

The Symbolic Fabric: A Study of Imagery and Themes in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* and *A Spell of Good Things*

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Abstract: Imagery and symbolism are essential elements of literature, allowing writers to convey their vision clearly and enabling readers to visualize the narrative. Ayobami Adebayo is an emerging contemporary novelist who is known for her psychological insights and criticism of the modern Nigerian society, uses symbolic imagery to reveal the subconscious thoughts of her characters, as conventional storytelling wouldn't suffice. She's a prominent figure in African English literature, leveraging imagery and symbolism to craft poetic prose. These literary devices help establish settings, build atmosphere, and evoke emotions, providing readers with a deeper understanding of her complex themes. This article highlights the crucial role of imagery and symbolism in Adebayo's debut novel, *Stay with Me* and her another novel *A Spell of Good Things*, demonstrating how authors leverage these elements to craft compelling stories, evoke emotions, and convey complex themes. Through analysis of various literary works, the article showcases the versatility of imagery and symbolism in captivating readers and enriching their understanding. It also explores the significance of interpretation in uncovering the deeper meanings behind these elements, ultimately underscoring their importance as vital tools for effective storytelling and artistic expression.

Key Words: Images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, hermeticism and literary expression.

Introduction:

Images and symbols in fiction plays a crucial role in expressing greatest sense, intense thought and enhances ongoing connection with the readers in exploring complex ideas. Symbols can be all-inclusive, cultural, or context-sensitive and are often established through repetition. Whereas, imagery immerses the reader in the story allowing them to experience the setting, characters, and events. Symbols shape moral framework and reinforce beliefs. It

creates empathy that resonates emotionally and also reinterpret history and construct alternative narratives. Archetypal patterns in literature too enables multiple interpretations that identify recurring patterns and universal themes. Intense reading of the text helps in finding recurring motifs, metaphorical languages, and any objects or actions that seem to carry a deeper meaning.

Symbols have an absolute unity of form and meaning, making their meaning inseparable from their form, making them open to multiple interpretations. Symbolism is a theory that deals with the theory of symbols and sensorial correspondences that explores the connections between the terrestrial and cosmic orders. It is characterized as a systematic attempt at hermeticism, which involves talking about the earthly order while conceiving the stellar one. Symbolism often involves unusual and evocative sensations and often create a morbid or melancholic atmosphere. It mostly features on musical, dreamy, or hypnotic qualities. Symbolist works often prioritize atmosphere and suggestion over precision and accuracy. Therefore, symbolism is known for its subjective interpretations based on personal biases or universally accepted truth that inherits multi-layered meaning and dreamlike or hypnotic quality. The different types of symbolisms and imageries that might be used in a literary work are colours, objects, seasons, people, situations and words.

Symbolism is an innermost nature of human expression or the literary expression. As Arthur Symons asserts:

Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them in Heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what symbolism in literature really is, a form of expression at the best but approximately, essentially, but arbitrary, until it has obtained a force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed not even language. What are the words themselves nothing but symbols almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? (Symons, 16)

In the above definition Arthur Symons gives a deep understanding of the word symbolism, its origin which states started with the first word uttered by the first man created in the universe. In early days, man used different set of symbols for his communication as it is evident from the first documented attempt of man to express himself through images carved on the surface of rocks in the caves. Symbols and imageries of scenes of hunting, men with arrows and spears expresses the use of symbolism in the early stage itself.

Based on the concept of literary imagery and its classification, literary imageries concentrate on scene and situation, providing a direct description. It figures our vision beyond the scene, using analogies and parallels through similes and metaphors based on complex ideas and emotions. It even makes the writing more engaging and easier to understand relating to sight, touch, smell, taste, action, and emotions. By using literary imagery effectively authors can create vivid, engaging, and thought-provoking stories. Visual imagery remains significant among all these, where works are deep rooted with the sense of sight and plays a very prominent role in one's writing. It describes what a scene or character looks like. Browning's Pippa's song is a well known poem for its excessive visual imagery.

He expresses, “The years at the spring”, “Days of the moon”, “Mornings at seven”, “The hillside’s dew pearled”, “The larks on the wing”, and “The snails on the thorn” (Young, W.T, 2). All these show how the visual imageries remain significant in literature.

Robert Frost emphasizes the importance of understanding metaphors in poetry by saying that, unless you are at home in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. This shows the importance of expressing symbols in the form of metaphors in Poetry. Northrop Frye discusses the role of imagery and symbols in literature, defining, “symbols means any units of literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention” (Frye, 71). Certain universal symbols like food, drink, light, and darkness, are shared across cultures and have universal significance. Also, an image is a mental picture created through words, but a symbol is an image that becomes suggestive in nature. It makes the writing more interesting, provide depth, and enrich the narrative, appealing to the senses and evoking emotional responses. T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” is a significant work in modernist literature where symbolism and imagery plays an energetic role in conveying complex ideas, emotions, and themes in a condensed and powerful way. It represents spiritual decay, disillusionment, and the search for meaning focusing on the complexity of modern life. The title “The Waste Land” and the symbol of water are the important elements in understanding the poem's themes and symbolism. The ‘waste land’ symbolizes barrenness, desolation, fragmentation and disunity and ‘water’ symbolizes dual nature, transformation and ambiguity. The use of these symbols add depth and complexity to the poem, inviting readers to interpret and reflect on the themes and ideas presented in an expressive, comprehensive way.

Ayobami Adebayo’s novels *Stay with Me* and *A spell of Good Things* are characterized by rich symbolism and imagery rooted in Yoruba culture to explore complex themes. The significant themes of this includes barrenness, Yoruba culture, family dynamics, betrayal, the wealth- gap, physical violence, sisterhood and political turmoil. Amidst this, Adebayo expresses her talent of bringing out the usage of symbols and imageries, which make her works to remain outstanding. Her works also brings out imageries that expounds the past, present and future expressions.

Symbols and Imageries in *Stay with Me*:

The novel *Stay with Me* exposes a number of symbols and images. The opening of the novel itself has the description of the ‘bedside lamp’ that holds a significant meaning in the context of Yejide and Akin’s relationship. It symbolizes Akin’s attempt to find a compromise between his and Yejide’s differing preferences regarding lighting in their bedroom. Akin buys the lamp because Yejide can’t sleep in the dark, while he has nightmares if the lights are left on. This gesture represents his effort to understand and accommodate her needs, showcasing his love and consideration for her. The lamp becomes a symbol of their relationship’s complexities, marked by moments of tenderness and compromise amidst the challenges they face. Overall, the bedside lamp serves as a poignant reminder of the couple’s love story, marked by moments of intimacy, compromise, and understanding. It is presented in the opening of the novel as, “Tonight I see the bedside lamp that Akin gave me a few weeks after we got married. I could not sleep in the dark and you had nightmares if we left the fluorescent lights on” (4).

The ‘coffee stain’ is an another significant symbol used in the novel, which could metaphorically gulp the image of Yejide’s love stained with dirt. It shows the stained love

imagined by her within a second. Even though, Yejidie lives in a polygamous society, she is not ready to accept Funmi as her husband's second wife, so considers Funmi, as a coffee stain and then looks at the white curtains in front of her that is stained with coffee stains. She says and symbolically represents it as, "I looked around the room for something to focus on the white lace curtains with blue trimmings, the grey couch, the matching rug that had a coffee stain that I could have been trying to remove for an year" (13).

The phrases 'cloud of dust' or 'clustering clouds' is another imagery that presents the four years love of the couple, where the lady is not ready to push Akin in the dusty cloud, which refers to the world of Funmi. She says, "I clenched my hands first as Akin drove away, leaving me alone in the cloud of dust he had raised" (17). Apart from this, the imageries, 'Bridegroom' and 'the blood stained hands' symbolizes betrayal in the novel. Again the imagery 'dirty panties' questions the illegal relationship which is acknowledged by the characters in the novel as:

You can confess all your secrets to me now, dirty or clean. Maybe a woman who has children for you somewhere...

There were things, I could have told her. Should have said to her. I smiled, I've got a few dirty socks and underwear. How about you? Any dirty panties?

She shook her head. (25)

'Axe' is another symbol that brings out the essence of the novel as it has the power to dig and plant something good and to kill at its extremism. The axe symbolizes the love between the couple that is strong, but the situation makes it to crack or bend, as their marriage life cannot yield them a child. The author quotes this as, "If the burden is too much and stays too long, even love bends, cracks, come close to breaking and sometimes does break. But when it's no longer love" (21). The symbol 'broomstick legs' refers to the lean and long legs of Funmi, which Yejidie describes in the novel as, "Funmi, don't let me not see your broomstick legs again" (38). 'Gold' symbolizes mother, where "mother is gold, mother is a treasured gold that cannot be bought with money" (45). Next is 'rain', which symbolizes that some blessing is ready to come from heaven. "when the rain started, I saw it a blessing from above, a mark of approval" (95). This is evident too with the verse from the Holy Bible that speaks of God's promising "showers of blessing". Specifically God says, "I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; there shall be showers of blessings" (Ezekiel:34:26). This verse signifies God's provision and favour often associated with physical and spiritual abundance.

Based on the characteristic symbols of representation, the character 'Sesan' symbolizes good fortunes which is expressed as, "I did not care if he never become an engineer or a lawyer or an accountant like his father if for the rest of his life he did nothing but stay alive that would have been enough to me" (172). Next important symbol is 'old notes'. It symbolizes Yejidie as the first wife. "I thought you had wiped me off the way, a teacher wipes off old notes from a chalk board with a duster. Akin, who will hold your hand today, if you cry silently? (215). Apart from this, a few other words like 'bastard', 'whore', 'cheat', 'unfaithful wife', 'bloody', 'the bigger liar in heaven, hell and earth' all symbolically represent Yediji by Akin. Also 'apologetic smiles', 'Pity-me smiles', and 'fake smiles' point at the disillusionment and loss related to her barrenness of being unable to conceive. Also,

‘women’ symbolizes machines, as quoted, “women manufacture children and if you can’t you are just a man” (247). All these shows Adebayo’s use of symbolism in the novel which express her talent of using a unique narrative technique in her writings in her debut novel itself.

Symbols and Imageries in *A Spell of Good Things*:

The novel, *A Spell of Good Things* is filled with symbols and imagery from the beginning till the end. The first symbol ‘rain’, exposes something good to be happened in the life of Eniola, the protagonist, who is depressed because of his shattered expectations to do odd jobs for his school fees during his school days. To express his hope for goodness, Adebayo opens like this, “Eniola pretend it was just water. A single melting hailstone. Mist or dew. It could also be some good thing: a solitary rain drop fallen from the sky, lone precursor to a deluge. The first rains of the year would mean he could finally eat an agbalumo” (7). The lines, “Like disobedient children transformed into rocks by an evil lizard in one of those stories his father used to tell” (7), points out the imagery as whenever Eniola is caught into trouble, he shuts his eye, thinking that he is not visible to the people around him. It highlights Eniola’s coping mechanism when faced with trouble or uncomfortable situations. By shutting his eyes and pretending he’s invisible, Eniola temporarily escapes the reality of his circumstances. His father’s stories also impact his perception of reality, that indicates a desire to escape or deny reality. It even provides insight into Eniola’s character and navigation of challenging situations.

Another imagery is a kind of belief that people imagines which is a myth too. Even today, people believe that pulling grey hair from their roots will make it grow better than before. The phrase “plucking grey hair makes it grow more” is a common idiom that can be interpreted in a figurative imagery, that the idea that focusing on or trying to eliminate one problem (grey hair) might lead to more problems or exacerbate the issue. This is also evidentially exposed in the novel. “The first time she plucked hair from Baami’s head, claiming that once she pulled them all from the roots, they would grow back even blacker than before. And Yet, last year, every strand on Baami’s head claiming every inch of his scalp, so that within weeks Eniola had to look at one of his father’s old photos to remember what he had looked like when his hair was black” (12).

Next is ‘God’, who symbolizes doctors in this novel, from whom the patients expect miracles. “Doctor, you women are closer to God, and we all know, that prayers work after midnight” (20). This symbolism of God in relation to doctors isn’t a direct representation. However, the novel explores themes of power dynamics, societal expectations, and the complexities of human relationships, where Doctors might be seen as authoritative figures, symbolizing control or influence over life and death. Medical professionals might represent hope or salvation for characters facing health challenges. To a better understanding, it investigates how the novel portrays themes like power, hope, or societal expectations in the form of symbols and images for a better understanding of the society’s impression on the writer’s writing techniques.

The ‘boiled sticks to eat’ symbolizes the harsh realities of poverty and desperation that many characters, particularly Eniola, face. The scarcity of food, the reliance on simple, meager meals, and the struggle to survive are all represented by this image. It highlights the

stark contrast between the lives of the wealthy and the impoverished in the novel's Nigerian setting. "It's like promising people free lunch and giving them boiled sticks to eat. Just start at Glorious Destiny, we will put you somewhere better when this is over, don't worry" (31). Following this, the use of simile in the novel, "May your wealth flow from farm to homestead like Adenrele Aremu Makinwa" (31), symbolically represents the blessings that the family is going to inherit for generation to generation.

Adebayo's 'half-baked graduates' even symbolizes the disillusionment and frustration with the Nigerian educational system and its perceived inability to provide meaningful opportunities for young people. It highlights a sense of wasted potential and the disconnect between academic achievement and real-world prospects, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds. Even the novel emphasizes a few politicians as the half-baked graduates who are not literates but having the nation's governing power, they are not ready to provide economic opportunities for the younger generation. It highlights the pathetic conditions of the literates who lack their professional values and moral values out of loss in dignity.

The phrase 'brainless dullard' isn't directly mentioned in the novel *A Spell of Good Things* by Ayobami Adebayo. However, the novel does feature politicians who are described as intellectually challenged, implying a lack of intellectual rigor in their decision-making processes. Specifically, Kunle's father and another aspirant are portrayed as lacking substantial plans for governance beyond empty rhetoric. This portrayal critiques the Nigerian political system and highlights themes of corruption and ineptitude. "she'd explained things to had concluded that she was a brainless dullard" (104).

Apart from this, Yeye's birthday on her fifty, symbolizes success and achievement in Nigerian culture and Kunle's character represents complexities in relationships. The vivid portrayals of Eniola's struggles, highlights socio-economic differences on darker aspects of society, that explores disparities between the wealthy and poor. All these show how the author has visually portrayed the reality by adapting symbolism and imageries in her writing skills.

Conclusion:

Adebayo has thus used imageries and symbolism to play a significant role in enhancing literary depth that adds emotional depth to convey complex ideas and emotions subtly yet powerfully. Thematically, the use of imageries and symbols weave together with themes, highlighting central ideas and underlying message to enrich reader's experience. Both the novels uncover hidden meanings and connection to convey nuanced ideas and emotions without explicit statement. To its comparison with literalism, symbolism offers a richer, more interpretive reading experience. In modern writings, it remains as a powerful tool in modern literature, allowing authors to explore complex themes and ideas. By incorporating symbolism, authors can create stories like Adebayo that are both thought-provoking and emotionally resonant.

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