Gendered Power and Identity in Postcolonial Africa: An Analysis of Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me*

Vanessa Aizenosa Eke-Kola [1*], Peace Ayonkia Igah [2], Dorcas Oluwakemi Akinbo [3], David Opeyemi Adebayo [4]
[1] University of Benin, Department of English and Literature, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
[2] University of Calabar, Department of Arts Education (Education/English), Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
[3] Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, École d'Histoire de la Sorbonne, Paris, France
[4] Adekunle Ajasin University, Department of English and Literary Studies, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author: **Vanessa Aizenosa Eke-Kola**

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Abstract
This essay explores negotiation of power, gender, and identity in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s novel *Stay With Me* using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Set against the political turmoil of 1980s Nigeria, the novel negotiates the complex skein of gender roles in the socio-political and economic sphere.
Using the lives of Yejide and Akin, Adébáyọ̀ investigates how the performance of gender identity is constructed by society, economy, and family. The research demonstrates how gender roles are not born but enacted via the enactment of acts that constitute social norms, a demonstration of the performative nature and fluidity of gender. By establishing how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, and political power, the research reveals how intersecting categories create the characters' experience.
Precisely, it situates the way women's lives are commodified and put under their reproductive activities, controlled by patriarchal structures. The study further examines the women's emotional work and psychological labor in their experience of patriarchal relationships as they illustrate how their freedom is restricted by economic dependence and social roles. Lastly, *Stay With Me* also criticizes the colonial legacy and continuation of gender inequality in postcolonial African society. In the novel, there are informative explanations of turning the current gender roles upside down and searching for change at both personal and societal levels, where the performativity power in gender identity construction is evidenced.

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Introduction

Gender, power, and identity in modern African literature, including Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me*, is the paradigm that best accounts for societal normalcy and the struggle of the individual within postcolonial states. Adébáyọ̀ situating the book in the Nigerian social field closely investigates the dynamics on the terrain of women's space, power negotiation, and individual and collective construction of the sense of self in the rich politico-social environment. Gender in its intersection with identity and power has become increasingly the subject of academic concern, particularly within African scholarship, where there is a traditional perception of tradition, colonial construction, and modern understanding of sense of self (Umezurike, 2021) [35]. Adébáyọ̀ informs us in *Stay With Me* how social pressure dictates the roles of women, revealing cultural tradition to individual desire. The subject whose gender and sense of self are made possible by politico-societal realities provides us a language of resistance and accommodation.

In challenging the intersectionality of women's role with the powers that be structures, Adébáyọ̀ overturns the laws which imprison women, in fact men as well, into fixed destinies. This desire for performativity by which, as theorized by Judith Butler, the sense of gender is considered a thought rather than an accreted trait is something which becomes a naturalized characteristic (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. Through the personality, the novel demarcates how such sense correspondences with the genders are not rigid but are the practice of repeat performance with the integration with society. Butler's performativity theory of gender has continued to be at the forefront of gender role fluidity, particularly in postcolonial African literature. Gender to them is not identification but a chain of performance as dictated by society (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. Adébáyọ's protagonists, similar to postcolonial African literature, grapple with these gender constructions and attempt to subvert them along the way to create new identifications. *Stay With Me* so strongly demonstrates the tension with which its maidens are courageous enough to inhabit a world that tells them how to perform its constructions of the genders (Adebayo, 2017) [1]. It is a good sample with which to note how the gender might be employed today by the modern African storyteller of stories towards subversion of power relations into legitimation that the gender is not so much an issue of personal identification but an issue with inter-subjective relations and the practice of power.

Furthermore, Adébáyọ̀'s intersectionality of power and gender in her writing reflects overall tendencies in African literature, whereby colonialism's influence continues to articulate power and gender within society. Colonialism's introduction of autochthonous gender systems upset indigenous views of gender building and compressed reorganization of roles in society (Said, 2022) [31]. Adébáyọ̀'s novel, and other postcolonial writing, opposes this legacy insofar as it discusses the extent to which these transposed arrangements continue in the post colony. Women, perhaps above all but especially, but the book's main characters more generally, struggle labor with the vestiges of colonial domination and the sexual relations colonialism left behind, re-arranged, and formally institutionalized postcolonial states and civil society institutions.

Another characteristic hallmark of the novel *Stay With Me* is the intersectionality between gender and other identificatory categories, including class, ethnicity, and politics. The intersectionality theory of Kimberly Crenshaw, which describes how the many vectors of identification (gender, race, class) intersect to create the lived experience for the subject, can be utilized in the analysis of the socio-politico dynamics of the novel by Adébáyọ̀ (Crenshaw, 2017) [10]. The power relations among the characters in the novel show how identification as or ascription to gender cannot be contained within a compartment but needs to draw from the other bases of oppression like political corruption and social injustice. With these forces thereby intersecting, the binarism of opposition between the masculine and the feminine gets conquered by something much subtler and sensitive between the power Americanization (Collins, 2020) [8].

The postcolonial setting under which *Stay With Me* is also being read raises the manner in which gender identity has been politicized and commodified in contemporary African societies. The legacy, and impact, of colonialism on gender roles has been argued ad infinitum by postcolonial theory writers such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, both of whom argue that colonial occupation was as much a psychological and cultural as political and economic endeavor (Said, 2022; Fanon, 2020) [31, 14]. Adébáyọ̀, and these theorists, performs a world in which the political and the personal must always be entwined, and in which gender performance is inevitably intertwined with social and political institutions that organize lives. The gendered life of her characters, and of women in general, grapples with the legacy of colonial patriarchy, and insists on the erasure of current gender inequalities. Also, on shift is queer theory popularity, which is also gaining popularity in reading African literature as a central paradigm on how gender and sexuality are negotiated and fluid. Queer texts, particularly those built on same-sex desire or non-binary sexualities, provide a way of subverting the heteronormative presuppositions that overdetermine gender's discourse.

In *Stay With Me*, the avoidance of the direct confrontation with queerness, the negotiation of gendered expectation and non-compliance offers a subterranean critique of the binary, heteronormative norms that relentlessly organize society's presuppositions (Dibia, 2020) [13]. In so doing, the book constitutes itself as part of the emergent corpus of African texts that break up the strict lines of the masculinity and the femininity, challenging the reader to interrogate the social-constructed fictions of power and gender.

Finally, Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me* is an interesting work for the deconstruction of the constructions of power, gender, and identity in postcolonial Africa. Through the statistical Application by the Butlerian theory, where the operation of performativity and the practiced functioning of the intersectionality theory are enabled, the present work would denounce the social, political, and historical forces or layers that determine the gendered identities of human beings. Adébáyọ's book disassembles traditional perceptions of masculinity and gender, providing a clear articulation of how the gender construct is performed, interrogated, and reiterated in present-day Nigerian society. By this, the present study will be adding to research on gender in black literature, providing crucial information on how sense of gender identity is continually constructed and deconstructed against the backdrop of politics and civil unrest.

Research Objectives

- In exploring the gender, power, and identity constructs of Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me* based on the gender performativity and intersectionality theory.
- To explore how Adébáyọ̀'s characters perform their gender identities in Nigerian socio-political realities.
- To contribute to gender studies through examining how sexual identities and gender roles are performed, resisted, and transformed in African literature.

Methodology

The research is guided by a qualitative approach, and it uses literary theory interpretation in reading Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me* based on gender, power, and identity. The approach enables close reading of how gender is constructed in the novel with particular focus on character relations in family structures, societal expectations, and politics. Close reading illustrates that gender in the novel is not biological or essentialist but performed and constructed on an ongoing basis through experiences and actions of the characters.

At the forefront of analysis is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) that posits that gender is not a natural

identity but a continuous performance following societal expectations (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. This theory is employed to discover how the characters perform, conform to, resist, or negotiate their gender roles as a response to the pressures and norms from the outside environment. With the exclusive focus on performativity, the study brings to bear the fluid and constructed nature of gender rather than fixed identities.

Using this theoretical framework, the study looks into the dynamic construction of gender identity and how it is performed in a postcolonial Nigerian context. The methodology allows for close examination of how power relations construct gendered identity and gendered roles in the novel and how these performances reflect broader socio-political conditions.

The focused strategy offers important perspectives on the intersection of gender and power in contemporary African literature while contributing meaningfully to ongoing debates in gender studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory. The study finally augments the critical appreciation of *Stay With Me*, noting the performativity of gender against the backdrop of Nigeria's turbulent social and political life.

Related Literature

This study analyzes the theoretical underpinnings of gender roles, identity, and performance in postcolonial African literature. Feminist theory has been applied in this chapter as the primary framework in examining gender issues. Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity Theory*, which departs from the usual assumptions of gender as an essential identity is used. Gender, in Butler's view, is not an innate quality but rather a performance and is reconstituted in repetition by language, behaviour, and social norms. This theory dissolves binary constructions of gender and provides room for a more comprehensive explication of gender fluidity, particularly in postcolonial African societies wherein gender roles are rigidly constructed both by the colonial experience and the existing patriarchal structures.

Gender Performativity Theory

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity shows that gender does not exist as a fixed identity because it resists the way that society portrays gender. Social performance of acts of gender leads to the creation and ongoing reconstruction of gender identity as argued by Butler (2020) [8]. The acts create the foundation of gender existence instead of exhibiting natural gender traits (Butler J. , 2020) [8]. The approach negates essentialist interpretations of gender based on McCall (1992) [20] who depicts the way that culture norms create fluid gender patterns instead of fixed identities (McCall, 1992) [20]. The introduction process of gender per Butler (1990) [6] operates as a machine that runs in circles and makes social norms rule it by repetitive actions talked and performed on an ongoing basis (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. Following this, Butler (2004) also opposes the binary conception of gender as confining individuals into rigid male and female boxes. Gender, to them, is performative and negotiated constantly in view of historical and cultural backgrounds (Butler J. , 2004) [7]. This is in accordance with the positions of scholars like Butler (1990), who argue that gender identities are not determined naturally but by societal and cultural forces that universalize them into normative roles (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. Butler's theory also has very serious implications, particularly for queer and feminist theory, in that it demands a broader and expansive understanding of gender than the historically entrenched binary models. Butler is against the traditional binary gender system since it forces one to stick to strict male or female roles. In their view gender is a performative act whose constant negotiation it requires because cultural and historical conditions dictate its definition (Butler J. , 2004) [7]. The study confirms Butler's view that society and cultural forces condition gender identities by their establishment of normative roles as compared to biological factors as held by Butler (2024). The theory of Butler generates multiple important effects which affect both feminist and queer theory because it requires scientists to study gender outside of traditional binary classifications.

In their earlier works Butler (1990) [6] emphasized that power functions as the key factor which dictates how people perform their gender roles (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. People establish their gender identity through social standards which they adopt from their surroundings. The concept of performativity remains connected to power systems which control gender identity, according to Farhadytooli (2015) because social approval and repeated actions serve as necessary components for gender identity construction (Farhadytooli, 2021) [15]. Oakley (1972) [25] along with other scholars examine Butler's power theory to show how gender functions as a social control system through institutionalized rules which define social acceptability (Oakley., 1972) [25].

According to Butler (1990) [6] gender is destablised when people break away from gender rules through their defiance of standard gender expectations. The resistance shows how gender functions as a performance (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. The ones who defy such norms resist the systems that generate gender discrimination while they create new forms of themselves beyond given gender roles. Butler's theory also intersects with intersectionality since gender identity is not only gender-norm knowledge but also other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality. Butler (1990) [6] speculates that gender is performed within these intersecting categories, which define how gender identities are viewed and lived (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. This is further argued by scholars such as Silva (2020) [32], who point out that gender identity cannot be studied in isolation but has to be examined alongside other social cleavages that cut across and shape the lives of individuals (Silva, 2020) [32]. The intersectional perspective shows how gender identity is not just a gender issue but has power and inequality that is shaped by much broader social systems. Aside from intersectionality and power, Butler's theory also revolves around language as an element in the formation of gender. According to Butler (1990) [6], the role of language is most important in doing gender in the sense that it is through language that gender norms are done and controlled (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. This assertion stems from the argument of Floyd (2020) [16], which describes how gender identity is done and constructed through language processes, and how this also relates to the experience of the individual based on their gender (Floyd, 2020) [16]. Gender is not merely a biological or individual trait but a performative expressed and done by action and speech. The performativity conception of gender also deconstructs the binary framework, because it creates the possibility of more than two, non-traditional performances of gender that deconstruct customary linguistic and behavioral conventions (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. Performativity theory developed by Butler also deconstructs the conception of a stable, cohesive self. Instead, Butler, (1990) [6] points out that the self is not an ontologically determinate, pre-existing entity but is constructed repeatedly

through the performance of gender. In this view, it confirms Morgenroth's (2020) [22] argument that identity is fluid and re-defined by social performances and engagements. Given that gender is performed through a series of actions, it is re-produced as an unknowable and fluid notion that is mediated by the cultural beliefs about it (Morgenroth, 2018; Morgenroth, Thekla et al., 2021) [21-22]. This perspective is counter to the conventional constructions of identity and new possibilities are created for thinking about the multiplicity and fluidity of gendered experience. The performativity theory of gender engenders some risky outcomes which affect queer and feminist political movements. The Butler theory is a necessary tool to interpret the manner in which gender expectations within society function and change through performance. Morgenroth, (2018) [21] explains how Butler's theory enables people and social groups to subvert normal gender norms as they construct new gender identities that exhibit the whole range of human living (Morgenroth, 2018) [21]. The political outcomes become evident since this mode enables the production of spaces which enable inclusive gender change with equal access to all. Judith Butler created their Gender Performativity Theory in order to subvert traditional assumptions regarding gender while proving that gender exists as a socially constructed form which has no definitive definitions. By proving gender performance Butler shows how gender exists beyond male-female dichotomies, which allow the production of numerous diverse gender identities. The theory demonstrates how power relations as well as language intersectional and systems elements constitute gender identities as they establish one framework through which to study gender disparity and oppose traditional gender roles. Butler's theory continues to energize feminist and queer movements that aim to subvert gender oppression and allow social change (Butler J. , 1990) [6].

Gender Identity and Roles in Postcolonial African Literature

Postcolonial African fiction has been leading the way in reconfiguring social norms and interpretation of gender roles for postcolonial critics in African societies. The work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jude Dibia, and Chinua Achebe has individually led to the deconstruction of old-fashioned gender norms. Gender fluidity, masculinity, and femininity, in relation to postcolonial identity ambiguity, are covered by the writers. Crenshaw's intersectionality theory which explains how gender intersects with race and class to construct new experiences of oppression is a most pursued approach in gender identity research in African literature (Crenshaw, 2017) [10]. Authors like Adichie and Achebe show how the intersecting categories construct gender roles, especially in the postcolonial context (Bonvillain, 2016) [5].

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie offers a powerful analysis of gender roles in the figure of Kambili, a young Nigerian girl who has to find her way through the oppressive systems of her society and family. The novel provides a dynamic of changing relations between Kambili and her father, Eugene, a man whose authoritarianism is representative of traditional gender norms of power and control. Kambili's eventual personal growth symbolizes a challenge to the rigid gender roles imposed by both family and society (Adekeye, 2023; Oladipo, 2015) [2, 28]. This can be seen in her transformation from a submissive girl to a woman who reclaims her voice and identity. As Dhamoon (2020) [12] discusses, this transformation defies normative constructions of gender and championing women's autonomy, offering a critique of patriarchal society in African societies (Dhamoon, 2020) [12]. Adichie's focus on gender roles is not only women but also the ways in which men, like Eugene, are constrained by societal constructions of masculinity, and how this then leads to them imploding morally
and psychologically.

Similarly, Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* challenges traditional constructions of masculinity with the character of Adrian, a gay male attempting to navigate the expectations of heteronormative Nigerian society. Dibia's portrayal of Adrian resists homosexual male stereotypes instead presenting a complex human with emotional depth and vulnerability. The novel documents the postcolonial African context contradictions of gender identity, where gender fluidity is fought against cultural expectations and legal regulation (Dibia, 2020) [13]. Adrian's dilemma illustrates the need for a broad vision of gender and sexuality in African literature, provoking readers to ask themselves what it is to be a man in a world that insists on conforming to rigid gender roles.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* also raises questions about gender roles, and that too largely through the character of Okonkwo, who embodies traditional concepts of masculinity. Okonkwo's insistence on the rigid male-female role dichotomy leads to his own tragic downfall because he is unable to synthesize his internal vulnerabilities and the outside pressure of conforming to hegemonic masculinity (Löfstedt, 2008; Kalahari, 2025) [19, 17]. The novel's portrayal of Okonkwo's relationship with women, his wives and daughter, captures the way gender roles are not only socially constructed but also reproduced by cultural and political institutions of Igbo society. As Singh, (2020) [33] argues, Achebe's novel criticizes how the colonial experience complicated gender norms and tensions that emerged between pre-colonial and colonial masculinity. Okonkwo's failure is a criticism of the harm that rigid gender categories inflict (Singh, 2020) [33].

Further, postcolonial African literature also has a tendency to explore the intersection of gender with race, class, and ethnicity, which allows for an appreciation of identity's complexity in an evolving world. African literature in Bonvillain's definition, always defines gender as multifaceted and fluid, reversing patriarchal and colonial discourses that have long silenced women throughout history (Bonvillain, 2016) [5]. Such intersectional positioning can be experienced in novels such as Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun, which experiments with the effects of war, class, and gender on Nigerian women during the Biafran War. Adichie depicts women who reverse gender norms commonly found in Olanna and Kainene, who navigate their complicit social positions with agency and strength, showing that gender is not monolithic or essential but intersectional and socially and politically constructed.

Specifically, Dibia and Okparanta provide a critical analysis of gender fluidity and non-normative sexualities. In *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta narrates the life of Ijeoma, a young woman as she learns to accept homosexuality in a patriarchal society. Through Ijeoma's narrative, Okparanta condemns the homophobia institutionally entrenched in Nigerian society and the violence habitually doled out to individuals who violate customary gender and sexual roles. Okparanta's presentation of queer subjects' family acceptance, and the acceptance of the family by Ijeoma's mother of her sexuality, is a deviation from the way African

literature has been able to present gender ambiguity and sexual diversity so far. This has been seen as a move in the right direction for African literary studies, in which queer lives have been erased or pushed to the periphery. Ojiakor counters that the writing of Okparanta serves to redefine Nigerian literature's gender construct in the direction of nonheteronormative frames towards a better explanation of a wider array of human identity (Okparanta, 2015; Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2024; Ojiakor, 2024) [27, 11, 26]. Postcolonial African literature in general is rich to access on the issues of gender identity politics, fluidity, and doing femininity and masculinity. Such authors as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jude Dibia, and Chinua Achebe are also building postcolonial African gender roles discourse and using their writings to unsettle hegemonic norms and to consider the intersection of gender with other markers. By their writing on the performativity and fluidity of femininity and masculinity, these authors offer a critical framework for approaching postcolonial African complexity with regards to questions of identity, requiring a longer and more complicated struggle with gender and sexuality (Nwachukwu, 2015) [24].

Feminist and Postcolonial Theory in African Literature

Postcolonial and feminist theories have been pivotal in theorizing discourse on gender roles in African literature. In postcolonial African societies, power relations between genders are greatly influenced by both the colonial experience and patriarchal forms. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler believe that gender is not just a biological or natural aspect but one constructed through actions subject to relations of power (Butler J. , 1990) [6]. In African literature, the mentioned theories meet with postcolonial theory, which examines how legacies of colonialism continue to shape gender relations and roles (Strazzeri, 2024) [34]. The novels of such authors as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀, and Tsitsi Dangarembga present sophisticated accounts of the way in which these inheritances shape the lives of women and men in contemporary African societies. *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a touchstone for the coming together of feminist and postcolonial theory within African literature. Adichie in her depiction of Kambili theorises the psychological and emotional impact of patriarchal authoritarianism and domination at the level of the family, a representation of the prevailing social order of Nigerian society (Bartels, 2020) [3]. Chandran comments that Kambili's evolution from silence and conformism to self-actualization is a representation of a critique of dominating structures that thwart the agency of girls and women (Lawal, 2024) [18]. The novel examines not just the gender relations of a colonial context but also its individual and social effects on such power onesupremacies. By showing the development of Ndubuoke's change, Adichie examines not only the colonial and patriarchal agendas that construct and circumscribe Ndubuoke's feminine identity but also what these may entail in postcolonial Nigerian society.

Likewise, in *A Spell of Good Things*, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ uses feminist and postcolonial frameworks to explore the intricacies of gender relationships among Nigerians society reproduced. The heroine of the novel, Eniola, experiences a gendered world organized by gendered expectations based on colonial and postcolonial histories. Adébáyọ̀'s portrayal of Eniola's engagement with the father and the men surrounding her life reveals the ongoing legacies of patriarchy in organizing women's lives. To the limit of the argument of Bizimungu (2024) [4], Adébáyọ̀ objectifies colonial imposition of gender norms and examines how colonial legacies limit the agency and empowerment of women (Bizimungu, 2024) [4]. Eniola's struggle to secure autonomy in a patriarchal world is a reflection of intersectionality across gender, class, and colonial history, since her class and economic standing are foisted upon her social location as a woman. Postcolonial feminist scholarship also grapples with the manner in which the histories of colonization disrupted traditional African gender norms, imprinting Western patriarchal order. This is observable in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, where the intersection of colonialism, gender, and race from the lives of the protagonist, Tambudzai. Dangarembga critiques the manner colonialism reorganized gender roles in Zimbabwean society as secondary to men, both during colonial rule and postcolonial rule.

For Moyana, R., the novel portrays the internalized oppression of women, both by colonial and patriarchal ideologies. Tambudzai's journey of self-discovery, which includes questioning the social constructs around her gender and race, highlights how postcolonial literature uses feminist theory in a bid to overcome the residual traces of colonial power that continue to define women's roles (Moyana, 2011) [23]. Intersection of race and gender in postcolonial African literature is also crucial in grasping the subtle depiction of gender roles. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw (2017) [10] understands it, serves as a critical framework with which the intersection of race, gender, and other social categories cross over and produce discrete experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 2017) [10]. In *A Spell of Good Things*, Adébáyọ̀ integrates such a conception of intersectionality within her work, as characters such as Eniola exist in a world where both gender and class intersect to impact their social mobility. Osmani's treatment of gender dynamics in the Nigerian context is informed by the colonial history that constructed and reinforced rigid gender roles, often relegating women to the private sphere while limiting their agency in public and political life (Osmani, 2019) [29]. The portrayal of gender roles in the novel is thus a rebuke of the colonial and postcolonial patriarchal structures that still shape women's identity and their societal roles. Feminist and postcolonial feminist readings of African literature also observe how women in African cultures have negotiated and violated the roles which they have been assigned. Bizimungu says African feminist novels like those by Adichie, Dangarembga, and Adébáyọ̀ creates room for imagining gender and goes against colonial and patriarchal injunctions (Bizimungu, 2024) [4]. The power of the female heroines, for instance, Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* and Tambudzai in *Nervous Conditions*, is symbolic of a bigger battle for gender equality in the context of African feminist struggles (Bizimungu, 2024) [4]. With the intervention of postcolonial feminist theories, the novels upset the hegemony of the colonial gender norms and demand a revolution in the conception and performance of gender in African societies. Secondly, postcolonial feminist theory has emphasized richer interplays between colonialism, gender, and identity in African literature. Oyěwùmí (1997) [30] argues that colonial imposition of Western gender dualism destroyed indigenous African gender systems that were more fluid and less rigid than those in operation under colonial states (Oyěwùmí, 1997) [30]. In *A Spell of Good Things*, Adébáyọ̀ is scathing in her critique of colonial imposition of gender roles, noting with especial sharpness how such roles continue to

restrict women's identities and stifle their potential. The novel, by Eniola's existence, proves the long-lasting legacy of colonialism on gender identities because colonial legacies have continued to shape the construction of gender power relations in postcolonial African societies.

In conclusion, postcolonial and feminist theories provide a solid ground for the analysis of gender role and identity portrayal in African literature. By Adichie, Adébáyọ̀, and Dangarembga, these theories show the survivance of colonial traditions on gender relationships and women's struggle and survival in postcolonial African communities. By the feminist and postcolonial critique of gender roles, African literature redefines conventional gender norms and opens new avenues for gender empowerment and ident.

Textual Analysis

How Socioeconomic Challenges Affect Gender Roles in *Stay with Me*

In Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s evocative novel *Stay with Me*, the personal is irrevocably political and economic. Amidst the context of Nigeria in the 1980s, the story of Yejide and Akin's crumbling marriage over infertility becomes an engrossing lens through which to examine how socioeconomic challenges shape, distort, and reimagine traditional gender roles. The book argues that in such a society where material security is fragile, roles in relations come to be bargained on economic lines, trapping the participants in performances of femininity and masculinity over survival rather than authenticity. Most glaringly obvious of this is economic logic underpinning polygamy, one that trims down marriage to an economic bargain over a love relationship. Akin is pressured into taking a second wife, not out of love but out of family and economic necessity. As he rationalizes, "When my mother threatened that she would begin showing up at my wife every week with a new woman if I did not pick someone in a month, I had to act. Funmi was the clear choice because she did not want much from me. Not initially." (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.28). The choice is not out of compatibility or love but out of cost-benefit. Funmi is worth it because she has low expectations, as she has outlined clearly: "She accepted a separate flat, miles away from Yejide and me. Didn't ask for more than a weekend every month and a reasonable allowance." (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.29). This arrangement places the second wife not as a wife but as a kept woman, her status "positively defined by a monetary exchange and contract." Just as the worth of a man is measured according to his ability to produce offspring, a social capital that ensures his continuation. Moomi's boasting about "Juwon already had four children, all boys" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.27) underscores that a man's value is tied to his virility and his ability to produce male progeny, which is itself a socioeconomic strategy for legacy and security.

For women, this economization of relationships creates a devastating state of financial dependency that erodes their agency and identity. Yejide, despite receiving a "generous personal allowance," feels a profound sense of vulnerability. Her poignant remark, "I did not like knowing that if for some reason Akin stopped giving me money, I would not even be able to afford a packet of chewing gum" (Page 38), reveals the vulnerability of her condition. Such dependency compels her to suffer immense humiliation. Even where Moomi is about to bring Funmi into her home, Yejide gauges her resistance not emotionally but economically: "If I quarrelled with Funmi, it would make matters worse. Moomi might tell me to leave and although Akin kept repeating how much he loved me, I no longer believed him." (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.89). Since she has no independent means, she does not possess the capacity to defend her home. Her own body is commodified, prepared and evaluated for its worth in keeping her husband happy and securing her position (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 131). The second wife, Funmi, on the other hand, internalizes this transactional relationship entirely, calculating her husband's provision only in material terms: '"Our husband is a very caring man.". He has taken good care of me. We thank God that he earns enough money for us all."' (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 43).

Adébáyọ̀ also complicates the traditional roles, though, by highlighting where women financially contribute, which creates tension in the prescribed gendered dynamic. Yejide is not a passive dependent; she is an affluent businesswoman. Iya Martha points out Yejide's contribution to their shared home, (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.20). The economic power becomes one of pride and identification for Yejide, reminding herself of her superiority over Funmi(p. 44). Her business acumen is born out of need, as her early plunge into hairdressing in university meant that "whenever Iya Martha felt like withholding the monthly allowance my father transferred through her, I didn't starve" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 38). This financial independence is her benchmark. But even her career is negotiated through her husband's financial power. When Akin is funding her salon, her passion is tempered with financial prudence, "it was not sensible to spend money on a place that would be closed for five days a week", but his role as the moneyman eventually underpins her career ambition, positioning him as the one in control of her career aspirations (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 39).

The book also analyzes the stupendous socioeconomic pressure placed upon men to be the single breadwinner, one so monumental that failing to be able to do so is an existentially catastrophic event. Akin's work life constitutes his identity, which comes to a priority over his life at home, (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 48). His ability to provide is directly proportional to his masculine success; the birth of a son is in proportion with a prudent financial profit. This male heir's entanglement with pecuniary success highlights the deep connection between a man's social and economic capital. The devastating consequences of failing this duty are displayed in the case of Dotun. His forced movement into Yejide's home after he "lost his job in Lagos" and "came to Ilesa to hide from his creditors" (168) is a dramatic flip of traditional masculine duty.

Lastly, *Stay with Me* exists in a world in which love is continually being stretched to its limits by economic conditions. Gender roles are not natural but scripts enforced by the need for stability in an unstable world. From the "economic calculus behind polygamy" through objectification of women's bodies and the crushing weight of the provider mandate on men, Adébáyọ̀ demonstrates that socioeconomic challenges are the primary constructors of personal relationships. The tragedy of the novel is how these economic imperatives warp love into exchange, render individuals bare of their utilitarian value, and force characters to enact rigid roles which ultimately estrange them, even in the presence of kin.

The Negotiation of Gender Expectations in *Stay with Me*

Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s book *Stay with Me* foregrounds a profound inquiry into the manner in which individuals navigate, resist, and ultimately succumb to oppressive gender expectations within Nigerian society. Through the dissolving marriage of Yejide and Akin, the book demystifies how gender expectations represent a merciless negotiating table where personal agency is traded for acceptance by society. The story meticulously documents twenty crucial moments at which the characters have complex negotiations with the strict roles defined for them.

The external pressure for conformity fixes the terms of negotiation from the outset. Baba Lola's remark that "category: It is one child that calls another one into this world. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.16) reduces womanhood to birth-giving purpose. This becomes a weapon in Moomi's confrontation: "Women give birth to children and if you can't you are nothing but a man. Nobody should call you a woman. let my son have some with Funmi" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.54). Yejide internalizes this verdict, feeling the name "iyale, first wife" as a "verdict that branded me not woman enough for my husband" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 18), reducing her identity to a brand of failure.

Threatened by this coercion, characters engage in agonized pragmatic bargains. Akin pleads with Yejide, "You know I won't cheat on you. My mother won't pressure you for children any more" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.23), while himself justifying his decision to remain with Funmi (28). His conflict is that he has a duty as first son, balanced against half-brother Juwon who already had four children, all boys. Yejide's strategy is desperate, attempting to become pregnant in the classical sense since the only way she could save myself from polygamy was to get pregnant before Fumni (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.28). Her blanket obedience to the prophet's command, reveals to what degree she'll adjust to norms. These exchanges create a stark contrast between internal ideals and outward performance. Although both are averse to polygamy, they're expected to act out their respective roles publicly. Funmi is “the good younger wife” as soon as Yejide's role is displaced, whereas Yejide must accept Funmi’s arrival under the guise of help (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.73), Even their resistance gets negotiated, Yejide sets up her worth via class positioning: “I own Perfect Finish. I got my first degree from Ife. I am not some mad woman off the street” (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.77).

The novel also complicates these negotiations by altering perspectives on motherhood and masculinity. Moomi outlines motherhood through suffering: “a woman can be bad wife but she cannot be bad mother. I must pray for grace so that I am able to suffer on behalf of that child” (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.34). With the arrival of the baby, Akin is a fawning father, "singing make-believe songs to Olamide and reading newspaper stories aloud to her" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.31), enacting achieved masculinity. But the novel's most profound negotiation occurs when Yejide's expectations are utterly reshaped by her child's sickness. All social ambitions are relinquished by her: "I did not care if for the rest of his life my son was unable to add two and two to get four. If he did nothing but stay alive, that would have been enough for me" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p.184). This final, tragic bargain distills the gender expectations down to their most nakedly human essence, the primal need to preserve a loved one's life, stripping away how all other social demands increasingly weigh against this most primal imperative. Throughout these scenes, Adébáyọ̀ effectively demonstrates negotiating gender expectations is less about prevailing, but persevering and the painful reconstituting of self under intolerable duress.

Gendered Labour, Emotional Labour, Family Roles, and Survival Strategies

In the rich panorama of Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s writing, individual despair at infertility is transformed into a public sphere in which social expectation, gendered labor, and survival strategies for emotions brutally intersect. The novel rigorously explores how traditional roles within the family are not only assigned but imposed, creating a crucible within which selves are created and broken. Even in the first lines, the stress is couched not as a nubile yearning for children but as filial and social obligation. The protagonist's mother is straightforward in closing the door on love after four years of marriage, turning the subject to his "obligation to her as a first son" and at once throwing into shadow his half-brother, Juwon, with his four sons a triumphant fulfillment of this duty (27). This contrast highlights the way male identity is also made to depend on procreation, although in a different form from what is being forced on women. The proposed solution by the family, bringing in a second wife named Funmi, highlights the transactional nature of marriage arrangements in this economy of reproduction. She is "the obvious choice because she didn't want much from me. Not in the beginning" (28), which is a line heavy with the implied threat of demands to be made and the woman reduced to what she can do. The communal reinforcement of this strategy is brutally revealed when Baba Lola makes her announcement, stating, "'Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too'" (16). This superstition that fertility is somehow contagious or competitive places an unbearable weight upon the first wife, Yejide. She is indoctrinated with the politics of womanhood by an older relative who dictates that "a woman can be a bad wife but she must not be a bad mother," and she must "ask for the grace to be able to suffer for that child" (17). This conflation of motherhood with sanctioned suffering proves to be a mortal prophecy that Yejide eventually fulfills in violent actions. The most brutal expression of this coercion is from her mother-in-law, who pleads, "'Close your thighs to him, I beg you. If you don't, he will die childless. I beg you, don't destroy my life. He is my first son'" (54). Thus, Yejide's body is constructed as an obstacle to family line, and her refusal to relinquish her wedded space is done as an existential destruction against an entire family.From this oppressive pressure, characters employ elaborate and also appallingly successful survival strategies. Yejide's economic independence, which is developed from her hairdressing business that financed her university upkeep and later became a successful ten-dryer salon (38, 166), is a realistic resistance. It gives her a sphere of competence and dignity separate from her fertility issues. This independence is useless, however, against psychological and emotional battles in the home. Her husband, Akin, retreats into emotional absence, performing the motions of obligatory gestures unengaged. He apologizes by rote and hugs a family member "for good measure" and then retreats, having malt as "I watched them eat" (21). Challenged with Yejide's despair regarding Funmi, he brushes her aside with exhausted finality: "'You sound crazy, right? You are not pregnant and Funmi is not coming to stay here. Can I sleep now?'" as he pulls the covers over his head (78). This withdrawal is his survival strategy, a refusal to be

living in a world he can't master. At the novel's end, its greatest deception, the fake pregnancy and the obtaining of a child, unleashes another loop of gendered labor built around frantic, paranoid mothering. When Yejide is told to 'Breastfeed the child," she has a total psychological reversal, looking down at the child and making a choice to believe (60). This is a belief that extends to an all-encompassing identity. She creates a room into a playroom of one's own, "a space for just the two of us" (79), a spatial realization of her desperate, sole proprietorship of motherhood. This room is subsequently utilized as a tool for cruelty when she brings the unwelcome Funmi into this very same room, stating, "'Let me show you your room'" (89), an act that asserts her dominance and delineates Funmi's life as being outside the sacred mother-child dyad. After the devastating loss of her initial child, Olamide, Yejide says of the unbalance of mourning: "It was as if nobody would miss her.". No one was regretful that Olamide had died. They were sorry that I lost a child, not that she died" (158). This is an insightful comment regarding how the worth of the child hangs on being an extension of the mother, a marker of her successful femininity. This loss adds to Yejide's maternal labor into a pathology. With her second baby, Sesan, she becomes "watchful" to the point where "Akin thought I was becoming paranoid.". I was practically willing to padlock Sesan's wrist to my apron strings and drag him around for the rest of his life" (165). This is no longer care; this is a survival strategy against the horror of loss, an absolute identification of herself within the insistence upon her child's survival. The discovery that Sesan has sickle cell disease raises this dynamic to a living nightmare, making every moment a desperate battle. Her universe shrinks to the rhythm of his snores: "The sound was my life" (184). Her requirement is narrowed down to the bare minimum of her gendered labor: "I did not care if for the rest of his life my son was never able to add two and two to get four.". If he simply existed and stayed alive, that would have been enough for me" (187). Through all this tumult, the text explores further the emotional work of the marriage relationship itself, largely performed through sexual intimacy. The moments of Akin's vulnerability, such as when he "knelt beside me and laid his head on my stomach.". I could sense his tears that day, stuck my dress to my stomach and legitimized my grieving" (161-162), are sporadic instances of familiar emotional heft. Yet this is often coupled with a physical connection that tries to impart what words cannot. Yejide describes kissing her husband "to swallow that word 'OK'" and says even after intercourse, "it still was not enough.". I learned more than ever" (184). It is a yearning for an emotional fulfillment and a validation that is withheld from them by their corporeal union. Their group rhetoric that surrounds them provides little heat, and their tragedy turns into a test of their piety by raw proverbial wisdom: "'But this God is a great God-o. What do we want to do with a soft pestle? Can it pound yam? " (178). These passages construct a powerful critique of the way societal convention distorts fundamental human relations and transforms love into duty, motherhood into preoccupation, and the body into a battlefield, where the most intimate labor is performed under constant surveillance by family and cultural imperative.

Violence as a Gendered and Power Dynamic

The most insidious form of violence is institutional and psychological, exercised by the family to control reproductive duties. It is clothed in tradition and concern but is actually coercive. Baba Lola's statement, "'Well, our wife, this is your new wife. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too'" (16), is a violent appropriation of Yejide's marriage agency. This family-approved act arms polygamy to cause psychological trauma, bringing both women to the level of reproductive tools. This structural pressure is internalized and armed by women against other women, as displayed when Moomi attacks Yejide's very existence: "Women manufacture children, and if you can't, you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman." (Page 54). This verbal violence seeks to annihilate Yejide's self, bringing her worth down to her womb. Thus, when psychological coercion fails or is rejected, the threat of harm to the body assumes the role of enforcing obedience. Akin's reaction to Yejide's justifiable anger is an example. When she confronts him, "You brought a new wife into this house and you are angry? When did you plan to tell me? " his response is immediate and physical: “His hand covered my mouth. ‘OK, I’m sorry.’” (23). The gesture of covering her mouth is a literal and symbolic act of silencing. His apology, coming simultaneously with the physical suppression, reveals a dynamic where his power to control the narrative and her voice is paramount. This physical release of energy is echoed in a later and more terrifying eruption wherein Akin's fury leads to ruinous violence: "He grasped a saucer from the table and raised it overhead. He hurled it across the room, then he ripped off the tablecloth from the dining table." (69). Even though the object of violence is not yet Yejide, it is directed at her space, both as a formidable threat and as the demonstration of his suppressed, explosive power. The most frightening aspect of this gender violence is the domination and desecration of the female body itself. After she has been blessed with a child, Yejide is forced into a performance of motherhood through a degrading act of bodily coercion. The command, "Breastfeed the child”, is prefaced by bodily control of her body: "To sit on the ground. squeeze my breast and push the nipple to the open mouth." (60). It is a profound desecration; her body is being used as a tool, its function directed and controlled by man. The same motif applied to the body as a place of conquest occurs in sexual violence. The account of Prophet Josiah and Mrs. Adeolu, "His robes were bunched up around his waist, exposing his thrusting buttocks" (86), is not an expression of passion but of raw, transactional power. It shows the book's wider context in which sex is often divorced from intimacy and becomes a method of procreation or domination, as later is the situation with Yejide when she uses sex in a desperate attempt to absorb Akin's suffering: "I kissed him to swallow that word 'OK'. His tongue, his hands, his hardness deep inside me again." (184). This behaviour, although initiated by her, is born out of an economy of desperation and grief, illustrating how intimacy can be stained through trauma.

Lastly, the relentless bombardment of this gender violence gets internalized and translates to violent consequences. Yejide's mindset deteriorates under stress, hitting the horrific memory of pushing Funmi downstairs: "I could hear her last yelp, see the way her hands tried to catch the banister after I pushed her." (pp.137-138). As a sufferer of psychological and systemic violence, she herself inflicts physical violence, underlining how abuse is answered with abuse. Her desperation is also internalized, shown through self-harm when she self-mutilates by cutting her own hair: "I cut the tresses myself and left the rest of my hair in low uneven chunks." (160). Self-mutilation is a reflection of this cruel

rejection of femininity and beauty which has not been of value in this system.

Maternal love, warped by this culture, is even converted into a form of smothering, violent domination. When she learns that her son has sickle cell disease, her defensiveness becomes pathological: "I carried him, squeezing him close to me until he yelped." (pp.182-183). This action, born of love, is also an action of possession so profound that it physically hurts, indicating the depth to which violence in her life has infused even her greatest loves.

This is what *Stay with Me* finally accomplishes: a searing indictment of a society in which power is exercised by gendered violence. This violence is multifaceted; it flows from the institution of family to the individual body, and it erases boundaries between victim and perpetrator. The novel categorically states that in a world where everybody owns a woman's body but her, every encounter, a family meal or a husband's touch, is too readily an act of war.

Discussion of Findings

Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s literary analysis of *Stay With Me* provides a compelling examination of how gender roles intersect with socioeconomic forces and how those forces shape individual identity and relations. The play stages the tension between personal desire and external pressure, particularly within the interplay of Nigerian family life in the 1980s. Centrally placed is Yejide and Akin's marriage, which collapses in the wake of infertility, to expose the socio-cultural matrix of gender relations in an economically insecure society. The novel condemns the transactional nature of gendered relationships, where how they are negotiated is not due to love or personal attraction, but due to survival, need, and economic power. The imposition of polygamy as a solution for infertility, as Akin rationalizes for reasons of economics and family needs, also contrasts sharply against the romanticized notion of marriage. This economic rationality, whereby a woman is assessed by her ability to bear children, or preferably, male children, is a measure of the commodification of the female body in patriarchal societies. Yejide's emotional vulnerability, as it pertains to her economic weakness at the mercy of her husband, is a cogent critique of the lack of autonomy that many women experience in patriarchal societies. Analysis also touches on the problematic aspect of gendered work within the marriage. Yejide's economic independence, gained by her salon business, is a type of empowerment but is undercut by the constant societal forces defining her. Akin's machismo problems, where his value is tied to his economic achievement and provision, expose the draconian expectations placed upon men as well. These economic and gendered roles, shaped to a large degree by family and cultural expectations, ultimately reflect how individual and family woes are often the result of larger societal forces. The gender performativity theory, applied herein, enlightens us on how the gender roles of *Stay With Me* are not static but performed continuously by society's expectation, actions, and power play. How Judith Butler argues that gender is a series of repetitive acts rather than essentialist identity is observed in the characters' responses to societal pressure. Yejide and Akin perform their gender roles within the limits of family and cultural confines, negotiating and resisting at times. Yejide's quest to become established by bearing children and her ultimate embrace of economic independence reveal a flexible negotiation of gender roles, revealing how the positions can be reversed and reinterpreted. Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay With Me* is thus a biting critique of the manner in which gendered convention is so saturated with power relations, socialization, and economic considerations, and the manner in which insistently these determinants influence the trajectory of the lives of citizens of postcolonial African society.

Conclusion

Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s novel *Stay With Me* offers a thick sense of gender, power, and identity in the socio-political and economic life of postcolonial Nigeria. The novel investigates how gender roles are performative not essentialist ones, based on the pressure of society, family, and economic necessity. In the complex dynamics of Akin and Yejide's marriage, Adébáyọ̀ speaks of the transactional nature of gendered identity where self and love cannot help but be overshadowed by conformity and survival. And the application of Judith Butler's gender performativity also brings to light the malleability of gender, for instance, with such characters as Yejide, who are always negotiating and performing their selves under the pressure from outside.

Further, the novel illustrates the objectification of women's bodies in a patriarchal society where women are valued based on their capacity to perform reproductive labor. Adébáyọ̀ illustrates the psychic and affective work that women like Yejide are confronted with, thereby illustrating how agency is undermined by social conventions. Through an interlacing of gender, power, and socio-economic conflicts, *Stay With Me* offers a sophisticated deconstruction of the making of identity in a global world beset by colonial and patriarchal wounds. In the end, the novel leads one to question the performance of gender and how enduring power relations configure the lives of characters in it.

Recommendation for Future Studies

Exploring the Intersection of Class and Gender in Postcolonial African Writing: More work may explore how class is intersecting with gender within postcolonial African societies, such as in books like *Stay With Me*. Determining the influence of class position on gender performance and gender identity would complete more of an investigation of socio-economic issues at stake.

Gender Performativity Theory and Queer Readings: Future research can also apply Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in queer interpretations of African literature. With emphasis on non-heterosexual sexualities and homoerotic longings, future research can examine how postcolonial African writers challenge heteronormative definitions of gender and suggest more flexible and plural forms of gender identity.

Colonial Legacies and Their Impact on Gender Constructs: Another potential research topic is the contribution of the colonial legacy to the construction of gender constructs in contemporary African literature. Examination of the past and how its enduring legacy determines the ways in which gender roles and expectations are understood in the postcolony could shed even more light on the gender concerns that prevail in Africa today.

The Position of Emotional and Psychological Labor in Gender Relations: The position of emotional and psychological labor in gender relations, particularly in intimate relationships, can also be studied further in future research. This may involve exploring how African women characters, like Yejide, experience emotional and psychological demands in patriarchal settings.

Gender, Identity, and Resistance in African Feminist Literature: Based on *Stay With Me* feminist theorizing, future research could be on how the works of African women writers are acts of resistance to societal expectations of gender roles. How African women protagonists resist and subvert societal expectations in such works would be a most significant contribution to feminist scholarship in African literary studies.

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