Stay With Me
By Ayobami Adebayo
ISBN 9781782119463

From the mid-1980s till just before the turn of the 20th century, Nigeria was ruled by a succession of military dictators. This period has captured the imagination of a generation of young Nigerian writers. Stay with Me, a product of those times, adopts a novel writing formula that has been shown to yield great dividends - pick a period of political upheaval and set a love story against it. The ancient Yoruba myths of The Tortoise and Olurombi, which form the matrix for the novel, both centre on the lengths to which an African woman would go to have children.

A culture in which female barrenness is seen as a curse is ready fodder for psychopathologies, from mood disorders to anxiety and other illnesses. One such pathology, as seen in Stay with Me, is pseudocyesis. This concept (the name attributed to John Mason Good in 1823, from pseudes, meaning false, and kyesis, meaning pregnancy) has been known since antiquity. Pseudocyesis is the false belief of pregnancy that is associated with objective signs and reported symptoms of being pregnant. Physiological manifestations of pseudocyesis include irregular menstruation, abdominal distension, a subjective sensation of fetal movement, changes in breast size and shape, nausea and vomiting. All of these are experienced by Yejide, the novel’s heroine.

The novel focuses on the psychosocial origins of pseudocyesis, emphasising the context of infertility, the personal grief of the protagonist, the feelings of insecurity, frustration and accompanying social stigma and the potential for infidelity as a remedy. There is some evidence that the early loss of a mother or polygamy may provide context for pseudocyesis; both of which are present in Yejide. Attribution to bewitchment and other cosmic forces often leads to seeking help from non-traditional (spiritual) sources, part of Yejide’s pathway to care.

The theme of infidelity is illustrated by the protagonist’s adultery with her brother-in-law. This aspect of the novel requires a degree of suspending disbelief, but it ultimately does not adversely affect our enjoyment of the passage in which all is revealed and ‘the fires of hell overflowed their banks and spilled into [their] bedroom’.

Staying with the theme of false pregnancy, we are reminded of an excerpt from Plato’s Timaeus: ‘The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren for too long after puberty it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body...’. Despite the improbability of this statement and its obvious patriarchal sentiment, the sense of it continues to generate topics for fiction, as demonstrated by this novel.

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doi:10.1192/bjb.2019.57

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