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Involuntary Childlessness and Coping Strategies in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Societal expectations from heterosexual couples often centre on the manifestation of fecundity within a year of the union. Faced with this expectation, involuntary childless couples experience great distress in the event of reproductive challenges which propel them to explore coping strategies to remedy the situation. This paper examines the coping strategies adopted by involuntary childless characters in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It identifies the problem and emotion focused coping techniques as strategies that proffer direct solutions, and mitigate the emotional turmoil occasioned by involuntary childlessness. The study finds that the problem and emotion focused coping strategies successfully resolve the condition of involuntary childlessness when they are jointly administered by the partners in the childless union and when the coping technique does not trigger more stressors for either partner.

Keywords: Stressors, coping strategies, childlessness, *Stay with Me*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Introduction

The notion of work-life balance suggests that individuals will often strive to maintain a balance between their careers and personal lives. Once adulthood is attained in many societies, the next question that usually follows is "when are you getting married?" This goes to show that achieving a balance in one's personal life is often subsumed into settling into family life and building a home. It is for this reason that P. A. Dykstra and G. O. Hagestad opine that a foundational element of a typical adult life is parenthood (1518). This suggests that couples who will never make this transition occupy a difficult position in the society. Consequently, individuals without offspring, especially women, are portrayed as "others" and as heteroclites (Letherby 7). Parenthood is generally regarded as more fundamental in the lives of women than men (Veevers *Childless*; Hird and Abshoff 347; Letherby; Bulcroft and Teachman 116), and the inability to take on the role of being a parent for women is largely assumed to be more disadvantageous, with more far-reaching consequences than for men.

Bamidele Rasak and Pelumi Oladipo define childlessness as the term for people having no children (44). Childlessness is generally characterized as voluntary or involuntary (Balen 25). Voluntary childless can be described as a decision not to have children, a condition that is more common in western countries than in poor resource nations (Balen 25). Involuntary childlessness is defined by Vula Baliotis as childlessness not by choice but by circumstance, whereby a couple have no children despite desiring parenthood. The reasons for involuntary childlessness frequently revolve around non marriage, late marriage, or infertility (Blake 245; Hagestad and Call 1338). To most people at midlife and especially those that are old, childlessness represents a blocked life goal. In short, not having children may deflate social recognition, and involuntary childlessness may lead to a sense of disappointment and failure, that, in turn, lessens people's sense of well-being (Hansen, et al. 3). The position held by Hansen, et al. greatly corresponds to the reviews of some critics on *Stay with Me,* which will henceforth be referred to as *Stay.* Alexandra d' Abbadie, for instance, opines that *Stay* is "driven by a masterfully paced plot, where secrets unfurl and shock you even at the very end." The story also mirrors the experiences of "a woman driven to her absolute wits' end by her in-laws and husband" (d'Abbadie).

Similarly, Laura Angela Bagnetto remarks that "the pain of infertility for a couple is just the tip of the iceberg in *Stay with Me*." The novel highlights an intricate

nexus of familial issues, several severe health challenges, and the Yoruba culture. The backdrop of the Bagangida regime of the 1980s forms the background of the story, just as the fledgling couple, Yejide and Akin "struggle to come to terms with secrets that could affect their future together." Sumaiyya Naseem states that even though Akin and Yejide have engaged in a present-day marriage instead of an old-fashioned one, they are not spared from "the familial pressure to have children." Yejide's agony when Akin takes a second wife creates "a new territory in terms of mental health representation."

In line with the above reviews, Diana Evans states that a woman without children in the Nigerian society is a disaster, and is assumed to have likely brought the calamity on herself. It is because of this that the childless protagonist in desperation behaves irrationally at the mountaintop. The reviews on *Stay* establish the relevance of children in the Nigerian society and the physical and psychological suffering their absence generates. This condition is what prompts the childless couple, Yejide and Akin to go out in search of coping methods.

The reviews on Adichie's fiction are robust and highly insightful. Critics have adopted different ideological positions in evaluating her corpus of works. Two dominant perspectives from which *Half of a Yellow Sun,* which will henceforth be referred to as (*Sun*), has been examined are its feminist and historical dimensions.

A. S. Okpala states that "the female protagonists… such as Kambili and Beatrice (in *Purple Hibiscus*), Olanna and Kainene (in *Half of a Yellow Sun*), and Ifemelu (in *Americanah*) challenge the circumscribed patriarchal social structures that suppress their individuality" (2). This action of theirs results in the reaffirmation of their identities as women, wives and mothers and the dismantling of the exploitive racial, gender and class barriers (Okpala 2). Similarly, Sophia Ogwude asserts that Adichie's humanistic treatment of the relationship between Olanna, Kainene and their lovers makes the relationship appear normal and common place even though to many critics in the Nigerian society, such relationships are questionable and unconventional. Ogwude states that "for minds trapped in primordial African values, the novelist could be considered iconoclastic but in reality, she is delightfully progressive" (122).

Gloria Ajami Makokha argues that the Nigerian woman experiences "double colonization, the first time by the British colonialists, and the second time by the Nigerian man in postcolonial Nigeria" (119). Furthermore, the mental colonization of the African woman makes her to accept patriarchy. Makokha posits that "The problem of patriarchy and domination of African women by the African men can be

solved by the men resorting to treating women as their counterparts, and not as second-class citizens, both in the domestic and formal set up" (119).

Uchenna David Uwakwe provides a discrepant critique of the feminist projection in *Sun*. He asserts that although a lot of questions on patriarchy are raised in *Purple Hibiscus*, the situation is different in *Sun* and *Americanah*, because both novels portray "a profuse characterization of women not exactly as being oppressed by man but indeed often browbeaten by their own self-delusion" (355). This is depicted in *Sun* through the valorisation of the masculinity of Odenigbo and Ojukwu, and demonizing of Mama.

Joke De Mey delves into the historical nature of *Sun* through an exploration of the intersection between history, literature, and trauma (23). Mey states that Adichie relies on post memory in her enactment of the Biafra war events. The therapeutic function of the novel is that it has a memorial function for Adichie and it also helps her to deal with inherited parental trauma (54). Chijioke Uwasomba similarly remarks that *Sun* deals with the relationship that exists between story and history. In *Sun*, Adichie succeeds in producing a work of faction in her narration of the Biafra war story. Uwasomba further states that:

> there can be no literature without a history because there is a clear connection between literature (story) and life (history). Literature and life can never be far apart. It is this intricate relationship between literature and life (history) that one sees Chimamanda Adichie exploring in [*Sun*]. (2)

The above reviews reveal that the tropes of childlessness, polygamy, patriarchy, feminism, and historicity have been closely examined by critics of *Stay*, and *Sun*. This paper, however, focuses on an in-depth study of the coping strategies adopted by the involuntary childless characters to mitigate the psychological stressors of childlessness.

Theoretical Background

Stressful encounters and coping strategies share an intimate relationship with the former giving rise to the latter. R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman in their transactional theory of stress state that "psychological stress refers to a relationship with the environment that a person appraises as significant for his or her well-being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources" ("Cognitive Theories of Stress" 63). The two cardinal processes that are captured in this definition are the principal mediating factors that interact within the person - environment transaction, namely; the stressful events and the coping strategies. These stressful events can

be described as stressors. Stressors are factors that induce negative stress responses. Sarah Lindberg defines stressor as "a person, place, or situation that is causing stress. Stress is the actual response to one or a combination of those stressors."

When a person encounters a stressful situation, the individual engages in an appraisal of the situation. These appraisals provide the means through which we understand what people do and think in a stressful situation, and this signifies a process-oriented tactic (Lazarus, *Stress and Emotion*; "Relational Meaning" 37). The appraisals can be divided into the primary and secondary evaluation methods. The primary appraisal deals with an assessment of whether the stressful situation poses as a threat, harm, or challenge (Lazarus, *Stress and Emotion* 76). The secondary appraisal on the other hand, has to do with the coping methods that can be used to resolve the stressful encounter (Lazarus, "Relational Meaning"). The secondary appraisal that encompasses coping techniques is the bedrock of the present paper.

Coping methods refer to the pattern of handling stressful encounters or disturbing life events. Lazarus describes coping as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts a person makes to manage speciûc external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (*Stress and Emotion* 110).

S. Folkman and R.S. Lazarus divide coping techniques into problem and emotion focused coping strategies. Problem focused coping techniques entail an attempt to reverse the stressful circumstances by means of direct action, decision-making moves, and problem-solving activities. The emotion focused coping methods are engaged in by managing the dispiriting emotions without an actual alteration to the condition (If It Changes 150). Coping is thus regarded as an adaptive process, which mediates between stress and its long-term effects on mental and physical health as well as on a person's functioning (Skinner, et al. 216).

Involuntary Childlessness and Coping Strategies in *Stay* and *Sun*

In *Stay* and *Sun*, the involuntary childless couples largely employ the problem and emotion focused coping strategies which are often used in unison to remedy the childless situation. In *Stay*, Yejide and Akin engage the problem focused coping strategies of medical/herbal treatments, religious intervention, surrogacy, and polygamy, and the emotion focused coping strategy of receiving emotional support. In *Sun*, the problem focused coping method is primarily engaged in through adoption

while self-acceptance and positive appraisal are used as emotion focused coping strategies.

In *Stay*, Yejide visits the hospital for a solution to her childlessness and when this fails, she goes in the quest of a religious intervention. She also accepts to be consoled and emotionally supported by Dotun. Akin on the other hand, adopts the problem focused strategies of herbal treatment, surrogacy, and polygamy as remedies to the childlessness situation. Yejide conducts numerous hospital tests which all give the unanimous results that "there was nothing preventing [her] from getting pregnant" (Adebayo 52). Similarly, Akin goes to the hospital to get tested, and when he returns, he misinforms Yejide that "the doctors had found nothing wrong with him" (Adebayo 52). Since medical science could not unravel the mystery behind her childlessness let alone resolve it, Yejide becomes "open to alternatives," especially spiritual ones (Adebayo 52). Yejide decides to take Mrs. Adeolu seriously and believe her testimony that Prophet Josiah is a miracle worker, especially since "her protruding stomach" served as proof to her claims (Adebayo 55-6).

Consequently, Yejide makes the journey to the Mountain top of renowned miracles (Adebayo 55) with a white goat and in the company of the prophet's assistant who keeps looking at her with keen and lecherous interest (Adebayo 56). After being asked to dance with the goat and breast feed it, Prophet Josiah sincerely assures her, "even if no man comes near you this month, you will be pregnant" (Adebayo 59). Subsequently, Yejide comes down from the mountain, and begins to feel the symptoms of pregnancy. Her stomach gradually becomes distended; she experiences nausea and begins to have food cravings. The only challenge Yejide has is that whenever she goes for a scan, the doctors always state that there is no sign of a growing foetus and suggest that she may be experiencing a chemical pregnancy, which Yejide firmly refutes. And so, instead of the visit to Prophet Josiah to serve as a solution, it unleashes more stress and tension in her. Yejide expects Akin to be supportive of her at this confusing time of her life. But when she insists that she is pregnant, Akin calls her a "crazy woman" (Adebayo 116) and walks out on her. Only Dotun understands her urgent need to believe she is pregnant. In the face of her husband's disbelief, "[Dotun] believed her… his eyes held something [she] hadn't seen in Akin's eyes for so long…[she] wanted to hug Dotun…until his faith restored her dwindling hope and drove away the familiar despair that was eating [her] up" (Adebayo 116). Later in the day, when Dotun comes into her room, she allows herself to be comforted by him and they engage in lovemaking.

At the point where Yejide allows herself to be comforted by Dotun, she does not realize that she is acting out the script of surrogacy that is carefully planned as a problem focused coping strategy by Akin, for his brother to seduce and impregnate her. After several failed attempts to cure his impotence through herbal treatment, Akin resorts to surrogacy. It is during his university days that Akin discloses to Dotun that he has never had an erection. He visits Baba Suke, who gives him an herbal concoction that merely serves as a purgative and does not cure his condition (Adebayo 281). Concerned about his wife's desperation to have children, and his inability to impregnate her, Akin opts for surrogacy by begging Dotun "to come to Ilesha to get Yejide pregnant" (Adebayo 282). Surprisingly, Akin is willing to give up his "piece of land," something which Zifa refrains from in *The Song of a Goat*.

Akin decides that Dotun would come over whenever his wife is ovulating, "once every other year, Dotun was supposed to spend a weekend with us, get my wife pregnant and go back to Lagos" (Adebayo 226). At this time, Akin prides himself on his craftiness, at arranging his brother and wife like two laboratory rats, in one place to copulate and bring forth children in his name. He does not at this time realize how mentally devastating the experience of seeing his brother sleep with his wife will be. On the day the copulation is to take place, Akin rushes back home to call off the deal with Dotun. On his way back, he half hopes that he will meet them sitting in the parlour watching television, but instead, he meets the bedroom door securely locked and his brother actively and passionately involved with his wife. All Akin can do is to "stand in front of the bedroom door and [weep]" (Adebayo 222). Akin had hitherto felt sorry about the guilt he was compelling his wife to carry, being forced to "find comfort in a man she despised" (Adebayo 224). But on this day, it is only intense rage that Akin feels, "he didn't give a damn how [Yejide] felt that day. Rage coiled itself around [his] throat like a constrictor, made [his] eyes water, gave [him] a sharp pain in [his] chest] each time [he] took a breath" (Adebayo 225). Before the copulation ends, Akin cleans his eyes and drives off so as not to be caught by the duo. Much later when he returns home and Yejide comes and puts her hand around him, "[he] wanted to hurt her, to make her feel pain. [His] hands shook when [he] touched her hair" (Adebayo 225).

The deployment of surrogacy as a problem focused coping strategy to involuntary childlessness, leads to more chaos, misunderstanding and unhappiness between Akin and Yejide. This is because it is not mutually agreed upon by the couple and so is interpreted as a betrayal by both. The episodes of intimacy between Yejide and Dotun give rise to the birth to Olamide, Sesan and Rotimi, children with sickle cell.

And so, Yejide transits from a childless woman to one who buries the children she has waited all her life to have.

Another problem focused coping strategy adopted by Akin is polygamy. Akin succumbs to family pressure to marry Funmi because his family believes that she will produce the much-wanted children which Yejide's supposed "bareness" prevents her from doing. After Yejide gets pregnant and delivers the first child, Akin's friends gather together to celebrate and congratulate him. But only Funmi knows the truth and so, she asks Akin, "Do you think I'm a fool? Your lies and the fake nonsense you've been doing in bed; you think I don't know? Is it because I've not decided to expose you?...Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant?" (Adebayo 260). In an attempt for Akin to cover Funmi's mouth to prevent her from shouting, she staggers backwards and tumbles down the stairs, thereby adding her death to his book of guilt and misdeeds.

It is imperative to note that the problem focused coping techniques initiated by Akin such as surrogacy and polygamy, have all the markings of stressors because they increase the emotional turmoil and angst he experiences in the marriage. Instead of mitigating the effects of involuntary childlessness, on the contrary, these coping strategies widen the wedge between Akin and Yejide and damage their marriage further. Aside from the resentment of feeling betrayed which Akin nurses against Yejide because she allows herself to be seduced by Dotun; the damage which surrogacy wrecks in the marriage is also exemplified when Akin comes home and finds Dotun having sexual intercourse with his wife without his permission, even after their deal has ended and Dotun is supposed to maintain a good distance from Yejide (Adebayo 226). At this time in the narrative, Dotun had confessed the arrangement he has with Akin to her on the assumption that she already knows. Yejide is shocked that her husband hatches such a devious plan with Dotun, thereby taking unfair advantage of the hurt and vulnerability in which her childless condition places her. As a result, Yejide develops a deep hatred and anger for Akin. Therefore, on the day when Akin catches her and Dotun intimately involved, Yejide is the first to see her husband standing by the door. Akin thought that Yejide's eyes will show guilt, but rather, her "eyes stared at [him] with contempt. She glared at [him] as if [he] was an insect that she would like to crush" (Adebayo 226).

The suspense between when Yejide sees Akin and when Dotun realises that his brother is around is gripping. Dotun tumbles from the bed, completely taken by surprise; he stammers some words and begins to beg, at the same time trying to tie a bed sheet around his torso. Akin marches towards Dotun with just two weapons:

his "raging anger and clenched fist" (Adebayo 227). Akin rams his fist into Dotun's face, breaking his nose, punching his neck, chest, stomach, until there is blood everywhere, both Dotun's and his blood. At this moment, Akin's gaze is drawn to the offending body part that contrives all the havoc, "and a lifetime of rage heated up [his] head" (Adebayo 227). At this point, Akin begins to consider all the feverish dreams he has been having, of wishing that he can trade places with Dotun ever since he began to sleep with Yejide. His rage at this point can be best described as the fury of an impotent man who knows no bounds. Akin's brain explodes with all the tension, frustration, and depression which his impotent condition has caused and in extreme rage, he attacks Dotun's manhood, an attack that almost cost his life (Adebayo 228). After the incident, Yejide stops talking to Akin; she spends her mornings in the hospital with Dotun. Akin wishes that Dotun was dead, and had never been born. But inwardly he knows this is a lie; in reality, he wishes that he had never been born (Adebayo 229). This event marks the climax of the narrative, and from this point, the relationship between Akin, Yejide and Dotun unrelentingly retrogresses.

In *Sun*, Odenigbo gets involved with Amala and thereby cheats on Olanna. She copes with the stressor induced by Odenigbo's infidelity by moving out of his house and vengefully paying him in the same coin. After Olanna sleeps with Richard, the act "took on a redemptive significance for her.... selfishness liberated her" (Adichie 245) and only then is she able to forgive Odenigbo and move back into his apartment. In her period of hurt, Olanna also visits Father Damian to get religious support and empathy, but this fails because Father Damian emphasizes that she gets closer to God without addressing her hurt or providing soothing words. Most importantly, Olanna and Odenigbo employ the problem focused coping strategy of adoption and the emotion focused coping strategies of self-acceptance and positive appraisal in relation to Olanna's failure to have children. Olanna and Odenigbo equally accept the reality that she might not be able to bear him children. Odenigbo does not anchor his relationship with Olanna on the basis of reproductive capabilities, and so he tells her, "our relationship is the most important thing to me, we have to make the right decision for us" (Adichie 251). When Amala delivers the baby, Olanna positively appraises the situation as an auspicious occurrence and decides to adopt the baby (Adichie 251). Olanna is like Flora Nwapa's Efuru, who reconciles with the fact that she may never have children of her own and so dedicates the remainder of her life to the service of *uhamiri*, and becoming a mother figure to the community. Olanna becomes an adoptive mother and nurtures Baby in the best way possible.

Surprisingly, Odenigbo is prepared to send the child away to be raised by Amala's people in the village because what is important to him is the preservation of their relationship.

Olanna's family members try to dissuade her from her decision to adopt Baby. Her mother plainly tells her, "it is not right for you to raise the child he had with a village girl he impregnated as soon as you travelled" (Adichie 251). Even Odenigbo's mother rejects the child, she connives with Amala to conceive when she sees that it is not a baby boy. Olanna counters every opposition to her decision to raise the child. She realises that she will find solace in raising her, especially as she cannot have children of her own. She convinces Odenigbo that it is the right thing to do and he unconditionally supports her. Odenigbo and Olanna's coping strategy of adoption is laudable because they find a panacea to the situation of involuntary childlessness in unison. Odenigbo's attitude contradicts that of Akin in *Stay* who ropes Yejide into a web of lies and half-truths, arranging with his brother to seduce and impregnate her, and to take the limelight off himself; he yields to family pressure to marry a second wife even when he knows that he is the impotent partner. Kainene rightly calls Odenigbo a "revolutionary" (Adichie 36). This is aptly manifested in Odenigbo's progressive outlook to life, especially as it pertains to childlessness. He subverts traditional and antiquated African beliefs of blaming a woman for involuntary childlessness and taking drastic measures to resolve the situation often to the detriment of the relationship. Olanna and Odenigbo's mutual acceptance of the situation deflects stressors from Olanna and preserves their relationship; whereas Akin in *Stay* adopts coping strategies that serve as stressors to Yejide.

Conclusion

An exploration of coping strategies adopted by involuntary childless characters in *Stay* and *Sun* has been the focus of this paper. *Stay* and *Sun* present two set of couples: Akin and Yejide, Odenigbo and Olanna, who adopt a mixture of problem and emotion focused coping strategies to combat involuntary childlessness. Akin uses the problem focused coping strategies of herbal treatment, surrogacy and polygamy, while Yejide uses the problem focused coping strategy of medical treatment, and religious intervention. In additioin, she also uses the emotion focused coping strategy of receiving emotional support from Dotun. In *Sun*, Odenigbo and Olanna utilize the problem centred coping methods of adoption in addition to the emotion focused coping techniques of self-acceptance, and positive appraisal. Surrogacy and polygamy problem focused coping strategies which serve as stressors

to Yejide are ironically coping strategies to Akin as illustrated in *Stay*. Other problem focused coping strategies like medical/herbal treatment and religious intervention are not useful in resolving the problem of childlessness between Akin and Yejide because they are insincerely deployed by Akin who deceives Yejide that he is medically sound and thereby deflects the blame for their childless condition from himself while prophet Josiah takes advantage of childless women in the guise of proffering spiritual solutions. This situation differs from what obtains in *Sun*, where the problem focused coping strategy of adoption in addition to the emotion focused coping strategies of self-acceptance and positive appraisal prove to be very successful in resolving involuntary childlessness because they are mutually accepted and carried out by Odenigbo and Olanna. Most importantly, the coping strategies do not induce more stressors for them. Olanna accepts the fact that she cannot have children of her own and moves for the adoption of Baby. Odenigbo also accepts Olanna as a partner despite her impaired fecundity. When Olanna suggests they adopt Baby, Odenigbo complies only because Olanna desires it and assures him that it will not destroy their relationship. Adichie's characterization of Odenigbo and Olanna challenges society's negative attitudes towards childless women. It also promotes adoption as a viable alternative to couples facing involuntary childlessness.

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