

REPRESENTATION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AND STIGMATIZATION ON MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG ADULTS IN AYOBAMI ADEBAYO *STAY WITH ME* AND AKWAEKE EMEZI *FRESHWATER*

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of gender stereotypes and stigmatisation on the mental health of young adults as depicted in two African novels—*Stay with Me* by Ayobami Adebayo and *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi. Gender roles and societal expectations in African contexts often impose rigid standards, limiting personal identity and contributing to mental health challenges when individuals fail to conform. The study addresses the gap in understanding how African narratives reflect the psychological impact of these stereotypes and stigmatisation. Using textual analysis, this study critically examines how the characters in both novels navigate societal expectations, identity crises, and stigmatisation. Intertextuality and Identity Theory form the theoretical foundation, providing tools to explore how literature reflects and reinterprets cultural norms and identity construction. The findings reveal that unmet societal expectations lead to anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among the characters. The novels suggest that acceptance, empathy, and identity negotiation are key to overcoming these struggles. The work recommends increased awareness and mental health support for young adults grappling with identity conflicts and stigmatization within African societies.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Stigmatisation, Mental Health, Young Adults, African Female Novelists.

Introduction

Gender stereotypes have long been ingrained in African societies, shaping individuals' roles and expectations. Traditional norms impose strict gender roles, making deviation challenging and reinforcing patriarchal dominance across generations. These norms dictate that women must be nurturing and submissive, while men are expected to exhibit emotional restraint and strength. Such rigid structures restrict personal expression and

contribute to mental health struggles, particularly for individuals who find it difficult to conform. Oyewumi (54) notes that the failure to meet societal gender expectations often leads to stigmatization, fostering feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. The pressure to uphold these gender roles is particularly evident among young adults, who must navigate the complex balance between personal identity and social conformity (Henslin (2010) 34). Smith (112) affirms that the intersection of gender norms and social stigmatization exacerbates psychological distress, reinforcing emotional suppression and restricting individuals from seeking necessary mental health support. Beyond limiting personal freedom, rigid gender expectations also contribute to the stigmatisation of those who resist them. In many African cultures, deviation from traditional gender roles is met with social ostracization, prejudice, and discrimination. This is particularly damaging for individuals dealing with mental health challenges, as their struggles are often dismissed or perceived as a failure to uphold gender norms. For example, men are often expected to suppress emotions and avoid seeking help, while women who openly express distress may be labeled as weak or incapable. This intersection of gender stereotypes and stigma shapes societal attitudes toward mental health, reinforcing negative perceptions that discourage individuals from seeking professional support. Social rejection of gender nonconformity often compounds mental distress, making individuals more susceptible to psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety (Johnson 34).

Stigma is a deeply rooted social construct historically used to marginalise and control individuals. According to Hinshaw (369), the term stigma originated in ancient Greece, where it referred to a visible mark placed on certain people, such as slaves or traitors. In modern contexts, stigma manifests through negative stereotypes, discrimination, and exclusion, affecting various aspects of social life, including mental health treatment and acceptance. (Gary (2005), 2005) defines stigma as a “collection of negative attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behaviours that influence the individual or the general public to fear, reject, avoid, be prejudiced, and discriminate against people.” Sheikhan et al. (2) classify stigma into three intersecting levels: structural stigma, referring to institutional policies that systematically limit the rights and opportunities of individuals with mental health disorders; social stigma, which arises when dominant social groups reinforce prejudiced stereotypes and discriminatory practices; and self-stigma, wherein individuals internalize societal negativity, leading to self-doubt, shame, and reduced self-esteem. In many African societies, where mental health awareness remains low, stigma is often rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, further ostracizing those who seek help for psychological issues.

Literature Review

The psychological impact of gender stereotypes and stigma has been extensively studied in both local and global contexts. Research indicates that marginalised groups, particularly individuals who challenge conventional gender roles, face greater risks of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Johnson 34). Mwamwenda (54) defines gender stereotyping as the rigid perceptions of what men and women should be able to achieve based on cultural norms rather than individual ability. Across societies, gender remains a fundamental classification system, influencing an individual's access to power, prestige, and opportunities (Henslin (2010) 10). Akanle and Adejare (51) argue that while gender is widely discussed, its definition remains fluid, evolving with cultural, historical, and socio-political changes. In many African societies, gender roles dictate life choices, relationships, and career trajectories, shaping the overall mental well-being of individuals (Yusuff (2012) 269). These socially constructed expectations limit personal aspirations and contribute to deep-seated mental distress, particularly for those who struggle to conform to societal norms (Commonwealth Secretariat (2015) 2).

African literature has long interrogated the tensions between traditional gender expectations and evolving societal roles. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have explored the psychological consequences of gender oppression, illustrating how individuals struggle under the weight of cultural expectations. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta portrays how societal pressure forces women into self-sacrificial motherhood, using the character Nnu Ego to illustrate how a woman's worth is reduced to her ability to bear children (Yusuff (2012) 271). This narrative highlights the emotional and psychological cost of gender norms that prioritize societal approval over individual well-being. Similarly, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie critiques patriarchal dominance through the character Papa Eugene, whose authoritarian control over his wife and daughter represents how gender norms restrict women's autonomy within the family structure. Kambili's struggle for self-expression within this repressive environment reflects the mental burden imposed by patriarchal traditions, showing how rigid expectations create cycles of oppression and psychological distress in African societies.

The stigmatization of gender nonconformity has been closely studied in relation to mental health, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Goffman (2) notes that self-reported experiences of gender nonconformity reveal how individuals internalize societal stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity. While some studies on adults have observed nonconformity in movement, speech, and appearance, research on

adolescents primarily relies on self-reported accounts. Nonconformity—defined as deviation from societal norms—often results in social exclusion, discrimination, and stereotyping. Such stigma has profound psychological consequences, as marginalized individuals are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. Goffman (3) further argues that stigma damages personal identity, reinforcing negative self-perceptions and feelings of isolation. Link and Phelan (367) highlight that internalized stigma, particularly among marginalized youth, significantly contributes to mental health deterioration, as individuals view themselves through the lens of societal prejudice.

Ultimately, the negative impact of rigid cultural and social expectations on mental health is well-documented. Societies that emphasize conformity often reject those who challenge traditional gender roles, leading to psychological distress such as guilt, alienation, and emotional instability. Meyer (2003)'s minority stress model (675) establishes a direct link between prolonged discrimination and mental health challenges, particularly among sexual minorities, who experience heightened stigma for deviating from heteronormative expectations. Similarly, Corrigan and Watson (23) assert that mental illness itself is heavily stigmatized, with individuals labeled as unstable or dangerous, further isolating them and discouraging help-seeking behaviors. In many African communities, mental health struggles are dismissed or misunderstood, reinforcing cultural barriers that prevent individuals from accessing necessary support. This cycle of stigmatization and neglect underscores the need for societal change, ensuring that individuals have the freedom to live beyond restrictive gender norms without facing discrimination or psychological distress.

African literature serves as a critical tool for examining these social realities, providing insight into the intersection of gender norms and mental health. As Akanle and Adejare (112) observe, literature mirrors societal expectations and their psychological consequences. In *Stay with Me*, Yejide's struggles with infertility highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchal expectations, as she is pressured to bear children to validate her womanhood (Adebayo (2017) 67). Likewise, *Freshwater* portrays Ada's conflict with identity and societal rejection, illustrating the psychological burden of gender nonconformity (Emezi (2018) 102).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, specifically textual analysis, to critically examine the representation of gender stereotypes and stigmatization in *Stay with Me* and *Freshwater*. Textual analysis is appropriate for this research as it allows for

an in-depth exploration of how literary texts reflect and respond to societal structures and norms. The selected novels are analyzed using intertextuality and identity theory as theoretical frameworks, which provide insight into how these texts interact with identity and cultural gender expectations in African societies.

Primary data for this study comes from close reading of the novels, focusing on themes of gender, identity, and mental health. Secondary sources, including journal articles, books, and critical essays on African literature, gender studies, to support the analysis. The study identifies recurring motifs, character experiences, and narrative structures that highlight the psychological implications of gendered expectations and societal stigmatization.

Synopsis of *Stay with Me*

The focus of *Stay with Me* is on Yejide and Akin, a married couple from Nigeria whose love is put to the strain by both personal challenges and cultural expectations. Because becoming a mother is viewed as essential to a woman's identity, Yejide feels tremendous pressure to become pregnant from both her family and society. She has made several attempts to conceive, but she is still unable, which causes conflict in her marriage. Under pressure to carry on the family line, Akin resorts to desperate means, such as taking in Funmi as a second wife in an attempt to conceive.

The narrative explores the psychological and emotional toll that this arrangement has on Yejide, who feels hopeless and deceived. She goes through a number of procedures and therapies in the hopes of a miracle in an effort to maintain her status and live up to social expectations. She eventually finds out she is pregnant, but the happiness of being a mother is tainted by more tragedy and intricate disclosures about the lengths Akin has gone to in order for them to become parents. As the story progresses, it reveals Yejide and Akin's relationship's deep-seated hurt, deceit, and secrets. The difficulties they face due to infertility, social constraints, and bereavement highlight the complexity of love, cultural expectations, and the costs associated with upholding appearances. *Stay with Me* is a poignant examination of marriage, sorrow, and resilience in the face of societal and personal obstacles, set against the backdrop of political turmoil in Nigeria.

Synopsis of *Freshwater*

In *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018), Ada's journey is a complex battle for control between herself and the spirits that inhabit her mind, with Asughara being one of the most dominant presences. Ada's attempt to eliminate Asughara is rooted not in hatred but in a desire to reclaim her identity, which Asughara has altered in an attempt to protect

her. Asughara's influence over Ada is a manifestation of trauma, where her unchecked desires and impulses conflict with Ada's sense of self, leading to a deep struggle for balance. The novel explores the intricate layers of Ada's psyche, detailing how her experiences with trauma shape her identity and the interplay between her consciousness and her spirit entities. The novel reveals that Asughara emerges from Ada's trauma, explaining her nature as a spirit that embodies the pain and chaos of Ada's experiences. Asughara's presence is intertwined with Ada's sexual encounters, wherein she pursues her desires without concern for the harm they cause to Ada. This unchecked indulgence spirals further after a romantic betrayal, leading Asughara to seek out dangerous and harmful partners, using sex as a means of expressing her rage.

Ada's struggle to understand her condition through scientific and medical lenses marks an attempt to rationalize her identity and trauma. Yet, this understanding often conflicts with the spiritual nature of her experiences, leading to further turmoil. To regain control, Ada undergoes physical changes to reconcile with the spirits that share her body, seeking a form that reflects her evolving identity beyond traditional notions of femininity. Throughout the novel, Ada's self-harm, alcoholism, and struggles with her own mind are portrayed as attempts to numb the pain of her trauma and the demands of the spirits within her. The societal reactions to Ada's behavior range from confusion to empathy, highlighting the difficulty of understanding those with experiences like hers. Emezi (2018) emphasizes the importance of acceptance and support through characters like Malena, who offers Ada unconditional love, and Leshi, whose non-sexual relationship with Ada provides the trust and understanding she needs to face her trauma. Leshi's compassion helps Ada reconnect with herself, as he sees beyond her trauma to the true nature of her spirit. His approach exemplifies how empathy and respect can play a crucial role in helping individuals like Ada find healing. Through these relationships, Ada gradually gains the strength to embrace her multifaceted identity, leading to a final declaration of self-worth and balance. The novel's narrative style mirrors Ada's fragmented consciousness, using multiple narrators—including Ada, Asughara, and the collective "we" of the spirits—to convey the different sides of her mind. This shifting perspective allows readers to witness the internal struggles that shape Ada's journey, ultimately leading to her self-realization. By the novel's end, Ada finds a sense of equilibrium among her spirits, asserting her place as the source of her own power, a reflection of her newfound acceptance and strength. This study examines how *Stay with Me* and *Freshwater* depict the intersection of gender stereotypes, stigma, and mental health struggles, revealing the psychological impact of societal expectations on individuals who resist conventional gender roles.

Theoretical Framework

1. Intertextuality

Intertextuality suggests that texts interact with existing narratives and cultural discourses, shaping and reshaping societal understandings. This study examines how *Stay with Me* and *Freshwater* reinterpret gender norms and mental health issues within African societies. Kristeva (66) emphasizes that intertextuality allows literature to engage with existing social narratives, offering alternative perspectives on entrenched societal beliefs.

Examining how Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with me* and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* interact with and alter societal myths about gender and mental health is possible through the lens of intertextuality. The cultural narratives surrounding gender expectations in African civilisations are explored in both novels. One can see how these stories react to ingrained cultural conventions around marriage, family, masculinity, and femininity thanks to intertextuality. For instance, *Stay with me* captures the narrative that is ingrained in many African civilizations about the pressures placed on women to complete the role of mother. In a similar vein, *Freshwater* addresses gender flexibility and challenges binary gender concepts, which are not customarily accepted in African communities. The writers of these books challenge conventional wisdom by presenting fresh perspectives on gender identity and individual fulfilment. The novels are not merely stand-alone pieces; they also take part in current discussions concerning the negative effects of societal

conformity and nonconformity on mental health. *Stay with Me* reflects societal narratives that have profound psychological ramifications, such as the stigmatization of childlessness and infertility. Conversely, *Freshwater* tackles mental health issues resulting from social rejection and identity disintegration. Intertextuality draws attention to the ways in which these works address and transform broader societal concerns regarding mental health, stigma, and non-traditional identities. These concerns are mirrored in other African works of literature as well as in debates around the world.

Both works interact with and challenge well-known literary and cultural allegories. The story of marriage and motherhood is rewritten in *Stay with Me* to highlight the psychological costs of strict gender roles and demonstrate how cultural expectations can undermine individual wellbeing. This addresses how women are typically portrayed in African literature, but it also questions the notion that becoming a mother is a sign of fulfilment. *Freshwater* challenges traditional representations of mental illness

by fusing the spiritual and psychological domains. It does this by employing a fractured narrative style and adding spiritual components to present a novel with a story on identity development. The text is positioned within both African traditions and current global discourses on mental health as a result of this subversion, which offers fresh perspectives on identity and recovery.

Thematic similarities and differences between the two novels are made clearer by intertextuality. Both works examine the subject of stigmatisation: in *Freshwater*, the stigma is centred on the rejection of non-binary identities and the quest for personal acceptance, whereas in *Stay with Me*, it is centered on infertility and social expectations of women. The study is able to examine the common mental health implications of these two narratives and show how various forms of gender-based stigmatization appear in diverse cultural contexts. This analogy contributes to the conversation by illuminating the ways in which literature may be used to challenge and reimagine social conventions.

2. Identity Theory

Identity theory explores how social expectations influence individual self-perception. This framework helps analyze the psychological distress caused by role conflict and social rejection in the selected novels. According to Stets and Burke (226), the internalisation of social expectations shapes personal identity, and deviation often leads to anxiety and isolation). Identity is not fixed; rather, it changes in response to social forces, expectations, and obstacles. Examples of this are the gender stereotypes and stigmatisation that are portrayed in the novels *Stay with Me* by Ayobami Adebayo and *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi. Identity theory presents an effective structure for dissecting how cultural norms and expectations influence characters' identities. It also aids in examining how conflicts between one's social and personal identities, can result in identity crises, social rejection, psychological discomfort and impact mental health. Role conflict arises when a person's personal identity—how they see themselves—does not align with their social identity, or how other people expect them to behave. This mismatch causes psychological tension (Burke and Stets 229).

Depending on the significance of a given role in their lives, people give priority to certain identities over others. For instance, Yejide's sense of self in *Stay with Me* is fundamentally shaped by her roles as a wife and mother, and her mental health is threatened when she falls short of social norms about parenthood. Ada's challenges in *Freshwater*, where she attempts to strike a balance between her own experiences and the norms of a gender-neutral society, reflect identity fragmentation. People face identity risks and are frequently stigmatised when their identities conflict with society norms.

Stigmatisation can lead to anxiety, loneliness, and inadequate sentiments, all of which are detrimental to mental health.

According to identity theory, in order to deal with the stigma and reclaim control over their life, people may resort to identity management techniques like self-harm, withdrawal, or taking on new identities (Thoits 361). Yejide's identity as a woman in *Stay with Me* is strongly related to what society considers to be a mother. This role conflict between her need for self-acceptance and the expectation from society to become a mother, which causes mental suffering and strain in her marriage when she is unable to conceive.

Freshwater depicts Ada's fractured identity, in which other spirits—including Asughara—occupy her thoughts, offering a more sophisticated examination of self. Her personal sense of self conflicts with the expectations of a binary, gender-conforming society, and her effort to reconcile these disparate aspects of herself reveals an identity crisis. Ada's journey sheds light on the difficulties associated with being non-binary in a conventional cultural setting where people who identify as non-binary are stigmatised. The novel highlights the significance of acceptance and integration by highlighting how identity fragmentation and internal conflict can result in self-harm and mental health difficulties.

In *Stay with Me*, Yejide's breakdown is a direct result of social pressure and betrayal, whereas in *Freshwater*, Ada's mental health issues are a result of trauma, stigma, and the inability to fit in with society's expectations. Ada and Yejide both use identity negotiation as a means of taking back control of their life. Ada physically alters her body to match her outward appearance with her inner identity, whereas Yejide goes through rituals and procedures in an attempt to fit her identity with conventional expectations of parenting.

The novels emphasise the impact of stigmatisation on the formation of identity, particularly for those who do not live up to social norms. Identity theory makes it possible to investigate how marginalisation and rejection of non-conforming identities lead to mental health problems.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that both *Stay with Me* and *Freshwater* depict the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes and stigmatization on mental health. In *Stay with Me*, Yejide's experiences with infertility illustrate the psychological toll of rigid gender norms that

equate womanhood with motherhood. Her struggle leads to emotional distress, social alienation, and a deteriorating marriage, highlighting how patriarchal expectations enforce mental suffering on women who fail to conform. The novel underscores how societal norms prioritize reproductive roles over individual well-being, contributing to depression and identity crises.

In *Freshwater*, Ada's identity conflict demonstrates the impact of nonconformity on mental health. The novel challenges binary gender norms, presenting Ada as a character who embodies multiple identities. Their struggle with societal rejection and internalized trauma results in self-harm, dissociation, and existential crises. Emezi (2018)'s narrative portrays the intersection of African spirituality and identity struggles, suggesting that Ada's fragmentation is not solely a psychological disorder but a deeper metaphysical and cultural experience. This approach broadens the discourse on gender identity beyond Western medicalized frameworks.

In addition, the study finds that societal rejection intensifies mental health struggles, as characters who deviate from gender norms face alienation, self-doubt, and psychological distress. Both novels critique African orientation on identity that continue to shape contemporary gender expectations, illustrating how these structures perpetuate discrimination and hinder self-acceptance.

Conclusion

This study analyzed gender stereotypes and stigmatization in *Stay with Me* and *Freshwater*, emphasizing their impact on young adults' mental health. In *Stay with Me*, Yejide's infertility and subsequent childlessness form the crux of her emotional turmoil and social stigmatization. Within the deeply patriarchal society depicted, a woman's worth is often tied to her ability to bear children, and Yejide's inability to fulfill this role isolates her, driving her into profound psychological distress. Her pain is amplified by societal expectations and the pressures placed upon her by family and community members who view her infertility as a personal failure. This struggle underscores the harsh judgment faced by women who do not conform to traditional gender roles, revealing the vulnerability imposed by cultural beliefs about femininity and motherhood.

The complexity of Yejide's plight is further intensified by the hidden truth about her husband, Akin, who is actually the cause of their infertility. Akin's silence is rooted in a patriarchal culture that values male dominance, his inability to speak out forced Yejide to bear the weight of societal scrutiny alone, compounding her sense of inadequacy and

shame. These dynamics illuminated the damaging effects of patriarchal norms, not only on women like Yejide but also on men like Akin, who are pressured to uphold a façade of strength.

In *Freshwater*, Emezi introduces a different, yet equally compelling, exploration of identity through the spiritual dimension that permeates the protagonist's life. The protagonist's experiences of spirituality and alternate identities are portrayed through an Igbo cosmological lens, where beings known as *ogbanje* challenge the boundaries of traditional gender roles and mental health perceptions. This spiritual framework allowed for a unique exploration of identity, suggesting that gender and selfhood are fluid and complex, influenced by both cultural and spiritual forces. The protagonist's navigation of this spirituality brought to light the intricate ways in which African beliefs and cosmology intersect with personal and gender identities, offering a perspective on identity that transcends Western understandings.

This study clarified the wider societal ramifications of gender stereotypes and stigma around mental health by examining these representations. Additionally, it promoted a greater understanding of the intricate relationship between personal identity and societal norms, particularly for young individuals facing these difficulties.

Through intertextuality and identity theory, this study highlights how literature critiques and reshapes dominant gender narratives. The results suggest that fostering awareness and mental health support can mitigate the negative effects of gender-based stigmatization. Future research should explore additional African literary works to broaden this discourse.

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