

Stay With Me, by Ayòbámi Adébayò

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My first encounter with Ayòbámi Adébayò's *Stay with me* was at a session of the Cape Town Open Book Festival held at The Book Lounge in September 2017 titled *Food and Nigeria: Ayòbámi Adébayò, Yemisi Aribisala and Chibundu Onuzo speak to Yewande Omotoso about stories and food*. I was attending the English Academy International Conference at the Granger Bay Campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and was invited to the event by my daughter. My mouth salivated at the title of the session and I went in hope of buying and eating the best Nigerian food delicacies. Rather than physical food, I was fed the most fascinating stories about food in the novels of the three young Nigerian authors. The discussion was anchored by Yewande Omotoso who played devil's advocate by asking provocative questions and creating an atmosphere of awe and laughter, plus the desire to buy and burrow into the novels. I left the event that evening with signed copies of novels by each of the writers. On my return to Pretoria, I randomly picked Ayòbámi Adébayò's novel to read and from the moment I opened it I could not put it down. I finished reading it that same evening.

Stay with me narrates the heart-wrenching story of how a passionate and affectionate relationship enjoyed by Akin and Yejide in their admirable marriage succumbs to prejudices about childlessness and pressure from society to become a devastating scene of desperation, deceit, loss, death, tragedy and profound grief. It is set in Ilesha, a city in Osun State, Nigeria, in the 1980s during a period of socio-political upheavals, student unrest, military rule, nullified elections, coup d'états and the menacing audacity of armed robbers and corrupt police officers.

The novel has 42 chapters divided into four sections. In the first section the scene begins in Jos in December 2008 and goes back to Ilesha in 1985 and carries on from there. In the second section the scene begins in Ilesha in December 2008 and is followed by events from 1987 onwards. Like in the second section, the scene in the third section starts in Ilesha in December 2008 and takes the reader back to 1992 onwards. The fourth



section then takes the reader back to December 2008 in Ilesha. In all the four sections, the story is told over a span of 25 years in alternating chapters from the point of view of the two protagonists, Yejide and Akin, but mainly from the point of view of Yejide. With this intricate plot, Adebayo succeeds in weaving together the characters' complex love story and imbuing it with suspense, leaving her readers anxiously probing for answers until they suddenly and shockingly stumble on the missing links at unexpected turns in the flashbacks. An apt description of the creative brilliance of the author is captured in a review by Omotayo (2017) in the following words:

This novel is an interlocking series of stories: there is that almost perfect love story between Yejide and Akin; there is also another part of the story showing society's misplaced expectations of women; and another side telling the story of sacrifices, resignation and willful ignorance in the face of unavoidable gloom. Above all, the portrayal of deep pains and pyrrhic attempts to recover from them will always get the reader. Ayobami Adebayo etches pains on her characters. Every one of them is struggling against something, none is free. Yejide suffers rejection, Akin struggles to prove his masculinity, Dotun strives against the many forces of his carefreeness.

Akin and Yejide meet and fall in love during their undergraduate days at the University of Ile Ife. It is love at first sight for Akin. Their love blossoms admirably and they get married within a year. Their promising and fascinating love life begins to crumble when after four years of marriage, they are still childless. As Akin puts it,

I loved Yejide from the very first moment. No doubt about that. But there are things even love can't do. Before I got married, I believed love could do anything. I learned soon enough that it couldn't bear the weight of four years without children. If the burden is too much and stays too long, even love bends, cracks, comes close to breaking and sometimes does break. But even when it's in a thousand pieces around your feet, that doesn't mean it's no longer love. (Adebayo 2017, 21)

In a desperate quest to conceive Yejide and her mother-in-law seek help from traditional healers, while she and her husband have countless consultations with specialists and doctors, all to no avail. The story takes a dramatic turn when Akin's uncle Baba Lola, accompanied by one of Yejide's stepmothers suddenly arrives at Yejide's house with a second wife, Funmilayo for Akin. Unable to bear the thought of losing her husband, Yejide makes a grueling pilgrimage to Prophet Josiah on "the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles" where she is made to breastfeed a goat. After this experience, she develops a phantom pregnancy and a mental disorder that takes over a year to be resolved medically. It is at this point that Akin takes a destructive decision to save face and to rid his wife of the shame and indignity of childlessness. His decision to elicit the help of his younger brother to get Yejide pregnant brings in its wake many devastating consequences of enormous sorrow and grief, which could have been avoided if he had cared more about his wife than his ego.

The story accentuates Yoruba cultural beliefs that irrespective of other achievements and successes in life, a man is only a man when he has children to continue the family genealogy, and a woman is incomplete until she is able to conceive and bear a child. It also shows the tension and pressure that family and society can exert in and exert on a childless marriage.

Several themes around marriage, relationship and family are explored in this novel. These include love, the uncertainties of marriage life, polygamy, sacrifice, deceit, secrecy, shame, grief, hope, childlessness, infertility, forgiveness, illness, family tension, self-deception and vulnerability. The story is driven by the tension emanating from the contrasting views of older and younger generations about polygamy, infertility and childlessness, which constitutes part of the constant clash between modernity and tradition. For example, the death of Yejide's children is explained medically as well as from Yoruba traditional belief that perceives the children as *Abikus* ("spirit children that are born only to die").

Another aspect of culture that is carefully woven into the story is Yoruba onomastic practice. The name of each character contributes to the meaning and interpretation of the novel. For example Iyejide, shortened as Yejide, is a name given to a female child whose mother died during or just after giving birth. It is not surprising that death follows Yejide throughout the novel, as her children die after birth. Akin is a name given to male children meaning a "brave or strong one." It depicts masculinity, which Akin attempts to display in all his decisions and actions, however misguided. Funmilayo, shortened as Funmi, means "give me joy." Funmi is brought into the marriage for the sole purpose of bearing a child so that Akin "leaves a child behind when he dies" (Adebayo 2017, 12). She is portrayed in the novel as someone who is given, but not desired—and as it is evident in the story, she exists only to be used as a pawn in this intricate love story.

The names Akin and Yejide give to their children also tell a tale of their struggle to have children. Olamide, the name of the first child, means "my wealth has arrived." This is because among the Yoruba people, a child is equated to wealth. Sesan, the name of the second child, is short for Oluwasesan, meaning "God has rewarded me"—in this case with another child after the death of the first child. Rotimi, the name given to the third child means "stay with me." This name is commonly given to an *Abiku*. It is a plea for the child to stay alive and not die like the other two. The title of the novel *Stay with me* comes from the meaning of this name.

Food is another significant cultural aspect in this novel. The different functions of food are conveyed patently in this novel. An example is when Yejide suddenly changes her mind and no longer offer her visitors pounded yam but fed them bean pottage after they present Funmi as Akin's second wife:

I will prepare the food,' I said, refusing to ask them again what they wanted to eat. Now that they have introduced Funmi, it was acceptable for Baba Lola and Iya Martha to have a meal. I was not ready to cook a separate meal for each person, so I served them what I wanted. I gave them bean pottage. I mixed the three-day-old beans I had been planning to throw in the bin with the freshly cooked pottage. Even though I was sure they will notice the mixture tasted a little bad, I counted on the guilt Baba Lola was masking with outrage at my behaviour and the glee Iya Martha was hiding beneath her displays of dismay to keep them eating. (Adebayo 2017, 15)

Here we see how food can be used to show hospitality and at the same time express rejection and revenge.

Stay with me can be read from a feminist perspective. It portrays a patriarchal society in which a woman is always blamed for the inability of a married couple to conceive or have children. It also highlights the infinite privileges of males as opposed to the suffering of females. According to Omotayo's (2017) online review, "this book depicts the lurid otherness of women in the society." In order to deal with her otherness as a childless woman, Yejide consciously works out a self-defense mechanism of protecting herself from the prying eyes of her mother-in-law and others:

I had expected them to talk about my childlessness. I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles. I-look-onto-God smiles – name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick – and I had them ready. (Adebayo 2017, 11)

In the same vein, she emotionally detaches herself from consciously loving and caring for her third child Rotimi after having lost two children:

I was not punishing Rotimi for anything. I simply did not believe that she would live long enough to remember anything I did or did not do. I believed it was a matter of time before she went the way of my other children and I was readying myself, adjusting myself to being without a child. Whenever I thought about it, all I hoped was that she would not suffer too much. I did not hold her too close because I was protecting myself from her. I had lost pieces of myself to Sesan and Olamide and I held myself back from Rotimi because I wanted to have something left when she was gone. (Adebayo 2017, 279)

From a feminist perspective, these two examples indicate that patriarchal expectations of women turn women into caricatures or shadows of themselves in cases where these women are unable to meet these expectations.

One of the outstanding qualities of this debut novel is the language used to narrate the story. Written in lyrical prose, Adebayo infuses ordinary words with incisive meanings that forcefully engage her readers. The opening paragraph exemplifies this:

I MUST LEAVE THIS CITY TODAY and come to you. My bags are packed and the empty rooms remind me that I should have left a week ago. Musa, my driver, has slept at the security guard's post every night since last Friday, waiting for me to wake him up at dawn so we can set out on time. But my bags still sit in the living room, gathering dust. (Adebayo 2017, 3)

With this captivating opening, Adebayo engages her readers with her characters. She has the ability to capture and describe raw emotions with words which leave the reader deeply touched, like when Yejide and Akin lose the child they had waited for so many years:

It was as if nobody would miss her. No one was sorry that Olamide had died. They were sorry that I have lost a child, not that she has died. It was though, because she had spent so little time in the world, it did not really matter that she was gone – she did not really matter. One would think we had lost a dog that was dear to our hearts. It squeezed me deep inside to see people so calm, as if nothing much has been lost. And when voices from the too-calm stream of consolers told me to imagine how terrible it would have been for this to have happened at a later date, on the eve of her graduation or the eve of her wedding, I wished I could wail, scream, roll on the ground and give her the mourning she deserved. But I could not. The part of me that could do that had gone into the morgue's freezer with Olamide to keep her company and to beg for her forgiveness for all the signs I had missed. (Adebayo 2017, 146)

Adebayo's use of affective language is something that many other reviewers such as Omotayo have commented on, and the novel is worth reading for an experience of an emotion-packed-language festival.

Stay with me has been widely reviewed online by readers and critics, some with glowing praise, but others with pungent criticism. One plot-related flaw that readers and reviewers have pointed out is Yejide's perceived ignorance of Akin's infertility. This has been bluntly stated by Ositelu (2017) in the following online review:

Adebayo is rigidly intent on a specific narrative trajectory, at the cost of realism, authentic characterisation and empathy. By the novel's conclusion, Yejide is virtually divested of agency or responsibility for her choices. Instead, she functions like a petulant literary automaton. The whole novel is predicated on the notion that an educated and canny businesswoman is somehow shockingly ignorant of how the reproductive process works. Yejide's virginal status on marrying Akin is apparently shorthand for being an idiot. If a reader can have their intelligence insulted this much and suppress the urge to hurl their hardback copy across the room, they have the patience of Job.

As a reader, my view is that the author deliberately chooses to portray Yejide as ignorant in order to foreground the theme of self-deception that is prevalent in many marriage relationships. Many married women simply and deliberately turn a blind eye against any thought of what they fear to be wrong or true in their relationships as their own mechanism to protect their marriage. This is apparent from the following reflection by Yejide after she confronts Akin to tell her the truth about his impotence:

What did I know? I knew that I was once invested in his lies as he was, probably more than he was – I imagine he at least admitted the truth to himself. I could not do that until Dotun had spoken the words; I could not allow him to be flawed. So I bit my tongue when customers talked about sex and I let him hold my hand when he told the doctor our sex life was absolutely normal. I told myself I was respecting my husband. I convinced myself that my silence meant I was a good wife. But the biggest lies are often the ones we tell ourselves. I bit my tongue because I did not want to ask questions. I did not ask questions because I did not want to know the answers. It was convenient to believe my husband was trustworthy; sometimes faith is easier than doubt. (Adebayo, 265)

Yejide's words above reveal that it is her choice to stay ignorant, and this is something that Ositelu does not consider in her criticism.

Adebayo's debut novel has been shortlisted for the *Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction*. It is described by Margaret Atwood (2017) as "scorching, gripping, ultimately lovely." Cross (2017) describes it as "deeply impressive ... Packs a tremendous punch", while Evans (2017) labels it as "clever and funny... a bright, big-hearted demonstration of female spirit, as well as the damage done by the boundlessness of male pride." For *The Sunday Times*, it is "affecting and powerful ... Adebayo's prose is a pleasure." These positive responses can only tell of a skilfully crafted story.

Stay with me is a potpourri of everything that is good to know about the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It is thoroughly enjoyable and profoundly fascinating, with surprises and sometimes shock and awe. It can be contrasted with Lola Shoneyin's *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives* (2011) in terms of how women in Yoruba society attempt to deal with childlessness and male infertility. As a Nigerian undergraduate student in the 1980s, the era in which Adebayo's novel is set, I could identify with the story as well as with the Nigerian socio-political milieu in which the story is contextualised. Thus, *Stay with me* is a must-read novel in 2017. I highly recommend it for readers' enjoyment. As the title suggests, it is a story that will **stay with you** long after you have finished reading it.

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