



Society And Gender Identity In African Fiction: Re-Evaluating Women's Identity In Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come

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Abstract:

One emerging reality in African literature, especially the African fiction is the redefinition and/or re-presentation of women's identity and sensibility. This is painted against the backdrop of various societal schisms that seek to perpetually keep the status quo of the enslaved female and the lionized male in the continent's literature. The female character in African fiction has been portrayed as submissive, culturally handicapped against certain social behaviour, subservient and a second fiddle to the dominant male. This is the kind of picture we find in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Elechi Amadi's The Concubine, and even Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana. However, the advent of serious women writings, and also the influx of western – oriented ideologies such like feminism mark the beginning of the redefinition of the personality and identity of women. In this paper, using Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come, we attempt to examine society's perception of gender identity as it affects women, particularly in Africa where the novels are set. We conclude by asserting that the redefinition of the female gender in African fiction is a timely endeavour as women in real life experiences are continually breaking out from their neglected corners to contribute to society's development.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Redefinition and/or Re-presentation, Women's Sensibility and Society.

1.Introduction

One common feature of the African societies, apart from the peculiarity of postcolonial socio-economic abnormalities is patriarchy. Patriarchy is a form sociological stratification that exalts the male gender over the female. It ultimately seeks to delineate the society among gender lines, thereby assigning certain roles and responsibilities to a particular gender, the male in this sense, and relegates the female gender to the background. Marginalization, suppression, self-defacement, self-erasure, and injustice are but a few negative terms associated with such a social order.

Gender is a socially constructed order. It is socially constructed because the delineation of social roles and the way the two sexes – male and female are conceived attract different levels of distinctions. According to Rogers Webster (1990), “gender is a socially constructed difference which forms the basis of inequality, oppression and exploitation between sexes... “(72). Suffice to state that the term ‘gender’ is used to capture the differential roles of sexes in the society. This has been the bane of societal development, particularly in Africa where the aspirations, expectations, and desires of the sexes are conditioned on the dictates of the socio-cultural and religious structures in the society. Perhaps this informs Imoh Emenyi’s position in her paper entitled, “Women as Symbols of Patriarchal Capitalism” where she states that:

...the male and female children are socialized differently, the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the latter is trained to meet his needs. The prominence given to male trait as attributes that are positively valued has culminated in the institutionalization of male dominance. The female is planted in domestic space as a wife and mother... (38)

The unparallel pedestal on which the two genders – male and female is placed is the ultimate cause of female marginalization, suppression, erasure of self – value and esteem. Akorede (2011) also notes that:

Gender stereotyping and gender discrimination are closely tied to the issue of sexuality. These are barriers to woman’s positive sense of worth and achievement. They affect woman’s progress and advancement, so that pre-designed roles assigned by culture and tradition limit the woman from attaining possible self fulfilment. (34)

Prior to this age of vibrant and pragmatic literary advocacy on the accurate and/or fair projection of the identity of the African woman by male writers who have dominated the literary scene, the depiction of the African woman in literary works typically reveals discriminatory comments such as: the woman is like a lifeless piece of property or thing that can be bought, sold, and treated like lifeless objects; the woman is senseless and incapable of logical reasoning, and as such cannot participate in decision making process in the home and in the society at large; the woman is to be seen and not heard; the woman is pre-destined to live a devoted life of a 'wife' to a faceless god; the place of women in the society is behind the burning firewood and the cooking pots, and ultimately in the bedroom. Sotunsa (2008) corroborates this view when she affirms that:

The pioneer African male writers mirrored patriarchy in their works. The man is often the protagonist and antagonist who dominate other people, while the women are made peripheral and their characters hardly developed (82).

When we probe the reason for this stereotyped depiction, we discover that writings, indeed, creative writings in Africa particularly from the pre-colonial age to the early colonial era were dominated by male writers. Femi Ojo – Ade (1983) observes that:

African literature is male created, male oriented chauvinistic art. An honour roll of our literary giants clearly proves that point...Man constitutes the majority and women the minority (158-159)

As it is generally consented that a writer is a product of his/her society, the unpleasant images and/or portraits of the African woman by male writers – products of a patriarchal society is informed by how women have been unreasonably suppressed and their voices and aspirations muffled.

Early works of pioneer African novelists like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Cyprian Ekwensi have depicted the African woman in the light of the aforementioned status. For instance, Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is condemned to take rash actions in order to keep up with the standard set by the society's culture on the attainment of honour, or bluntly put manliness. Okonkwo cannot afford to be taken for a woman when he tries to steer his kinsmen to action against the white colonialists:

"Let's not reason like cowards", said Okonkwo. "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my

eyes ?No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are pouring filth over us and Okeke pretends not to see". Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. "This was a womanly clan", he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland (113).

Here, weakness, indecision, and cowardice are attributed to women. Okonkwo's illustration of a man breaking the head of a wandering goat tells us all about the attributes of men: brutal force, and irrational behaviour. Achebe goes on in the novel to tell his reader about the lionized male as husband over numerous wives, as a dictator - father, and as indomitable. This portrait of the lionized male in the novel also permeates into other literary works of other writers who project the woman as a fated being whose destiny is to serve and not to be heard or respected.

However, with the coming of age of the group of female writers that Tess Onwueme describes as literary foremothers, the resilience, inner beauty, radiating grace and energy, and faithfulness of the African woman started to be projected. Sotunsa (2008) notes that:

The unfavourable portrayal of women by African male writers ignited a literary outburst which culminated in female writers attempt to counter the impaired picture of African womanhood by reversing the roles of women in African fiction written by men. African female writers began to present female protagonists who are pitted against all odds, yet emerge liberated and determined to exist with or without the man (83-84)

IniobongUko in a paper entitled "Transcending the Margins: New Directions in Women's Writing", rightly observes that:

Clearly, societal constructs set motherhood and procreation as the woman's major sources of fulfillment, but contemporary African women are seeking new avenues for self-fulfillment, arguing that it is now untenable, obnoxious and unacceptable that womanhood is validated only through motherhood and procreation, where procreation implies the male-child principle. (86)

Uko's position is right when we consider the dearth of literary works that have been produced right from the commencement of the literary campaign of re-presentation and/or redefining the image of the African woman in the African fiction.

Many women writers and critics have in desperate moves come out with several literary concepts and/or ideas. Ogun-dipe-Leslie propounds the concept of "Stiwanism" – an acronym meaning: Social Transformation in Africa including Women; Catherine Acholonu came out with "Motherism"; and lately Modupe Egun Kolawole, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and a host of others are in the forefront of "Womanism". These concepts and ideological stands have been reflected in literary works especially by women. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in *Efuru* is presented as a strong, resilient and noble woman; Buchi Emecheta's *Nnu Ego* in *Joys of Motherhood* is industrious, brave, and highly intelligent. And as we argue in this present discourse, Ata's *Enitan* in *Everything Good Will Come* is not docile, passive, and subjective 'slaves' who do nothing to liberate themselves as their fellow women projected in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

In one sense, the era of projecting African women as lifeless or insensitive objects is over. Over the years, more radicalistic stands have been taken, and sometimes, re-taken, all in a bid to redefining the face of feminist or womanist portrayal of women in the African fiction.

2.A Critique Of Society And Gender Identity In Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* And Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

Sefi Atta and Kaine Agary belong to the emergent class of female writers in Africa. Unlike their literary mothers – the likes of Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo and Bassie Head, the emergent voices of whom Atta and Agary along a host of other writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Abimbola Adelakun, and Lola Soneyin belong, have in their works redefine women's identity to sooth current socio-economic and civilization realities. They do so by presenting women who defiantly embrace the harsh realities of their society's gender prejudice; these women bear their burden with smiles and pride; they blaze the trail and upturn the conventional structure in the home by upsetting their men – mostly indolent head, as breadwinners and more importantly as an active partner in decision making.

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, like a Bildungsroman, narrates the tale of the protagonist, *Enitan*, from her age and/or stage of innocence, self-uncertainty and/or naivety to that age of self-discovery, identity, reason and self-fulfilment. When *Enitan*

first appears in the novel, she does that as a naïve girl whose innocence and timidity stems from her parent's scripted injunctions. She begins her story thus:

From the beginning I believed whatever I was told,
downright lies, even about how best to behave, although
I had my own inclinations. At an age when other Nigerian
girls were masters at ten-ten, the game in which we stamped
our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit partners with sudden
knee jerks, my favourite moments were spent sitting on a jetty
pretending to fish. My worst was to hear my mother's shout... (11)

While every other young child around her enjoys freedom, Enitan is systematically conscripted to the boundary set by her parents, symbolized by the fence that separates her house from the Lagoon that flows across. This wooden fence is not only a physical barrier, but, it literarily connotes psychological and social barrier that denies innocent Enitan the liberty to find out for herself what life is all about. The barrier is soon to be broken down when Enitan lets in a girl from the next door, Sheri, who unmask the artificial veil from Enitan's eyes.

Enitan finds her psychological incarceration by her parents imposing orders as anti-child development:

Who cared about what we thought at our age? Between
childhood and adulthood there was no space to grow
literally, and whatever our natural instincts, our parents
were determined to clip off any disobedience: "Stop moping
around." "Face your studies." "You want to disgrace us?" (53)

Atta, here advocates liberty and respect for the young child to be able to grow, discover, and learn so as to make decisions for themselves. Though, it is only reasonable for parents to offer leadership and/or mentorship for their wards, however, it is imperative that the parent allow their children to make certain decisions, particularly those pertaining to choice of career. When we observe the tension in family relationships depicted in Enitan's and Sheri's childhood experiences, we find Bungaro's (1996) assertion very appropriate. Bungaro asserts 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).

As Enitan continues in her psychological education, she discovers that her parent's over-protectiveness and eye-handedness is not only as a result of her being the only child, but because she is female. Enitan soon discovers that "at least the boys were saying something different" (53) from the girls. Her experience at the debate and dance sessions with Damola is an eye-opener:

We wondered how they could dare form a band, in this place, where parents only ever thought about passing exams what kind of home did he come from?... Parents allow him to do what he wants. Drives a car. Smokes. (52)

While parents would allow such a freedom for the male child, the female is locked behind some wooden fences and flowing lagoon. Even bold-face and strong-willed Sheri cannot put on her red lipsticks before her Alhaji, her father.

The unpleasant upbringing offered by Enitan's parents soon leads to her self-erasure and/or defacement. Her identity as a female becomes tainted as she becomes uncertain about her femininity:

I even worried about being skinny, and for a while I worried that I might be a hermaphrodite, like an earthworm, because my periods hadn't started. Then they did and my mother killed a fowl to Secure my fertility (56)

Inferiority complex and/or self-erasure is the first sign of a defeated identity. This becomes Enitan's lot; she feels unfeminine when every other girl of her age and class has started menstruating and hers is yet to flow. Given her state of self-defeat and the friction in her parent's marriage, the stage is set for Enitan's final liberation. Against her mother's directives, she opens her doors – physical and psychological, to Sheri who leads her in the long tortuous journey of self-discovery and maturity.

Atta also goes further to highlight the odds set by the society against the female gender to include sexual abuse, rape and abandonment. At one of the girls' night-outs, Sheri is raped, and thus her self-identity and pride wounded. This experience marks the beginning of awareness for Enitan as she soon discovers that the girl is always at the receiving end of all the abuses. Men who carry out dehumanizing acts like rape and infidelity are not held accountable for they are in control, while society rain torrents of abuses on women for they believe it is bad girls that get raped, and also that " good

women didn't shout in somebody's house. Good women didn't fight on the streets. Good women didn't come looking for men. Good women were at home" (155).

In her voyage of self-discovery, Enitan realizes that all the principles set for her to follow by her parents; especially by her father are all lies and excusable means of suppressing and muffling her voice and being. She soon discovers her father's extra-marital affair that has produced another child. All the men she has met in her life have filled her with one desire, which is trust; what she agrees is her fault or weakness. But, these men have faltered at one point or the other as they come out to show their real colour – further foregrounding the impression about men being untrustworthy. We find it first in Enitan's boyfriend while she is London for her university education. Her painful experience over there is recaptured thus:

The first person to tell my virginity belonged to me was the boy who took it. Before this, I'd thought my virginity belonged to Jesus Christ, my mother, society at large...In those brief seconds between owning and giving up my virginity, he licked the walls of my mouth clean. After I thought he pierced my bowels, I burst into tears. (77)

Enitan is cowed into giving up her sense of pride to prove her sincerity, commitment and respect to her boyfriend. Her boyfriend is to later shock her when he condemns her attitude on bed, obviously indicating she no longer satisfy his sexual orgy. This justifies the argument that women are but objects of exploitation by men. Enitan's fated meeting with Mike who she reveals bothered her like a white sheet also affords her another lesson as she discovers that like every other men around her, he is not without his own "stains, hidden dirt". (93). She saunters into Mike's apartment one day and finds a bombshell that uncovers his infidelity. In one sense, the abuse of the sexuality of women as experienced by Enitan and Sheri, according to Uko (2006: 92) is a springboard for personal development and/or self-discovery.

Society, particularly the African society has not failed in projecting women as passive beings whose feelings, opinions and dignity is muffled by culture and some unscripted native laws. Sheri's experience provides us an insight into this fact. After she loses her father, Sheri and her stepmothers and siblings are left at the mercy of their uncle who inherits their father's and husband's properties. We discover that:

A man could marry one wife under civil law, but he could bring another woman into his home under native law...

If he pleased, he could beat up his wife, throw her out,
with or without her children and leave her with nothing...
If he died, under some native customs, his son would inherit
his estate instead of his widow. Sometimes, a widow couldn't
inherit land at all...(139)

This is the harsh reality of womanhood in the most African societies, even under some customs the author refers to as the "progressive customs".

One recurrent determinant of fulfilment and/or achievement for women is childbearing.

This is audibly resonated in this novel. Uko (2006) observes 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 (86)

Enitan's late pregnancy causes a friction in her marriage as her husband's relatives begins to raise dust. The author affirms that:

Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than
to be barren. We had both been raised to believe that our
greatest days would be: the birth of our first child... A woman
may be forgiven for having a child out of wedlock if she had no
hope of getting married...but angel or not, a woman had to have
a child. (105)

Thus, childbearing becomes the formal acceptance of a bride in her husband's family. And not only must the woman be fruitful with children, she must also and more importantly bear male children because they turn out to be determining factors of property sharing and/or inheritance when her husband dies. Such is the portrait of the African woman that Enitan and Sheri seek to redefine. They look forward to evolving a new gender order where equality, respect, and trust reign supreme. Enitan refuses to be the "kitchen martyr" (107), but a woman who would be left to pursue her own happiness, career, and freedom. Society blames education for the Enitan-example of rebel-wife who

believes that it is an “overload of duties” (184) for a woman to multitask as house-keeper, cook, child-bearer, and bed-warmer. Enitan wonders:

How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I’d seen?
Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility, like
a fish bone down my throat. (184)

That is why Enitan declines to personally serve her husband’s brothers, to the defiance of custom. While her husband challenges her, she defiantly questions his authority thus: “why can’t you go to the kitchen? What will happen to you? Will a snake bite your leg” (184). This way, Enitan begins to redefine the portrait of the African woman; she is no longer naïve, slavishly submissive and timid before a suppressive culture. Atta’s duty of rewriting women’s identity in the Enitan pattern coincides with Kaytrak’s (1996) observation that:

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. (232)

This new, rather defiant portrait of women depicted by Enitan and Sheri is a direct counter-assault on the patriarchal structure that has hitherto muffled their freedom. The lionized male now feels threatened by the intimidating portrait of the new woman. Sheri’s blossoming catering business becomes a threat to brigadier, her lover who had hitherto restricted her to the boring corners of his house. Sheri revolts, beats brigadier “for every person who had crossed her path in life”. This is a symbolic beating, as it connotes her revolt against gender marginality that has hitherto held her down. Such is the descriptive sense for a social structure that encourages gender marginalization and/or women enslavement backed up by age-long customs and native laws.

Sefi Atta boldly asserts her feminist bend in this novel through Enitan when she remarks:

If a woman sneezed in my country, someone would call her
a feminist. I’d never looked up the word before, but was there
one word to describe how I felt from one day to the next?
And should there be? I’d seen the Metamorphosis of women...
By the time they came of age, millions of personalities were
channelled into their about three prototypes: strong and silent,
chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kindhearted. All the rest were

known as horrible women. I wanted to tell everyone, “I! Am!
Not! Satisfied with these options!...I would not let go until I was
heard...(197)

This is a pure feminist, rather radical feminist declaration. We find this plausible as it underscores current social realities in the society. Over time, recent events and happenings have revealed women defiantly challenging ‘sacred’ orders and native laws and tearing into threads the thick blankets separating the lionized male from the estranged female. Sheri leaves brigadier’s house and concentrates on her flourishing business; and Enitan walks out of her marriage to pursue a life where she can freely fulfil her destiny - She becomes an advocate for women prisoners under the dictatorial military rulership of her country. And now that she has found her rhythm, Enitan is so convinced that she declares, “Nothing could take my joy from me” (326). Thus, Enitan dances “palongo” on the street, obstructing traffic and defying verbal abuses and shame – a way of announcing her freedom, indeed the freedom of the enslaved African woman.

It is also important for us to examine the female bonding and/or solidarity displayed by Enitan and Sheri in the novel. This is a major catalyst that springs women liberation in the society; the absence of which would result in intra-gender conflict. Enitan and Sheri do not share the same socio-religious background. While Enitan hails from a relatively conservative family background with a conservative father and an overzealous Christian mother, Sheri is a Muslim and invariably hails from a polygamous home. But the two jolly friends cast all the barriers aside and together unite in their quest for self-realization and fulfilment.

While we consider quest for gender identity and self-realization as the major thematic thrust in the novel, we must not lose sight on the cross-examination that Atta carries out on the Nigerian historical and socio-political system. Atta relays the socio-political nightmare of the Nigerian people under different military regimes. This is in fact the first challenge Enitan encounters as young girl growing up. She is aware even at the tender age of seven that:

...our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General,
that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had
another Major General heading our country... and now it
seemed the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two (13)

Enitan’s observation chronicles dark era of tyranny, injustices, and suppression of the under-privileged class in the country. It was the period of when the hopes, dreams and

aspirations of the Nigerian people got swept away in the tsunami of military coups and counter-coups, leaving in its tracks bloods of innocent civilians, and also heralding the dawn of postcolonial disillusionment. Enitan's father does not hide his frustration when he laments that:

Twenty-five years after independence... and still this nonsense.
No light, no water, people dying all over the place, before their time,
from one sickness or the other (110)

The death as we concede it here is both physical and psychological. The generation of Nigerians that agitated for independence were absolutely disillusioned as their wishes for the new nation were murdered, and as substitutes for their dreams, the power-drunk military rulers offered them molestations, arrests and extra-judicial executions.

Atta boldly condemns the military for disorientating the sense of humanity and worth of the Nigerian people. She presents revolutionary characters in the novel that defiantly rise up to challenge the tyrannic rulership of the military. Uncle Alex joins the Biafran Army to fight for the emancipation and secession of the Igbo region from the Nigerian nation. Peter Mukoro is also another character who assumes the roles of a social mobilizer, crusader and civil right activist. He is not deterred by his incessant arrests and incarcerations. Enitan and her father also join in the vanguard for the emancipation of the innocent and helpless civilians in the country.

As a way of conclusion, Enitan's exit from marriage is sensible and/or culturally acceptable becomes an unending debate among her relatives, friends and colleagues, and even the outer world of the novel. But one fact that cannot be denied is that Enitan is fashioned by the author to sooths the realistic portrait of the city and educated African woman echoed in Maria Cutrifelli (1983) thus:

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 (3)

Suffice to state that Atta's portrayal of defiant women is informed by recent realities in gender relations.

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