

Interrogating the Quest for Women Empowerment in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Sajna P

Ph. D. Research Scholar

Kannur University Central Library

Kannur, Kerala.

e-mail:najmh03@gmail.com

&

Dr Sr Marykutty Alex

Associate Professor and Research Guide

Department of English

Nirmalagiri College

Koothuparamba, Kannur, Kerala

Abstract

The paper proposes to examine feminist issues in Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come (2006). It tries to decipher the silence of the marginalized and their attempts to break themselves away from the lack of identity confronted in the social, economic and political spheres. The writer portrays her female characters to be more radical than men. She projects the female as the most unfortunate victims in the post- colonial crises. The novel unfolds the role of social, cultural and economic factors in the native land, in inhibiting the progress of women. The novel records the life of the heroine, Enitan- the various incidents that occur in her life from childhood till she comes of age. Enitan and other female characters in the novel portray the twenty-first century Nigerian woman caught in the constricting and inconsistent demands of traditional ethics and norms introduced by Westernisation. Enitan's ambition of becoming a female president in Nigeria portrays her interest in liberating women. She yearns to free herself from the prison of domesticity, which pats women who swallow their voice and freedom of expression. Enitan leaves her husband in order to achieve her own freedom and to free her father. Atta instructs women on the future of declining patriarchal domination through the practical actions of gender-assertive Enitan, Sheri, Mrs. Ameh and even the Mother of the Prison.

Keywords: Marginalisation, female empowerment, patriarchy.

“Many of the stories we tell have already been told.

It is the freshness we bring to the re-telling that matters”

(Adichie)

The African women have always been portrayed through a negative lens from the past. The condition of women in society as well as their sufferings in the domestic circle have urged them break the shackles of restriction and spring up as free individuals. The society, structured upon the tools of gender discrimination and patriarchy, subject women to extra burdens especially in developing countries and has been a great barrier to women empowerment. This has resulted in their protest against oppression in the present socio-cultural set up to ensure equality of sexes. Taking into account the history of African women writers, we see that the earlier writers were hardly noticed because of the traditional attitude of the African people particularly women. These traditional beliefs and customs were imposed on people by their male counterparts. The feminist writers try to subvert the ‘othering’ role assigned to women and reflect their urge for recognition and identity, in order to enhance their position in a male dominant society. In December 2012, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about being a feminist for TEDxEuston in her speech entitled, "We should all be feminists". In her talk Adichie affirms that there is a lot of negative baggage linked to feminism and she sarcastically considers feminists associated with the word terrorists. She states that our ideas of gender have not evolved and states her anger towards it. Yet she believes in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better.

Sefi Atta, born in Lagos in Nigeria 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 and 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. She has three novels to her credit- *Everything Good will Come* (2005), *Swallow* (2008) and *A Bit of Difference* (2012). She also has a published collection of short stories entitled *Lawless* (2007).

Everything Good Will Come is a truth to life novel since it evokes the sights and smells of an African. 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.

The story is told from a first person perspective- Enitan's perspective. It is a bildungsroman, which reveals an unbroken growth pattern till Enitan comes of age as a self-conscious and assertive woman. Sectionalised into four parts, 1971, 1975, 1985, 1995, 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. 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 presents the reader with the platform on which her heroine's sensibilities are developed.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World", interrogates the subject position. She questions the hypothesis that a woman's identity means that she speaks for women from a position of 'knowledge'.

"Can men theorise feminism, can whites theorise racism, can the bourgeois theorise revolution, and so on. It is only when the former groups theorise that the situation is politically intolerable. Therefore it is crucial that the members of these groups are kept vigilant about their assigned subject positions". (235)

In the 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). 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. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues vehemently that feminist struggles are fought on both an ideological, representational level and an experiential, everyday level. This echoes that the value of theory exists in its political effectiveness.

Enitan is a character greatly influenced by her childhood experiences and seeks an unimaginable freedom to liberate women with pre-matured means and procedure in a country like hers. Enitan as a child is controlled and moulded by her parents, she has no freedom and choice of her own because everything she does is being dictated for her, for instance in (p. 41 and 42), when the father gives her a pen as a gift, the father tells Enitan that he wants her to study law, so that she will become a lawyer in order to run his practice when he dies:

He retrieved a rectangular case from his pocket and handed it to me.

"A Pen"

"Yours"

It was a fat navy pen. I pulled the cap off.

"Thank you Daddy".

My father reached into his pocket again. He pulled a watch out and dangled it. I collapsed. It was a Timex”...

“What is that?”

What you don’t want to be. You want to be a lawyer”

Going to work was too remote to contemplate.

He laughed.

“Tell me now, so I can take back my gifts”.

“I’m too young to know”.

‘Too young indeed. Who will run my practice when I’m gone?’ (39)

Thereafter, Enitan studied in the University. This cropped up her quest for freedom, during the period of individualistic living, in a conservative society where women are being praised for swallowing their voice devoid of any freedom of expression. Trinh Minh-Ha’s “Grandma’s Story” in her initial essay *Woman, Native, Other*, refers to traditional cultures as sites of cultural space that is female, gendered, but not subordinated. In other words, a postcolonial re-appropriation of “women’s space” against the movement of “genderless hegemonic standardization”.

In her essay “Reading Towards a Theorization of African Women’s Writing: African Women Writers within Feminist Gynocriticism”, Nana Wilson-Tagoe ascertains a “double-edged representation in which the politics of history, race and gender intersect to reveal the very complex ways in which the African woman writer can relate both to a woman’s sphere and to the wide world around” (26). Wilson-Tagoe further asserts that “the African woman’s text be read not as a polarization of male and female tradition, but as a complex discourse with general intersecting points, crisscrossing and interrogating each other continuously” (27).

Enitan as a child grows up with hatred for womanhood because all her life she lived a prisoner- from her father’s house, her mother always makes sure she does things to satisfy her without hearing from her or seeking her own opinion like the father always does to her from Royal Girls’ College ‘A girls boarding school to where she attended in London where she studied law then back to Nigeria, her father’s law chamber where she serves as a lawyer then to her husband’s house. 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)

Enitan believes that she has what it takes to release her father and Peter Mukoro. So with the help of Grace Ameh, Mrs. Mukoro, Enitan then organizes a way for the release of her father and Peter Mukoro. Enitan feels that her husband Niyi is least concerned about her father’s predicament, she then decides to leave the house in order to achieve her ambition.

Enitan's ambition of becoming a female president in Nigeria portrays her interest in liberating women. She dislikes men domination, oppression, control of her. Her conversation with Sheri on their dream reveal her power of self-realization.

I want to be something like . . . like president.

"Eh; women are not president." "why not.

"our men won't stand for it, who will cook for your husband".

"He will cook for himself"

"What if he refuses"

"I will drive him away"

"You can't she said"

"Yes I can. Who wants to marry him anyway"

"What if they kill you in a coup".

"I'll kill them back

"what kind of dream is that".

"mine" I smirked.

"Oh, women aren't presidents" she said. (30)

Her childhood experiences especially in her father's house develops in her the quest for an unimaginable freedom to liberate herself and other women. Enitan's career as a legal practitioner influences and upgrades her, it places her in a capable position to face the task but political instability and suppression of the law makes her powerless and also the fear of being arrested by the police.

Enitan's attitude towards her husband and her neglect to her duties and marital responsibilities without any regard to Niyi's feelings shows how her non-chalant attitude prevents her from being controlled by the people around her.

"Your husband works too had" she said.

"Everyone works too hard", I said. "I'm about, to work too hard". You must take care of your husband's home'. She teased like an old woman. "Ah, I hate it," . . . "And for a man who won't even take a glass to the kitchen. . . The man behaves as if I am his personal servant". . . "you must have known before", she said. "I haven't been at home this long before". "It's his mother, I'm sure". "The statute of limitations has run out". "Show him sense, jo. (207)

Enitan takes charge of everything around her and never allows her husband to molest or over shadow her with his interest. Rather she makes him humble and co-operative to her wills (p. 201). Enitan runs and controls her father's office more strictly than her father. She handles all the activities with regard to feminist upliftment even after her detention with Grace Ameh in their cause of liberating women. They continue to have other secret meetings aimed at educating and enlightening women to voice their opinion;

Enitan believes that women are oppressed and they need self-liberation and to her the only way to liberate women from oppression is by living alone. For instance in (p. 152) where she packs out of her father's house because she discovers that Debayo is her father's son and her mother was not aware of it. She thinks that running away will solve the problem or change the mind of his father:

But don't tell me it is time I meet your son. That is not my choice. Not my lot, and I don't have to live with it". "I have not asked anything for you." "Does my mother know?" "He did not answer. "does she know?" "No," he said. Shame had winded him. His voice was too low. . . "I'm not staying here," "where are you going? He asked, "To my boyfriend's house," I said. My father pointed, "walk out of that door and you won't be welcome back here". "Liar". I said. I packed a bag, I didn't even look at him as I walked out (p. 152).

Enitan believes that she cannot bring her father out from the prison by living with her husband. Her husband stops talking to her because he does not want her to talk to the journalists and also Grace Ameh;" I mean, how can I decide what to do about my father from a kitchen? Come to think of it, how can I decide anything with a mini Idi amin sitting right there in my home" (245). Niyi does not really care about Enitan's father's detention and this makes Enitan feel that she needs her own freedom in order to release her father from the prison.

Enitan knows well that she can't liberate women from the kitchen, she leaves her husband for no just reasons;

My husband asked why I was leaving him. "I have to" I replied. Three words; I could say them. "What kind of woman are you?" Not a word. "Wouldn't you have tried to stop me too" he asked. Probably, but he wouldn't have had to leave me to do what he wanted. . . My old neighbor from Sunrise Estate, Busola, a smile for her when she confided, "Everyone is talking about you. They say you left for no reason. He never beat you, never chased. . . And Sheri had this to say:"You wait. You just wait. Your father will ask when he's out; why did you leave your husband. (332).

In fact, she is trying to tell women that before they would be free, they must abandon their husbands and live alone, but it is not realistic or practical in Nigerian society because most women want a man by their side.

Comparing Grace Ameh with Enitan's behaviour, she is also married to Joe, with children, unlike Enitan, Grace Ameh is a dedicated wife and a loving mother. She is educated and clearly has the freedom to pursue her career at the same time struggle to meet up-to the demands of her family and job. She is a journalist, she did not leave her husband's house because of her work, and rather she combines her professional life and domestic duties.

As Jane Bryce posits in "Half and Half Children: Third –Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel", "Like Hibiscus, where "things fall apart" on a particular day,

on the third Sunday of September . . . everything changed” (12). This change is a result of the meeting between Enitan and Sheri as children, which leads, later, to Sheri’s rape in the park, and to an adult relationship. . . While Enitan struggles to realize herself within marriage, Sheri unashamedly becomes the mistress of a powerful man who doesn’t require her to have children” (60)

Enitan comments after her experience in the prison, “I promised myself that I would no longer speak for women in my country, because, quite simply, I didn’t know them all” (284). Enitan rejoices after her father is released from prison at the climax of the novel. As she dances at the side of the road, the driver reprimands her, “Nothing good will come to you!” and she chides him back “Tell him, *a da*. It will be good. Everything good will come to me” (335).

Sefi Atta is a radical feminist who believes that women can do without men, this belief makes Enitan to leave her husband’s house. A traditional reader would criticize Enitan for leaving her husband who had done no wrong. But we can justify her stand because she wanted to help her father and she was aware that her husband would be an obstacle in her path. To conclude, we can say that Enitan is a radical feminist in the sense that she strongly believed that living with a man will not allow her to achieve her ambition in life. Adichie’s definition of feminist is a man or a woman who says, “Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better.”

Works Cited:

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Harper, 2007. Print.
- , “A Hibiscus Blooming Under African Sun.” Interview with Adaure Achumba. www.nigerianentertainment.com/frontpage/index_19/02/07
- . "The Danger of a Single Story." TED Talk (2009). April 2010. Web.
- Afshar, Haleh, ed. *Women and Politics in the Third World*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Atta, Sefi. *Everything Good Will Come*. London: Interlink, 2008. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge: London, 1994.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *From Black Power to HipHop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*. USA: Temple, 2006. Print.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Doyle, Laura. *Bordering the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Gamble, Sarah. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto, 1982. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary*. 2:12(3)(1986):333–58. Print.

Nnaemeka, Obioma, Ed. *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Puri, Jyoti. *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

---. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern. Ed. G.N. Devy. *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002. Print.

Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. Print.

Wilson-Tagoe, Nana. "Reading Towards a Theorization of African Women's Writing: African Women within Feminist Gynocriticism." In Ed. Stephanie Waller, *African, Women: Gender, Popular Culture, and Literature in West Africa*. London: Zed Books, 1997. Print.

