

Women Empowerment: A Critique of Female Protagonists in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow*

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Sefi Atta, one of the most renowned Nigerian-born women writers of the recent times, is an award-winning novelist, short-story writer and dramatist. Her novels primarily focus on the difficulties, situations and conditions of women in contemporary Nigerian society. Patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexual violence, social, economic, educational, political and psychological issues are the leitmotif of Sefi Atta's novels. Her novels also portray powerful and highly individualistic women characters who give voice for their rights and also have concern for numerous issues concerning women. Her novels, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and *Swallow* (2010) deal with the predicament of modern women and their struggles in search for their identity and voice in contemporary Nigerian society. The desire for independence and female empowerment is the fulcrum around which *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* revolve. These two novels trace emotions and feelings which the female protagonists go through. The protagonists try to live a dignified and meaningful life and retain their worth as a human as well as a woman in the midst of conflicting realities. The female characters such as Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come* and Tolani in *Swallow* are projected as bold, determined and assertive women who struggle for their emancipation and rightful position both in families and society.

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan is shown as eleven year old, naive, shy, ignorant and inexperienced in the beginning of the novel. But towards the end of the narrative, she empowers herself and proves her individuality. To attain her self-identity, she has to bear with family relationships and people in power. Sunny Taiwo, her father, is a lawyer by profession. He showers her love and affection and makes it sure that she should not get closer to her mother. Her father's intentional love and affection makes her mother an evil figure in the family. Arinola, her mother, leads a life of alienation after her younger son died of cell-sickle crisis. Enitan is too young to understand the side of her mother's story and has closely been drawn to her father. Sunny is portrayed as a hypocrite who usually speaks about liberation of women and blames them for their lack of involvement and insensitivity in economic and political problems of their nation. But he, as a patriarch, abuses his wife psychologically and economically. He never stands according to his ideology and belief. Enitan comes to know of her father's hypocrisy much later in her life which ends up in leaving her father's house finally.

Enitan goes to London to study law. Back home, she joins her father's firm. Her father's true colours have gradually been unveiled. She becomes so furious when his staff members are paid very low. Her anger mounts up when he declines to transfer one of his houses to his wife's name after their divorce. He fails to obey the orders of the court. He says that "After what she's done, bad mouthing me all over the place, trying to get me disbarred. If I put the property in her name, she will probably give it to that church of hers" (Atta 108). Thus, Atta, through such characters, exposes male chauvinistic stand and their unfair treatment of women in contemporary Nigerian society.

To cap it all, Sunny Taiwo has a son out of wedlock. Polygamy is quite common in Nigeria. But Enitan takes it as an offence and leaves her father's home permanently. She comes to know that her father's infidelity, insensitivity and patriarchal dominance are the primary reasons for her mother's detachment and hypertension. She can wholly understand her mother's mental trauma. Her mother has lost her little son and longed for solace and comfort. But Sunny never cares for her and has left her languish in mental suffering. So she has resorted to church. Enitan believes that her mother opts for a divorce just to restore her dignity and peace of mind. Sunny never abuses his wife physically but inflicts emotional, mental and psychological pain. Atta accuses men for maintaining their sexist stance towards physically weaker gender. She also condemns Nigerian elite men who appear to be patriotic and struggle for liberation of their country from military regime but truly they oppress women at home.

Enitan, eventually, discovers that her father's patriarchal authority turns her mother an eccentric figure in the family. When her mother is found dead in her solitary home because of having consumed expired medication, she completely breaks down. She feels guilty for having detached herself from her mother in her girlhood. Now, she is aware of the fact that her father's infidelity, authority and lack of concern are responsible for her mother's pathetic life and death.

Enitan encounters great challenges in her conjugal life. Sefi Atta discusses the varied issues of marital disharmony through the life and experiences of Enitan. Niyi Franco, her husband, is a manager in an insurance company. He was once a lawyer. He is a domineering husband. He strictly upholds the traditional and cultural norms of the society despite his sound knowledge and education. He sternly believes that kitchen remains for the female sphere. But Enitan never desires to serve as a "kitchen martyr" (Atta 105). There starts the feud between the husband and the wife. Enitan never wants to spend most of the time in the kitchen. She also encourages her fellow women to not waste their time and true value by serving in the kitchen for so long. Enitan clearly thinks that women must go beyond the limited horizons of their lives beyond domesticity. Thus, Enitan tries to come out of the confinement perpetuated by patriarchy. Through Enitan, Atta questions men who try to transform women into kitchen martyrs. "For Atta the kitchen kills the aspirations of the woman, and if the woman must achieve her dreams; she must move out of the kitchen space" (Akung 120). Atta truly dreams for a social transformation where women can be valued more than their domestic space.

Enitan's late pregnancy causes friction in her conjugal life. Motherhood is celebrated as a central and positive thing in the lives of women. But when women are revered only for their biological roles such as procreation, nurturing etc. motherhood becomes a burden for several women. When Enitan is impossible to get pregnant in the first few years of her conjugal life, Niyi's relatives abuse her verbally. Even they force Niyi to abandon her. Thus, she falls victim to this institution. Enitan cannot bear with the unjust treatment meted out to women in terms of motherhood. In a fit of rage, she thinks that "My mother invited me to her vigils; my father offered to send me overseas to see other doctors. I asked why they harassed women this way. We were greater than our wombs, greater than the sum of our body parts" (Atta 188). Ultimately, she becomes pregnant and cries out of joy.

Enitan faces trials and tribulations when she gives voice for the liberation of prisoners, including her father. Sunny Taiwo calls for a national strike against the military rule in order to release the detainees. So he gets arrested. Enitan worries for her father and other prisoners who have been waiting for trials in prison whereas Niyi worries about his family. She wants to go for a campaign against the military rule along with Grace Ameh, a journalist. Niyi strongly opposes to it. So the cold war between them begins. So he chooses silence as a weapon to threaten Enitan emotionally. He has stopped talking to her for several months. Niyi expects Enitan to serve as a typical, traditional wife who looks after her family with love and care.

Enitan suffers mental trauma due to Niyi's choice of silence. She cannot bear any longer after she has witnessed her mother's pathetic death. She cannot remain the same as she was before. She wants to find out the true meaning of her life. She thinks that "the smell of my mother's death.... Otherwise my memory of her would have been in vain, and my survival would certainly be pointless. Anyone who experienced such a trauma would understand" (Atta 332). So, she leaves her husband along with her newborn baby, Yimika. Thus, she battles against the suppressive forces in her own ways and proves her individuality as a new, modern Nigerian woman. Atta portrays Enitan as a trend setter and as a progenitor of modern generation.

Tolani in *Swallow*, on the other hand, works at the Federal Community Bank in Lagos. She struggles to make a living in the hustle and bustle of the big city of Lagos. Rose Adamson, her roommate as well as her colleague is her best friend. Both of them face sexual harassment and patriarchal suppression in the bank. Mr. Salako, the branch manager, is wholly corrupted. He is also the board of director's messenger boy. Mr. Salako shows no respect for women and treats them as their subordinates. He always flatters the director or the Bigman who visits the bank. People would say that Salako is "scatterbrained" (51). But Tolani believes that it is his tactics to avoid his duties. As Rose is his secretary, he misbehaves with her several times. But on one episode, unable to tolerate his sexual advances, she slaps him in front of the customers and security guards. When Tolani comes to know of it, she fears that it would end up in her dismissal. True to her words, Rose is dismissed on the basis of

insubordination. Even the novel begins with Tolani's narration as "On the morning that Rose was sacked she and I could easily have been killed" (Atta 7).

Tolani is unable to believe that Rose has lost her job. All the employees in the bank blindly support Salako and blame Rose for her rash behavior. Rose reacts to her dismissal and tells Tolani, "No justice. No justice for people like us. You hear? Only for the wicked and the corrupt in this country"(Atta 22). Tolani also becomes the victim of sexual harassment, when she is transferred to Rose's position as the secretary of Mr. Salako. Salako orders her to take Quarterly Budgets file. The cabinet is three drawers high. Tolani wonders that Salako can reach the file easily. While trying to get the file, Mr. Salako walks between his desk and the cabinet. She shivers and tries to get out of the way but both of them stuck in the narrow space. She tries to free herself from him, but he hugs her tightly. She thinks that "Filthy was the first word that came to my mind followed by "fool" (Atta 85). She has sworn several times that if a man touches her inappropriately, she must slap him. But since Tolani is voiceless and subordinate to her boss, she leaves his room quietly like "an obedient daughter would" (Atta 86). Through the construction of Tolani, Sefi Atta expresses her views that Nigerian women make a lot of noise but never react when right time comes.

Mr. Salako's misbehaviour affects Tolani psychologically. Whenever she hears his voice, she starts shivering. Thus, she suffers mental trauma that would take time to heal. She cannot quit her job. In another episode, when Mr. Salako orders her to take the file again, she declines it. So, he decides to issue her a memo complaining that she becomes recalcitrant. She has left with no option except speaking out the truth boldly. Tolani meets Ignatius, her senior, and discusses Mr. Salako's misconduct with him. But Ignatius threatens her with the dire consequences. Tolani knows very well that her memo would be torn up certainly. The novelist shows clearly that the system favours only the perpetrators and encourages them to repeat the same acts.

Tolani is in threat of being dismissed by Mr. Salako at any time. Tolani and Rose fall victim to the situation. The situation forces them to become drug mules. OC Okonko, the boyfriend of Rose, smuggles drugs to America. Rose has already fallen prey into OC's tricks. "Rose, like many Nigerians, sees the possibility and opportunity of leaving the shores of the country at any cost to escape the social, political and economic malaise of the nation. It is on this sad note that Rose makes plans to serve as a drug mule for OC Okonkwo" (Nwiyi 3). But Tolani is in dilemma because she is aware of drug – trafficking that has already claimed the lives of several women. Also, she feels that drug mules are "like prostitutes" (Atta 136) and surely would end up in prison, if caught. Thus, Tolani is determined not to become a drug mule. But her determination seems to have shattered when Mr. Salako rejects her time – off. Out of anger, she blurts out that he should not chase her as she is of his daughter's age. She asks him "Would you be happy if someone at work chased your daughter?" (Atta 186). It infuriates him and

suspends her for two weeks. She tries to apologize but he never heeds her. She may be dismissed from her job at any time. As her survival is at stake, she, too, starts practising swallow drugs.

Tolani's unexpected visit to born-again church makes her realize her pure strength. Godwin, her colleague, invites her to church. She gets angry on seeing the pastor's attempts to lure common people to raise money. Her real strength comes out as a sense of anger. She abuses the mushrooming growth of religious institutions and their people for deceiving people in the name of god. She realizes the truth that she must question if she wants to overcome her problems. Also she comes to understand that she does not want to become a drug mule. She says that "My spirit will not allow me to be a smuggler" (227). Also she tries to take revenge of Mr. Salako by blowing chicken feathers into his face after she has learnt of his fear of juju.

Tolani's growing suspicion of her deceased father's impotency is another factor that has disturbed her throughout the action of the narrative. Tolani has a doubt that her father's brother, Brother Tade must be her real father as her father has been believed to be sterile. On one episode, she tells Rose that "I think my father's brother is my real father.... If a woman is infertile, she can't hide it. If a man is sterile... The wife finds someone else to father her child and keeps the whole thing a secret" (Atta 203). Arike, Tolani's mother is resourceful, assertive and successful business woman. Arike has established herself as a reputed cloth-dyer in Makoku. Her economic power bestows her a sense of satisfaction, confidence and fulfillment. She is the one who has refused to marry the new Oba and married a man of her own choice. She is the first woman to ride a motor bike in Makoku as it has been so rare. She challenges patriarchal oppression in her own ways and revolts against it and proves herself as an autonomous, assertive and versatile woman.

Arike, too, faces challenges when she is unable to give birth to a child. She has been criticized by her family members and colleagues for not having given birth to a child. Their criticism and inquisition force Arike to think "I was thinking, so that was all I was born for, to give birth? That meant that I was a failure in life" (Atta 152). Thus, Arike's inability to procreate becomes an embarrassment for her family. Throughout the novel, Tolani is doubtful about her origin. Tolani's resurging doubts about her father's impotency and Rose's tragic death are the reasons for her mental trauma. While leaving Lagos for Makoku, her native town where her mother has been dwelling in, she feels that "I vowed that I would not cry for Rose anymore... She'd never cried for herself ... I was willing to accept that her death was not final and that her spirit was safe..." (Atta 259-60). She musters up courage to admit the loss of her friend. She feels Rose's presence by her side and considers her imaginative voice the guiding principle of her life.

Tolani's journey to empowerment begins after she understands the stark reality of life and realizes her real worth as a human. After being dismissed from her job by Mr. Salako and her break-up

with Sanwo, her boyfriend she decides to stay in Makoku with her mother. Back home, Tolani is able to understand the pathetic situation of her mother and tries to reconcile to it. She feels that her mother could have exposed her father's impotency to the world. But Arike has made compromises and sacrifices in her life. Instead, she has enjoyed much freedom than her fellow women and kept the secret as a privilege. Towards the end of the novel, when she tries to reveal the secret to her, Tolani stops her by saying "Your story is already told" (295). Thus, the details about her birth is immaterial for Tolani.

Tolani's acceptance of her past life marks the beginning of a process of self – realization and empowerment. She knows very well that her mother's selfless love has nurtured her. Her mother is the only true soul with whom she can share everything. The hope and the level of confidence that has been ingrained in her by her mother help her rediscover her real worth, dignity and identity. Her bonding with her mother enables her to change her attitude towards the life. Thus, she gives up her idea of forcing Arike to tell the truth about her birth. As the quest for survival has become imperative, Tolani decides to assist her mother at work. She tries to try her hands at Adire arts and crafts in Makoku. She even thinks of designing table spreads and mats with the help of other women. Thus, she tries to empower herself by starting a business along with her mother. Thus, towards the end, she proves herself as a survivor who attempts to survive in the midst of harsh realities and difficulties. She becomes a matured, strong individual capable of facing the vicissitudes of life.

The search for identity and female empowerment is the intriguing concept in literature these days. Numerous novels revolve around this concept. Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* centre on this concept. An identity crisis is a period where the protagonist questions herself and makes an effort to discover her own values and sense of direction. An identity crisis enables the protagonist to empower herself towards the end. Thus, Atta's protagonists - Enitan and Tolani redeem themselves and their values with great fortitude and perseverance. These two novels depict how these protagonists come to terms with their past and present. The quest for true identity and female empowerment form the crux of these two novels.

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