Masculine Anxieties and Patriarchal Pressure: Male Vulnerability in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how patriarchal constructions of masculinity shape male identity and psychological experience in contemporary Nigerian fiction. While African feminist scholarship has extensively analyzed the impact of patriarchy on women, this study shifts attention to the ways in which the same system produces anxiety, repression, and instability in men whose identities are tied to expectations of sexual potency, emotional control, and reproductive authority. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity alongside African cultural studies on fertility and gender, the thesis offers a comparative analysis of Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that masculinity in both novels operates as a fragile performance sustained through secrecy, silence, and control. In *Stay with Me*, Akin's impotence generates a crisis of identity that leads to deception, emotional repression, and violence as he attempts to maintain the appearance of masculine authority. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Baba Segi's patriarchal power depends on the illusion of fertility, which is sustained by the silence of his wives and collapses upon the revelation of his sterility. In both texts, reproductive expectations function as central markers of masculine legitimacy, and their disruption exposes the instability of patriarchal identity.

The thesis argues that patriarchal masculinity relies on collective silence that protects male reputation while transferring the visible consequences of reproductive failure onto women. However, this concealment produces significant psychological costs for men, including anxiety, isolation, and emotional disintegration. By foregrounding male vulnerability, the study contributes to African literary criticism by positioning masculinity as a site of tension and

instability rather than a fixed position of dominance. It also calls for further interdisciplinary and comparative research on masculinity, mental health, and reproductive stigma in African contexts.

Keywords: *African literature, masculinity, patriarchy, performance, reproductive anxiety, vulnerability*

Dedication

To my brother, Kizito Aidam,

for your support and encouragement.

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Table of Contents

Page

Title Page ……..... 1

Abstract ……...…..…. 2

Dedication …….....……....…. 4

Acknowledgements 5

Table of Contents ……...……...…. 6

Introduction ……..……...……..... 7

Chapter One ……...…….....21

Chapter Two …….……...……..…… 45

Conclusion …….…….……... 70

Works Cited ……..……..…….72

Introduction

In contemporary African literature, questions of gender have most often been examined through the lens of women's oppression and resistance within patriarchal systems. Canonical texts such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* foreground the structural and emotional burdens imposed on women by marriage, motherhood, and cultural expectations. Feminist literary criticism has rightly centered these narratives, exposing how patriarchy disciplines women's bodies, silences their voices, and constrains their autonomy. As a result, women's suffering under patriarchal rule has become a dominant and necessary focus of African gender studies.

Yet patriarchy does not operate as a system that affects women alone. While masculinity is frequently associated with authority and power, it is also shaped by rigid expectations that demand dominance, emotional restraint, sexual potency, and control. These expectations can become damaging to the men who are required to embody them. Within many African societies, manhood is closely tied to fatherhood, virility, and the ability to lead and provide. Failure to meet these standards often carries profound psychological and social consequences. Despite this reality, the emotional and psychological burdens borne by men within patriarchal structures have received comparatively limited attention in African literary criticism.

This thesis turns to two Nigerian novels, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, to examine how men are shaped, constrained, and in some cases undone by hegemonic ideals of masculinity. In both texts, male protagonists are not presented simply as agents of patriarchal dominance but as figures whose identities are destabilized by the very systems they are expected to uphold. Akin and Baba Segi occupy positions of social authority as husbands, yet their infertility exposes the fragility of masculine

ideals built on sexual potency and reproductive success. Through these characters, the novels challenge the assumption that patriarchy functions only as a source of male privilege, revealing instead how it produces anxiety, secrecy, repression, and violence in men who cannot conform to its demands.

By focusing on male vulnerability, infertility, emotional suppression, and the internalized fear of appearing weak, this study explores how masculinity is constructed, enforced, and internalized within Nigerian cultural contexts. Drawing on R. W. Connell's (also known as Raewyn Connell) theory of hegemonic masculinity, the project examines how dominant models of manhood are maintained through silence and performance, and how men who fail to meet these ideals experience psychological distress and relational breakdown. In doing so, the thesis responds to a significant gap in existing scholarship by centering the inner lives of male characters rather than treating them solely as symbolic representatives of patriarchy.

Although African feminist criticism has generated a rich body of work on women's experiences, studies of masculinity in African literature remain relatively underdeveloped. Where masculinity has been addressed, male characters are often read primarily as oppressors or embodiments of patriarchal failure, rather than as individuals shaped by the same structures they enforce. Scholars such as Lindsay and Miescher have argued that African masculinities are neither fixed nor monolithic but are historically and culturally negotiated. Connell's framework further demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity dominates by marginalizing not only women but also men who do not conform to its ideals. However, literary analyses that apply these insights to the psychological dimensions of male experience remain limited.

Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge this absence. Critics examining *Stay with Me* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* have largely focused on the suffering, resilience,

and agency of female characters, often interpreting male figures as antagonistic forces or narrative obstacles. What remains underexplored is the interiority of these men, the anxieties they suppress, the fears that govern their actions, and the emotional costs of maintaining masculine authority. This thesis intervenes in that gap by placing male vulnerability at the center of analysis. It approaches masculinity not as a stable position of power but as a contested and fragile identity shaped by cultural expectations of fertility, control, and dominance. By asking not only how masculinity is performed but what it costs to perform it, the study contributes to a growing but still marginal body of scholarship that takes seriously the gendered struggles of African men within patriarchal systems.

Theoretical Framework and Scholarly Gap

To interrogate the pressures placed on male identity in these novels, this study adopts Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as its primary analytical framework. Connell conceptualizes masculinity not as a biological essence but as a set of socially produced practices situated within relations of power. Masculinity, in this sense, is constructed through dominance, authority, and the repudiation of weakness, while alternative or failed masculinities are subordinated or marginalized. This framework is particularly relevant to the analysis of African literary texts in which cultural expectations of manhood are entangled with fertility, lineage, and public authority.

Within Nigerian patriarchal contexts, masculinity is often defined by the ability to produce heirs, control women's bodies, and maintain emotional restraint. Hegemonic masculinity rewards men who conform to these expectations with social legitimacy, while punishing those who fail through ridicule, shame, and loss of status. Connell's theory illuminates how this system operates not only to privilege certain men but also to discipline them. Men who

cannot perform the required scripts of virility and control remain socially dominant in appearance yet psychologically unstable in practice. This tension is central to the characterization of Akin in *Stay with Me* and Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, both of whom occupy positions of authority while privately confronting infertility and insecurity.

While feminist criticism has been instrumental in exposing how patriarchy subjugates women, it has often treated masculinity as a stable source of power rather than a site of crisis. In many readings of African fiction, male characters are interpreted primarily as oppressors, symbols of cultural decay, or antagonists to female agency. Such interpretations, though valuable, risk flattening masculine identity into a single dimension of dominance. Connell's framework challenges this simplification by demonstrating that hegemonic masculinity relies on constant performance and concealment, rendering it deeply fragile.

Existing scholarship on *Stay with Me* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* has largely centered women's suffering, particularly in relation to infertility, polygamy, and marital control. Critics have examined Yejide's humiliation and endurance, as well as the emotional and physical toll placed on Baba Segi's wives. These studies illuminate the gendered burden placed on women within patriarchal systems, yet they often leave unexplored the internal dynamics that govern male behavior. The men's silence, rage, and manipulation are frequently described but rarely theorized as responses to masculine anxiety and fear of emasculation.

This thesis addresses that gap by reading male behavior through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and masculine crisis. Rather than framing Akin and Baba Segi solely as perpetrators of patriarchal harm, the study analyzes them as subjects shaped by restrictive gender norms that demand invulnerability. Their secrecy, deception, and eventual violence are read not as innate

cruelty but as symptoms of a cultural system that equates masculinity with potency and control. Connell's distinction between hegemonic, complicit, and subordinated masculinities allows for a nuanced examination of how these men benefit from patriarchal privilege while simultaneously suffering under its demands.

By foregrounding masculine interiority, this study contributes to a growing but still limited body of scholarship that examines men as gendered subjects in African literature. It extends conversations in masculinity studies by situating African male characters within global theories of gender while remaining attentive to local cultural realities. In doing so, the thesis reframes infertility not only as a medical or social problem but as a catalyst that exposes the instability of patriarchal masculinity itself.

Cultural Studies Approaches

Cultural studies provide a necessary framework for understanding how infertility functions not merely as a medical condition but as a socially regulated crisis of gender identity within African patriarchal systems. Cultural studies scholarship on West African societies provides an essential framework for understanding how masculinity is constructed around sexual performance and reproductive authority. In studies of Ghanaian media and social life, sexual capacity is frequently treated as a metonym for masculine power. In her work on impotence and masculinity in Ghana, Mensah Adinkrah argues in his article "Better Dead Than Dishonored: Masculinity and Male Suicidal Behavior in Contemporary Ghana" that sexual dysfunction carries intense stigma, describing impotence as "a private matter" that exposes men to ridicule and humiliation if revealed (475). Because masculine identity is closely tied to sexual prowess, exposure of impotence can produce what has been described as symbolic social death (Adinkrah 475). The ability to perform sexually and father children is often regarded as the ultimate

validation of manhood, while sexual failure threatens a man's authority within both family and community.

Medical and sociological studies reinforce this cultural logic. Amidu et al. observe that in many Ghanaian contexts a man's conception of himself "rests hugely on his ability to perform his conjugal duties," and sexual dysfunction significantly diminishes quality of life and interpersonal standing (7). Reproduction is not only biological but symbolic, functioning as proof of virility, lineage continuity, and masculine competence. Adomako Ampofo, Okyerefo, and Pervarah similarly note in "Phallic Competence: Fatherhood and the Making of Men in Ghana" that reproductive success and sexual performance remain central markers of prestige and authority for men within many West African societies. Masculinity is therefore not merely a gender category but a public identity continually validated through bodily performance.

These cultural dynamics are not limited to Ghana but resonate broadly across West African contexts, including Nigeria, where both *Stay with Me* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are situated. In both novels, male identity is inseparable from fertility, potency, and reproductive control. Baba Segi's authority is sustained by the visible evidence of children, while the exposure of his sterility produces collapse and humiliation. Likewise, Akin's impotence threatens not only marital stability but his sense of masculine legitimacy. In each case, male vulnerability is rendered unspeakable within a system that equates sexual capacity with power.

Importantly, African scholarship also emphasizes that silence becomes a culturally sanctioned strategy for managing this vulnerability. Adinkrah documents cases in which men conceal impotence at great psychological cost, including extreme distress and even suicide when exposure becomes unavoidable (475). Such findings illuminate the narrative trajectories of Baba Segi and Akin, whose secrecy functions as a defensive response to a cultural environment that

offers little space for male fragility. Masculinity in these texts is therefore not simply dominance but performance, sustained through concealment, displacement, and control.

Situating the analysis within African cultural studies prevents an overreliance on Western masculinity theory alone. While Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful structural framework, West African scholarship demonstrates that virility, lineage, and sexual performance carry specific historical and communal meanings within African contexts. By foregrounding African studies on impotence, reproductive stigma, and masculine identity, this thesis anchors its reading of both novels in the cultural realities that shape the anxieties of Baba Segi and Akin. Sexual performance becomes not merely a biological function but a social currency upon which masculine legitimacy depends. When that performance fails, both texts reveal the resulting crisis as psychological, relational, and cultural.

Scholars working within anthropology, psychology, and cultural analysis emphasize that infertility destabilizes masculinity precisely because virility and reproductive success are treated as foundational markers of manhood. This perspective is significant to the present study, which examines how literary representations of male infertility reveal the emotional, social, and ethical consequences of patriarchal silence.

Marcia Inhorn's ethnographic study, "Sexuality, Masculinity, and Infertility in Egypt: Potent Troubles in Marital and Medical Encounters," offers foundational cultural evidence on the relationship between masculinity and infertility in African contexts. Inhorn argues that male infertility remains an under acknowledged yet significant cause of childlessness because impotence and infertility are culturally equated with losses of virility and manhood (289). This cultural conflation explains why male infertility is often concealed, denied, or displaced onto women. Men who acknowledge infertility risk symbolic emasculation, while women are

expected to absorb responsibility and social blame. Inhorn's findings illuminate the behavior of fictional figures such as Akin in *Stay with Me*, whose secrecy stems from the fear that admitting infertility would negate his identity as a husband and man.

Inhorn further demonstrates that medical institutions often reinforce patriarchal silence rather than disrupt it. She observes that women are routinely subjected to repeated gynecological examinations, while male partners are rarely asked to provide semen samples (292). This medical bias sustains the assumption that infertility is a female problem, even when evidence suggests otherwise. Such practices resonate with Yejide's experience in *Stay with Me*, where she endures invasive rituals and public scrutiny while Akin remains shielded from examination. Patriarchal norms thus operate through both cultural expectation and institutional practice, intensifying women's suffering while preserving male authority.

A particularly revealing aspect of Inhorn's study is her description of a culture of silence within fertility clinics, which she characterizes as a don't ask, don't tell approach to male sexual dysfunction. Physicians avoid confronting male infertility for fear of offending patients, leaving women sexually frustrated, emotionally isolated, and burdened with unfulfilled expectations of motherhood (297). Women become silent custodians of masculine pride, expected to protect male identity even at personal cost. This pattern mirrors the dynamics in both novels under study, where women conceal male infertility to preserve family stability, as seen in Yejide's protection of Akin's secret and in the collective silence of Baba Segi's wives.

Inhorn also notes that cultural codes governing gender and sexuality prevent women from openly addressing male infertility. Sexual initiation is framed as a strictly masculine prerogative, making it socially unacceptable for women to request intercourse or semen samples even when medically advised (298). Women are silenced first by medical structures and then by cultural

prescriptions of femininity. Male infertility therefore remains unspoken, while women bear the visible consequences of childlessness. This dual silencing provides a cultural parallel to Nigerian literary depictions, where women shoulder blame while lacking the authority to articulate the truth.

Even with the availability of reproductive technologies such as Viagra and intracytoplasmic sperm injection, Inhorn emphasizes that treatments are pursued in secrecy and marketed as remedies for an otherwise hidden and emasculating condition (300). Technological advancement does not dismantle patriarchal definitions of masculinity but instead enables their concealment. Infertility remains a threat to male subjectivity rather than a shared marital challenge.

Complementing Inhorn's ethnographic work, Ezeugwu and Ojedokun examine how masculine norms across African societies shape men's mental health in "Masculine Norms and Mental Health of African Men: What Can Psychology Do?" They identify restrictive emotionality as a dominant feature of masculinity, encapsulated in cultural proverbs that insist men must not cry or express vulnerability. Such expectations compel men to suppress distress and perform emotional control, even when facing psychological crisis. This framework is directly applicable to the male characters analyzed in this study, whose silence and anger reflect culturally sanctioned responses to perceived failure.

Drawing on social construction and role theory, Ezeugwu and Ojedokun argue that masculinity is learned through family structures, cultural wisdom, and social hierarchies rather than inherited biologically. Men are expected to embody strength, provision, and authority, and failure to meet these ideals leads to stress and emotional breakdown. This framework clarifies

the internal conflict experienced by characters such as Akin and Baba Segi, whose identities collapse under the contradiction between social expectation and bodily limitation.

The authors further link restrictive masculinity to destructive coping mechanisms. Men discouraged from emotional expression often turn to aggression, risk taking, or substance abuse. Evidence from East Africa reveals how men overwhelmed by failure and social pressure resort to alcohol or suicide, described as unhealed psychological wounds (3). These findings align with the fictional trajectories of male characters whose repressed shame erupts into violence or manipulation. Akin's eventual aggression and Baba Segi's authoritarian posturing can be read as culturally conditioned responses to masculine anxiety rather than isolated moral failures.

Ezeugwu and Ojedokun also highlight the stigma surrounding mental health, noting that depression among African men is frequently dismissed as weakness. Men who express vulnerability risk ridicule and loss of status. This stigma mirrors the silencing of male infertility in *Stay with Me*, where acknowledging impotence would invite social humiliation. By drawing these parallels, the study situates literary representations of masculine anxiety within documented cultural realities.

To counter these patterns, the authors propose an inclusive model of intervention that emphasizes awareness, psychological referral, bias reduction, and integrated care. While their recommendations are policy oriented, they underscore a key point relevant to this thesis: patriarchal masculinity is socially produced and therefore capable of being unlearned. The tragic trajectories of Akin and Baba Segi illustrate the cost of a cultural system that offers no space for male vulnerability.

Finally, Moolla's article "The Polygynous Household in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*: A Haven in a Heartless World" analysis of *The Secret Lives of Baba*

Segi's Wives situates masculinity within the contradictions of modern Nigerian society, where global ideals of monogamy coexist with enduring economic and cultural justifications for polygyny. She argues that the polygynous household, while flawed, can offer women certain forms of material and emotional agency absent in monogamous arrangements (90). This reading reveals how Shoneyin's novel simultaneously critiques and sustains patriarchal systems, framing women's resilience as cultural pragmatism rather than feminist liberation.

Taken together, these cultural studies approaches provide the interdisciplinary grounding necessary for reading infertility as a crisis of masculinity rather than a private medical failure. They support this thesis's central claim that patriarchal constructions of masculinity convert male vulnerability into female suffering while producing cycles of secrecy, repression, and collapse that harm both genders.

Previous Scholarship

Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi's article "Gender (Re)Configuration in Nigerian Literature through Time and Space" provides a historical and theoretical foundation for understanding how gender identities develop within Nigerian fiction. He traces a shift from the patriarchal representations common in early male authored texts to the assertive feminist voices of contemporary women writers such as Lola Shoneyin. Ogunyemi argues that Nigerian literature has moved from narratives that privilege masculine dominance toward those that foreground female autonomy and resistance, shaped by historical change and shifting spatial dynamics (123). Drawing on theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, and Russell West-Pavlov, he emphasizes that literary representations of gender are not fixed but are produced within specific cultural and spatial conditions that influence interpretation over time (124).

By placing Shoneyin within a literary continuum that stretches from Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe, Ogunyemi maps a genealogy of gender consciousness that reflects Nigeria's evolving social landscape. His argument that space functions as an instrument through which gender hierarchy is justified, and later contested, aligns with the spatial politics of *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (128). In Shoneyin's novel, the domestic sphere, historically associated with female confinement, becomes a site of negotiation, resistance, and revelation. Ogunyemi's engagement with Kristeva's semiotic feminism reinforces the idea that meaning emerges through relational contexts rather than stable certainties, a principle evident in the wives' use of secrecy, bodily autonomy, and strategic silence to reconfigure patriarchal authority within the household.

While Ogunyemi's work is important for mapping the evolution of gender consciousness in Nigerian literature, it does not offer sustained attention to masculinity as a fragile and internally conflicted identity, nor does it address infertility as a destabilizing force within patriarchal structures. This gap is partially addressed by Faith Ben-Daniels and Nathaniel Glover-Meni, whose study remains the only scholarly work to date that places *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Stay with Me* in direct comparative conversation. Their article examines masculinity in both novels through Connell's framework, arguing that patriarchal cultures equate manhood with fertility and family leadership, thereby subjecting men to intense pressure to perform biological and social dominance (55).

Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni argue that infertility renders men "false men" who retain patriarchal privilege while concealing their physical limitations. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Baba Segi's sterility is revealed through medical testing, leaving him emotionally broken and symbolically unmade. His despair, captured in his lament that his life is ruined and

shrouded in darkness, demonstrates how infertility strips him of masculine pride and existential stability (57). Teacher's reaction, which expresses a sense of camaraderie with another man stripped of manhood, further confirms infertility as a shared but rarely articulated male burden within patriarchal societies.

The authors emphasize that cultural definitions of masculinity privilege reproductive success over ethical responsibility or emotional maturity. Baba Segi's friend, Olaopo's assertion that potency is measured by whose wives bear children exposes how masculinity is evaluated through outcomes rather than integrity (58). The description of Baba Segi's body as medically empty despite its outward appearance of virility underscores the gap between performance and reality (59). The authors interpret this contradiction through Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, showing how patriarchal authority is enacted even in the absence of biological capacity.

Similar dynamics operate in *Stay with Me*, where Akin's infertility remains hidden and women absorb the blame. When Baba Lola introduces Funmi as a solution to childlessness, he assumes Akin's virility and frames infertility as Yejide's failure, reinforcing gendered responsibility (60). Akin's silence confirms his complicity, forcing Yejide into humiliating religious rituals, including the demand that she breastfeed a sacrificial goat at Prophet Josiah's mountain. The authors show how such scenes channel desperation and suffering onto women while protecting male identity through silence.

Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni conclude by situating these narratives within a broader African literary tradition that links masculinity to violence and fear of exposure. They draw parallels to Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Idan in Darko's *Not Without Flowers*, demonstrating a persistent literary pattern in which men destroy others and themselves to avoid appearing weak (62). Their conclusion emphasizes that patriarchal definitions of masculinity

impose heavy burdens on men that ultimately rebound onto women, producing cycles of silence, humiliation, and harm (66).

While Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni make a significant contribution by placing these two novels in dialogue, their analysis treats masculinity primarily as a social role under threat rather than as an internally fractured identity shaped by secrecy, emotional repression, and self deception. Their study does not fully examine how narrative structure, unreliable narration, and gendered silence function as mechanisms through which masculine anxiety is sustained and concealed. This thesis builds on their comparative framework but extends the discussion by foregrounding infertility as a psychological crisis that destabilizes male subjectivity from within, rather than merely undermining social authority. By combining close reading with masculinity theory and cultural analysis, this study shows how patriarchal expectations compel men to protect their identities through secrecy and violence, while transferring the emotional and social costs of that protection onto women. In doing so, the thesis reframes male infertility not only as a social problem but as a narrative and ethical crisis at the heart of contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Chapter One

Masculine Anxiety and Impotence in Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me*

Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* narrates the unraveling of a marriage under the weight of reproductive expectation in contemporary Nigerian society. Told through alternating perspectives, the novel traces how masculinity, sexual performance, and secrecy shape intimate relationships within a patriarchal culture that equates manhood with potency and control. At the center of the narrative is Akin, whose impotence becomes the unspoken crisis that destabilizes both his identity and his marriage.

Although the novel gives narrative voice to both husband and wife, its central conflict originates in Akin's inability to perform sexually and his refusal to name that inability. Within a social framework that defines masculinity through virility and reproductive authority, impotence is not merely a bodily condition but a threat to male legitimacy. Akin's early rejection of polygamy signals a desire for intimacy grounded in love rather than hierarchy, yet four years of childlessness expose the fragility of this ideal. When his family introduces a second wife as a solution, the gesture functions not as remedy but as concealment. Male impotence remains unnamed, while blame is displaced onto Yejide (his wife). Her humiliation, desperation, and submission to medical and spiritual interventions emerge as consequences of a masculine crisis she is not allowed to identify.

This chapter offers a close reading of *Stay with Me* that centers Akin's impotence as a psychological and cultural rupture. Impotence is presented not as biological infertility but as a collapse of patriarchal manhood, a condition that compels secrecy, emotional repression, manipulation, and ultimately violence. Through unreliable narration, delayed revelation, and shifting perspectives, Adébáyọ̀ gradually exposes the cost of concealment. Akin's refusal to

confront his impotence fractures his sense of self, corrodes intimacy, and redirects the emotional and social burden of his anxiety onto his wife. The novel demonstrates that when masculinity is bound to sexual performance and dominance, the failure of the body becomes a threat to identity itself. In this way, *Stay with Me* portrays impotence as both a personal crisis and a cultural indictment, revealing how patriarchal ideals generate not only female suffering but also male psychological disintegration.

Impotence and the Displacement of Blame

One of the early indications of how patriarchy frames infertility in *Stay with Me* is found in the introduction of Funmi as Akin's second wife. This moment is structured by Akin's unacknowledged infertility, which renders male reproductive failure unspeakable and redirects blame onto his wife. Rather than questioning Akin's ability to father a child, his family immediately locates the problem within Yejide's body, reaffirming a patriarchal logic in which male virility is assumed and female fertility is policed. Baba Lola, Akin's father, articulates this logic when he tells Yejide, "Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too" (10). His statement implies that fertility circulates among women and that Yejide's supposed barrenness is the true obstacle to familial continuity. By presuming Akin's virility, Baba Lola reinforces the cultural script that infertility is a woman's burden and a woman's failure.

Yejide's response exposes how thoroughly this script has erased Akin from reproductive responsibility. She reflects, "I had expected them to talk about my childlessness… What I was not expecting was another smiling woman in the room, a yellow woman with a blood-red mouth who grinned like a new bride" (10). Her anticipation of blame reveals how she has internalized the patriarchal assumption that infertility must belong to her. The possessive framing of "my

childlessness" later in the novel confirms this internalization, as Yejide unconsciously absolves Akin of accountability. The juxtaposition of her shock and Funmi's introduction shows how polygamy functions as a patriarchal solution that conceals male infertility while humiliating women through substitution and displacement.

Yeboah, Mohammed, Freitas, and Otoo in "Everyday Stories and Untold Tales of Infertility: A Literary Examination of Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*"offer a useful framework for understanding this moment. They argue that African societies "treat infertility as exclusively a female problem, even though male infertility is as common as female infertility" (171). This belief system explains why Akin's family treats his impotency as impossible and seeks resolution through the introduction of another woman rather than medical inquiry or shared accountability. Yejide's admission that she expected blame directed at herself aligns with what Yeboah et al. describe as "the automatic bearing of blame by women," a cultural reflex that maintains male reproductive authority by rendering male infertility invisible. Through this erasure, masculinity remains intact, protected by silence and tradition.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity further clarifies why this logic persists. In *Masculinities*, she defines patriarchy as "a structure of social relations which guarantees men's dominance over women" (77). Within this structure, masculinity is sustained through authority, silence, and control, while vulnerability is displaced onto women. Akin's family participates in this structure by treating his impotency as unthinkable and repositioning Yejide as the site of failure. The decision to introduce Funmi is therefore not a neutral cultural practice but a ritual reinforcement of male privilege. It demonstrates how a man's reproductive failure can be concealed through the replacement of a woman, preserving masculine authority while intensifying female vulnerability.

Yeboah et al. observe that this scene "exposes how biased society is about fertility and condemns the unjust treatment women are subjected to" (174). Funmi's entrance transforms Yejide's private grief into a public spectacle, forcing her to witness her displacement in real time. Yet the cruelty of this moment also lies in how effectively it protects Akin from scrutiny. While Yejide becomes the visible site of shame, Akin's infertility remains unnamed, untreated, and unchallenged. Patriarchal order is preserved through her humiliation and his silence.

The public dimension of this encounter reflects what Oseghale and Akhuemokhan describe as the "great distress" infertility produces when "societal expectations from heterosexual couples centre on the manifestation of fecundity within a year of the union" (47). In such contexts, childlessness becomes a collective concern rather than a private struggle. Polygamy is presented as a practical solution that restores social credibility, even as it deepens psychological and emotional fractures within the marriage. As Oseghale and Akhuemokhan note, coping strategies shaped by social pressure often "create new stressors" when they ignore emotional realities (54). The introduction of Funmi exemplifies this dynamic. It resolves nothing but instead magnifies Yejide's suffering and Akin's guilt.

Adébáyọ̀ renders this moment with careful symbolic detail. Funmi's "yellow" skin and "blood-red mouth" mark her as both desirable and threatening. She appears not simply as another woman but as the embodiment of patriarchal promise, the illusion that masculine failure can be solved through female replacement. The domestic space becomes a site of judgment and control, stripped of intimacy and transformed into a stage for enforcing gender hierarchy. The imagery underscores how cruelty is disguised as custom and how violence operates beneath aesthetic surfaces.

Akin's role in this moment is defined by strategic silence. He does not protest, explain, or intervene. His refusal to speak operates as participation rather than passivity. By allowing his family to enact the ritual of substitution, Akin preserves the fiction of his virility while consenting to the redirection of blame onto Yejide. This silence exemplifies what Connell identifies as hegemonic masculinity, a mode of power sustained through emotional restraint and distance rather than overt assertion. Akin's authority is maintained precisely because he does not have to speak.

The introduction of Funmi also demonstrates how women become agents in reproducing patriarchal blame. Akin's mother and Baba Lola (his father) enforce the logic that infertility must belong to Yejide, not their son. As Yeboah et al. note, mothers-in-law play a significant role in sustaining patriarchal norms by policing female fertility and shielding male identity (182). This complicity ensures that the system survives by circulating blame among women while protecting men from accountability. Connell describes this process as a form of participation through hierarchy, where even those harmed by patriarchy may reinforce its rules to secure limited power within it (79).

Through the introduction of Funmi, *Stay with Me* exposes patriarchal blame as a moral economy in which women absorb the costs of male silence. What is framed as a culturally sanctioned solution to infertility becomes an instrument of humiliation and control. By locating this event early in the narrative, Adébáyọ̀ establishes infertility as a crisis shaped not only by biology but by gendered expectations that demand women suffer in order to preserve masculine pride. The scene makes clear that the preservation of male identity within patriarchy depends on the displacement of failure onto women and the collective refusal to name male vulnerability.

Impotence and Masculine Secrecy

Akin's struggle with impotence is the secret that defines his marriage. His inability to perform sexually threatens the foundation of masculine identity within a patriarchal culture that equates manhood with potency, authority, and control. Rather than confront this condition, Akin chooses silence and deception, strategies that allow him to preserve the appearance of masculinity while concealing sexual failure. His impotence is never named within the marriage, and the social label of infertility is instead displaced onto Yejide (his wife), who comes to believe that their childlessness is her responsibility.

During an intimate conversation, Yejide pleads for honesty, inviting transparency and emotional partnership. She says, "So, Akin. You can confess all your secrets to me now, dirty or clean… There were things I could have told her. Should have said to her. I smiled" (25). This moment marks a critical refusal. Akin's silence is not hesitation but deliberate withholding. By choosing to smile rather than confess, he denies Yejide access to the truth of his sexual incapacity and replaces intimacy with performance. His silence preserves masculine authority by ensuring that his impotence remains unspoken and unexamined.

Later, when confronted, Akin attempts to justify his deceit by framing it as protection. He insists, "This is not cheating on you; I don't have a new wife. Trust me, it's for the best. My mother won't pressure you for children any more" (18). His justification exposes the logic of patriarchal masculinity, where deception is reframed as care and authority is maintained through control over information. What he refuses to name is his impotence. Rather than confronting vulnerability, Akin manipulates circumstances to sustain the illusion of masculine competence.

Gbadegesin provides a clear reading of this pattern by demonstrating how language encodes Akin's inner conflict. Through corpus based analysis, she shows that Akin's narration is

dominated by first person constructions that signal anxiety and self deception. Statements such as "I didn't have to think before I answered" and "I could act as if I didn't know what was going on" reveal a self divided between performance and truth (9). The repeated foregrounding of "I" functions as a compensatory assertion of control at the very moment when bodily control has failed. Gbadegesin explains that this tendency to mask shame through restrictive emotionality and pretense is a defining feature of patriarchal masculinity rather than a personal flaw (2). Silence becomes a strategy through which impotence is hidden and masculine identity is preserved.

Yeboah et al. further clarify how this silence operates as power. They argue that patriarchy not only oppresses women but also traps men in silence, leaving them unable to admit weakness without risking social disqualification (171). Akin's refusal to speak is driven by this fear. To confess impotence would be to forfeit authority, respect, and control. His silence therefore functions as a performance of strength, what the authors describe as a façade designed to validate manliness (191). Yet this performance isolates him emotionally and fractures his capacity for intimacy.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity illuminates this dynamic. Masculinity, she argues, is produced through social practices that reward dominance and emotional restraint (77). Akin conforms to this model by suppressing vulnerability and regulating emotional expression. His silence is not absence but action. By controlling what can be known, he maintains authority within the marriage. This same restraint shapes his response to loss. When their children die, Akin suppresses grief, extending the logic of masculine containment that also governs his silence about impotence. Emotional repression becomes a habit that structures both sexual and affective life.

Psychological scholarship reinforces this reading. Ezeugwu and Ojedokun observe that African men are socialized through cultural proverbs that equate emotional expression with weakness. The belief that men must not cry produces unresolved psychological wounds that manifest as denial, aggression, and self destruction. Akin's repression aligns with this pattern. He assures Yejide that "the doctors had found nothing wrong with him" (Adébáyọ̀ 52), a lie that converts sexual failure into medical innocence. This misdirection preserves masculine pride but corrodes trust, transforming the marriage into a performance sustained by concealment.

Akin's deception thus reflects what Connell calls the patriarchal dividend, the unearned insulation men receive from social accountability (79). His silence shields him from public scrutiny while Yejide absorbs the stigma of childlessness. In this way, *Stay with Me* reveals that impotence is not merely a bodily condition but a masculine crisis managed through secrecy, manipulation, and violence. Adébáyọ̀ shows that patriarchy does not eliminate male vulnerability but hides it by displacing its consequences onto women.

Impotence and Masculine Anger

Akin's anger must be understood as a response to impotence and the threat it poses to his masculine identity. His sexual dysfunction is not publicly acknowledged, yet it shapes his reactions to perceived disrespect and loss of authority. Under patriarchal logic, masculinity is tied to potency, control, and social esteem. Because Akin cannot embody sexual potency, he compensates by performing authority in other visible ways, most notably through anger and aggression.

When he lashes out at Yejide, saying, "You called me a bastard in front of my uncle. You disrespected me" (18), his outrage exceeds the immediate situation. The insult wounds him not only because of public embarrassment but because it touches the insecurity already lodged

within him. Yejide observes, “Already, I was coming undone, like a hastily tied scarf coming loose, on the ground before the owner is aware of it” (19). The unraveling of the marriage mirrors the unraveling of Akin’s carefully guarded self-image. His anger functions as an attempt to stabilize an identity that is internally unstable.

Yeboah et al. describe this dynamic as a feature of patriarchal masculinity, where men “validate their manliness through aggression and dominance rather than communication” (191). Akin’s anger is therefore not spontaneous but strategic. When Dr. Bello informs Akin that Sesan is not biologically his, he is revealing the truth behind the child’s conception. Because Akin is impotent, he had secretly arranged for his brother Dotun to sleep with Yejide in order to produce a child while preserving the appearance of his own fertility. Confronted with this revelation, Akin performs the outrage expected of a betrayed husband. He recalls, “I made sure I seemed angry enough. Behaved the way I imagined a man would when discovering that a child wasn’t his. I punched a wall, yelled and slammed the door” (Adébáyọ̀ 191). The phrase “seemed angry enough” exposes the theatrical quality of his rage. He is not simply expressing emotion; he is performing masculinity. His reaction is calibrated to meet cultural expectations of how a potent man ought to behave.

Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity clarifies this performance. She argues that masculinity operates as a dominant social ideal that few men fully achieve but all are pressured to approximate (76). For Akin, impotence threatens his proximity to this ideal. Since he cannot assert potency sexually, he asserts authority through temper, intimidation, and control. His anger becomes a substitute for the virility he cannot display. What appears as dominance is in fact compensation.

Gbadegesin connects this compensatory behavior to repressed shame, noting that "infertile men mask shame with restrictive emotionality, pretense, and sometimes aggression" (2). Although Akin's condition is impotence rather than sterility alone, the psychological logic is similar. The scene in which he attacks Dotun illustrates the intensity of this internal conflict. Akin unexpectedly discovers Dotun and Yejide together, the very arrangement he had secretly orchestrated in order to produce a child and conceal his impotence. Faced with the physical reality of this arrangement, Akin experiences an overwhelming surge of rage. He narrates, "Rage coiled itself around my throat like a constrictor" (Adébáyọ̀ 225). In the violent confrontation that follows, he kneels between Dotun's legs and twists his penis in an attempt to injure him. This act is symbolically charged because the attack is directed at the organ that represents sexual potency. By targeting Dotun's sexual capacity, Akin attempts to destroy the visible reminder of his own impotence. The aggression therefore reflects not simply anger over betrayal but a displaced response to the masculine inadequacy he struggles to conceal.

Ezeugwu and Ojedokun frame such behavior within a broader African context of masculine socialization. They argue that boys are raised under the belief that "boys do not cry, and men do not shed tears," a cultural script that equates vulnerability with weakness. Over time, this repression produces what they describe as "unhealed psychological wounds" (144). Akin's emotional restraint is not strength but injury. Because patriarchy denies him permission to grieve or confess, anger becomes the only socially acceptable outlet for distress. His aggression is therefore both an assertion of control and a symptom of psychological fracture.

Adébáyọ̀'s narrative structure further exposes this fracture. Through alternating perspectives, the novel contrasts Akin's rehearsed justifications with Yejide's emotional openness. His internal monologues often rationalize deception, particularly his decision to

secretly arrange for his brother Dotun to sleep with Yejide in order to produce a child and conceal his impotence. Reflecting on this decision, he insists, “I did what I had to do. It was for the best” (Adébáyọ̀ 110). The statement reveals how Akin attempts to convert shame into logic by framing manipulation as necessity. Instead of confronting his sexual incapacity or speaking honestly with his wife, he reinterprets his deception as a responsible act meant to protect the marriage. The performance of anger and control thus replaces the possibility of confession. By preserving the appearance of masculine strength, Akin deepens his emotional isolation and reinforces the silence surrounding his impotence.

Yeboah et al. argue that patriarchy traps men in a paradox because it grants men authority while discouraging emotional vulnerability (171). Akin embodies this contradiction throughout the novel. His anger allows him to maintain the appearance of masculine control in public while concealing the insecurity produced by his impotence. This performance becomes visible when Dr. Bello informs him that Sesan is not biologically his. Instead of expressing genuine emotional conflict, Akin consciously stages a reaction that conforms to expectations of masculine outrage. He admits, “I made sure I seemed angry enough. Behaved the way I imagined a man would when discovering that a child wasn’t his. I punched a wall, yelled and slammed the door” (Adébáyọ̀ 185). The language of performance reveals that Akin’s anger is calculated rather than spontaneous. By displaying aggression, he preserves the image of masculine authority before others even as the truth of his impotence threatens his sense of self. His anger therefore sustains his public image but corrodes his private life. Violence and pride do not restore potency. They merely conceal impotence while deepening his emotional isolation.

Through Akin, *Stay With Me* shows that masculine aggression is often the outward face of inward collapse. Impotence destabilizes his identity, and patriarchy offers him only one

permitted remedy: control. When he cannot control his body, he attempts to control others. Yet the performance fails. His anger reveals not strength but fear, not authority but anxiety. In this way, Adébáyọ̀ reconfigures masculine pride as a fragile defense mechanism, exposing the destructive consequences of linking manhood to sexual dominance.

The Consequences of Akin's Impotence

Akin's impotence is not merely a private bodily condition; it is the hidden crisis that structures the marriage and determines the distribution of suffering within it. Because his inability to perform sexually cannot be admitted within a patriarchal culture that equates manhood with potency, authority, and control, the consequences of his condition are displaced onto Yejide. What remains unspeakable in him becomes visible in her. Her humiliation is therefore not incidental but a structural effect of his silence.

Akin's refusal to confront his impotence produces a moral and social vacuum that must be filled. Rather than interrogating his sexual incapacity, his family assumes his virility and redirects reproductive anxiety toward his wife. This displacement is consistent with what Yeboah et al. describe as the cultural tendency to treat infertility as exclusively a female problem even when male infertility or impotence is equally common (171). In Akin's case, the social fiction of male potency must be preserved at all costs. The preservation of his masculine identity depends on ensuring that responsibility never attaches to him.

As a result, Yejide internalizes blame for a condition that does not originate in her body. She confesses, "I had expected them to talk about my childlessness" (16). The possessive framing reveals how thoroughly Akin's impotence has been erased from public consciousness. His silence allows the language of failure to attach to her alone. In this way, impotence becomes

a protected secret, while infertility becomes a public accusation. Akin's masculinity remains intact precisely because it is not examined.

The consequences of this concealment intensify once social pressure escalates. Yejide's visit to Prophet Josiah's mountain illustrates how Akin's impotence is managed through ritual displacement. She recounts being instructed "to sit on the ground with my legs stretched out, squeeze my breast and push the nipple to the open mouth in my arms" (52). This spectacle is not simply an act of desperation; it is the externalization of Akin's hidden inadequacy. While she submits to bodily humiliation, his impotence remains unnamed and unchallenged. Her body becomes the site upon which masculine failure is symbolically corrected.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity clarifies this dynamic. In patriarchal systems, masculinity is sustained through authority and the appearance of control, even when that control is fragile (77). Akin's impotence threatens the foundation of his masculine legitimacy. Rather than surrendering authority by confessing vulnerability, he permits a system in which Yejide is disciplined, inspected, and corrected. His silence is therefore not passive. It is a form of participation that allows the gender hierarchy to operate in his favor.

Oseghale and Akhuemokhan's analysis of coping strategies in *Stay with Me* further illuminates the destructive logic at work. They argue that when reproductive failure occurs, couples often adopt coping mechanisms shaped by social pressure rather than emotional honesty (47). In Akin's case, coping does not mean confrontation. It means concealment. By allowing Yejide to pursue rituals and remedies, he avoids exposing his impotence. The burden of action rests entirely on her. As the authors note, such strategies often create "new stressors" rather than resolve underlying tensions (54). Akin's decision to preserve pride instead of confessing truth multiplies suffering within the marriage.

The emotional cost of this displacement accumulates. Yejide admits, “I simply had to get pregnant, as soon as possible, and before Funmi did. It was the only way I could be sure I would stay in Akin’s life” (44). Her desperation reflects the stakes created by Akin’s silence. Because his impotence remains hidden, pregnancy becomes the only visible proof that the marriage can survive. Yet this urgency is generated not by her biological inadequacy but by his refusal to acknowledge his own. His protected masculinity requires her submission to anxiety, competition, and humiliation.

Gbadegesin observes that patriarchal cultures treat impotent men with derision, encouraging them to mask shame with restrictive emotionality (2). Akin’s concealment fits this pattern precisely. He avoids exposure by allowing a false narrative of female infertility to dominate the household. His masculinity is preserved through silence, but that preservation demands sacrifice. Yejide’s humiliation is the cost of maintaining his image.

Even the social and religious institutions that surround them reinforce this arrangement. The prophet disciplines Yejide’s body rather than questioning Akin’s potency. Family members urge her to act, pray, and endure. In each instance, the system works to protect male identity from scrutiny. Akin benefits from what Connell calls the patriarchal dividend, the insulation men receive from structures that shield them from accountability (79). His impotence remains invisible, while Yejide absorbs both stigma and correction.

Adébáyọ̀ constructs this imbalance deliberately. The narrative juxtaposes Akin’s hidden crisis with Yejide’s public suffering in order to expose the asymmetry at the heart of patriarchal marriage. The humiliation endured at Prophet Josiah’s mountain, the anxiety produced by the introduction of Funmi, and the internalization of blame all originate from the same source: Akin’s unacknowledged impotence. His silence creates the conditions for her degradation.

Through this displacement, *Stay with Me* demonstrates that impotence in a patriarchal society is never contained within the male body. It is redistributed. The male subject retains authority by transferring vulnerability outward. Women become the visible carriers of a failure that is not theirs. In centering Akin's impotence, the novel reveals that masculine anxiety does not disappear under patriarchy. It is merely concealed, and its concealment produces suffering that radiates through the marriage. Yejide's humiliation is therefore not a separate theme but the direct consequence of a masculinity that refuses to admit its fragility.

Protecting Masculinity Through Maternal Policing

The mother-in-law's accusation must be read not simply as an attack on Yejide but as a mechanism for shielding Akin's impotence from exposure. Her declaration, "Women manufacture children and if you can't you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman" (47), functions as an aggressive redirection of attention. The insult appears to discipline Yejide, yet its deeper function is to secure Akin's masculine identity by making his sexual incapacity unspeakable.

In a culture where manhood is equated with potency, Akin's impotence cannot be publicly acknowledged without collapsing his authority. The solution, therefore, is not to question him but to redefine womanhood around reproductive success. By equating femininity with fertility, the mother-in-law eliminates any conceptual space in which male sexual failure might exist. The accusation is less about Yejide's body and more about preserving the fiction of Akin's virility.

Yeboah et al. explain that African societies often treat reproductive failure as exclusively female even when male infertility or impotence is equally common (171). This cultural reflex protects male identity by transferring reproductive responsibility onto women. The mother-in-

law's speech enacts precisely this reflex. Rather than asking whether her son can perform sexually, she asserts with certainty that womanhood itself is defined by successful reproduction. In doing so, she reinforces the illusion that masculinity is intact.

Akin's silence during this confrontation is crucial. He does not interrupt, defend, or correct his mother. His muteness preserves the narrative that blames Yejide. This silence must be understood as active participation. By allowing the insult to stand, Akin protects his impotence from scrutiny. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity clarifies how this operates. Patriarchal systems maintain male dominance not only through visible authority but through structures that render male weakness invisible (77). The mother becomes an instrument within that structure, absorbing and redirecting suspicion away from her son.

The insult itself exposes the fragility of the masculine identity being protected. If Akin's sexual capability were secure, there would be no need for such aggressive enforcement of reproductive expectations. The violence of the language reveals anxiety beneath the surface. To declare that a woman who cannot produce children is "just a man" is to reinforce the idea that reproductive ability defines gender legitimacy. Ironically, this definition is the very standard Akin cannot meet. Yet rather than confront that contradiction, the family intensifies its policing of Yejide.

Gbadegesin's observation that patriarchal cultures treat impotent men with derision helps explain this defensive posture (2). Because impotence threatens social standing, families often collaborate in sustaining silence. Publicly humiliating Yejide restores stability to Akin's image. If she is defined as defective, he remains whole. The mother's accusation therefore performs a stabilizing function. It reaffirms male sexual competence through female degradation.

Oseghale and Akhuemokhan note that communal expectations surrounding fecundity generate intense anxiety within marriage (47). In this scene, that anxiety is externalized through verbal aggression. The mother-in-law speaks with authority not because she knows the truth but because the system allows her to assume it. Her confidence rests on a patriarchal consensus that men are presumed capable unless proven otherwise. Since Akin's impotence is concealed, the burden of proof falls on Yejide.

Akin benefits from what Connell calls the patriarchal dividend, the insulation men receive from structures that shield them from accountability (79). The mother-in-law's enforcement of reproductive norms is one such structure. While she appears dominant in the domestic sphere, her authority reinforces the broader hierarchy that protects male identity. She disciplines Yejide so that her son need not confront himself.

The generational continuity of this accusation is also significant. Patriarchal systems endure because they are reproduced within families. Older women enforce rules that stabilize masculine authority. In doing so, they preserve their own limited power within the hierarchy while sustaining the broader structure that prioritizes male legitimacy. The accusation is therefore both maternal and institutional. It is tradition speaking in defense of male vulnerability.

Through this episode, *Stay with Me* reveals that Akin's impotence is not merely a personal crisis but a protected secret supported by collective denial. The mother-in-law's voice becomes a barrier preventing scrutiny of male sexual failure. Her words attack Yejide, yet their true function is defensive. They construct a world in which masculinity cannot fail and therefore cannot be questioned.

By centering Akin's silence and the family's collusion, this scene demonstrates how patriarchy sustains masculine authority through displacement. The accusation is not an isolated

act of cruelty but part of a wider mechanism that redistributes shame away from male bodies. Akin remains untouched not because he is innocent but because the system is designed to protect him. His impotence survives unexamined while the woman absorbs its social cost.

Akin's Surrogate Scheme and the Illusion of Control

Akin's impotence reaches its most calculated expression in the arrangement he orchestrates with his brother Dotun. Unable to perform sexually and unwilling to confess that inability, he constructs an elaborate surrogate scheme designed to preserve the appearance of masculine potency. He later admits, "That was all it took to have Olamide, one weekend. The master plan was to have four children: two boys, two girls. Once every other year, Dotun was supposed to spend a weekend with us, get my wife pregnant, and go back to Lagos" (220). His language is striking. He calls it a "master plan," presenting deception as strategy and manipulation as foresight.

More revealing still is his confession, "I always assumed I was the instigator, the one who decided when it was time for them to go into a room and make babies" (220). This assertion exposes the psychological function of the scheme. Because impotence strips him of sexual authority, he attempts to reclaim authority through orchestration. If he cannot perform sexually, he can at least control reproduction administratively. In positioning himself as "instigator," Akin converts sexual failure into managerial power. The illusion of control compensates for bodily inadequacy.

Gbadegesin identifies this pattern as characteristic of masculine anxiety under patriarchal pressure. She notes that impotent men often "mask shame with restrictive emotionality, pretense, and sometimes aggression" (2). Akin's arrangement is pretense in its most elaborate form. His repeated emphasis on "I" in statements such as "I was the instigator" reflects what Gbadegesin

describes as a compensatory assertion of agency in the face of diminished virility (8). The more his body fails, the more his narration asserts dominance. Language becomes the site where masculine control is reasserted.

Oseghale and Akhuemokhan interpret this type of action as a distorted coping mechanism shaped by patriarchal expectations. They classify Akin's decision as a "problem focused coping strategy" that ironically functions as a stressor (57). Rather than confronting impotence through vulnerability or medical honesty, Akin constructs a secret reproductive system that maintains social credibility. The arrangement allows him to appear fertile while concealing sexual incapacity. Yet this solution intensifies fracture within the marriage. As the authors note, coping that excludes mutual consent generates deeper emotional instability (50). Akin's unilateral scheme confirms this pattern. His control is achieved at the expense of intimacy.

The arrangement also exposes the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity establishes standards few men can actually meet, yet all are compelled to approximate (77). Akin cannot meet the sexual standard, so he manufactures the appearance of compliance. The surrogate plan is therefore not merely deception. It is performance. It stages fertility so that masculinity remains intact in the public imagination.

Yeboah et al. observe that patriarchal systems treat male reproductive failure as culturally unthinkable (171). Akin's scheme embodies that refusal to think the unthinkable. Rather than risk emasculation, he transfers biological labor to his brother while retaining symbolic fatherhood. The secrecy surrounding Dotun's role protects Akin from ridicule. The children will carry his name. Society will confirm his masculinity. The lie becomes structurally sustainable because patriarchy values appearance over truth.

The psychological cost of this performance is visible when Akin later encounters the physical reality of his arrangement. He confesses, “All I could do was stand in front of the bedroom door and weep” (222). The image marks the collapse of administrative control. Confronted with the embodied proof of his impotence, the illusion fractures. Ezeugwu and Ojedokun’s analysis of restrictive masculinity helps explain this breakdown. They argue that when men are socialized to equate emotional expression with weakness, unresolved distress often manifests in destructive coping behaviors. Akin’s surrogate scheme is one such behavior. His tears outside the bedroom door expose what patriarchal training has forbidden him to admit: grief over his sexual inadequacy.

The irony of Akin’s “master plan” lies in its inversion of power. He imagines himself protector and strategist, yet he becomes hostage to his own fabrication. Gbadegesin notes that fear of exposure compels him to sacrifice honesty and intimacy (9). The more he insists on control, the more dependent he becomes on secrecy. What begins as an attempt to safeguard masculinity evolves into a structure of entrapment.

Adébáyọ̀ delays the revelation of the surrogate arrangement until late in the narrative, forcing readers to reinterpret earlier events. What appeared miraculous now appears engineered. When the truth is finally revealed, Akin explains the deliberate nature of the plan, admitting that Dotun was meant to impregnate Yejide so that he could preserve the appearance of fatherhood. Reflecting on this arrangement, he states that “the master plan was to have four children… once every other year Dotun was supposed to spend a weekend with us, get my wife pregnant, and go back to Lagos” (Adébáyọ̀ 220). This delayed disclosure mirrors the cultural silencing of male impotence itself. Just as the novel withholds the truth from the reader, Akin withholds it from his wife and community. Narrative structure thus reflects psychological concealment.

Ultimately, the surrogate scheme demonstrates that Akin's impotence is not contained within his body. It shapes every decision he makes. His deception reveals how patriarchal masculinity converts vulnerability into manipulation. Instead of confessing limitation, he manufactures an illusion of potency. Instead of sharing weakness, he orchestrates control. The arrangement with Dotun does not restore masculinity. It exposes its instability. The more elaborate the performance becomes, the more visible the anxiety beneath it. Akin's impotence therefore becomes the silent architect of betrayal, transforming love into strategy and fatherhood into performance.

Violence as the Collapse of Masculine Control

Akin's violence marks the final stage of his masculine crisis. When secrecy, performance, and manipulation fail to protect his illusion of potency, aggression becomes his last available strategy. He confesses, "I could hear her final yelp, see the way her hands tried to grab the banister after I pushed her down the stairs" (129). This moment is not sudden rage but the culmination of prolonged psychological strain. The act emerges from the fear of exposure. Once Funmi threatens to reveal his impotence, the structure of lies that sustained his authority begins to crumble.

Throughout the novel, Akin constructs elaborate mechanisms to conceal sexual incapacity. He orchestrates reproductive arrangements, performs anger when necessary, and regulates information carefully. Yet Funmi's confrontation disrupts this fragile system. Her challenge, "Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant" (260), directly names what he has refused to articulate. Impotence, once spoken aloud, destabilizes his masculine identity. In this confrontation, the threat is not merely relational but existential. If impotence becomes public knowledge, he loses not only marital authority but social legitimacy.

Gbadegesin interprets this violence as displaced aggression rooted in emasculation. She argues that impotent men often mask shame with restrictive emotionality and aggression (2). In Akin's case, aggression becomes a defensive reflex. When exposure becomes unavoidable, physical force replaces narrative control. Silence is no longer sufficient. His violence is therefore not impulsive but compensatory. It seeks to reassert dominance where biological failure has already undermined it. By silencing Funmi physically, he attempts to silence the truth symbolically.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity helps clarify the structural pressure behind this act. Masculinity, in this framework, is maintained through authority, control, and emotional restraint (77). Akin's impotence threatens all three. He cannot fulfill the sexual function expected of him, and he cannot admit vulnerability without risking ridicule. When hegemonic masculinity becomes unattainable, men often intensify performance. Violence, in this context, becomes exaggerated masculinity. It dramatizes power at the precise moment power is unstable.

The psychological dimension of this escalation is equally significant. Ezeugwu and Ojedokun observe that cultural injunctions such as "boys do not cry" produce emotional suppression and poor mental health outcomes. Akin embodies this suppression. He rarely expresses fear openly. He frames deceit as protection. He substitutes control for confession. Yet beneath this exterior lies accumulated shame. His breakdown after arranging Dotun's visits, when he stands outside the bedroom door and weeps (219), signals internal fracture. The violence that follows emerges from unresolved humiliation. Repression has transformed into eruption.

Yeboah et al. note that patriarchal systems equate virility with male worth (171). Within such systems, impotence signifies a loss of manhood. The exposure of sexual inadequacy

therefore carries social consequences beyond the private sphere. Akin's aggression must be read within this cultural framework. He is not reacting solely to personal betrayal but to the potential collapse of masculine identity. Violence becomes a desperate attempt to prevent symbolic castration.

Importantly, Akin's aggression does not restore stability. It reveals instability. After the act, there is no triumph, only disintegration. The performance of control collapses into guilt and psychological ruin. Immediately after pushing Funmi down the stairs, Akin recognizes the gravity of what he has done and confronts the irreversible consequences of his violence. He recalls hearing "her final yelp" and seeing "the way her hands tried to grab the banister after I pushed her down the stairs" (Adébáyọ̀ 129). The memory returns to him with painful clarity, exposing the horror of the moment rather than any sense of victory. Gbadegesin observes that emotions such as shame and helplessness surface repeatedly in his narration (15). These emotions do not disappear after violence; they intensify. Aggression fails to repair impotence because the crisis was never simply sexual. It was existential.

Adébáyọ̀ structures Akin's confession carefully, revealing his violence later in the narrative. This delayed disclosure mirrors the social silencing of male impotence. Just as his condition remains hidden for much of the novel, the full extent of his aggression remains concealed until the narrative demands revelation. The technique reinforces the theme of suppression. Masculine crisis is hidden, layered, deferred. When it surfaces, it does so catastrophically.

In this sense, violence functions as the endpoint of compensatory masculinity. Akin first attempts secrecy. Then administrative control. Then emotional performance. When each strategy proves insufficient, he resorts to force. The progression demonstrates how patriarchal ideals

narrow the acceptable range of male response. Vulnerability is forbidden. Admission is dangerous. Help-seeking is emasculating. What remains is domination.

Akin's violence therefore represents the collapse of the masculine façade he has struggled to maintain. It is not evidence of strength but of exhaustion. His impotence destabilizes his identity, and each attempt to restore it through control only deepens psychological fracture. By the time aggression emerges, masculinity is no longer sustainable as performance.

Through Akin's descent, *Stay with Me* illustrates how hegemonic masculinity becomes self-destructive when built on denial. The fear of exposure transforms secrecy into manipulation and manipulation into violence. Impotence, unspoken and unresolved, becomes the silent engine of catastrophe.

Chapter Two

Masculine Anxiety and Patriarchal Vulnerability in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* offers an exploration of how masculinity is constructed, performed, and sustained within patriarchal societies. The novel presents Baba Segi as a man whose identity depends on the cultural expectations that define manhood through authority, sexual potency, emotional restraint, and control over women. His polygynous household functions as a stage on which he performs masculinity, yet this performance is shaped by deep anxiety and the fear that the foundations of his identity may collapse. The appearance of confidence masks a reality marked by insecurity, dependence on tradition, and an intense need to protect his social image.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a crucial framework for understanding Baba Segi's world. Connell explains that masculinity is not an inherent quality but a social position constructed through practices that reward dominance and suppress vulnerability. Baba Segi embodies this model of manhood. He believes that the size of his household and the number of his children establish his superiority, and he interprets obedience from his wives as a sign of his natural authority. African masculinity scholarship by Morrell and Ouzgane further clarifies the cultural pressures that shape his identity. Their work shows that many African patriarchal communities define male worth through lineage, family expansion, and the ability to command respect within the domestic sphere. These expectations intensify Baba Segi's fear of failure and deepen the anxiety that governs his actions.

At the center of the novel is the tension between masculine performance and patriarchal vulnerability. Shoneyin demonstrates that the very structure that elevates Baba Segi also exposes him to intense emotional fragility. His belief that manhood is measured through fertility creates a

constant fear of inadequacy. His insecurity shapes his behavior toward his wives, especially his fourth wife Bolanle, whose education and presence disrupt his sense of control. The truth about his infertility threatens not only his authority but his entire understanding of himself as a man. His eventual breakdown reveals the emotional cost of conforming to patriarchal expectations that leave no space for honesty, openness, or vulnerability.

The wives complicate the narrative of patriarchal authority. While Baba Segi views them as subjects under his control, the novel reveals that they possess their own forms of power. Their cooperation, secrecy, and resourcefulness expose the limits of his authority. By sustaining the illusion of his fertility, the wives protect the household and ensure their own survival, revealing that patriarchal structures depend on the hidden labor and endurance of women. Their strategic choices highlight the contradictions in a system that elevates male authority while relying upon the social, emotional, and reproductive labor of women.

This chapter argues that Shoneyin uses Baba Segi's experiences to reveal the instability of patriarchal masculinity. Through his fears, his attempts at dominance, and his eventual collapse, the novel exposes masculinity as a fragile construction shaped by societal demands rather than natural superiority. The wives' agency and the revelation of hidden truths further dismantle the myth of male invulnerability. In this way, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* critiques a gender order that harms both men and women. It shows that a system that elevates dominance and suppresses vulnerability produces emotional wounds that shape individual lives and domestic relationships.

Male Sexual Privilege and Domestic Entitlement as Foundations of Masculine Power

Masculinity in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is constructed around power, control, and public recognition. Baba Segi enters the story with the self assured confidence of a

man who believes that his authority is unquestionable. His introduction in the novel immediately links his sense of manhood to fertility and the continuation of his lineage. He wakes with a persistent stomach pain and concludes that Bolanle's childlessness is the cause. The narrator notes that "when Baba Segi awoke with a bellyache for the sixth day in a row, he knew it was time to do something drastic about his fourth wife's childlessness. He was sure the pain wasn't caused by hunger or trapped gas; it was from the build-up of months and months of worry" (Shoneyin 1). The novel establishes that the physical discomfort he experiences is not medical but symbolic. It represents the emotional discomfort of a man whose authority feels threatened by the absence of children from his young educated wife. His pain is tied to the cultural expectation that a man must have children to assert his masculinity. Baba Segi fears that without a child from Bolanle, others may question the strength of his masculinity and the completeness of his household.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful lens for understanding these fears. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity secures its authority through social practices that present men as leaders whose value is affirmed by control, productivity, and the ability to reproduce the family line (Connell 67). Baba Segi embodies this model. His self worth rests on his ability to father children and command the women in his home. He says to Bolanle, "Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you are saddened by it as well. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them con men and rubbished their powers. Well...I have thought long and hard about it and I think we should go to the hospital to talk to a doctor." (Shoneyin 14). For him, each child increases his public display of success. The children are not simply members of the household. They are evidence of his virility. In his mind they prove his rightful place as the head of the family. His repeated reference

to Bolanle's childlessness therefore becomes more than a complaint. It becomes a crisis of identity. Baba Segi's identity as the head of a polygynous household is built on the belief that a man's sexual access to women and his command over domestic life are natural expressions of masculinity.

> Taju honked twice as he drove into the large compound. The entire household poured out of different rooms to welcome their benefactor. Baba Segi's three sons lay prostrate, their torsos curled upward like mats rearing their edges. The daughters knelt before him. From the eldest child to the youngest, he called them by their names: Segi and Akin, a daughter before a son, from his first wife; Tope, Afolake and Motun, three girls born eleven months apart, from the second; and Femi and Kole, sons smugly birthed by Iya Femi, his third wife. Baba Segi looked lovingly into the faces of the older children and pinched the cheeks of the younger ones. He made each child feel extraordinary (Shoneyin 8)

His confidence and authority arise from a cultural system that rewards men for exercising control in both the bedroom and the household. His sense of entitlement is clear from the opening chapter, where he proudly displays his sexual appetite and domestic dominance. Bolanle describes how he approaches sex as a ritual of entitlement rather than intimacy, insisting that

> I covered my ears with my hands. It must have been my vulnerability that turned him on because he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as possible. It was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust, that he didn't make light of his husbandly duties. He wanted to fuck me pregnant. If there was ever a moment when the memory of being raped became fresh in my mind, that was it. (Shoneyin 44).

His sexual hunger is not portrayed as desire but as proof that he is fulfilling the expectations of a man who must demonstrate vigor and potency.

Baba Segi's sexual narrative is inseparable from his belief that a man must have many wives and many children in order to be respected. When he reflects on the growth of his household, the narrator notes that:

> The door of the shack stood ajar so Baba Segi entered the small room. He frowned. It annoyed him that Bolanle was the reason he had come, when just two years before, he had boasted of his conquest: how Bolanle was tight as a bottleneck; how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed; and how she took the length of his manhood on her back—splayed out and submissive. He didn't quite know how he would tell the men that all his pounding had proved futile (Shoneyin 4)

This boast is not simply self confidence. It is a claim to a culturally sanctioned form of dominance. African masculinity scholars explain this link between male sexual access and social honor. Ouzgane and Morrell observe that many patriarchal communities construct manhood through "the demonstration of physical vigor, the expansion of the household, and the reproduction of lineage" (Ouzgane and Morrell 5). Baba Segi's pride in his wives and children shows that his authority is derived from these expectations. To him, the size of his family is tangible proof that he has met the requirements of masculinity.

However, beneath this confidence lies a deep vulnerability. Baba Segi's sense of entitlement is grounded in the belief that his sexual performance is the foundation of his authority. Any threat to this performance threatens his identity. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity explains why this is the case. Connell argues that masculinity is upheld through practices that "define authority, deny weakness, and reward emotional control" (Connell 77).

Baba Segi's confidence in his sexual potency allows him to believe that he naturally occupies a superior position within the household. He interprets the wives' obedience as confirmation of his power, believing that he has earned their respect through his performance of manhood.

This entitlement extends to his expectations of domestic submission. Baba Segi expects his wives to fulfill his needs without question. His authority is constructed through a language of ownership that reduces his wives to dependents whose value lies in their silence and obedience. His statement, "My wives do not visit my workplace. Your friend should have told you that. Why would they? They are taken care of; they have no reason to trouble me," (Shoneyin 4) reveals the extent to which he understands marital relationships through the logic of control rather than partnership. By insisting that they are "taken care of," Baba Segi frames his financial provision as justification for restricting their mobility and autonomy. The security he claims to offer becomes a mechanism that keeps his wives away from spaces where they might interrupt his performance of public masculinity. His question, "Why would they?" signals an expectation that obedient wives have no legitimate desires or responsibilities outside the household. This moment exposes how patriarchal entitlement shapes Baba Segi's identity. He relies on the idea that control over women confirms his authority. His anxiety emerges indirectly in the impulse to keep domestic life hidden from his workplace, a space where he must project confidence and stability. He does not see these rituals as social constructions but as natural expressions of gender hierarchy.

Yet the novel gradually reveals that this entitlement masks a significant emotional vulnerability. What Baba Segi views as the natural order is actually a system maintained by the wives' silence and cooperation. His authority depends on performances that the women have learned to provide in order to survive. The moment Bolanle enters the household, his confidence

begins to unravel. Her education threatens him because it disrupts the pattern of unquestioned submission. Teacher, Baba Segi's friend and adviser, exposes the limits of Baba Segi's authority and reveals how his masculine confidence depends on controlling the narrative of his household. When Teacher asks, "Why are you running skelter helter, Baba Segi?" (Shoneyin 5) he draws attention to Baba Segi's frantic attempts to reassert dominance in a situation he no longer understands. The imagery that follows, of sunlight "ripped through the torn mosquito net" (Shoneyin 5) and forming a halo near Baba Segi's head, intensifies the sense that he is being illuminated, even exposed, in his vulnerability. Teacher's observation that Baba Segi is "running from post to pillar" (Shoneyin 5) emphasizes his confusion and fear as the familiar strategies of spiritual intervention and traditional authority fail him. The suggestion that "since the woman is educated, she will only listen to people from the world she knows" (Shoneyin 5) disrupts Baba Segi's belief that he can manage his household through charisma and control. Teacher's advice to "take her to the hospital" (Shoneyin 5) shifts the solution into a modern, institutional space that lies outside Baba Segi's influence. This moment reveals a significant rupture in patriarchal power. Baba Segi's usual confidence is shaken because the problem requires a form of knowledge he cannot command. His panic shows how fragile his identity becomes when education and modernity challenge the authority he relies on to maintain his sense of manhood.

In this way, Shoneyin reveals that male sexual privilege is not a sign of strength. It is a structure built on insecurity, silence, and cultural reinforcement. Baba Segi believes that his sexual access to multiple wives and his control of the home make him powerful, but the narrative exposes the emotional fragility beneath this claim. His masculinity requires constant performance because it is not grounded in confidence but in fear of exposure. The structure that elevates him ultimately makes him vulnerable because it defines his worth through traits he does

not truly possess. Shafi's poststructural feminist reading expands this understanding of patriarchal violence by situating Shoneyin's novel within a wider African cultural context that disciplines women's bodies and identities. She argues that both Shoneyin and El Saadawi "demonstrate the female gender experience, dehumanization and deprivation on account of their sex in the patriarchal societies," revealing how domination is embedded in everyday social structures rather than isolated acts of abuse (Shafi 27). Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Shafi explains that femininity in these contexts is "a process of becoming and not of being," produced through repeated practices that teach women to internalise subordination (27). Her discussion of Iya Tope's (Baba Segi's second wife) forced marriage as "a product of transaction between her father and her husband," where she becomes "compensation for the failed crops," highlights how patriarchal economies treat women as property and deny them agency (Shafi 29). Shafi also interprets Baba Segi's infertility as a metaphor for masculine inadequacy masked by cultural privilege, noting that although the wives prove "Baba Segi does not have capability to impregnate any woman," society continues to blame women for infertility to protect male pride (30). Her analysis of Bolanle's rape further reveals how "victims are made to suffer eternal psychological trauma" while perpetrators move without consequence, showing how silence and shame reinforce patriarchal authority (30). Through this lens, Shoneyin's novel exposes the cultural mechanisms that sustain gendered violence and positions the women's resistance as a challenge to the performative structures of male dominance.

Masculine Anxiety and the Fragility of Patriarchal Authority

While Baba Segi's sexual entitlement forms the surface of his authority, the novel gradually reveals that this authority is shaped by deep anxiety. Shoneyin constructs a masculinity

that appears forceful but is constantly threatened by fear of inadequacy. The household rituals that reinforce his importance also expose how dependent he is on the submission of his wives. His confidence falters whenever he senses the possibility of resistance or disruption. This instability becomes clear when Bolanle enters the home. Her presence unsettles him because she embodies forms of power that do not fit within his understanding of gender roles. Baba Segi's reaction to Bolanle in this scene demonstrates how patriarchal authority becomes a performance meant to conceal male vulnerability. When he appears at her doorway, his posture is described as "curled inward like a boxing glove," (Shoneyin 13) a gesture that conveys both physical heaviness and emotional tension. His question, "Where did you read that a wife should leave the room when her husband is ailing?" (Shoneyin 13) attempts to reframe Bolanle's independence as disobedience. By assuming that her behavior must come from something she "read," he reduces her actions to a challenge to his authority rather than a personal choice. His refusal to enter the room or close the door further reveals that the exchange is meant to be observed, since he "wanted every ghost that stalked the corridor to bear witness to her unseemliness" (Shoneyin 13). The need for an audience indicates how fragile his sense of masculine control has become. He relies on public performance to restore the authority he fears he is losing, especially in relation to Bolanle, whose education destabilizes his belief that he should command unquestioned obedience. The moment exposes how patriarchal masculinity relies on surveillance and ritualized correction rather than emotional honesty, and how a man's insecurity can intensify his need to police female behavior.

Connell's framework helps explain this reaction. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity relies on the maintenance of dominance and the suppression of any force that threatens male authority. Masculinity is therefore sustained through a constant policing of

boundaries. In Baba Segi's case, the perceived threat is not physical but symbolic. Bolanle represents a form of womanhood that does not yield easily to patriarchal expectations. Her refusal to participate in household rivalries, coupled with her desire for self definition, unsettles a man who depends on the silent cooperation of women. His anxiety is visible in his attempts to monitor her, correct her behavior, and position her lower within the hierarchy of wives. These actions reveal that his authority is not natural but fragile, constantly tested by any deviation from expected gender norms. Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity depends on silence, emotional restraint, and the concealment of vulnerability (Connell 77). Baba Segi performs this restraint. He never expresses fear directly. Instead he converts it into anger or into desperate attempts to seek a solution outside the home. His visit to Teacher is a reflection of this performance. He would rather consult a group of men in a hidden and morally ambiguous space than admit his fears to Bolanle or confront the truth about himself. He relies on collective male authority to protect his pride. This is consistent with what Ouzgane and Morrell describe as the communal reinforcement of manhood, where men turn to other men to affirm their masculine identity (Ouzgane and Morrell 10).

At Teacher's shack, Baba Segi's desperation becomes more visible. He tells the men about Bolanle's "barrenness," presenting the issue as her failure rather than a shared challenge (Shoneyin 14). The men respond with suggestions that reinforce patriarchal control. One advises him to drag her to a healer "Baba Segi, I think you should *drag* her to a medicine man if she doesn't follow you. You are the husband and she is a mere wife, and the fourth one at that! If you drag her by the hair, she'll follow you anywhere, I swear it!" (Shoneyin 4). Another warns that an educated woman cannot be beaten like a traditional wife. Their conversation reveals how the community polices gender expectations and protects men from responsibility. The suggestion

that Bolanle should be forced to obey highlights the social belief that a wife's body is a site of male authority. Even the retired police sergeant notes that a woman like Bolanle could easily have a man jailed, not because violence is condemned, but because her education elevates her above the usual norms that protect men from accountability. "You want to land Baba Segi in jail? Who would dare to *drag* a *graduate*? When she opens her mouth and English begins to pour from it like heated palm oil, the constable will be so captivated, he will throw our friend behind bars!" (Shoneyin 4). This scene illustrates the collective performance of masculinity that Connell identifies, where men assert dominance by controlling women and by encouraging one another to maintain authority through silence, violence, or manipulation. Baba Segi's fear of losing face among other men reveals his dependency on this collective validation. His masculinity exists not only in the structure of his household but also in the way the community of men perceives him.

The novel also shows that Baba Segi's sense of authority is rooted in tradition rather than personal strength. His reliance on Teacher, who sits in a shack between brothels and whose preaching in. English impresses local men, reveals how superficial this authority truly is. Teacher's influence demonstrates the social value placed on male wisdom, even when that wisdom comes from questionable sources. Baba Segi's willingness to submit to this advice highlights how invested he is in the appearance of masculine control. Teacher's final recommendation that "the place to take her is the hospital" (Shoneyin 7) becomes a turning point that exposes Baba Segi's vulnerability. He must now confront the possibility that the source of infertility lies with him rather than Bolanle. The anxiety becomes even clearer when Baba Segi reflects on his role as the head of the household. He insists that his wives owe him obedience because he is their provider, yet the narrator's description exposes the insecurities beneath his claims. Although Baba Segi constructs himself as the unquestioned patriarch of the household,

Shoneyin reveals that his pride is never free from insecurity. His sense of masculine authority is rooted in public performance and domination. This is clear when he "puffed out his chest" (Shoneyin 20) as he displayed his household and "told the children to welcome their new auntie," (Shoneyin 20) a gesture meant to affirm his power before witnesses. Yet beneath this bravado is a persistent fear that his authority is fragile. Even before Bolanle's arrival fully destabilizes the household, Baba Segi "knew his wives were restless," (Shoneyin 6) a sign that he cannot completely control the alliances and secrets among them. His anxiety sharpens when he reflects that "all his pounding had proved futile," (Shoneyin 4) a moment where sexual inadequacy threatens the very foundation of his patriarchal identity. Masculinity in the novel therefore sits uneasily between performance and vulnerability, pride and fear.

African masculinity scholars provide further context for this fear. Ouzgane and Morrell argue that patriarchal authority often relies on the illusion of male omniscience within the domestic sphere. They write that men in such contexts are expected to project confidence even when "the structures of domestic life remain largely in the control of women whose labor sustains the household" (Ouzgane and Morrell 7). Baba Segi's anxiety emerges precisely because he senses that his authority is performative rather than rooted in actual control. The women's cooperation allows him to maintain his image, but the knowledge that this cooperation is fragile makes him emotionally unstable.

The tension between authority and insecurity intensifies as the wives disrupt the image of control that Baba Segi depends upon. Even small challenges generate an emotional response that exposes the vulnerability beneath his performance of dominance. This fragility is clearest when he confronts the truth about the children and cries out, "You, who have brought bastard children into my home! You have used me! Wounded me!" (Shoneyin 233). The language of injury

reveals that defiance does not simply anger him. It pierces the identity he has built as the unquestioned head of the household. At other moments, he resorts to loud, defensive speech in order to recover authority, demanding, “Who are you asking questions? Do I look like a fool?” (Shoneyin 58). His raised voice signals a need to mask anxiety with aggression. Even subtle reactions in everyday interactions betray the same vulnerability. When confronted with uncomfortable truth, “Baba Segi glanced at the bowl and winced” (Shoneyin 14), a small but telling gesture that shows how easily his confidence falters. Together, these scenes reveal a man whose authority collapses whenever the women expose the limits of his control. His emotional reactions are not expressions of natural power but signs of a masculinity that depends on performance, fear, and the constant effort to keep insecurity hidden.

The core of Baba Segi’s masculine anxiety lies in his fear of exposure. He fears that his wives might discover or reveal truths that undermine his authority. This fear shapes his understanding of himself as a man. Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity demands that men suppress vulnerability because “any admission of weakness destabilizes the claim to dominance” (Connell 77). Baba Segi internalizes this rule. He believes that appearing uncertain, emotional, or dependent would destroy his identity. As a result, he navigates his household through a constant tension. He must appear strong even when he feels helpless. He must demand obedience even when he suspects that his authority is hollow.

Shoneyin portrays this anxiety not as personal weakness but as a structural consequence of patriarchy. Baba Segi’s vulnerability emerges because the system that supports his authority provides no space for emotional honesty. His fear of inadequacy becomes the driving force behind his attempts to maintain power. Every decision he makes carries the pressure of proving

himself. His need to control his wives arises not from confidence but from the constant fear that any sign of failure will expose the myth of his masculinity.

Through Baba Segi's experiences, Shoneyin demonstrates that patriarchal systems produce fragile men whose identities rest on unstable foundations. Masculinity constructed through dominance creates psychological burdens that shape male behavior and distort family relationships. Baba Segi's anxiety reveals that beneath the appearance of authority lies a profound vulnerability, one that the novel slowly exposes as the wives gain narrative and emotional agency.

Infertility as the Breaking Point of Masculine Identity

The most significant source of Baba Segi's masculine anxiety emerges from the fear that he may not meet the central requirement of manhood within his cultural context: the ability to father children.

> Sixteen years before, when he was an impatient twenty-six- year-old husband, Baba Segi had sat with Teacher and two other men to discuss a predicament that was similar to the one he was in now. He had been eager for his sick mother to see the fruit of his loins but his wife's menstruation persisted. Teacher had suggested that he visit an herbalist and Iya Segi had lapped up the dark green powder her husband sprinkled on her palm. The medicine worked swiftly. Baba Segi cried with both grief and gladness at his mother's burial, six weeks after the birth of his daughter Segi (Shoneyin 3)

For a man whose authority depends on the size of his household and the perceived virility that comes with it, infertility represents not only a biological limitation but also a moral, emotional, and social crisis. Shoneyin uses the revelation of Baba Segi's infertility to expose the instability of patriarchal masculinity and the deep vulnerability hidden beneath its outward performance.

Before the truth is revealed, the narrative offers subtle but powerful signs of Baba Segi's growing fear of failure and his desperate attempt to maintain the appearance of masculine control. His treatment of his wives shows a man who feels entitled to comfort while the women around him endure discomfort. This is evident when the narrator observes that "He observed the jerky rise and fall of her bosom but he did not move to ease her discomfort" (Shoneyin 1). His retreat into emotional distance signals a fear he cannot articulate. The same anxiety appears when he "dashed down a narrow alleyway," (Shoneyin 1) so consumed by worry that he did not even notice his driver scrambling after him. His frantic movement exposes the instability beneath his bravado. Baba Segi seeks refuge among other men because this homosocial space allows him to perform certainty even when he feels none. The narrator explains that these were "the days that men came to meet men, to talk about women and the evil that they did," (Shoneyin 2) and within this circle "Every man had his say but Teacher always had the last word" (Shoneyin 3). This environment teaches him that masculinity must appear authoritative and unshaken.

His sense of authority is also tied to his role as a provider. As he boasts, "My children must eat their fill. It will not do for them to look like beggars when their father works so hard to keep the skin of their bellies taut" (Shoneyin 10). Providing becomes proof of power. Yet even in domestic spaces, his authority depends on constant surveillance, as "He liked to observe their every facial expression" (Shoneyin 13). His need to monitor his wives shows a fear of losing control. This reaches a peak when he humiliates Bolanle publicly, insisting that "every ghost that stalked the corridor" should witness her supposed offense (13). His masculinity therefore thrives on performance, surveillance, and spectacle, revealing a man who projects confidence because he is terrified of what silence might expose. Ogunyemi's work provides an important historical framework for understanding how Shoneyin rewrites the gender expectations that shape Baba

Segi's household. He explains that contemporary Nigerian women writers "depart from Achebe's masculinist representation of women in polygynous marriages as weak and passive" and instead create "women characters who are dynamic, strong, assertive, ingenious and subversive as they negotiate their individual freedoms within a polygynous marriage" (Ogunyemi 131). His argument shows that Shoneyin's novel participates in a broader literary shift in which time and space alter how gender is imagined and represented.

The polygynous home, once depicted as a space of confinement, becomes a setting where women redefine themselves through strategies of secrecy, sexuality, and emotional resilience. Ogunyemi's observation that "with the passage of time comes real social transformation in not only male writers' thinking about women but also in their recreation of women in fictional writing" (132) clarifies how Shoneyin's characters inhabit a new feminist consciousness shaped by Nigeria's changing cultural landscape. His assertion that gender is historically contingent and performative reinforces this chapter's argument that the wives' choices are not simply personal acts but interventions in a system that has long privileged masculine authority.

Olusegun Adekoya's "Love's Metamorphosis in Third-Generation African Women's Writing: The Example of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" interpretation sharpens this reading of Baba Segi's unraveling by showing how Shoneyin inverts the gender hierarchy that once sustained his authority. He argues that Baba Segi's "large frame," initially presented as a marker of "oppressive hypermasculinity," becomes a hollow performance once his impotence is revealed (Adekoya 334). His physical reactions, especially the vomiting and digestive distress that accompany his fear, become visible signs of emasculation rather than strength; they mark what Adekoya calls "a revolutionary turning of the tables against men, an inversion of the patriarchal gender order" that exposes the fragility of masculine power (334).

Infertility therefore becomes more than a biological condition. It emerges as a metaphor for the disempowerment of men and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that depend on the myth of male potency. Adekoya further explains that the wives' adulterous choices, often condemned within traditional morality, function as "a devious strategy adopted to offer a solution to their husband's problem of infertility," transforming them from passive subjects into active agents who sustain the household (Adekoya 334). Their agency highlights how patriarchy collapses from within because the women it seeks to control become the architects of its survival and exposure.

The breaking point arrives when he receives the medical diagnosis that shatters his image of himself. In the hospital consultation room, the revelation that none of the children are biologically his forces him to confront what he has refused to imagine. At first he reacts with stunned disbelief, ducking "as if someone had taken a swing at his face" (Shoneyin 216) and crying out, "Woe! It cannot be!" (Shoneyin 216). Soon the shock gives way to a deeper collapse. The narrator describes him after Iya Segi (Baba Segi's first wife) has confessed and left the room: "Baba Segi's head was bowed, bent right over like a dying branch before it offers its leaves to the next gust of wind. His tears hit the floor with a quiet splat" (Shoneyin 216). The simile of the dying branch shows that the news has broken the posture of authority he has maintained in public, since his body bends under a truth that strips him of the story he has told about his manhood. The tears that fall silently onto the floor make visible a vulnerability that his culture has never allowed him to show. In this scene, the novel reveals that the performance of fertility and control was always fragile, and that once medical knowledge exposes the lie, the masculine identity built on dominance and secrecy cannot hold.

African masculinity scholarship provides insight into the magnitude of this moment. Ouzgane and Morrell note that in many African patriarchal cultures, infertility threatens a man's entire social worth because "a man's legacy is measured through lineage and the public acknowledgment of his children" (Ouzgane and Morrell 12). Baba Segi's reaction demonstrates exactly this fear. His groan symbolizes more than shock. It expresses the collapse of a social identity built on the assumption of reproductive power. Without children, he loses the cultural markers that define him as a man. This loss is not private. It has public, social implications that deepen his despair.

Shoneyin intensifies this crisis when the wives begin to confess the truth. Their confessions expose the extent to which Baba Segi's authority relied on their silence. Iya Segi's voice delivers the first devastating blow. She admits, "If my husband did not have seed, then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?… So, I found seed and planted it in my belly" (Shoneyin 215). The metaphor of planting underscores the agricultural logic of fertility within patriarchal communities, where a man's seed is expected to reproduce heritage. Her statement reveals that she assumed the responsibility of preserving the household's future because Baba Segi could not fulfill the role expected of him.

But the true devastation lies in the layered confessions that follow. Another wife continues this unraveling by adding, "Not my first, not my second" (Shoneyin 216), stripping Baba Segi of every child he believed he had fathered. This repetition functions as a rhythmic dismantling of his identity. Each revelation removes a piece of the masculine image he has built over years. The truth is not only humiliating. It is emotionally destructive because it reveals that his authority rested on illusions sustained by the very women he believed he controlled.

Adam and Bulus's "The Dialectics of Betrayal in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*"offer a sociological interpretation that strengthens this moment of collapse. They argue that Shoneyin portrays the Alao household as a space where trust and power intersect, and where betrayal emerges not as a personal flaw but as a cultural symptom of patriarchal imbalance. They explain that in polygynous families, "betrayal takes place when an initial trust is broken and occurs in variant ways and modes" (Adam and Bulus 70). Iya Segi's decision to sleep with the driver after realizing that "her husband might not be able to get her pregnant" becomes, in their reading, an indictment of a society that measures a woman's worth through fertility and often "wrongly accused" women of barrenness (Adam and Bulus 72–73). This reframes the wives' actions not as moral failures but as pragmatic responses to patriarchal expectations that center male potency as the foundation of family identity. Adam and Bulus further argue that Baba Segi's desire to marry multiple wives functioned as "a way of showing off one's accomplishment in the society," revealing how masculinity in this context is a performance reliant on external validation rather than emotional maturity (Adam and Bulus 72). His devastation at the revelation that none of the children are biologically his aligns with their claim that the truth represents "the symbolic death of male pride" and exposes the vulnerability concealed beneath patriarchal authority (Adam and Bulus 74).

Connell's theory again helps clarify this collapse. She argues that hegemonic masculinity is inherently unstable because it depends on constant performance and the denial of vulnerability (Connell 77). When Baba Segi's performance is interrupted by the truth of his infertility and his wives' deception, he no longer has access to the behaviors that once reinforced his authority. The hospital scene shows this clearly. After Iya Segi confesses that none of the children are his, the narrator explains that "Baba Segi's head was bowed, bent right over like a dying branch before it

offers its leaves to the next gust of wind. His tears hit the floor with a quiet splat" (Shoneyin 216). This image of a man folded in on himself stands in sharp contrast to the swaggering husband who once boasted of his potency and flaunted his paternity. His body bends under the weight of a truth he cannot negotiate, and his tears mark the collapse of the controlled, unemotional posture demanded by hegemonic masculinity. In that moment, his authority no longer rests on loud performance but is replaced by a painful recognition of his limits, which exposes the vulnerability that patriarchy has trained him to hide.

Shoneyin's portrayal of this breakdown positions infertility as the ultimate threat to patriarchal masculinity. It reveals that the emotional cost of maintaining dominance is significant and often hidden. Baba Segi's suffering exposes the psychological weight carried by men who conform to rigid gender expectations. He has built his identity around the belief that a real man must be fertile, powerful, and unshakable. The revelation that he is infertile destroys not only his authority but also his sense of self. His entire worldview collapses because it was built on a definition of masculinity that could not accommodate vulnerability.

Asante Lucy Mtenje's "'Putting Her in Her Place!': Gender and Sexual Violence in Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" adds to this discussion of patriarchal vulnerability by examining how female bodies become sites through which male authority is asserted and maintained. She argues that in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, sexual acts such as Baba Segi's "pounding" function as performances of dominance rather than intimacy, revealing how masculinity depends on the control of women's bodies. According to Mtenje, "rape is the communication of patriarchal power, reigning in, enforcing submission and punishing defiance" (83). Baba Segi's sexual aggression therefore

reflects not confidence but insecurity. His need to assert physical control compensates for the hidden weakness that infertility represents.

Mtenje further explains that Baba Segi "conflates various forms of male authority; even the intercourse is instrumental, since sex must produce children" (88). In this way, sexuality becomes a tool of patriarchal enforcement, one that exposes how fragile masculine identity truly is when stripped of reproductive power. The wives' experiences show that "female sexuality is a social construct whose rules are encoded in male-centred discourses which seek to (re)produce subordinate subject positions for women" (91). Mtenje's analysis clarifies that Baba Segi's collapse is not only emotional but structural, since his authority relied on violent performances that could no longer mask his vulnerability.

Through Baba Segi's crisis, Shoneyin demonstrates that patriarchal systems harm men by forcing them to stake their entire identity on ideals that are impossible to maintain. The unraveling of his masculine image exposes the fragility of power structured around dominance and secrecy. Infertility becomes the moment of truth that reveals the emotional and psychological instability hidden beneath the surface of patriarchal masculinity.

Emotional Consequences and the Collapse of Masculine Identity

The revelation of Baba Segi's infertility triggers an emotional collapse that exposes the full extent of his masculine vulnerability. Up to this point in the narrative, his authority has depended on a carefully maintained performance of strength, confidence, and control. However, once the truth is revealed, the emotional burden of sustaining these performances becomes impossible to carry. Shoneyin uses this collapse to demonstrate that patriarchal masculinity is not sustained by inherent power but by fragile social expectations that deny men the freedom to

express weakness. When these expectations become impossible to maintain, the emotional consequences are severe.

The hospital scene marks the beginning of Baba Segi's emotional collapse, but the most powerful unraveling happens when he returns home and confronts his wives. The man who once projected absolute control appears physically broken. Later, when he speaks in the house, his grief becomes even more visible: his voice is described as "heavy with gloom," (Shoneyin 212) and he eventually "let out consecutive howls so haunting that the neighbors hurried to their gates" (Shoneyin 235). These raw, unrestrained sounds signal the collapse of the masculine identity he has spent his life performing. The man who once swaggered through his compound and commanded fear now trembles, weeps, and howls in a way that exposes the vulnerability patriarchy taught him to conceal. His authority dissolves publicly, leaving only the wounded man beneath the façade.

Shoneyin's choice to depict Baba Segi's sobbing in such detail is significant. It challenges the idea that men must suppress emotion in order to be considered strong. Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity requires emotional restraint because vulnerability threatens the claim to dominance (Connell 77). Baba Segi's inability to contain his emotions therefore marks a rupture in the system of masculinity he once embodied. His sobs destabilize the gender order within the household. The wives who once submitted to him now witness the truth: his authority was never natural or unshakable. It was a fragile performance built on the assumption of fertility and the illusion of control.

The emotional consequences extend far beyond the first shock of the hospital revelation. After the confrontation, Baba Segi enters a period of profound withdrawal marked by silence and physical heaviness. When he returns home, he is unable to face anyone "he shut his eyes as if to

do a private appraisal of the situation," (Shoneyin 235) withdrawing inward rather than asserting himself as he once did. Later, when the weight of Segi's death settles on the household, the narrator notes that he moved without words: "Without speaking, he hauled himself out of his chair and headed for his bedroom" (Shoneyin 235). His silence continues even when he re-emerges, described only through his bodily collapse as "consecutive howls so haunting that the neighbors hurried to their gates." These moments reveal how decisively his voice (once loud, commanding, and central to his authority) has deserted him. His collapse acquires deeper symbolic force when we recall that his very identity—his name, "Baba Segi"—is built on a lie. He is not Segi's biological father, and by the end of the novel, Segi's death extinguishes the only role that allowed him to claim paternal authority. The name that once affirmed his status becomes an empty title, stripped of meaning. What remains is a man unable to look others in the eye, unable to speak, and unable to rely on the behaviors that once reinforced his masculinity. His withdrawal signals the total collapse of the performative identity he has built; the loud patriarch becomes a silent figure struggling under the weight of his unmasked vulnerability, his symbolic position dying alongside the child whose name he bore.

African masculinity scholars provide insight into the depth of this despair. Ouzgane and Morrell note that in patriarchal societies, infertility does not simply represent a biological limitation but a profound disruption of social identity. They write that "a man's legacy is measured through the continuation of his lineage, and the failure to produce heirs carries social and emotional consequences that alter his place within the community" (Ouzgane and Morrell 12). Baba Segi's emotional collapse reflects this truth. Without the children he believed he fathered, he loses the cultural markers that define him as a man. His silence signals a loss of social identity as much as a personal grief.

The emotional consequences also reshape the household itself. Baba Segi's vulnerability reveals that the wives have always been the true anchors of the family structure. Their confessions and their calm responses to his despair demonstrate that they have navigated the emotional and social complexities of the household for years. Shoneyin shows that the household's stability has been maintained not by Baba Segi's authority but by the wives' resilience, cooperation, and strategic choices. Baba Segi's collapse exposes his dependence on them. His masculinity, which he believed was self sustaining, actually relied upon their silence, labor, and emotional endurance. Moolla's analysis reinforces this dynamic by showing that the polygynous household operates as both a site of patriarchal oppression and a space where women develop strategies for survival and influence. She argues that despite Shoneyin's condemnation of polygyny, it also provides women with "the only security" available to them in contemporary Nigeria, since the "monstrous patriarch" and the distortions of traditional marriage can still offer material and emotional refuge (Moolla 72). This complicates the idea that Baba Segi alone anchors the household. Instead, Moolla explains that women like Iya Segi subvert gender expectations through economic self-reliance and sexual autonomy, thereby "reversing gender stereotypes more fundamentally" (Moolla 83). Their actions are not motivated by a desire to undermine the marriage but by the pragmatic need to preserve the stability of the home, especially when infertility threatens the future of the household. As she notes, "all of the other wives engage in extra marital affairs not as an implicit critique of the plural marriage but because of their desire for children and the preservation of the polygynous household" (Moolla 85). This insight clarifies why Baba Segi's emotional collapse is so complete. The women's agency reveals that the power he believed he possessed rested not on his masculinity but on their ability to navigate and negotiate the structure of polygyny. Their resilience exposes the contradictions of

a system that elevates men symbolically while depending on women practically, showing that patriarchal authority is neither absolute nor self-sustaining.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how patriarchal constructions of masculinity shape the psychological lives of men in contemporary Nigerian fiction. While African feminist criticism has rightly focused on the oppression of women within patriarchal systems, this study has argued that the same structures also produce deep anxieties for men whose identities depend on expectations of sexual potency, emotional control, and reproductive authority. Through the analysis of Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the study has demonstrated that masculinity in these novels functions less as a stable position of power than as a fragile performance sustained through secrecy, silence, and control.

Both novels reveal that reproductive expectations lie at the center of masculine identity in patriarchal societies. Fatherhood serves not only as a biological function but as public confirmation of manhood. When this expectation is disrupted by infertility or impotence, masculine identity becomes unstable. Rather than openly confronting vulnerability, male characters attempt to preserve authority through concealment, manipulation, and emotional repression. In *Stay with Me*, Akin's impotence produces secrecy, deception, and eventually violence as he struggles to maintain the appearance of masculine control. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Baba Segi's authority rests on the illusion of fertility and the obedience of his household, yet the revelation of his sterility exposes the fragility of the patriarchal identity he has constructed.

By placing these two narratives in conversation, this thesis demonstrates that patriarchal masculinity often relies on collective silence. Women frequently bear the visible consequences of male reproductive failure, while male vulnerability remains concealed in order to protect

masculine reputation. Yet this concealment comes at a significant emotional cost. The fear of appearing weak prevents men from acknowledging vulnerability, producing cycles of secrecy, anxiety, and destructive behavior. In this sense, both novels critique patriarchy not only as a system that subordinates women but also as a cultural structure that restricts emotional expression and destabilizes male identity.

This study contributes to African literary scholarship by shifting attention toward the interior lives of male characters and examining masculinity as a site of psychological tension rather than simply a position of dominance. By combining masculinity theory with African cultural studies on fertility, reproductive stigma, and emotional repression, this thesis demonstrates that male vulnerability is an important dimension of gender analysis in African literature.

Further research could expand this conversation in several directions. Future studies might explore how African literature represents male mental health, particularly in relation to emotional repression and social expectations of strength. Comparative work across different African regions could also reveal how cultural variations shape literary representations of masculinity and infertility. In addition, interdisciplinary engagement with sociology, psychology, and medical anthropology could deepen understanding of how reproductive stigma and patriarchal norms influence both literary narratives and lived experience.

Ultimately, *Stay with Me* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reveal that patriarchal masculinity is sustained through fragile performances that conceal vulnerability rather than resolve it. By exposing the emotional costs of these expectations, both novels challenge the myth of male invulnerability and reveal masculinity as a contested identity shaped by cultural pressure, silence, and fear of failure.

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