

Feminist Philosophy and the Deconstruction of Patriarchy in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyse how Sefi Atta constructs feminist philosophy and uses narrative strategies to deconstruct patriarchal legacies and gender constructs that militate against women's emancipation and welfare in *Everything Good Will Come*. Specifically, the study leans on African feminist theory proposed by Mary E. Modupe Kolawole to explore how Atta uses feminist consciousness to question the logic of customary laws and traditions put in place by men to oppress and exploit women. The study explores the thematic orientations of the novelist through language, setting and character portrayal. Specifically, the study examines how Sefi Atta deploys African feminist philosophy to expose and dismantle patriarchal structures in the novel. Relying mainly on Kolawole's womanist framework, the study discusses education, professional agency, and female resistance as narrative vectors of emancipation. It argues that Atta's portrayal of Enitan and other women re-centres female experience and calls for collaborative gender politics. The analysis positions the novel within broader post-colonial debates on sexism, socio-economic inequity, and cultural tradition.

Keywords

Feminist Philosophy, Patriarchy, Women, Emancipation

1. Introduction

Many critics have theorized on feminist philosophy without paying enough attention to Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. Obioma Nnaemeka states that [African] feminist theory is the most innovative and truly living theory in today's academies, but the struggle... extends beyond feminism and far beyond institu-

tions (Nnaemeka, 1997: xiii). She pursues further that “Opening out [feminist vistas] will apply the living insights of feminist critical theory in current social and political contexts.” (Ibidem). Elizabeth Olaoye, in her approach, finds out that the protagonist “Enitan embodies African feminism” without explaining in concrete terms how Atta constructs such feminism in the novel (Olaoye, 2015: p. 143). It is Debora Puchèrova who has paid some attention to Sefi Atta’s novel, with a declaration that nevertheless does not fall in line with the feminist philosophical line I try to examine. According to her, “Atta’s feminism is strongly class-conscious and aware of how feminism can be complicit in validating capitalist institutions.” (Puchèrova, 2022: p. 71). Such statements raise the issue of feminist critical orientation but lack precision as to what aspect of feminist ideological inflections *Everything Good Will Come* can be bent to render intelligible Atta’s social vision and commitment. Ode Ogede departs from these critics and asserts that African feminist theory, like Atta’s, is “a diversity of arguments [that] emerges around the issues of gender, literary theory and the representation of women in West Africa” (Ogede, 2023: p. 2). It follows that Atta’s feminist narrative philosophy and strategies for deconstructing patriarchy need further analysis. That is why I propose to study Atta’s feminist philosophy and the deconstruction of patriarchy in *Everything Good Will Come*. The study thus purports to examine ways in which Atta articulates her feminist philosophy, lays emphasis on women’s oppression authored by patriarchal laws and customary regulations that relegate women to second-citizenship, and further claims alternative ways of empowering them. The methodological approach adopted is textual analysis sustained by the African feminist approach. Two points are discussed: firstly, Atta’s feminist philosophy and secondly her deconstructive strategies through which she denounces unbecoming societal structures. Textual analysis is a research method that consists of closely and critically examining written texts. It refers to the process of deconstructing text and its underlying meaning. I will critically examine the meaning of *Everything Good Will Come* and try to understand the author’s narrative intention through language and thematic development. Textual analysis is a close reading of these elements to find out the writer’s purpose, the text’s relations with cultural contexts and ways in which they create meaning for the reading audience. It tries to connect the text to broader socio-cultural contexts to understand its influences and significance by developing judgements and interpretations supported by textual evidence.

By definition, African feminism is the critical theory that seeks to bring the (African) woman from oppressive cultural norms of voicelessness to a more human condition where she feels emancipated and fulfilled to significantly contribute to her society’s development. In *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole has theorized African feminism as “Believing strongly in Women’s enablement, their empowerment and social assertion as significant contributors to human development (Kolawole, 1997: p. 52). She means by there the theory that repositions women in social discourses. Sefi Atta shows ways in which patriarchy has indoctrinated Nigerian women in *Everything Good Will Come*. Through the protagonist Enitan, who grows up in a male-oriented society in La-

gos, she establishes the cultural forces rooted in the belief systems that overshadow women and impede their visibility. The weight of customary laws that confine women to the kitchen core only, the denial of school education to girls, and the imposition of husbands on girls are some of these laws.

2. Atta's Feminist Philosophy Construction

I mean by feminist philosophy the critical orientation taken by Sefi Atta to deconstruct patriarchal ideas and defend acceptable treatment for women. It conceives society as a mosaic of cooperative men and women acting and believing in a more just society for oppressed women. The feminist agenda here does not exclude men from the sphere of female empowerment. It rather programmes and incorporates men as important supporters for women's struggles for liberation and the total accomplishment of women's emancipatory becoming programme.

Contextualizing African feminism to Sefi Atta's, I argue that Atta is part of African female writers (besides Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta) who defend an African variant of feminism that admits women's emancipatory becoming as a possible achievement of the cooperation of men and women. She believes that not only do societal norms and cultural beliefs colonize women and struggle to keep them under the control of men, but they also militate against their socio-economic and cultural emancipation in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Kolawole Mary Modupe explains that,

To the African woman, many forms of oppression exist around her simultaneously. Imperialism as well as the inescapable influence of post-colonial conditions... The internationalization of racism and the progressive feminization of poverty are equally important. Many African nations are still under the yoke of frequent political unrest, turmoil and instability. Women receive the butt end of these because in the final analysis they are the ones who are confronted with hungry children who must be fed particularly in polygamous situations (Kolawole, 1997: p. 12).

What is readable here is the contingency of postcolonial factors that work to subject women to poverty. Such factors are imperialism, racism, sexism, and political unrest, coupled with native customary laws. In consonance with these ideas, Atta seeks to turn the tide regarding stereotypes labelled on women that trade against their dignity and respect. There is a strong relationship between feminism and African consciousness, which Mary Modupe Kolawole explains as an awareness of the women's need for struggle to end sexism and other forms of discrimination from men: "To argue that African women do not need liberation is to present a false picture of them, an illusion that emerges from over-romanticism. All over the continent, there are areas of women's marginalization that call for a re-ordering of the social order, and African women have peculiar needs in this area." (Kolawole, 1997: p. 10). It is obtained from this assertion that African feminism works for creating voices and spaces for African women both in literature and society. Atta propounds her feminist philosophy through three important vectors:

education, professional career and character depiction. First, Enitan's formal education is confirmed by her training as a lawyer: her education is the process of learning and training through which she has acquired skills and competencies to become professionally active and useful to her community. She has been educated at school, has graduated from the university and trained as a lawyer. Sefi Atta attributes law studies and professional training to her for the purpose: fight against the injustices inflicted on women and act as an eye opener to women's folk for them to know their rights as women. Enitan, then, is a vector of change. She is set to promote the advancement of women's interests and rights so as to implement the feminist agenda consisting of reducing gender disparities and creating equal opportunities for men and women. Depicted as a dynamic character, changing roles but sticking to the same feminist philosophy, she stipulates: "In 1981, [I] graduated from University and joined a firm of solicitors in London... Summer of 1984, I returned home for law school" (Atta, 2005: pp. 76, 79). By this, it is thus established that Enitan has made a strong breakthrough in education and professional training as a lawyer. Yet she is aware that the change of women's condition in society is predicted upon a compendium of other changes, namely that of political leaders who are corrupt in the main and are essentially males. In a conversation with her father, she confides:

They step in with one policy or the other, suspend the constitution, mess up our law with their decrees... detain people without charge. I am sure they're deliberately trying to ruin the country... I viewed the world with a bad squint, a travelling eye, after that, seeing struggles I could do little about (Atta, 2005: p. 108).

It is perceptible from this extract that the heroine Enitan's social vision goes beyond that of a woman seeking family comfort. Hers is a larger ambition to see revolutionary change that will encompass both the political eviction of corrupt leaders and the overall change of attitude towards women. Women must be granted the same opportunities as men, for instance in education, employment and political leadership decisions. Public service needs to be filled with equally competent men and women. Male power misuse and abuse must give way to more human treatment for women. It is to confirm such an ideological agenda that the novelist creates Enitan to thrive among men, forge ahead as a woman and achieve social recognition as an activist for the improvement of the living conditions of women. Enitan's feminist philosophy can be endorsed by Allison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, who opine that "Feminist investigations of sexism and its myriad effects began as critical explorations of women's 'second class' positions vis-à-vis men" (Bailey & Chris, 2008: p. 1). What comes out here is that feminism operates in reaction to male oppression, an idea confirmed in Atta's novel. The particularity of Enitan's feminist assertiveness is that she sticks to her developmental goal albeit the barriers erected on her way by men. Such barriers are among others the marital fus created by oppressive lovers to silence her. Enitan rises herself above the frustrations created by male romantic deceptions. This specific reason leads critic Mary E. Modupe Kolawole to assert:

[African feminism] *does not require compartmentalization and one does not need to identify radical, liberal, psycho-analytic and other categories of womanism. Any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or Africana womanist* (Kolawole, 1997: pp. 34-35).

Here again, Modupe's stand is in line with Atta's in that feminism for her is not a retrieval from western traditions of women's struggle for freedom. Rather, it is the recognition of the injustices done to women by patriarchy and the double necessity therefrom, to confront and remove such critical burdens and create new assertive avenues for women to emerge as empowered beings and strong contributors to the construction of social development. It is also to channel women with the most exalting task of human society: cooperating with fellow woman and men to attain the eclosion of their full potential as emancipated members of society. It is against the backdrop of such ideological endorsement that Sefi Atta raises a more powerful critical claim: the equal distribution of the country's wealth among all citizens by namely laying emphasis on women. She says this by lamenting: "oil wealth hadn't touched their palms and civil service wages were paltry. The Franco men tilted their nozes heavenwards, the women fanned their cleavages laden with gold and coral beads, their clothes reeked of camphor balls" (Atta, 2005: p. 185). Specifically, it proves clear from this submission that men siphon the public wealth for their interests and leave women behind. There is a need, therefore, to rethink women's treatment. The language used here verges on irony and metaphor in that "Franco men" is slang for "macho men" and to "tilt their noses heavenwards" gives the image of a dog sniffing in meat from a distance. Sefi Atta thus uses language and characterization in one of the most satirical ways to deconstruct patriarchal paradigms and address women's empowerment. It is in the same context that Mary E. Modupe Kolawole further declares:

African women's location within existing feminine discourse and reactions such as we see... can be best understood within proper cultural contextualization. Secondly, one needs to assess such views against the backdrop of larger issues such as post-coloniality and Third World issues. Despite the varying reactions to feminism, many African women seem to agree that the way African women perceive their reality and the exigency that shape their consciousness and mobilization has to be different from the way western women perceive and react to their situation (Kolawole, 1997: p. 11).

What comes out of this analysis is that culture-based context for women's struggle is helpful to better orient the discourses developed in defense of women. In other words, the critic means that when women's ill-treatment becomes institutionalized within a cultural tradition, it becomes difficult to uproot it. The reality of that situation is formulated in the novel as a question put by Sheri's father to Enitan: "Can you change the culture...?" (Atta, 2005: p. 140). That question seeks to bring to full awareness and understanding the problematic disposition of the

customary laws that are essentially directed against women's full emancipation. In other words, there is a system of double jeopardy whereby women are subjected to sanctions men are not. This leads to the result that men conspire to control women in every sense of their social mobility and by the same token, oppress them for menial reasons. The case in point is the arrestation and imprisonment of Enitan, Grace Ameh, three Nigerian female activists fighting for emancipation, on arbitrary grounds, their participation in public debate regarding political change: "They threw us into the cell, Grace Ameh and I" (Atta, 2005: p. 264). The rationale behind that imprisonment is that these two women are trying to open the eyes of their fellow women on their rights to claim for more social justice. The sanction through imprisonment indirectly points out that men wish to oppress women without any protest on their behalf. Atta thus captures these images in the narration to explain the reasons behind the birth of womanist consciousness, justifying the protests of women against patriarchal system. Yet, another reality surfaces when looked at a broader perspective. Postcolony and the Third-World factor are advocated to give sense to the critical position of the novelist and which transpires in Modupe's position. Postcolony is advocated because Nigerian leaders have inherited corrupt practices from the ex-colonial rulers. Unfortunately, they have done little or nothing to change such practices. The moral decay that was established by the British and continued with the African leaders after independence thus deserves a questioning from the postcolonial African womanist critic like Enitan, incarnating Sefi Atta. The postcolonial factor thus becomes relevant in questioning male propaganda and promoting women's empowerment.

Another prominent feature of Atta's feminist philosophy in the novel is the resistance developed by the female characters. There are two types of resistance: resistance against marital power abuse and resistance against the oppressive ruling system. The first form of resistance happens when women are confronted to dishonest and deceptive lovers. For instance, Enitan's mother left his father when she sensed the man was unfaithful to her. Sheri left the brigadier when she understood he was marrying other women and used autocratic rules to evince her. When Enitan discovered her husband, Niyi Franco, sought to control her in every domain of her life, she found that intolerable and sought freedom by breaking away with him. Women's resistance seems to be tagged with rebellion but it is not. It is a form of protest into which they seek more attention from men regarding their welfare. It is their way of voicing their claims for the eradication of oppressive patriarchal laws. The annihilation they are confronted with in the patriarchal system creates such frustration and anguish that they wish to gain more freedom by creating a distance with the system.

Regarding the second form of resistance, it is formulated against the political oppression. Frankly speaking, women are persecuted in the novel by men through the police, the judicial system and different institutions in charge of regulating the law. At a certain public gathering where both men and women are present, the police made irruption and caught women:

There were about forty or so people present. They were mostly men. One of them caught my eye because he was smoking a pipe... I was in awe of the people I was listening to, that they wrote without recognition or remuneration, and more so that they denounced injustices as a group, at the expense of their freedom and lives. At the same time, I thought that none of them could be fully conscious of the implications of speaking out. They would have an awareness only; an awareness that manifested itself in whispers, omitted names, substitute names when people discussed politics at gatherings or over the phone (Atta, 2005: pp. 262-263).

Here, Enitan comes to the meeting because she carries in her the feminist ambition of seeing her society change. She wishes to bring revolution and change that will take into account women's visibility. It is such novative ambition that creates in her the desire to militate for change. She is both activist and militant for women's rights. She thus incarnates the values of freedom and emancipation. Rejecting passivity she embraces vitality, constructive criticism and opposition to vision for women's resilience. Although the meeting is convened by men Enitan sees her presence as vital because she must be there to speak for women. She is representative of the majority group of women who are afraid to show up but who bear grievances against the dictates of men. At that meeting Enitan has found out the weak point of men: they fear to mention names in their speeches and public address. Enitan also recognizes that men are discriminatory regarding women. It is not far-fetched to say that on taking the floor, Enitan courageously confronts men in their abuse of power and calls fellow women to assert themselves in a positive construction of society. Even Grace Ameh, Enitan's friend, incarnates that assertiveness and courage. She confronts men with the following words: "I stand where I want" and the narrator says about her: "A woman of words, her voice had broken in her rage... I am not part of your little brigade" (Atta, 2005: p. 65). These informative elements concur to say that Sefi Atta has indeed developed a strong feminist critical discourse against oppressive patriarchal laws and systems that blow off women's emancipation.

3. Deconstructing Patriarchy: Atta's Strategies

I use patriarchy here to mean the assertion of male-centred culture that controls women in most spheres of life. It encompasses customary laws and societal rules that organize life in society and power decisions around male autocracy. This definition is endorsed by Allan G. Johnson in her *Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, where she explains that patriarchy is the male-centered structure that maintains women under oppression (Johnson, 2006: p. 57). When Enitan exclaims that Sheri is "a kitchen martyr" (Atta, 2005: p. 105), she sees behind that expression a derogatory language. "A kitchen martyr" is a cultural construct and female gender bias referring to the belief that in Africa, the woman's place is primarily in the kitchen, especially when referring to the cooking and serving food function. In traditional Nigerian society, women are educated to be silenced when men talk, to accept uncritically men's views and to follow the ideological stand of

men. According to Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman, “Enitan’s father espouses an enlightened sexism and expects her to believe that patriarchy is a thing of the past. He pushes the myth that men like him have made this liberation and empowerment of women possible” (De La Cruz-Guzman, 2015: p. 8). Here, the critic traces the attribution of the label “kitchen martyr” to her father who must have produced that for Enitan’s mother. Probing into the trajectory of this stereotype, it appears that girls are educated to see themselves as ones. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator explains how their socio-cultural education conditions women to believe in and obey every societal rule taught them:

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 of ten-ten, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit partners with sudden knee jerks, my favorite moments were spent sitting on a jetty pretending to fish. My worst was to hear my mother’s shout from her kitchen window: ‘Enitan, come and help here’ ... We lived by Lagos Lagoon (Atta, 2005: p. 7).

From these statements, Enitan has presented the educational background of women, who take kitchen duties over from their mothers and have to comply to the rules of cooking well and serving their husbands. For the good functioning of the family, women’s cooking is a good adjunct. However, it is the derogatory label of “martyr” tagged at that responsibility that looks critical. In fact a martyr is someone who has suffered death because of his/her religious devotions and committed principles to that religion. Metaphorically, “kitchen martyr” then alludes to the state whereby devoted women to their cooking tradition are dead to their own feminine existence to serve the interests of men. Sefi Atta is a gender sensitive writer who looks at society from the perspective of the victimization of women. She champions the cause of women as weaker members of society who needs more visibility, attention and care. Women’s confinement to home chores problematizes their societal and political visibility especially when they are school-educated, professionally trained and can offer better competences to larger social public. This idea is endorsed in the remark made by Enitan in the form of an irony: “Now our greatest contribution to our society was that we were more traditional than the people who had given birth to us” (Atta, 2005: p. 77). This is a way of saying that the Nigerian society of Enitan contemporaries is attached to retrogressive cultural norms that were even condemned in the past: the dehumanization of women and their forceful confinement to primitive life by oppressive macho men. Such men would ask educated females like Enitan to get rid of her education and become a housekeeper or barmaid. For instance, Enitan observes, “From the day you were born, feeding you ideas. Don’t cook this and that. Maybe you should have been born a son to satisfy him” (Atta, 2005: p. 93). The remark is made for men as they despise their daughters and blame them for being born female. They should be born male for them to be happy. That ideologically male-children orientation brings them to be willing to reduce even educated girls to menial jobs

and status. To be specific, the question arises: when a lawyer like Enitan Tawo, who graduated at the University as a lawyer, would leave off her skills to serve society in the settlement of lawsuits and confine herself to home cores, what profit will that be to herself and to her immediate community? It follows that Sefi Atta looks at Nigerian society with a critical eye by promoting women's education, professional achievement and social services. These critical ideas are better shown when she creates assertive women like Sheri and Enitan, who respectively break away from the brigadier and Niyi when these men want to rule them with traditional dictates. To better understand the functioning mode of traditional Nigerian society, it is important to consider the socio-cultural rules that govern it. When the reader considers women's images, it transpires that they are controlled by patriarchal structures:

What place did the law really have in family matters? At law school, I'd learned those indigenous set of codes collectively called native law and custom. They existed before we adopted civil law, before we became a nation with a constitution, and they established individual rights under inheritance and marriage. A man could marry only one wife under civil law, but he could bring another woman into his home under native law. It was polygamy, not bigamy. If he pleased, he could beat up his wife, throw her out, with or without her children and leave her with nothing. His relations might plead with him to show her mercy, but she had no claim over his property (Atta, 2005: p. 137).

The specific antinomical gender-based injustice against women pointed out here are the polygamy granted to men, the inheritance of family property also reserved for men alone and the right to exercise violence on wives. Such practices are dangerous and condemned by the novelist. Nevertheless, men often resort to them. The family as the microcosm of society, is regulated by patriarchy-inspired laws that promote men and demote women. It becomes problematic in this context to advocate full enjoyment of human right by women. Men have full prerogatives even crossing the borders of their rights. For instance, battering a wife is an abuse of power which denotes the callousness of patriarchal deviationism. In societies where physical violence and verbal abuse are high, women are forced to stay only on the receiving end. In *Everything Good Will come*, violence against women is felt mostly in urban places like Lagos and Abuja. According to the critic Rita Nnodim,

*Urban violence and the oppressiveness of postcolonial rule impact female urban lives and identities in an embodied way. They invade, in a very literal sense, the female body (the rape in *Everything Good Will Come*, the figure of the prostitute in *Swallow*), are ingested by women inhabiting the city... Sheri has to face the social consequences of rape and infertility in the wake of an abortion gone wrong, which forces her to reimagine herself and her identity outside the context of received notions of female identity as wife and mother (Nnodim, 2017: p. 103).*

Reading closely Nnodim's analytical observation gives me the opportunity to say that Sefi Atta points an accusing finger at the urban setting as a reservoir of

African women's oppression and exploitation. The city is not a bad place per se. But the societal forces constructed by men in such environment come together to make women's oppression prosper. For instance, rape is often viewed in places like buses, prison cells, night clubs or streets that concentrate bigger proportions of men. When men are more numerous than women, they are prone to oppress them and exploit them sexually. This is confirmed in the novel by the rape of Sheri at the party organized by her friends: "If she hadn't stayed long as she did at the party, it would certainly not have happened. Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls" (Atta, 2005: p. 65). In fact, what the narrator calls loose girls, and forward ones are the product of the male educational system that has produced morally corrupt youth. To be clearer, it is the life the youth have inherited from their parents, especially men who show recklessness in their manner of living, by for instance bullying their wives, divorcing and remarriage. To borrow Chinua Achebe's expression, the society is "corrupt through and through" (Achebe, 1960: p. 2). This points to the idea of responsibility. Not that women don't have their own part of responsibility in the social ill-treatment inflicted on them. They do have. But the most important part lays with men who misuse their power to bully women.

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. Even with the progressive customs, widows inherited according to how many children they had, and sons could have double the rights of daughters. The court determined how to share a man's estate, according to how he lived his life: the traditional or civil way. In reality, his relations could come into his house, "drive his wife home" and sit on her front porch threatening to put a hex on her if she dared to challenge them. Of course there were exceptions; women who fought in and out of the law court and they nearly always won (Atta, 2005: pp. 137-138).

What comes under attack here is the patriarchal regulations designated under the name of native custom and which deny identity and status to women in situations of crisis when their husbands finish marrying them. It is reported that a man could bring in inadvertently other women for marriage without prior notice to the first legitimate wife. They use as pretext the prevalence of native custom allowing polygamy for men. Worse, they decide at will and without any justifiable rationale to divorce the women. In addition to such unjust patriarchal dispensation functioning with dictatorship arsenals, modern jurisdictions and traditional courts protect and defend men, not women. At the husband's death women's troubles are worsened when the man's relatives and family members make incursion in the house, seize property, including the house and mercilessly expel the legal wife to establish themselves as the new owners. Nigerian traditional society thus endorses injustice against women by sanctioning innocents and protecting the guilty. They practice double standards law whereby the wicked ways of the stronger prevail over the legitimate right and privileges of the weaker. The strong are men and the weak are women. Traditional customary law relegates women to

second-class citizens as they do not have the same rights with men. The system controls women, regulates their lives and orients their movements. Men decide what is convenient for women. Restrictions to basic human rights like freedom to own property, to inherit from their parents and the right to live in the husband's house after his death are constructed by men who want to control women per se. The injustice inflicted by patriarchy is even more perceptible when viewed from the perspective of housemaids. The girls who often enroll as housemaids are treated less like humans. Sefi Atta chooses the metaphor of "Our continent was a tower of Babel, Africans speaking colonial languages" (Atta, 2005: p. 212) to express how great women's problems regarding social injustice by men is. To be specific, she opines:

Most househelps in Lagos came from outside Lagos, from the provinces and from neighbouring African countries. Night watchmen/ women, washmen/ wash-women, cooks and gardeners. The geeral help we called houseboys and housegirls. It was not our way to feel guilty and adopt polite terms. If they had friends over, we worried that they might steal. If they looked too hard at our possession, we called them greedy, and whenever they fought, we were amused (Atta, 2005: p. 212).

Atta shows empathy in her depiction of the underprivileged social class, mostly composed of females: housemaids and housewives. By painting black the spectre of life of the housewives and housemaids, she unveils a deeper dimension of women's ill-treatment in a male-dominated society like Nigeria. To be frank, these women undergo material exploitation due to the disproportionate measure between their services and the underpaid salary they get. It is clearly stated that most houses cannot do without the services of cooks and housemaids. They are the errand runners, the cooks of the families, the watch-people, and sometimes those who lead children to schools. If justice prevailed, they would live decently on the salaries they got in compensation for their services. Unfortunately, they are banned from the socio-economic privileges. They are associated with children, no matter their age. They are deprived of food and clothes as punishment. It is obtained from a critical interpretation of Atta's submission that some female houseworkers live in untenable situations in most houses (El Saadawi, 1980: p. 44). This has attracted Enitan's attention to the point that she thus agrees that she exclaims: "Someone has to call a national conference for diet reform. The day an African woman can prepare a sandwich for a meal, that will be the day" (Atta, 2005: p. 213). It is questionable whether women are underfed. The expression to prepare a sandwich for the meal of the day is also a metaphor to explain the malnutrition among women due to food scarcity. In fact, women's starvation in the fictional Nigeria of the novel is a strong interpellation addressed to men to reconsider the way they treat women. Women deserve more than their actual treatment. A possible cessation of female services in that society will bring the whole social fabric to a complete collapse. An infectious breakdown is near if women decide not to help with the daily jobs. This very reason should be a fundamental motive to improve women's social condition.

Sefi Atta shows that patriarchy functions on the basis of gender constructs, and one of these constructs is that women are born to perform secondary roles (cooking, bearing children, being sexual tools for men) and treated unequally like men. The customary law that sustains women's exploitation and ill-treatment in terms of salary, food and public positions are lopsided and disconnected from reality. The discrepancy between houseboys and housegirls, if well-understood, seems to reposition the debate on fundamental human rights. In the Lagos society depicted here, boys are preferably sent to school while girls are sent to become housemaids and bar girls. These girls, unequally treated, are also expected to raise money through their meagre wages from housewives to feed and pay the education of boys. That is why they resort to shameful practices like swallowing cocaine wrapped in condoms to filter through customs to sell it overseas.

Some had swallowed condoms crammed with heroin and cocaine, others had squeezed them up their vaginas. There was a case of a woman who stuffed a condom of cocaine down her dead baby's throat and cradled him on a plane. She was caught when an air hostess noticed the baby wasn't crying (Atta, 2005: p. 156).

This attitude is condemned by Sefi Atta who sees in these injustice that needs redress. Gender constructs are unfair to women as they are unequally yoked compared with men. This is explained thus: "You live in this country, you suffer in some way. Some more than others, but that's life. He noticed my expression 'That's life, o-girl' (Atta, 2005: p. 228). What worsens women's condition is that nobody cares about what they undergo, from political leaders, members of human rights organizations and the common people. It is ironically explained that if people don't care, it is because they have so much to care about: "If people didn't care, it was because there was so much to care about. After a while, the suffering could seem like sabotage; salt in your sweet pap. A beggar's face at a car window could appear spiteful, a houseboy/housegirl's clumsiness deliberate. Sheer wickedness could begin with the need for self-protection" (Atta, 2005: p. 229). There is a strong parable here when the speaker opines that a beggar's face at a car window was more appealing to men's senses than the cries and groans of housemaids ill-treated by their bosses. It results from this statement that the Lagos of Sefi Atta in *Everything Good Will Come* is a dystopian society locked and impenetrable regarding women's good treatment. The novelist seems to move in crescendo with the depiction of women's plight in patriarchal Nigerian society. From the conditioning of the women's minds to view themselves as second-class citizens and the appendages of men, she moves to the educational ethics where even learned women in the novel like Enitan who graduated in law studies and Sheri the mistress of Brigadier are compelled to accept men's injustices. The neglect of women's education and their exploitation in socio-professional and economic spheres of life created an imbalance in the society due to the ascendancy of criminality and thugery. It is understood from the manifestations of such consequences that Atta conveys the philosophy according to which "To educate women is to educate the nation, and to refuse to educate the mis to push the nation into disas-

trous end':

Fraud rackets had recently increased. Overseas, they were calling it "Nigerian Crime". Here we called it '419', after the criminal code. Drug trafficking had also increased, and if the latest reports were true, Nigerian drug rings were now one of the largest suppliers to the US and Europe. Foreign embassies were reluctant to grant us visas, and those of us who received them risked being strip-searched for drugs at the airports. Many of the accused were single women, mules, who were caught en route to Europe or the US from ... (Atta, 2005: p. 156).

Atta's pen is sharp in painting women's social predicament. Her feminist aesthetics is ideologically charged towards the defense of oppressed and marginalised women in bid to leave the country and migrate in Europe. Due to their financial precarity they find life extremely hard in the country. Immigration becomes an imperative. It is unveiled in this extract that morality-degrading practices are going on among the population, especially. The women. Most of them seek to leave Nigeria for foreign ones because living conditions are intolerable. The lack of education, employment, facilities to train for decent jobs and the refusal by the authorities to grant these youths viable employment bring them to seek immigration as a way out. Women are found carrying cocaine in the airport, swallowing heroin and cocaine crammed in condoms, squeezing such drugs up in vaginas, stuffing drugs down a dead baby's throat are of the most degrading practices. Had Nigeria offered decent facilities for women, they wouldn't have opted for such practices. In addition, strict regulations are set to punish those women guilty of these practices. By exposing these, Atta is indirectly pleading for a change of attitude towards women, the most victimized of society. If women's conditions must improve, it should start from a change of mentality about their identity and importance in the community. It seems from close reading that females' oppression is rooted in the patriarchal devaluing of women because the very institutions that oppress women are those concentrating and holding all the powers and essentially, men are in control of these powers. The novelist has chosen Enitan, a female narrator, to tell the story because she believes a woman's social plight can only be well narrated by women. When the heroine Enitan embraces her profession as a lawyer, her sympathy rises for her fellow women in trouble. Such sympathy comes from the consciousness of a woman who envisions positive change for her them. By the same token, she finds it difficult to pronounce judgment against them, knowing that their infringement is traced back to the precarity of life they are forced to live. Put differently, Enitan finds she cannot condemn and sentence her fellow women who are in conflict with the law, not out of sheer desire, but due to the forces of circumstances, especially the male interest-based practices that disfavour women.

I hated coming out of court to find relations pleading to spare their son or daughter, old men and women prostrating. In one trial, the accused, a nineteen-year-old-girl, claimed she didn't know what she was carrying. Another woman had handed the package to her then disappeared. The court found the girl guilty.

A month before, the new regime had shot people for the same crime, as part of their war against indiscipline. The executions were carried out retroactively, to punish those who had been tried and convicted before the law came into effect, but following a public outcry, further executions were deferred (Atta, 2005: p. 156).

Here, it is obtained that the real problem with the convicted is the society, that is highly patriarchal, because it is reported that a girl is caught, tried and condemned by a regime (male politicians) who are used to shooting people for the same crime. It is signaled that a woman had handed over to that girl a bag of cocaine. That means that women are used as conduit pipes for male criminal actions. Man/woman relation in that society is soiled and soured by a contract of exploitation and domination, which Oyèronke Oyewumi qualifies in *African Gender Studies, A Reader* as “socially constructed” (2005: 9). They are socially constructed because they are not defined biologically. They are invented by men. The stronger (men) dominate and exploit the weaker (women) to satisfy their desires. At a deeper level of interpretation, it can be observed that Sefi Atta rejects patriarchal constructs of the ideology of unjust domination and exploitation. It is the deconstruct of the tenets of such injustice that the novelists give more detailed information about the girl under trial. She is a school librarian coming to Lagos to earn a better living. She thus falls easy prey to macho men who push her into the cocaine trafficking business. To be specific, that innocent girl has been deviated from her righteous path of social life and has fallen into a dangerous pit of illicit drug trafficking classified as criminal infringement. From a more practical feminist approach, Sefi Atta brings into attack the apparatus of patriarchal ideology that does not condone women’s success and is jealous of the well-being of girls. Such ideology also takes pleasure in inflicting unnecessary pain on women. The ascendancy of violence, mischief, betrayal and double-crossing is so phenomenal that Sefi Atta thus condemns with rigour the male attitude.

The girl’s face haunted me. The way her glasses kept sliding down, I imagined her as a school librarian in her hometown, coming to Lagos to earn a better living. When I actually began to believe her story, I realized I was not detached enough to be successful at litigation (Atta, 2005: p. 157).

Sefi Atta’s feminist consciousness thus transpires in the extract above as a recognizable critical stand against the injustice done to the girl whose future is aborted by senseless men in a bid to flaunt their ego. She decries women’s exploitation as a despicable evil to shun and preaches the liberation of women from these various forms of exploitation. She pleads for an upliftment of women and the type of social treatment where women are supported in their aspirations for emancipation. If men do not push women forward, they should at least abstain from impeding them from achieving their emancipatory objectives. Such dispositions will enable women to assert themselves as active role players in their social commitment for positive change. This will enable them to emerge as fully emancipated.

It is to deconstruct patriarchal legacies rooted in the customary laws denying dignity, status and human rights to women that Atta offshoots manism per se that relegate secondary roles to women. She believes that a woman can be married to a man, manage well the house and still be active and fully fulfilled as a developed being. Yet she condemns what Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman calls pre-conceived gender role constructs that attribute to men powerful responsibilities and prescribe only housework for women:

Therefore all the male heirs are expected to follow in the profession (of lawyers) but the women are to become stay-at-home mothers upon the birth of the first child, regardless of their prior professional accomplishments. Niyi believes himself to be enlightened and claims in public that “I can’t stop her. She is the boss in this house” (De La Cruz-Guzman, 2015: p. 12).

To be exact, she does not reject gender collaboration but rather recommends frank cooperation between men and women where both parties emerge as winners. She tries to deprogramme phallogocentrism and reprogramme women’s welfare in a concerted collaboration with men. It is to explain these postulates that Atta has the narrator explain a couple of things: “In my 29 years, no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion: shift-shift, prod-prod and then nothing” (Atta, 2005: p. 186). It is perceptible through this statement that Enitan has understood gender collaboration as both woman and man playing fully their roles in mutual understanding and respect. Women to be more productive and play an active role should be educated and exercise their jobs peacefully. Depending on their training, one needs to have female lawyers, engineers, medical doctors, university professors, business management experts, and successful political leaders, to mention but a few. If the opposite is obtained in society, it becomes abnormal and change is necessary. Enitan clearly acknowledges that from her grandmother’s account, their generation was allowed to fully exercise their professions:

As far back as my grandmother’s generation, we had been getting degrees and holding careers. My mother’s generation was the pioneer professionals. We, their daughters, were expected to continue. We had no choice in the present recession. But there was a saying, and I had only ever heard it said by other women, that books were not edible (Atta, 2005: p. 186).

Atta makes a powerful critical statement against the retrogression of social norms in the fictional Nigeria of her constructs. How come in the past women were allowed higher education and professional exercise of their liberal training, but nowadays men are so reluctant and unpermissive to let them enjoy the same privileges? It appears from a close observation that it is a deliberate deviation orchestrated by men who do not want to let go of their privileges, which, nevertheless, are too narrow and selfish. The novelist Atta does not see the logic of moving backwards regarding women’s socio-economic and cultural treatments. There

should be continuous efforts to improve women's conditions.

4. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to analyse Sefi Atta's feminist ideology and her patriarchal deconstructive strategies by showing how language charts with thematic concern to expose women's social plight, namely violence, physical abuse and sexual exploitation. Two key ideas emerge from the study: Firstly, Sefi Atta voices women's predicament from the perspective of a female writer and her account of women's suffering is vested with realism. There are many customary laws and traditions enacted by patriarchy and endorsed by men in power that obliterate women's efforts for freedom and emancipation. It obtains that man/woman relationship to be fruitful must reconsider the place and importance given to women. Such a relation should seek to reposition women by increasing their interests and visibility. Atta's ideology is not antithetical to gender collaboration, as women are not the enemies of men. Secondly, women's liberation is a collective struggle that should engage both men and women. Showing concern for the reduction of social injustice against women is a sign of solidarity. It results in inclusiveness and participative development are better than exclusive ethics. To be specific, the emergence of women in the areas of political, economic, and cultural power can sustain viability in the efforts towards such development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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