

“VENTING OUT” AT THE GENDER DYNAMICS THAN “SWALLOWING” IT IN SEFI ATTA’S *SWALLOW*

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ABSTRACT:

In *Swallow*, Atta focuses her concern on the plight of women in a patriarchal society. Typically, Atta’s feminist concerns influence her story and characterisation. Atta outlines the condition of women and how they are trapped professionally, socially and traditionally within the framework of patriarchy and demonstrates the destabilising effect of these on women as they struggle for their survival. The women characters in the novel endure and ‘swallow’ the gender dynamics in the society. But the protagonist of the novel, Tolani, at the end ‘vents out’ at the delineation and oppression that are thrust on her. This paper deals with how the women are suppressed traditionally and professionally and how they come out of the shackles they are locked up with.

Keywords: Swallow, Oppression, Vent out, Gender Dynamics, Disparity and Empowerment.

The lives of the native Africans are constantly reflected in the African Literature. It vividly portrays their oppression due to colonialism and later as a result of independence and the consequent conflicts. Before the European invasion, the African literature, more particularly, the Nigerian literature has existed through myths, folktales, legends, songs and other forms. This period is known as the classical period of Nigerian literature. Nigerian oral literature had its practitioners in the members of a cult who jealously guarded certain knowledge. Gradually, the novels replaced the folktales. They are an imaginative form of narrative literature woven around well-knit characters; sometimes even animals become characters as they relate with the physical or supernatural world. Later, the Africans developed the written form oral literature.

The publishing of *Palm-wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola in 1952 marked the starting point of the written form in Nigerian literature. Even before that, by the 1930s, the Hausas had a writing competition and the winning entries including Shehu Umar by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa were published. The stories were written in a language called Ajami, which is a mixture of Arabic and Hausa.

During the colonial era, introduction of the English language brought a huge difference in African Literature. Especially, literature from indigenous languages gave way to literature in the English language. More authors in Nigeria started writing in English, including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Many African writers expressed their political and social concerns through their works. These contemporary writers have taken up the issues related to the Nigerian women also.

Feminism, as an ideology manifests itself in different forms – Eco-feminism, Radical Feminism, Anarchist Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Black Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Separatist and Lesbian, and Post- colonial Feminism. Many feminists have opined that many diversities exist which result in uniform and universal female identities resulting from differences in class, race, nationality and historical events.

Space and time became the biggest hindrances, when women like black female writers attempted to write. They did not own even a room for themselves to recollect their thoughts in solitude; nor did they have free hours to relax or had “me” time. The social set-up was not favourable to these women to showcase their creative skills. However, the 1960s and 1970s marked the emergence of black female writers. Grace Ogot’s *The Promised Land* was the first novel by a black woman to be published. Gradually, black female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, Grace Ogot, Efua Sutherland and Buchi Emecheta initiated the advent of women’s writing. Sefi Atta, coming in these line of writers, is an important writer whose works focus more on women and their problems.

Sefi Atta was born in January 1964 in Lagos in Nigeria. She divides her time between the countries of United States, England and Nigeria. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles. She is qualified as a Chartered Accountant in England and also a Certified Public Accountant in the United States. She is the winner of PEN International's 2004/2005 David TK Wong Prize and has received the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa in 2006 for her debut novel *Everything Good Will Come*, the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 2009 for her short story collection, *News from Home* and several other literary awards for her works. She was also a juror for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2010. Sefi Atta is also a playwright, with her stage plays performed and published internationally; the BBC has broadcasted her radio plays. *Writing Contemporary Nigeria: How Sefi Atta Illuminates African Culture and Tradition* is a critical study of her novels and short stories which was published in 2015 by the Cambria Press.

Atta’s second novel *Swallow* was published in 2010. It vividly portrays the predicament of modern women in the contemporary society. It also deals with their struggles as they journey in the quest of their identities and the domineering male society which stifles their voices in the modern society. The whole novel revolves around the female characters and their empowerment and the desire for independence, where the female characters stand strong for their survival and for what they stand.

Joy Nwiyi in the article, “Survival and Female (Ad)venturing in Sefi Atta’s *Swallow*” in the International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature, says about the novel, “*Swallow*

tells the story of two friends, Tolani and Rose; working-class ladies from entirely different backgrounds whose struggle not to be crushed by the society in which they find themselves unites them” (2).

Atta’s novel, *Swallow* deals with the lives of two young women Tolani and Rose. Their personal and professional lives are dealt in a very detailed and realistic manner by Atta. The culture of Nigeria permits the women to educate themselves to a certain extent. But still, they concentrate more on their house chores, rather than their academic growth or profession.

The gender dynamics is even prevailed from the ancient days of Africa. The Lagos of the eighties was a hard time to live in. The Royal family had to answer the military government like all the others. No one bothered about them outside their circle. There was a unique practice in the Royal family before the military coups and independence. Any unmarried girl who reaches the palace would be a wife of the Royal Throne and the girl’s family need not worry. “Traditional rulers had not yet been totally undermined by the colonials. All unmarried girls in Makoku Town were warned to watch where they went: the stream to fetch water, the next compound. If they ended up in the Palace, no one would come to look for them” (90). Such was the practice in Nigeria where the girls were just abducted just like that in the name of marriage. The Nigerian culture was primarily concerned with the allotment of gender roles. The presumed roles of the members in the Nigerian society are very clear and male dominant too. In Nigerian society, the men were encouraged to have many wives. It is their traditional norms that if the elder brother dies, the younger brother has to take over the elder brother’s possessions and family too.

Atta, even points out the characters and events from the post-independence era. However, the character Iya Alaro is a woman who is brought from pre-independent Nigeria, as a revolutionary character. Because she was more advanced and progressive in thinking she did not adhere to the traditional role of the women. Hence, she was believed to have mystic and magical powers. The whole clan looked at her as if she was a witch and that her words were harsh and venomous. But, she was very closely related to Tolani’s mother and she was the one who encouraged marriage between Tolani’s mother and her father and spoke against the Royal policy of taking wives into the Palace.

Her mother, Arike talks about the tradition of getting the girls married. Her feelings regarding the marriage are expressed in the following manner:

The worst thing for a woman was to be married. Yes, I knew I would be one day. All girls did. You reached a certain age and you were married off. Your family arranged that. They received your dowry: cloth, yams, palm oil, goats, or whatever your husband’s family could afford, to show his appreciation for your upbringing. It was a token, nothing more. You moved into his home, had children and took care of them. (44-45)

Because she wants to escape from such a kind of societal boundaries, she moves to Lagos to pursue her education.

The rights and freedom of women could never be thought of strangled in such a male dominated society and to keep the women submissive, the society has strict rules. Women earned a little money when they were at home by doing some meagre jobs. The profession the women take up has to be indoors and this is not shown outside. Atta's character in this novel *Swallow* exhibits conviction. Tolani's mother is being criticised severely for riding a bike like a man. She is accused of going out and being empowered in the society. She is expected to be 'swallowed' by the societal norms rather than to become a rebellion.

Rose is a strong and courageous woman and she is seen as a little opposite of Tolani who struggles against the difficult offices she comes across. The docile nature of women in the patriarchal society is brought out very clearly by Rose when she becomes angry with the system:

It's rubbish. How many motherless children do we have around? Yet we continue to see childbirth as the ultimate. You must born pikin, you must born pikin by force. That's what I've always said: we Nigerians, we follow blindly. Meanwhile, the whole system is a mess because not everyone agrees, and when we follow without thinking, we all enter the same black hole. . . .The black hole of the African existence. (204)

Atta attempts to showcase the intensity of gender bias. She critically comments on the gender disparity and equality, which are the results of the consequences of traditional practices. These acts stand as the infringement on the rights of women even as human beings. Also, Sapiro in the work, *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, states, "the primeval struggle through which men have asserted their dominance over women is more deeply embedded in many cultures" (52). In the novel, Tolani is born and brought up in such a society where a woman is taken for granted. She does not know who her father is. Tolani confesses to Rose about her birth secret, "I think my father's brother is my real father, Brother Tade. You know that if a woman is infertile she can't hide it. If a man is sterile, no one has to know. Understand? The wife finds someone else to father her child, and keeps the whole thing a secret....She never talked about when I was born, only trouble because she had one child. Never from my father" (203). This proves that women are subjected to 'swallow' the secrets of men in order to save the name of the family and their dignity in the society.

Apart from all these shackles maintained in the traditional house, women have to struggle to come out of the glass cage and earn their own livelihood through various means. But the male dominant society traps them again and makes them as puppets to move according to their wish. The society expects them to 'swallow' men's misdeeds. When women 'vent out' and expose them, they will invite more sufferings. In the novel, the Federal Community Bank branch manager, Mr. Salako disrespects women and always treats them as his subordinates. When Rose works as his secretary, he misbehaves with her. This sexual harassment happens for a long time, but during on such assault, Rose could not tolerate him and slaps him in front of the guards and the customers. Rose is dismissed immediately by him due to subordination. Although, the fault is with Mr. Salako, no one in the bank supports Rose. Instead, they blame Rose for her harsh behaviour. Rose vents out as, "No justice. No justice for people like us. You hear? Only for the wicked and the corrupt in this country.

Look at Salako – everything he steals from the bank, taking money from customers, taking bribes” (22).

Mr. Salako again sexually abuses Tolani when she becomes his secretary, replacing Rose. Unlike Rose, Tolani stifles her anger and does not show it off. Tolani is affected psychologically by Mr. Salako’s misbehaviour. Even though she reports it to her senior worker Ignatius, she is threatened by him about the consequences if she gives complaint against him. When she starts to show a little opposition to his misconduct, she is suspended by him.

Taking her mother’s life as her inspiration, and her friend Rose’s life as a lesson, Tolani decides not to ‘swallow’ the oppression anymore. Instead she tries and ‘vents out’ at the male domination and inequality that are imposed on her. She goes back to her mother and tries to live her independent life.

Atta, by portraying her characters, tries to reconstruct the social norms in a patriarchal society. She orients her women to not ‘swallow’ the gender oppression but to ‘vent out’, that is, to voice out against the oppression to break the chains of gender bias. To an extent, this empowerment depends on education and financial freedom.

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