



# **The Challenge of Women's Domestification**

## **Portrayed in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the challenge of women's domestication portrayed in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, with a focus on how womanhood is narrowly defined through marriage and motherhood. Through the lens of Betty Friedan's liberal feminism, this research analyses how societal and familial expectations and pressures domesticate women and reduce their identity and worth to their reproductive roles. The main character in this book, Yejide, represents a woman whose education, achievements, and personal identities are constantly overshadowed by pressures to bear children. This domestication and reduction of her womanhood not only limit her worth in the eyes of society but also gradually strip away her identity. This research reveals that by portraying her struggles and challenges, the novel critiques societal and familial norms that domesticate women and equate womanhood with motherhood. Ultimately, *Stay With Me* intervenes in the domestication of women and the reduction of womanhood to motherhood and demands a redefinition, one that recognises women as complete in themselves, regardless of whether or not they become mothers.

**Keywords:** Domestification, Gender Roles, Liberal Feminism, Motherhood, Womanhood.

### **Introduction**

In many societies around the globe, women's worth has historically been reduced to their ability to carry out the roles of mothers and wives. Societal expectations regarding gender roles continue to define womanhood primarily through traditional norms, particularly marriage and motherhood. The domestication of women through the reduction of their womanhood to their reproductive roles is deeply rooted in societal and cultural practices. Even as societies evolve, the roles and expectations placed on women remain persistent, shaping the way womanhood is perceived and experienced. According to George

Murdock, the division of roles based on gender is not innate or fixed but is shaped "in accordance with convenience and precedent" (Murdock, 1949: 7).

The challenge of domestication faced by women not only threatens their autonomy but also exposes them to societal pressures that equate a woman's worth with her reproductive success and domestic contributions. In her infamous writing, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan (2001: 83) questions whether women embrace motherhood voluntarily as their sole purpose and identity, or if they are pressured into doing so because they are denied of other opportunities. The roles are continued to be believed as what's natural and most fulfilling for women. This shapes how women's identity is understood and limits the ways women can define themselves (McCormack & Graham, 2024)

In her writing of critical theory, Lois Tyson (2023: 89) define that the difference between good and bad girls lies in whether men find them valuable or suited to be wives or mothers. Women who are deemed to be good are those who are modest, self-sacrificing, and nurturing in their femininity and domesticity. They are also expected to be submissive as they are viewed as being below men in a hierarchical position. This conglomeration of patriarchal beliefs and practices is what adds more to the domestication of women and the reduction of women's value to be strictly confined to their role as wives and mothers.

In *Stay With Me*, Ayobami Adebayo (2017) tells the life of Yejide and Akin, a Nigerian couple in the 1980s who are struggling with infertility. As a woman, Yejide receives constant and intense pressure from her extended family and her in-laws. The pressure doesn't only take the form of unsolicited pieces of advice and well-wishes, but also in remarks of humiliation and incrimination. The constant reinforcement of the belief that she fails as a woman as she fails to be a mother intensifies her emotional and physical distress. This pressure puts a strain on their relationship to the point where Akin secretly agrees to take a second wife without Yejide's consent.

The pressure and expectation she faces are also rooted in her cultural background. As a Nigerian, Yejide is culturally expected to be a mother simply because she's a woman. The Nigerian culture places a huge emphasis on childbearing, even going as far as disregarding the well-being of the woman involved in the process of motherhood. African society sees infertility as the woman's fault, reinforcing the societal and cultural stigma that she is personally responsible for her barrenness (Gatuti et al., 2024).

Yejide's devastation is evident in her continuous desperate effort to seek help from both medical and spiritual treatment. She goes above and beyond, turning to traditional rituals in hopes of successfully conceiving. When she eventually becomes pregnant after she seeks comfort from Dotun, her brother-in-law, the

secrets, lies, and sacrifices that both Yejide and Akin have kept to themselves are unearthed in their marriage. A series of tragedies, griefs, and losses strike them as they live their constantly tumultuous lives.

In the novel, Yejide's worth as a woman is reduced to her ability to bear children. Despite her thriving career and impressive educational background, society still sees her as incomplete and inadequate because she hasn't succeeded in having a child. Yejide faces the struggle and challenge of domestication despite having a successful career and an impressive educational background.

Yejide's womanhood is narrowly defined by motherhood, leading to constant pressure and humiliation from her family and in-laws. This reduction of her worth and constant domestication forces her to live through a painful and sorrowful life that results in desperate actions. She undergoes harmful traditional practices to find a solution to her childlessness. What should be is a society where a woman's value is not defined by her ability to have children. A woman should inherently be recognised as a whole person with autonomy and worth beyond her role as a mother or wife.

This article will focus on examining how *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo portrays the domestication of women through the reduction of women's worth and identity to their ability to bear children. Using Betty Friedan's liberal feminism as its theoretical framework, this article will analyze how societal and familial pressures in the novel force Yejide into defining her womanhood through motherhood.

As the theoretical framework of this study, Friedan's view of women and their struggle can be applied and used as a tool to analyze the challenge of domestication faced by the women in this novel. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 2001), Friedan critiques the idea that women's fulfilment in life should be strictly confined to domestic roles, whether it is house chores or roles in reproducing. In her book, Friedan also exposes the loss of identity that many women experience when their value is solely defined by their reproductive and domestic roles. Using Friedan's theory, the research can focus on how a woman's value should not be tied to her reproductive ability and domestic role. Liberal feminism becomes a useful tool that calls for an improvement in society that allows women to be seen and valued as whole individuals, not just as mothers or wives.

In order to provide more insight into this research in relation to the reduction of women's value in Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, some previous studies will be listed below. The previous studies provided in this section are studies that are done by either using Adebayo's *Stay With Me* as their research object or Friedan's liberal feminism as their theoretical framework.

In her writings entitled *Cross-Generational Sororities: Honouring the Feminist Legacy of Ama Ata Aidoo in Ayobami Adebayo's Stay With Me (2017)*, Seron-Navas

(2024) explored how the work of Ama Ata Aidoo influenced Adebayo in *Stay With Me*. This article highlights Yejide's motherhood experience as something that deeply traumatizes and wounds her. In this article, Seron-Navas argued that Akin's supervision of Yejide's body is an act of ownership as he sees her body as a site of colonisation. In her exploration, she concluded that Adebayo picks up and highlights important topics that Ama Ata Aidoo addressed in her writings. In her novel, Adebayo brings up the issues of women's liberation, the tension between tradition and modernity, and women's quest for self-definition through motherhood. Adebayo, however, also modernises these themes in an effort to shape new African feminist awareness that transcends generational boundaries.

Another paper with Adebayo's *Stay With Me* as its object is *Everyday Stories and Untold Tales of Infertility: A Literary Examination Of Ayobami Adebayo's Stay With Me* written by Yeboah et al. (2024). This paper focuses on how the blame for infertility is automatically put on Yejide as the woman in the relationship. It brings up the argument that infertility is not exclusively a woman's problem and should never be treated as one. The paper concluded that the harmful beliefs and misconceptions that blame women entirely for the lack of success in reproduction are incorrect. Akin's silence and cowardice about his infertility are a product of the lack of room for men's masculinity to be doubted and questioned.

On the other hand, Yejide is constantly questioned and doubted in her ability to procreate. Moomi, her mother-in-law, repeatedly goes out of her way to make an effort to help Yejide, making this issue no longer between Yejide and Akin but a communal issue that is the talk of the family. This adds more harm throughout the narrative. Oseghale and Akhuemokhan (2024) wrote *Involuntary Childlessness and Coping Strategies in Ayobami Adebayo's Stay With Me and Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun* with the aim to analyse the coping mechanism of involuntary childless characters in the two novels. In Adebayo's *Stay With Me*, Yejide visits the hospital multiple times and even participates in alternative treatments to find the solution to her childlessness. She accepts pieces of advice and well-wishes from people around her while trying her absolute best to be a mother.

Akin, on the other hand, lies about his infertility and when he has to find the solution for their childlessness, he asks Dotun for a favour. Akin's coping mechanism does more damage than good to their marriage. The paper concluded that while Yejide uses both problem and emotion-focused coping strategies by receiving medical and spiritual treatment and emotional support from Dotun for their childlessness, Akin only uses a problem-focused coping strategy by using herbal treatments and practising polygamy.

Using the same theoretical framework as this paper, Betty Friedan's liberal feminism, Priyadharsini and Kumar (2024) wrote *Unveiling the Power of Liberal*

*Feminism in Namita Gokhale's Selected Works: A Journey Towards Gender Inclusivity.* In their paper, Friedan's liberal feminism is used to explore the complex experience of both male and female characters in some of Namita Gokhale's selected works. This paper argues that throughout their lives, women experience discrimination and oppression. In one of Gokhale's works, *Things to Leave Behind*, for example, Tilottama was not given a chance to pursue education and was told that women are born to take care of their families and children. However, Tilottama decided to break the stereotype and pursue education without the help of her family. She even later pushed her daughter to get educated as well as she understood its importance.

Compared to the previous studies that used either *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo as a research object or Friedan's liberal feminism as a theoretical framework, this research possesses quite a distance in terms of the subject of the research as no previous study has discussed the reduction of womanhood to motherhood in the novel. The use of Friedan's liberal feminism in this research will also provide novelty and a unique perspective on women's need to be seen and valued as whole individuals, not just mothers or wives. Therefore, there is a sufficient gap for this research to dive deeper into this topic.

## Method

This research uses qualitative methods in order to analyse and describe the societal pressure that forcefully domesticates Yejide and reduces her worth to her reproductive success. Fundamentally, qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyse the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations (Taylor & Lindlof, 2002). The data used in this method also differs compared to quantitative research. Qualitative data takes the form of words rather than numbers. In this research specifically, the data comes from the narratives and dialogues in *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo as the objects of the study.

As the subject of the study is the societal pressure that tied womanhood to motherhood, the data will be focused on the depictions of the pressures and how they reinforce the idea in the research object. The use of Friedan's liberal feminism as the perspective of this research is also prominent, as it provides a perspective that critiques and questions the social construction of womanhood that is limited to the roles of wives and mothers and the unrelenting domestication faced by women.

The data that are being used in this research take the form of either pieces of the narrative or dialogue from *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo, as this is qualitative research. As it has been stated above, the data will mainly focus on narrative or dialogue pieces that can be seen as depictions of the societal pressure that domesticates women and reduces womanhood to motherhood.

The primary source of data for this research is pieces of narration or dialogue from *Stay With Me* by Ayobami Adebayo that are relevant to the subject of the research. As the secondary data source for this research, relevant articles, journals, previous research, and theoretical books are used. The secondary data source relevancy is related to the reduction of womanhood to motherhood, societal pressure that reinforces the reduction, and liberal feminism.

## Results and Discussion

The challenge of women's domestication and the reduction of womanhood to motherhood in *Stay With Me* is most evidently portrayed through the unrelenting societal and familial pressure Yejide faces to have children. She is expected not only to marry but to successfully bear children soon after, as motherhood is seen as her sole purpose. In the early chapter, when Akin's second wife, Funmi, was first introduced, Yejide was referred to as *iyale*, the first wife. The word was a violent condemnation of her failure to be a mother.

*"I shuddered when Iya Martha referred to me as Funmi's iyale. The word crackled in my ears, iyale — first wife. It was a verdict that marked me as not woman enough for my husband."* (Adebayo, 2017: 15)

In this scene, the word *iyale* becomes more than just a title that Yejide is now forced to hold, but a word that threatens her reality. The very existence of Funmi is not only a solution given by her in-laws to her childlessness but also a confirmation that in their eyes, she has failed the one role they value in her: motherhood. For them, her entire existence and identity as a woman and wife is invalidated by her infertility. Her value as a wife is not measured by her partnership or personhood, but by her value as an ability to produce heirs. Nyahongo (2011) observes that in this context, women are often treated as commodities and properties whose worths are tied to their reproductive appeal.

From a broader African cultural perspective, Baloyi (2010) explains that marriage is often seen as a way to complete women. In Yejide's case, her inability to conceive leaves her culturally incomplete. The presence of Funmi as Akin's second wife is not only a personal betrayal of her position as his wife, but also a public denouncement of her womanhood. In many research studies related to the pressure to bear or not to bear children, race and ethnicity have often play an important role (Yang & Morgan, 2003).

This becomes one of the many instances throughout the novel in which Yejide's womanhood is not defined by her personal qualities, achievements, or successes, but rather solely by her reproductive capacity. In her writing, Friedan critiques the societal myth that the sole purpose in the life of a woman is to find complete fulfilment in her roles as wife and mother.

*"When motherhood ... is defined as a total way of life, must women themselves deny the world and the future open to them? Or does the denial of that world force them to make motherhood a total way of life?" (Friedan, 2001: 83)*

Friedan recognises that when women are labelled as lacking, "*not woman enough*", they are denied access to any identity beyond motherhood. When women are pressured to make their identity as wives and mothers as their "*total way of life*" and they're denied other paths of life, it may lead them to a crisis of self.

This part of the story begins Yejide's crisis of self. She is forced to embody a version of womanhood that she cannot fulfil, and in doing so, she begins to lose her sense of personhood beyond motherhood altogether. When she is told that she is not woman enough for her husband as she's without a child, her worth is no longer tied to her individuality, partnership, or achievements, but to her womb.

In her crisis of self, Yejide finds herself in desperation for a solution. Alongside Akin's mother, whom she calls *Moomi*, Yejide goes above and beyond, trying every treatment she had heard and advised of, even the extreme and draining ones. She's always ready to listen to what people say she must do to be able to successfully conceive. "*A new pastor I could visit; a new mountain where I could go to pray; or an old herbalist in a remote village or town whom I could consult,*" (Adebayo, 2017: 13), she almost routinely prepares herself for another suggestion, another cure, another trial.

This shows that her desperation and persistence are no longer only rooted in science and belief, but also in weary acceptance that she must keep trying, no matter how strange, painful, and emotionally draining the methods are. How the people around her constantly add more pressure by suggesting even more concerning kinds of treatment shows that this has been normalised. Yejide is made to believe that it is her duty to exhaust herself to try every option, no matter how degrading or physically taxing.

Akin's mother, whom Yejide called *Moomi*, is one of the most influential people in Yejide's life. After the death of her birth mother shortly after giving birth to her, Yejide was raised by the three other wives of her father. Growing up, none of them became a maternal figure whose warmth resembled a true mother for Yejide. *Moomi*, on the other hand, is the first woman who radiates the warmth of a mother. *Moomi* has witnessed the struggle and sacrifices she made to successfully bear a child. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear to the eye that *Moomi* plays a role in Yejide's challenge of domestication and the reduction of her womanhood to motherhood.

*"She had watched while my fresh perm was washed off into a flowing river by a priest... Moomi was there with me when I sat on a prayer mat for three days... until I fainted on the third day..." (Adebayo, 2017: 14)*

This piece of narration, too, shows how the treatments are not harmless symbolic rituals. They are physically and emotionally draining Yejide. Her willingness to participate in practices she doesn't fully understand, to the point where she lost consciousness during one of them, shows that the societal and familial pressure has erased, or at the very least, blurred her sense of boundaries. She wholeheartedly believes that she is incomplete, broken, and unworthy unless she can bear a child.

As Akin's mother, Moomi had begged Yejide to allow Akin to conceive a child with Funmi when Yejide had done nothing to stop him from doing so. Moomi asked Yejide to close her thigh for her son because even after having him for herself for 2 months, her stomach is still *"flat as the side of a wall"* (Adebayo, 2017: 45). Her emotional plea of *"Why won't you allow my son to have a child?"* (Adebayo, 2017: 44) not only reminds her of her infertility but also places the blame on her as if her infertility is a conscious decision she made rather than a medical reality she has to live through. Her pleas that are made *"in the name of God"* are not made out of her desperation or love for Yejide. They are manipulative tools that she uses to pressure Yejide and further domesticate her.

When Yejide explained to her that she hadn't done anything that would stop Akin from conceiving a child with Funmi, Moomi finally snaps.

*"Have you ever seen God in a labour room giving birth to a child? Tell me, Yejide, have you ever seen God in the labour ward? Women manufacture children and if you can't you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman."* (Adebayo, 2017: 45)

Moomi's dialogue above is one the most the most direct and brutal exposés of the core issue addressed in this research. It exposes the brutal reality of the reductions of womanhood to motherhood. Moomi once again reminds Yejide that her worth as a woman equates entirely with her ability to bear children. Moomi draws a firm and stark line that associates femininity and fertility. The process of bearing a child is not seen as a sacred moment either. It is described as a manufacturing process, suggesting that the role of a woman in this monumental moment in their life is merely functional rather than personal or emotional.

In 2017, research was conducted to determine how the dynamics of mothers and their daughters affect the discourse of reproduction. This was done by Dr Clare Bartholomaeus, who interviewed five pairs of mother and daughter. The interview shows that oftentimes, the expectation for woman to have children is not only direct in the form of overt questioning *"When are you going to have a baby?"* but can also be subtle in the form of emotional cues that pictured motherhood as the ideal way of life that fits into the *"heteronormative life course."* (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017).

Moomi, who has repeatedly pressured Yejide to bear children even when she

herself is trying her best to successfully conceive, firmly believes that to be a mother is the ideal life for a woman. Her pleas of “have mercy on me” show that not only does she pressure Yejide for the sake of heteronormality, but also a reflection of her belief in her own socially conditioned self-worth that’s tied to her daughter’s fertility.

The phrase “*if you can’t, you are just a man*” completely reduces and erases the womanhood of those who are infertile. It strips them not only of their social value but also of their gender identity altogether. “*Nobody should call you a woman*” excludes Yejide and other women who go through the same thing as her by redefining womanhood not by women’s inherent worth as human beings, their characters, or intellect, but by a single biological function.

It’s critical to note that throughout the novel, we can see that beyond her childlessness, Yejide is an independent and intellectual woman. She prioritises education by getting a degree and works hard to build her salon business. With the support from Akin prior to his polygamy, Yejide has successfully built a thriving salon with trusted employees and loyal customers. This goes to show that as a person, Yejide is more than what her womb can or can’t do. She is her own person with talents, passion, and dreams and therefore shouldn’t be seen solely as a wife and mother.

Yejide works hard to expand her business not only because she enjoys it but also because she wants to be able to support herself. Though Akin has given her a generous monthly allowance, Yejide doesn’t let herself be fully dependent on him. With her impressive educational background, she understands that she needs to be able to stand on her own two feet.

*“... I missed hairdressing and 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.”* (Adebayo, 2017: 32)

Regardless of the constant societal pressures surrounding childbearing that she faces and Akin’s betrayal, Yejide shows that she’s truly a woman with ambition, intellect, and independence. With her hard work, she earns a degree, builds her own salon, and manages a successful business. This is an impressive achievement in a society where women are often discouraged from standing on their own two feet and freeing themselves from fully depending on their husbands financially.

*“But when the mystique of feminine fulfillment sent women back home again, housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. Sexual love and motherhood had to become all of life, had to use up, to dispose of women’s creative energies.”* (Friedan, 2001: 261)

Through her work in the salon, Yejide has created an outlet for her creative energy. Before her marriage, she had already been making money through doing

other people's hair, and it helped her survive at times when her stepmother would withhold her allowance. Friedan mentions in her book how society often redirects women's ambitions, intellect, and creativity solely toward domestic roles. She brings up and critiques the post-war ideal that domesticity alone should fulfil a woman. It argues that it is to be expected from women to channel all their talent, education, and energy into motherhood and housework, at the cost of personal growth, autonomy, or professional development.

Even with all her achievements and successes, Yejide still finds no comfort in the end of her heated exchange with Moomi. Moomi no longer becomes a figure that radiates warmth for Yejide. She becomes both a source of comfort and pain as she nurtures and domesticates Yejide simultaneously. When Moomi hugs her at the end of their exchange, the embrace holds no warmth. Yejide's heart is far from consoled as Moomi's words sat in her stomach, *"cold and hard where a baby should have been"* (Adebayo, 2017: 45).

As the main character of the novel, Yejide is not the only victim of the reduction of womanhood to motherhood. The daughter of Iya Bolu, a woman who owns a business near Yejide's salon, has also become the subject of women's domestication.

*"Just wait until her breasts are sweet oranges and all the men that see her start standing stiff like soldiers. Small time, pregnancy will come."*

*'Not my daughter. God forbid.' Iya Bolu leaned closer to Aunt Sadia and raised her voice. 'My own daughter will go to school.'"* (Adebayo, 2017: 148)

The dialogue above is an exchange between Aunt Sadia, a customer in Yejide's salon, and Iya Bolu. It powerfully illustrates how the domestication of women and the reduction of womanhood to motherhood not only affect adult women like Yejide, but also young girls like Bolu. Iya Bolu, who was previously described by Yejide as someone who has a *"lack of formal education"* (Adebayo, 2017: 91), dreams for her daughter to become a doctor. She envisions her daughter's future rooted in her intellect and brightness. Aunt Sadia, on the other hand, sees that Bolu's beauty and identity as a woman is an inevitable path toward early motherhood.

Aunt Sadia's words are not just dismissive but also imply that beauty and education cannot coexist for a woman. She reduces Bolu to her physical changes that will happen down the road, suggesting that her body, not her intellect, will define her fate as a woman. The use of "sweet oranges" as the phrase to describe her breasts is a crude and sexualizing remark used to present the moment of her growth not just as it but as the beginning of her inevitable downfall into early pregnancy and societal expectation of motherhood.

Yejide breaks her silence during this exchange by intervening it with *"There is*

*nothing stopping a beautiful girl from facing her books, Aunty*" (Adebayo, 2017: 149). It is a subtle but important intervention that challenges the idea that femininity, ambition, and intellect are all able to coexist in a woman. This pattern aligns closely with Friedan's points in her book, which critiques the constructed perception of womanhood as a total way of life defined by domesticity and motherhood. Friedan observed that when motherhood becomes the sole measure of feminine fulfilment, the sole solution for women to be seen as their feminine selves, they are compelled to deny a broader world of possibilities open to them. This interaction demonstrates how this "mystique" that Friedan mentioned operates on a social level in Adebayo's narrative. It functions as a way to control and normalizes the confinement of women to reproductive roles.

This exchange becomes a harsh wake-up call that the reduction of womanhood of motherhood is not only experienced by those who are already married or of childbearing age, but is socially and culturally enforced at every stage of a woman's life. Society doesn't wait for a woman to choose her path but it anticipates and shapes it before she even has the chance to.

## Conclusion

This research reveals not just the personal tragedy of Yejide's infertility that leads to the reduction of her womanhood to motherhood, but the deeper, more complex societal belief and structure that equates a woman's worth with her ability to bear children. *Stay With Me* is a critique towards society that demands women to sacrifice their individuality, ambition, and emotional well-being for motherhood. This is not done voluntarily by women as a choice but as a desperate attempt to belong, as it becomes the measure of their identity. The pressure is not only felt and faced by Yejide alone, but it also casts its shadow on the lives of young girls like Bolu, revealing how early and quietly these expectations are imposed.

This research sees that *Stay With Me* begs society to question the pillars that become the foundation of those expectations. What do we lose when we reduce a woman and everything that she has built herself to be to just her womb? The answer lies in Yejide's pain, suffering, and resilience through it all. Her dreams, career, education, autonomy, and most important of all, her inherent worth as a person, that should be the pillar of her worth as a woman, are pushed aside in the pursuit of fulfilling societal expectations. Ultimately, *Stay With Me* is a powerful literary work that intervenes in the domestication of women and the reduction of womanhood to motherhood and demands a redefinition, one that recognises women as complete in themselves, regardless of whether or not they become mothers.

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