

Discovery, Assertion and Self-Realisation in Recent Nigerian Migrant Feminist Fiction: The Example of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

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Abstract

This paper offers a reading of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good will Come* (2005) as a quintessential African migrant feminist novel. This novel is subjected to textual analysis, using Post-colonial and Feminist theories as the framework, with a view to highlighting the enduring need for female discovery, assertion and self-realisation for survival in neocolonial Nigeria. A close reading of the novel reveals that, irrespective of the migrant writer's physical and probable psychological dislocation from 'home', the truism and reality of the post-colony as a wasteland overtaken by ineffable malady is captured in her novel. In considering the painful realities of such Nigerian existence, this paper discovers that Atta betrays specific gender sentiments as she projects the female gender as the most unfortunate victim in post-colonial crises and the bedlam which have bedevilled the national life.

Introduction

Literature as a creative activity projects those deeply ingrained and relatively enduring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour of the society from which it is drawn. Apparently, literature captures the diverse forms of interaction between various parts of a society and its people. Mary Kolawole (2005:9) corroborates this assertion, as she suggests that literature is not only an imitation of life, but also a concept which derives from certain sustainable principles. A multifaceted relationship therefore exists between literature and society, and the diverse conceptualizations of the relationship remain overt. The varying emphases on social art, therefore, make literature of great importance, as it transcends mere entertainment to expose the significant moral and social views of the writer and of his environment which form the nexus for his art. Alberto, in Demeterio (2001), also suggests that:

Literature is a social institution: it is created by the writer, who is a member of the society. Its medium is language, which is a social creation. It represents life, which is a social reality. It is addressed to men who form a social body. It is centrally conditioned by social and other forces and, in turn, exerts social influence (11)

African literature constantly reflects an attempt at narrating the African experience, the struggles associated with imperialism and its relics of denigration and oppression which seem to remain visible features of post-independence Africa. This accounts for the African writers' attempt at foregrounding the tension that exists within the shores of Africa, with the aim of asserting the African nation above all forms and conventions of imperialism and neo-colonialism. As it were, the African continent seems to stand at the crossroads as it negotiates self re-definition against subtle forms of imperialism while grappling with new forms of subjugation perpetuated within the nation by Africans. Regrettably, the attainment of independence has not automatically portended the realisation of the cherished dreams of freedom, responsibility of self-government, socio-political and economic satisfaction. A new reality however unfolds, maimed by anarchy,

chaos, coups, disillusionment, injustice, betrayal, poverty, social unrest, hunger, oppression, corruption and war. In fact, Africa has become embroiled in wars on two fronts, one within and the other without.

The African writer and his craft predictably continue to rise to the challenge of remaining committed to his community in the face of diverse socio-political instabilities and the contending trend of modernisation. In crafting an art which is relevant, the African writer not only probes, but also responds to the yearning of his environment. Specifically, contemporary Nigerian prose fiction continues to witness a tremendous emergence of literary works marked by diverse degrees of creative innovation and experimentation. However, remarkable in the development of this genre is the creative effort of migrant Nigerian prose fiction writers who project commitment and responsiveness to the socio-political and socio-economic realities of their motherland through their works. This commitment also reflects these writers' affinity and awareness of their socio-cultural heritage though physically removed from this matrix. This relatively new trend of writings from Nigerians in the Diaspora signals a paradigm shift from the picture of motherland and the numerous creative statements that have been generated internally by writers at "home" to those in the Diaspora. Since emphases, over the years, have been on the criticism of the socio-political realities of contemporary Nigeria by the home-based writers whose effort and commitment are commendable, it is not our desire, in this paper, to negotiate this sphere. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that home-based Nigerian writers have made meaningful contributions to literary representations of their natal home by providing a remarkable foundation for contemporary Nigerian fiction writers to thrive.

Although slavery facilitated a forced movement that led to the disintegration of Africa, its people, cultural practices and society, Toyin Falola (2008) takes note of the fact that voluntary movements have since the 1980s preceded this with notable increase. The degree of voluntariness to migrate to foreign lands can be weighed against the backdrop of the absence of an environment capable of offering its citizenry the opportunity for a meaningful existence. As a result, what may, therefore, be described as 'voluntary' may betray a good degree of compulsion, since people are compelled to make choices under the pressure of the absence of basic amenities, security and probable sources of livelihood. There is an unceasing dispersion of Nigerians to Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States and other regions of the world where 'home' is created in the Diaspora. While some exiles are forced, others are however voluntary. Voluntary or involuntary, Tejumola Olaniyan (2003) is of the opinion that exile inscribes, among other things, the limitation of the nation-state as we currently have it. He, therefore, describes exile as:

A kind of opting out or forcing out, reveals incommensurabilities of interests, hopes and aspiration between individuals and the nation-state, incommensurabilities that the state always denote as crises because its ruling idea of the nation is that it is based on a "deep horizontal comradeship", as Benedict Anderson would say, of homogenous yearnings. Exile thus puts a perpetual question mark on the nation-state and its idea by revealing its jagged edges and bursting seams that cannot be disciplined into conformity. (8)

Through the assertion above, Olaniyan foregrounds some disparity between the interest of an individual and his/her ancestral 'home'. This variance in interest results in crises which eventually lead to the exiling of the affected individual. This unfortunately besmirches the image of the nation-state, and it reveals it as stifling and suggests the latter as the reason why such an environment should be evaded. Also, commenting on Soyinka's essay "Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa's Culture Producers," and reacting to the concept of exile and the African writer, Olaniyan (2003) further indicates that the:

physical distance from "home" loses its status as a privileged marker of exile and becomes simply one other feature, perhaps more obvious than others, of that condition. In other words, physical distance from 'home' and its commonly associated feelings of being victimized, of bitterness, sorrow, loneliness, dejection not to say depression, nostalgia, and the likes, may be painful and distressing, but being at 'home' is often not any less so (4)

Although Olaniyan (2003) acknowledges the far-reaching psychological trauma and anguish the writer who is exiled is plunged into, he readily attests to the rather hostile nature of "home" which is "neither warm nor welcoming". This invariably creates an enabling environment for the creative expansion of the writer's craft. It is noteworthy that the current trend of exilic writings seems to be the exclusive property of the post-colony, that is, those previously colonised regions that gained independence from colonial rule. These freed ancestral homelands, however, remain un-freed from neocolonialism, a term which describes the metamorphosis of the machineries of colonial rule into the system of governance thereafter within these independent colonies. Hence, Elleke Boehmer (1995:233) observes that:

In the 1990s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an 'extra-territorial', than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'third world' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national background.

Ayo Kehinde (2007) also corroborates this line of thought when he observes that Afro-European writers' works not only reflect "home", but also betray perceived feelings of nostalgia and bonding to "home" which is usually elicited in writing.

Living abroad reveals a more acceptable way of life than what millions of Nigerians go through daily in Nigeria. With the standard of living and the value of human life, Nigerian writers are inspired by the contrast of the new world that they now live in; hence, they covertly compare, mentally, the life that they had known until the time they began their sojourn in the Diaspora. The reference to "home", through the vehicle of fiction which enables the recreation of a socially realistic Nigeria from the Diaspora, becomes inevitable. A plethora of reasons exists to attest to why Nigerians in the Diaspora respond, in their creative oeuvres, to the angst and tensions that describe the living experience in contemporary Nigeria. Many of these reasons are not unconnected with the frustration with the diverse *modus operandi* at "home" and the desire to propose change. This and many more form the several *raison d'être* for the thematic and

ideological thrusts of most of the Nigerian writers in the Diaspora. Adeola Aderounmu (2007) makes a frank remark which generally expresses what seems to be the mind of any Nigerian in the Diaspora:

Based on our new (or old) experiences and encounters out here, we are quick to draw comparisons with what we see. We make jokes of most of these things but in reality, we are disappointed and hurt by the system in Nigeria. Sometimes though, we wished we were back in Nigeria, but the decision to return is one of the hardest to make. Despite some shortcomings here abroad and some humiliating moments, one is not quick to make a U-turn... (3)

The discourse of motherland from many of the writers in the Diaspora is gaining grounds, taking into consideration the recent accolades it has received on the global scene. Nigerian migrant writings which project a preoccupation with socio-political and economic realities of the Nigerian polity reflect can be described as creative imaginative works which berate the deplorable state of Nigeria's socio-political and economic life. There seems to be a conscious awakening of the Nigerian writers, even in the Diaspora, to their responsibility as the conscience of their society. It is with a mastery of intense language use that these writers evoke images of suffering of Nigerian masses, as well as their struggle to rise above the perils of socio-political and socio-economic chaos that challenge the possibility of contemporary nationhood and independence. It can, therefore, be inferred that the Nigerian novel has reached a very significant stage in its development with discernible trends which characterise the works of Nigerian writers in the Diaspora, such as Ben Okri, Biyi Bandele, Debo Kotun, Segun Afolabi, Chika Unigwe, Helen Oyeyemi, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta and others. These writers are preoccupied with the narration of 'motherland' from the Diaspora as most of their works depict. It is remarkable that they project vivid pictures of the motherland, although they could be described as being physically removed from this milieu. Their works record diverse innovations in narrating, to a large extent, what could be described as dimensions of the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of Nigeria. Susanne Gehrman (2009) offers an illuminating insight on the importance of migrant fiction:

Because of the long-lasting effects of the colonial system based on ideological and aesthetic binary oppositions, postcolonial literatures, in particular those that have emerged in situations of migration, prove to be a fertile ground for critical reflection on cultural, sexual or ethnic differences as problematic constructions. Fictions enable the dense narration of the constitution and negotiation of differences through personal stories which may outline the tragedy of the process of 'othering' or may challenge and even overcome such a process (142).

The quest to understand and interpret the activities of man within specific societies could be described as facilitating the development of ideologies which may afterwards undergo alteration to become templates through which certain patterns of society are studied and interpreted. These ideologies, therefore, serve as models for understanding the phenomena that exist within these specific matrixes.

Sefi Atta's novel displays certain ideological persuasions which express certain socio-political and gender commitment; it could also be described as being women-centred and nation-centred in its thematic preoccupations. These ideological persuasions, as it were, not only project the critical perspective from which Atta writes, but also highlight the issues she fictionalizes as socio-politically and socio-economically realistic and germane to the contemporary Nigerian society which she narrates from the Diaspora. This is in accordance with Boehmer's (1995:233) assertion that:

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A Critique of the Narration of Discovery, Assertion and Self-realisation in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria, and has had most of her education in the United Kingdom and the United States. Although a Chartered Accountant, she is also a graduate of the creative writing programme at the Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her short stories have appeared in journals, including *Los Angeles Review* and *Mississippi Review*; they have won prizes from Zoetrope and Red Hen Press. Her radio plays have been broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation. She is the winner of PEN International's 2004/2005 David TK Wong Prize, and in 2006, her debut novel, *Everything Good will Come*, was awarded the inaugural Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. Sefi Atta lives in Mississippi with her husband, Gboyega Ransome-Kuti. She has two novels to her credit- *Everything Good will Come* (2005) and *Swallow* (2008). She also has a published collection of short stories entitled *Lawless* (2007).

Sefi Atta occupies a position as a "cultural traveller", projecting the tensions which ensue from the clash between traditionalism and the different faces and phases of modernisation in Nigeria. She gives preference to the attempts at subverting stifling cultural practices and socio-economic policies which affect women, in particular, and all Nigerians, in general. Atta achieves this by creating characters that raise issues that are of cultural, social and political interest to any Nigerian, irrespective of geographical location or the émigré status of such an individual. This explicates the fusion of the feminist perspective and the post-colonial approach to the narration of the motherland which permeates the entirety of her novels.

Everything Good will Come brought her fame and inclusion in the list of Nigerian authors who narrate their motherland from the Diaspora. Although the novel has not received adequate critical attention, reviewers continue to complement the effort of Atta, her story-telling art and skill in delicately weaving an account of motherland, especially from the feminist perspective, which allows continuous and strong reverberation of female voices. Atta focuses on the issues of relationship, education and discovery that give rise to assertion. Her novel also reveals that, in the motherland, social, economic and cultural factors collude to stifle the progress of the

citizenry, the woman in particular. Therefore, the primary theme of *Everything Good will Come* reflects Atta's desire to project the woman as a survivor of the harshest conditions, vicissitudes and hurdles which characterise post-independence existence, and the wearisome atmosphere in contemporary Nigeria. Her central character's education (formal and informal) and growth, therefore, function as a veritable launching-pad for surmounting the adversities that she encounters. Actually, the central themes of female assertiveness and post-independence dilemma of the motherland permeate the novel.

The novel captures a passionate and lyrical story through the eyes of Enitan who narrates the events that bedevil the country, her family, herself and the women who are close to her. It is a courageous story about friendship, family, ambition and self-discovery. The story which is told from a first person perspective- Enitan's perspective- is a bildungsroman, which reveals an unbroken growth pattern till Enitan comes of age as a self-conscious and assertive woman. Enitan's process of growth comes with self-realisation which prompts greater response and reaction to the activities which go on around her. These processes motivate her sexuality and individuality.

Sectionalised into four parts, the novel chronicles the heroine's life and the activities that occur around her from childhood till adulthood. Each attests to a particular phase in the journey to Enitan's self-discovery and realisation, a journey which begins with departure and ends in no-return. Each of these sections also situates the character's experiences within the time frame of 1971, 1975, 1985, 1995 and the experiences of the nation as an entity. These sections reveal the heroine's closure on the hinds of self-discovery, freedom and fulfilment. As Atta's story unfolds, different stages in the country's socio-political life are imaginatively captured. Domestic crises and tensions in Enitan's immediate environment are mirrored. Atta not only critiques these tensions, overtly and covertly, but also presents the reader with the platform on which her heroine's sensibilities are developed.

Everything Good will Come beams its searchlight on the smallest unit of the society which is a microcosm of the larger society. As a result, the Nigerian government, Enitan's constantly feuding parents, her friend (Sheri) and her boy friends come under Atta's scrutiny and criticism. Enitan and other female characters in the novel portray the twenty-first century Nigerian woman caught in the restrictive and contradictory demands of traditional mores and norms introduced by Westernisation. It would, therefore, appear that, due to Westernisation and the experience that comes with it, conforming to traditionalism, the status and roles these would have the woman perform, becomes problematic, resulting in chaos and conflict which were absent in these societies in the traditional period. This is in line with Bungaro's (2006) observation that fiction, especially African women's writing, explores the dynamics of power in African societies and the resultant tension and conflict which ensue from such complexities. Based on this, Atta's novel seems to question the extreme and erroneous aspects of traditionalism that are stifling to women, while she questions the move from traditional norms of nationhood to the individualistic, capitalist orientation which attend this. Fanon, while describing the universal quest for recognition in the last chapter of his psychoanalytic analysis, opines that:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by the other, that other will

remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 216-217).

In what looks like a terse opening of the novel, the narrator (Enitan) introduces herself as a novice and gullible child. Enitan says: “From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even about how to behave, although I had my own inclination” (1). By projecting herself as credulous, Enitan sets us on a pedestal through which her growth, self-realisation and assertion could be gauged as the story unfolds. Nevertheless, her careful observation and participation in life furnishes her with courage and makes her the assertive heroine we see at the end of the novel.

Atta does not mince words in betraying her objective as a creative writer: critiquing the mega-and-micro systems in Nigeria which unfortunately are defined by their dysfunctional nature. This and the predicament of the woman in post-independence Nigeria underscore Atta’s discourse of motherland from the Diaspora. At this age also, Enitan begins to understand the politics of the Nigerian society coupled with the tension the diverse political factions and ethnic groups display. This accounts for Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1987:11) statement that the process of the female writer’s social commitment to her society is inclusive of her:

Being aware of oneself as a Third-world person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies (11).

The initial conversation with Sunny, Uncle Alex and Fatai is quite expository. In Uncle Alex’s opinion, the British should be held responsible for the different fights between the people of the same nationality. He states categorically: “them and their bloody empire. Come here and divide our country like one of their bloody tea cake.”(13). Hander (1997), however, argues that a perception such as Uncle Alex’s in his attempt at describing and understanding the difficulties that attend ex-colonised nations like Nigeria is faulty since:

Other problematic, oppressive structures may be overlooked, that responsibility may not be assigned to the actual perpetrators (or perpetrators) of society’s ills, often Africans themselves and even well-meaning, though misguided ones. Such oversight thwarts understanding of the complexities of the societies and persons depicted, and thus a basic goal of post-colonial writing, to make sense of the chaos of the societies it writes about, to identify real roots of problems, and to seek solutions, fails to be accomplished (4).

Although Enitan gives the details of the information she obtains from the activities she sees around her and other adult conversations, her meeting with Sheri, the girl next door, is of great significance, as it marks her transition to an entirely new stage of life. Atta, at this instance, calls to mind a traditional belief of the Yoruba that “nature heralds the beginning of a person’s

transition: to life, adulthood and death” (16). Enitan is, however, not so lucky to have her next stage of life marked by this. One cannot help wondering if this is not a deliberate attempt by Atta to question a certain aspect of the Yoruba traditional belief and probably brands it with the tag of “superstition” or “coincidence”. This first encounter with Sheri sets the pace for Enitan’s social and moral education; it also contributes to the advancement and swift unraveling of the actions embedded in the plot. The relationship between these two young ladies projects an aspect of feminism, what Carol Davies (1986:13) describes as “sisterhood”. Davies speaks of the concept of “sisterhood” in the light of its ability to aid the advancement of women in society. Already cherishing this friendship and the bond of sisterhood, Enitan insists in the affirmative to fastidious Baba: “she is my friend” (20). To this, she adds a plea and kneels as well. Similar relationships and positive female interaction act as sources of assuagement to suffering women’s psyche and life. To corroborate this point, Janet Todd (1980:4) says:

Social friendship is a nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather smoothing their passage within it. If their destiny is almost always sexual and heterosexual...women’s salvation is social, for they may “fall” sexually, but must rise socially. Here the support and acceptance of other women is essential, since through their teaching of female lore, criminal or conventional, women aid and sustain each other.

In demythologizing and deconstructing the stifling structures in a male-oriented society, Atta instructs women on the way out of retrograde patriarchal domination through the practical actions of gender-assertive Enitan, Sheri, Mrs. Ameh and even the Mother of the Prison.

Through what could be described as age-long and die-hard techniques, Eshiet (1997:27) suggests that, with “reinforcing an excess indoctrination and relentless brain-washing into unquestioning identification with patriarchal approval and culture, female emancipation and liberalization of traditional fixations are brutally constrained”. This accounts for Christine Obbo’s (1980:143) observation:

Even though the world is changing all about them, it seems that women’s own attempt to cope with the new situations they find themselves in are regarded as a ‘problem’ by men, and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women’s roles.

Even as young as Sheri may be assumed to be, her dissuading of Enitan whose ambition is to be the president of the nation some day shows that she has undergone some process of socialization and indoctrination through which she describes fitting gender roles to Enitan within her social context. Mrs. Franco also tries unsuccessfully to tutor Enitan on how to and how not to behave as a woman. She suggests to Enitan that, as a woman, she must learn to make sacrifices. Consequently, she has this to say of her mother-in-law: “My father in-law had tamed his wife, almost as if he’s scooped out her brains and left just enough for her to keep on obeying him” (237). In what appears to be a loathsome remark, Atta artistically conceals the indictment of the mores and values of the arrogant traditions fashioned by men, kept and transferred by patriarchs and their women collaborators, such as Alhaji, Sheri’s step Mother and Mrs. Franco, to ensure the effacement, invincibility and obliteration of the women folk. Thus, Atta constructs realities

that recreate a formidable women's world as well as certain socio-cultural and economic factors that collude to ensure their victimization in post-independence Nigeria, which is defined by multiple drudgery.

Atta, through Enitan, indulges in the demeaning description of Arinola's choice of worship place and religious activities. She, at this point, seems to display unguarded animosity towards religion and all of such activities which may be associated with it. Enitan, therefore, describes her mother thus: "In her church gown I always thought my mother resembled a column" (21). It seems Atta lays bare her ideology concerning religious matters through her heroine:

Holy people had to be unhappy or strict, or a mixture of both I'd decided. My mother and her church friends, their priest with his expression as if he was sniffing something bad there wasn't a choir mistress I had seen with a friendly face, and even in our old Anglican church people had generally looked miserable as they prayed... How nay mornings had I got up vowing to be holy, only to succumb to happiness by midday, laughing and running helter-skelter? I wanted to be holy; I just couldn't remember (22)

Enitan's last sentence in the foregoing scene is deeply rooted in scorn and shrouded in the façade of a sincere heart revelation at an attempt at being "holy". Atta overtly derides what may be described as the religious excesses of certain sects in a country like Nigeria which seem to have "everything" and nothing going for it in the face of these religious activities. The derision of religion seems to reveal the religious persuasion of Atta which neither falls within the ranges of Christianity, Islam nor any other. This section, which takes us from the period of 1971 till about 1974, ends with Enitan getting ready to secure secondary education.

Secondary education in the boarding house at the Royal College marks another step in Enitan's social, moral and intellectual education. She is exposed to the reality of the multicultural nature of her nation, the myths and cultural practices that characterise these different ethnic groups. It is during this period that Enitan tries out her first relationship with the opposite sex. She also learns of the brutality that could result from relating with the opposite sex when Sheri is raped and commits a crude abortion to save her face. Forthrightly, Atta's heroine not only recounts the experiences that plague her as a growing woman in a tumultuous country but gets "some assurance that our world was uniformly terrible" (69)

The third section of the novel, which is set from 1985, puts Atta's heroine forward as having more experiences. Because of the many complexities which attend Enitan's association with Sheri's strange ordeal, England becomes an option, a place where she can acquire education without distractions, which the tensed atmosphere of Nigeria seems to offer. It is in London University that she learns that her virginity belongs to her. It is, however, unfortunate and noteworthy that her anonymous boyfriend who briefs her with this information which contradicts her previous perception is the same boy who takes it. According to Enitan:

I'd thought my virginity belonged to Jesus Christ, my mother, society at large anyone but my boyfriend, a first year pharmacy

student at London university, assured me that it was mine, to give to him(73)

Moreover, Atta highlights, through the words of her heroine, the selfish nature of men and the belief that her virginity is to be given to him. This persuasion is closely followed by the ditching of Enitan with irrelevant complaints. However, her great need for love places her in her next relationship with a young man nicknamed String Fellow and Mike Obi subsequently. These also do not prove any better, as they reveal the fickle nature of men in their treatment of Enitan.

Enitan's sojourn in the white man's land affords Atta the opportunity of juxtaposing the life of the black with that of the white. She takes a step further to address issues of black denigration which stem from lingering colonial perspective of white-black relations. This is tackled by Enitan who readily corrects or ignores the ones who prove to be fastidious. The separation of Sunny and Arinola Taiwo makes Enitan's sojourn in England and her dislocation from 'home' inevitable. Through this piece, Atta dramatically invokes one of those forces which account for the migration of Nigerians to the Diaspora. She, at this juncture, presents us with a picture of forced self-exile. Enitan describes her dilemma thus:

A squabble began between them, over ownership of property and me. My mother vowed to have my father debarred. Instead she developed hypertension...soon I began to spend vacation in London, working as a shop assistant in departmental stores to supplement my allowance to avoid staying with either of them (75).

This squabble eventually climaxes in later years in Arinola Taiwo's lonely death. In this light, Eshiet (1997:27) observes that the "non-involvement or lack of participation in issues vitally concerning the welfare of the woman has dire consequences for the female psychology." Despite these difficulties at "home", the social menace, the absence of basic amenities and the anarchy which define the Nigerian government and polity, the alienation and loneliness in a strange land pushes Enitan "home".

Atta also explores, at length, the varying difficulties and tensions which characterise the relationship between mother and daughter in post-colonial societies exemplified by the ever-failing relationship between Enitan and Arinola, her mother. Bungaro (2006:67) observes convincingly that:

Family relationships in African post-colonial societies manifest a growing level of tension, conflict and stress as a result of new opportunities, new interests and new dilemmas created by increasing gender and class stratification across Africa, but especially across generations of Africa (67).

She further states that these perceived tensions transcend the mother-daughter relationship to express generational, ideological and systemic tensions, which are eventually played out in the conflict between mothers and daughters. The already deteriorating relationship between mother and daughter becomes worse because the daughter fails to see and live by the social system

which stifles her mother's advancement and joy. According to Adrienne Rich (1977:235), "it is easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her". In a Freudian temper, Enitan continues to relate with her mother from a distance because she seems to persistently fight her father that she sees as "good". However, Arinola retorts: "If he's no good to me, he's no good to you. The day you realise it, I'll be here waiting for you. The damage has been done already. You're still blind."(91)

Conversely, all the major male characters in Atta's novel, but for a few exceptions, display one moral flaw or the other and an imbalanced gender perspective which accounts for their insensitive treatment and denigration of the "other" sex. Even though a man like Barrister Sunny claims that he is for the liberation of women, his treatment of Arinola (his wife) speaks volumes of his genuine position as the story unfolds. Enitan herself describes men as "Beaters, cheaters, lazy buggers" (237)

As a matter of fact, Enitan receives a "welcome home" when she suggests that Peter Mukoro should be sued, considering the inane behaviour which he puts up and the scandalous story which he is involved in. Not only is her suggestion treated as flimsy by the members of staff in her father's office, it creates the opportunity through which Atta creates awareness about the excesses of patriarchy. Atta easily lets off the fact that ingrained in virtually all facets and systems of the motherland is patriarchy which may not be easily rooted out by suing the Mr. Mukoros. This sarcastic "welcome home" that Mrs. Kazeem readily offers Enitan is Atta's attestation from the Diaspora that "home" is defined by the controlling and debilitating principles of patriarchy no matter how erroneous.

Atta also addresses the controversial issue of childbearing and the "joys of motherhood" which still appears to be an integral factor in African marriages. Arinola's struggle to attain motherhood, defined by the birth of a male child, is shrouded in irony. While she strives and loses every other form of fulfilment in order to meet the demand placed on her by her immediate society, Sunny, without taking his wife into confidence, gets a son outside their marriage just a year after Arinola's sickly son dies. Arinola is left in the dark for over two decades. This moment becomes strategic in the question of the moral stand of men as fathers and family heads as Enitan recalls her punishment for lying as a child (143). Sunny is a let-down and villainous male archetype who conjures the image of Flora Nwapa's Gilbert in *Efuru* (1968) who also gets a child outside his marriage, while *Efuru* languishes in anxiety and self-pity at the difficulty she encounters in child-bearing and the possibility of trying to preserve her husband's lineage at all cost. Uko (2006:86) maintains that:

Clearly, societal constructs set motherhood and procreation as the woman's major source of fulfilment, but contemporary African women are seeking new avenues for self-fulfilment, arguing that it is now unattainable, obnoxious and unacceptable that womanhood is validated only through motherhood and procreation, where procreation implies the male-child principle.

It is however significant that Atta makes an effort at addressing this issue which seems to be lingering despite the contemporariness the motherland is believed to have attained. Arinola's

plight and her treatment raise this as a silent question even in the more contemporary society than that of the Nnu Egos and Efurus that Atta addresses. The implication of these new directions in women writings, as Uko (2006:86) observes, could be described as the consistent attempt at the re-positioning of the African woman from the doldrums and fringes of societal schema.

Although P.C. Taylor (2002:428) describes feminism as purely Western and goes ahead to label this ideology with the tag 'individualistic', feminism transcends this description and judgment. Despite the fact that self-fulfilment is accentuated by feminism, the over-indulgence of patriarchy with self-fulfilment, as well as other self-centred projects, seems to be ignored.

The novel also dwells on consideration of women's quest for a good degree of freedom in society to pursue goals and targets which are not and do not necessarily terminate in the mere chase of individual ambition, but transcends this to cater for the needs of other women, family members and that fraction of society who do not have as priority the stifling of women. This, to a large extent, is captured in the final sections of Atta's novel. Enitan's assertion climaxes in the fourth and final section of the novel marked by an astonishing degree of growth and self-realisation. She claims her space as a female and tries to make meaning out of her existence in a world where all odds seem to be against women, especially those who speak out. Although she gets married to Niyi, she assumes the position of a totally independent woman, and when it does not seem convenient to maintain the status ("married") and pursue her vision as an activist for the emancipation of her father and others in similar debilitating situations, she opts for outside. Enitan says:

I couldn't remain as I was before, otherwise my memory of her [my mother] would have been in vain, and my survival would certainly be pointless. Anyone who experienced such trauma would understand... One life had gone and I could either mourn it or begin the next... This was the option I chose (308)

Enitan's fighting spirit makes Niyi's final and firm "NO" a difficult answer to take. She wants to be unstoppable to pursue and attain her goals. From this, she will derive fulfilment. Her action projects marriage as suffocating and constricting. True to her feminist's view, Atta's heroine takes a step further in controlling her space. Consequently, she seems to suggest that marriage and freedom are mutually exclusive in a typical African perspective. This disparity, therefore, motivates assertion after discovery has been made, and it attests to the veracity of Maria Cutrefelli's (1983:3) assertion that:

The new characteristically urban figure of the male-unprotected, husbandless single woman has significantly taken shape: and in the light of the traditional view of celibacy as a social failure, even a crime against society, the consciously deliberate rejection of marriage on the part of an increasing number of urban women appears to be a courageous, indeed daring deed.

Atta, therefore, challenges the jaundiced and stereotypical literary portrayal of women and goes further to project, through her female characters, the propensity for women to succeed outside the traditional roles of wife and mother. Entian comments on the assiduous task the feminist-oriented woman and the socio-political activist have in addressing the ills in the motherland thus:

But it was one thing to face an African community and tell them how to treat a woman like a person, it was entirely another to face an African dictatorship and tell them how to treat people like citizens (263)

Consequently, most of the women in Atta's novel possess a fighting spirit we do not easily associate with them at the beginning of the novel. However, Atta would have us believe as the novel unfolds and grinds to its conclusion that it is when her characters start fighting that they start living. Peter Mukoro fights for the Niger Delta; Sunny Taiwo, despite the odds, defends him. Sheri fights the psychological impact of her rape and moves ahead in life; she also indulges in physical combat with Brigadier when he goes beyond what seems to be his boundary with his different attempts at making a complete chattel out of her. Sheri's repressed feelings erupt, and "she beats him for every person who had crossed her path in life" (161). Uko (2006:92) argues that the sexuality of women constitutes a catalyst for self-discovery, self-assertion and holistic redefinition, as we see in Atta's novel.

Besides gender issues, Atta's fictional searchlight also pervades the issues of politics and governance in her motherland. She takes a look at the different military invasions, the governance of post-independence Nigeria, the calamity, poverty and denigration that attend these dysfunctional governments. Atta bears her mind forthrightly through her heroine, Enitan, on the need to be assertive and 'fight' for what is needed:

How did we live comfortably under dictatorship? The truth was that, we... if we never spoke out, were free as we could possibly be, complaining about our rubbish rotten country, and crazy armed robbers, and inflation. The authorities said hush and we hushed; they came with their sirens and we cleared off the streets; they beat someone and we looked the other way; they detained a relation and we hoped for the best (216).

Therefore, "freedom was never intended to be sweet. It was responsibility from the onset, for a people, a person, to fight for, and hold unto" (*Everything Good*, 307). This seems to be the main thrust of Atta's message. This discovery and the conception which goes with it motivate self-assertion and, optimally, self-realisation. It is in this light that Atta's ideological ethos as a writer should be examined; her novel exhibits those potent qualities that Kaytrak's (1996:232) uses in the description of women writers:

Women writers share specific gender concerns in terms of how social and Cultural factors appear from a female point of view. Their literary works imaginatively explore several conflicts between tradition (Social, custom, religion) and modernisation.

As the novel climaxes and Enitan becomes even more resolute, her father is released, and other prisoners Enitan has encountered in life also stand a chance of being freed. Her victory is expressed in the dance she does to the chagrin of road users. Enitan's dance typifies the exciting and liberating effect of freedom. Consequently, this novel ends on the optimistic note that "Everything good will come".

Conclusion

It has been established that Seffi Atta's narration of the socio-political and economic realities of Nigeria is ingeniously from the launch-pad of gender relations. Consequently, this paper attests to the inability of most Nigerian literary artists to entirely repress self-writing in their creative repertoire, and this inevitably informs the reality of gender biases irrespective of the writer's sex. Atta's narration of the motherland from the Diaspora has put her in the caste of female writers who could be accused of engaging in "anti-sexist sexism", considering the ineffectuality largely ascribed to her male characters. It should, however, be opined that the concern of many contemporary Nigerian female writers has been to showcase the plight of women creatively and also rebuff certain stereotypic perceptions about women which have naturally evolved from patriarchal impulses. Nevertheless, Sefi Atta's novels are not absolutely prototypical, since they address issues relating to the conditions of women and transcend this to interrogate postcolonial existence in Nigeria which is characterised by abnormality. It is appropriate to conclude, therefore, that the enduring strength of Atta as a novelist lies in her ability to highlight the appropriation of social, gender and economic caste as a means of subjugation in contemporary Nigeria. In fact, Atta's feminine perspective betrays very naturally her involvement in what may be described as gender polemics.

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