societal norms or to fill the void left by the absence of their desired motherhood role.

In one of Yejide's encounters on *Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory* which Mrs Adeolu, a pregnant customer had recommended, she witnesses the pregnant Mrs Adeolu having sex with the prophet.

That was when I found the shed – it was made from four wooden posts arranged to form a rough rectangle, and palm fronds covered it at the top. In the shed, 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. (Adebayo 73)

As women experience the weight of societal expectations to become mothers, their self-worth becomes linked to their ability to conceive. Consequently, the inability to fulfill this expectation can drive some women to engage in risky behaviors, including promiscuity, as a way to seek validation and reaffirm their desirability in the society.

The emotional toll of being stigmatized as "barren" can push individuals to pursue temporary relationships or even extramarital affairs in an attempt to regain a sense of agency over their bodies and their identities.

Under the weight of pressure on Yejide, along with the attentiveness she receives from Dotun, her husband's brother, she sleeps with him on multiple occasions. As a result, all three children she delivers are fathered by Dotun.

Unfortunately, a complication arises due to Yejide's AS genotype conflicting with Dotun's AS genotype, leading all of their children to inherit the sickle cell trait, causing the unfortunate demise of the initial two offspring. Following the loss of her first infant, Olamide, Yejide becomes pregnant once again by Dotun and gives birth to Sesan, yet another SS child who tragically passes away during toddlerhood.

The significance of addressing the stigma surrounding infertility holds importance not only for the well-being of individual women but also for the overall welfare of African societies, as it contributes to the establishment of more comprehensive and supportive communities.

3. Marriage failure and divorce

In many African societies, the widespread practice of attributing blame to women for their inability to conceive and bear children can have profound and far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the individual to impact the foundation of marriage and societal cohesion. This stigmatization, deeply rooted in cultural expectations and traditional beliefs, can create a chain reaction of negative effects that strain marriages and, in some cases, lead to divorce.

In Northern Ghana for instance, it is customary for the families of both the bride and groom to expect the announcement of an expected baby within a year of marriage and any delay in the signs of pregnancy by the woman is unacceptable.

In cases like this where fertility is singularly attributed to the woman and she turns out to be 'barren', she may internalize feelings of inadequacy and failure, and these emotions can strain the relationship between spouses.

In Cameroon, infertility is a reason for divorce among the Bangangte tribe

The pressure to conform to these established norms of motherhood can drive a wedge between partners, engendering conflict and emotional detachment. From lack of communication, to quarrels and eventually full blown disagreements. Sometimes, a partner's obsession over getting a child can be responsible for the failure of their marriage.

Coupled with the pressure from her mother and Pokuwaa's desire to have a child, she abandoned her first husband, Kofi Dafo. After three years of being childless with her second husband, Kwaku Fosu, she also divorced him even though "she was fond of him". Her mother had pressured her to pick up quarrels with him and eventually divorced him.

Her mother used to come and say, 'You see, my child, you should have children. You are my only daughter, and unless you have a child our lives will end miserably.' 'But mother, what can I do?' 'You have been married to Kwaku Fosu for nearly three years. There is no sign of a child. Will you still stick to him?'

(Konadu 18)

After suffering the stigma of being barren and the death of two children in fifteen years, Yejide, abandons her child with her husband, Akin and leaves him without notice.

Under the burden of societal pressure, support systems, often crucial to maintaining a strong marital bond, can crumble under the weight of societal judgment. Blaming a woman for her infertility drives a wedge between the couple, exacerbating the marital strain caused by societal expectations.

In the long run, a once happy home is broken down due to societal pressures and eventually the rate of divorcees keeps increasing.

Ways to Eradicate the Stigma and Pressures of Barrenness

1. Pastoral teachings and the church being a citadel

The religious institutions hold a significant platform within its pastoral teachings to underscore a pivotal message. The urgency arises for a substantial portion of our population, particularly those in rural areas, to develop a comprehensive understanding that our Constitution is fundamentally committed to safeguarding women's equality as partners alongside men in all aspects of life. This crucial insight possesses the potential to rectify prevalent misunderstandings linked to barrenness.

While Kimathi (81) posits that infertility could emanate from either male or female factors, it becomes incumbent upon religious leaders to collaborate with communities in order to counter narratives such as those put forth by Kimathi who confines a woman's worth solely to her ability to bear children.

Firstly, by leveraging community-based religious interventions, religious leaders are presented with a chance to disseminate the notion, especially during conferences and gatherings, that a woman's identity should not be solely confined to motherhood.

The church has, over time, absorbed unfavorable cultural notions regarding women, it should proactively advocate for the abandonment of such ideas. Moreover, the church should guide men to regard women (particularly their wives) as equals, companions, and friends (Imbiza 12).

While certain Bible verses, such as 1 Corinthians 11:3 ("But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.")

and Ephesians 5:23 ("For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior."), have been misinterpreted to reinforce the husband's supremacy over his wife. The Christian church shoulders the responsibility of rectifying this misguided perspective on women's subordination and addressing the prevalent misconceptions related to barrenness.

Another misconception that often arises from erroneously interpreting God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" as a prerequisite for marriage, which it is not. If we consider children as divine blessings, as articulated by Imbiza (40), "When the marital act is no longer solely intended for procreation, the purpose of marriage is redefined and ceases to be the cornerstone of society."

The church's involvement is justified given that marriage, initiated by God, coincides with the church's overarching authority. When God established the first marriage in Genesis, it was not without certain stipulations.

The church should underscore that children are indeed gifts from God. These teachings should be seamlessly integrated into premarital counseling and family gatherings. Women should be reminded that despite their inherent ability to conceive, it is God who bestows the capacity to bring life into the world.

While it is crucial for pastors to communicate that procreation is a facet of God's plan, it is equally imperative to avoid asserting that one "must bear children." It is more prudent to guide individuals towards an understanding that a marriage remains complete and valid even in the absence of children. The church's pastoral initiatives must steadfastly challenge the stereotype of women as mere child-bearers. This stereotype, rooted in patriarchal constructs, requires active

male involvement for its transformation. Pastors across denominations must collaborate to educate men, rectifying inaccurate perceptions of barrenness.

Secondly, the church must endeavor to become a refuge and a beacon of hope for women who find themselves shunned by their families and communities. The church should unhesitatingly strive to contribute to the healing of these marginalized barren women. This process can be facilitated through counseling and prayer. It is reasonable that after fulfilling their pastoral roles, pastors should refer individuals to specialists such as nurses, physicians, and social workers to offer comprehensive assistance to stigmatized women.

Furthermore, the church should actively seek ways to provide support to abused women affected by this practice. Practical theology must directly address the predicament of barren women, helping them overcome the sense of inferiority often exacerbated by the unfounded belief that they are responsible for their childlessness. A pivotal aspect of the church's responsibility is to aid these women in reclaiming their self-esteem, dignity, and respect within their marriages, families, and communities.

2. Healthcare policies and Medical checkups:

It is popularly believed that a stigma cannot be eradicated through silence therefore to address infertility without subjecting those affected to shame, it is imperative to enhance healthcare policies.

Firstly, healthcare providers can play a crucial role by conducting tests and medical assessments to uncover the underlying issues that perpetuate the misconception of men being perpetually fertile while labeling women as infertile. Furthermore, these professionals can impart knowledge

about the biological factors contributing to infertility as well as the array of available treatment choices.

To ensure a proper approach, individuals should initially seek consultation with medical experts and undergo tests before any unfounded accusations are made. This would however reduce the pressure being mounted on women to give birth to children. Instead, the responsibility will be shared between the husband and his wife.

Secondly, a collaborative effort among healthcare practitioners, communities, and educational institutions can prove valuable in disseminating health-related information about alternative avenues for parenthood, such as adoption and surrogacy.

Thirdly, integrating comprehensive sexual education into school curricula is essential. This would equip young people with awareness about preventing sexually transmitted infections and understanding that both men and women can experience infertility due to genetic and infectious factors.

3. Public awareness and Education

By challenging the stigma surrounding barrenness, we can foster a more compassionate and inclusive society where every woman is valued for her worth beyond her ability to bear children. It is our collective responsibility to create an environment of understanding and acceptance, empowering women to embrace their identities, regardless of their reproductive capabilities, and fostering a more compassionate and inclusive society for all.

Firstly, education and the dissemination of accurate information serve as foundational pillars. By offering comprehensive insights into the basics of infertility, its root causes, and the spectrum of available treatments, public education campaigns, workshops, and seminars can debunk prevailing myths and foster a more informed societal perspective.

Furthermore, the inclusion of role models who have triumphed over infertility challenges can instill hope and reshape perceptions. Sharing stories of women who have navigated their journey through barrenness to fulfillment underscores the universality of the issue while highlighting the potential for life satisfaction regardless of reproductive circumstances.

Secondly, media representation also bears significant influence. Partnering with media outlets to depict infertility with sensitivity and precision can contribute to unraveling stereotypes.

Television programs, documentaries, and news features that sensitively illuminate the experiences of barren women can kindle empathy and amplify understanding from people in the society.

Incorporating discussions about fertility, infertility, and family planning into educational curricula is equally significant. Nurturing empathy and a nuanced perspective from a young age equips the next generation with the tools to address these issues compassionately. Over time, society will gradually adjust to the new way of life, leading to the eventual elimination of the stigma attached to barren women.

Most importantly, legal measures also contribute to societal change. Striving for legal safeguards against discrimination based on reproductive status reinforces the movement to reshape perceptions and promote equitable treatment.

Within the Ekiti community of southwestern Nigeria, it is said that barren women are marginalized, finding themselves treated as social outcasts, and their bodies are interred on the outskirts of the town alongside those of individuals facing mental health challenges.

If legal restraints are placed on such communities, discrimination and unfair treatment of childless women will be stopped.

In essence, dismantling the stigma surrounding barren women necessitates a comprehensive approach that blends education, empathy, narrative sharing, and collaboration between various stakeholders. The combined efforts of individuals, communities, legal practitioners and policymakers are essential in steering society toward a more inclusive and empathetic outlook.

Conclusion

The research presented underscores the damaging consequences of such societal attitudes, which not only impact the emotional and mental well-being of affected individuals but also perpetuate a cycle of ignorance and discrimination.

However, amidst these challenges, fostering public awareness, promoting education, and advocating for inclusive policies, society can actively work towards dismantling the barriers of stigma and ushering in an era of empathy, understanding, and equality

Embracing these solutions signifies not only a transformative change in the lives of barren women but a pivotal step towards a more compassionate and harmonious society.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The examination of the stigma in A Woman in Her Prime by Asare Konadu and Stay With Me by Ayobami Adebayo has shed light on the pervasive and damaging stigma attached to barrenness in African society. Through these novels, we have revealed aspects of this issue, ranging from societal expectations, gender dynamics, emotional distress, and even the far-reaching consequences that exist within communities and families.

In this work, we revealed that the stigma of barrenness, which is deeply entrenched in African culture, not only exposes the unequal power dynamics between men and women but also underscores the importance of challenging societal norms that perpetuate such harmful beliefs. A chapter in this work highlights how women who do not bear children are often unfairly labeled as incomplete, which not only diminishes their worth but also fuels psychological distress. The inequitable distribution of blame, disproportionately placing the burden on women, while absolving men of responsibility, further intensifies the emotional toll on these women.

Furthermore, this research explores the far-reaching effects of this stigma on women's mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being. The pressure to conceive and the social expectation to exhaust every avenue for fertility treatment contribute to a cycle of despair and self-doubt. The consequence of these pressures is often a decline in mental health, with depression becoming an all-too-common companion for women grappling with the emotional weight of societal judgment.

Also, this research has uncovered a ripple effect on relationships and marriages. The stigma of barrenness, by fostering an environment of secrecy, mistrust, and insecurity, can inadvertently encourage infidelity and polygamy as desperate attempts to salvage perceived child bearing failures. This not only leads to broken relationships but also increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections and terminal diseases. In the long run, it also destabilizes the fabric of families and communities.

In addition, the work also points to potential avenues for change. Pastoral teachings have the power to transform mindsets and provide a platform for healthy discussions around barrenness, enabling society to shift from a culture of shame to one of empathy and support. In parallel, healthcare policies need to be reimagined to address infertility and barrenness, providing accessible medical solutions and comprehensive mental health support for affected women and couples. Education also tends to be a formidable weapon in dismantling the stigma. By imparting knowledge about the biological, psychological, and societal factors that contribute to fertility challenges, education can dispel myths, foster understanding, and promote empathy. Education can also empower women to stand up against discrimination and reshape their own narratives, breaking free from the oppressive cycle of shame.

In conclusion, the stigma of barrenness, as stated earlier and depicted in the novels, is a deeply rooted issue in African society. However, through collective effort, open dialogue, and systemic change, we can work towards a future where barren women are supported, valued, and empowered to rewrite their own stories. Only through these concerted efforts can we hope to dissolve the chains of stigma and build a more equitable and compassionate society for women and everyone.

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