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A Post Colonial Feminist reading of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Vidhya Vijayan

Ph. D. Research
Scholar at M G
University, Kottayam
&
Guest Lecturer in the
Department of English,
N S S Hindu College,
Changanacherry,
Kottayam, India

Abstract

This paper attempts to study how the African writer Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* interrogated the prominent traditional patriarchal domination and analyses how successfully she captures the African ethos. The study focuses on the central character Enitan, who creates her own identity unafraid of any social entities. The study revolves around how Enitan moved away from the traditional portrayals of self sacrificing woman towards a female protagonist who raises her voice against male domination and cultural backwardness. Not only Enitan, but the other female characters in this novel are also very assertive and utilize all means available to them to affirm their individuality. The study also focuses on the concept of 'modern woman' and how Enitan embodies or how she attains the status of 'modern woman'. The study also traces Enitan's evolution to a fiercely intelligent strong woman coming of age in a culture that still insists on feminine submission. The paper submits that woman cannot continue in the space defined for her by the society. So she is bound to create a space for herself, by strongly fighting against the male dominated society, both in the home and the larger society.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, Modern Woman, African ethos, Social entities*

The feminist novels in Africa pose themselves as cultural and political enterprises which carefully balance the literary text and social consciousness. According to Twinkle, while male writers focused on social, political themes, women writers dealt with personal or domestic themes and probe deep into the female psyche to authentically represent the pangs and pains of Black women(2). African women writers are very much interested in following Virginia Woolf's philosophy that 'a

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woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (29). Through the writings they try to assert their identity by emphasizing economic independence and education as being crucial to women's quest for self- definition.

In Africa and Nigeria in particular feminist writers have adopted different strategies to bring women to the forefront to achieve their goals and through their works, they tried to educate, inform and enlighten the woman to rise and fight for her rights. The female characters in their novels are no longer the submissive ones; instead they are highly assertive and strong enough to break the limitations upon them. Most of the feminist writers presented their characters as the ones in search of their identity and their life as a journey towards their self-assertion. African women writers are in spontaneous struggle to eradicate the ideology of male domination and have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-denying women towards portrayal of female protagonists who raise their voice against male domination and cultural backwardness.

Sefi Atta, a celebrated Nigerian born woman writer is known for her description of the lives of people, often in humorous and ironic tones. Sefi Atta's debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come* was published in the year 2006. She has made her own mark in Nigerian Literary landscape through her novels and plays. She has won Wole Soyinka Prize for her work *Everything Good Will Come*. The Time Literary Supplement observes that the novel *Everything Good Will Come* "depicts the struggle women face in a conservative society". As an African writer Sefi Atta interrogates the patriarchal society and successfully captures the very African ethos. She adopts a strong revolutionary approach in order to give voice to their feelings and thoughts, dreams and aspirations, urges and urgencies, pains and peeves, agonies and anguishes so as to liberate them from the labyrinth they have long been engaged in. She does not want to portray her own gender in the long-established mould of being humble, patient and helpless creatures always depending upon some male for physical and emotional support. Her novel reveals her concern for the need of empowering women in patriarchal structure of the country. Atta through her novel narrates the story of her motherland with the fusion of a feminist perspective and postcolonial approach. To skillfully narrate the deplorable conditions of women in post colonial Nigeria, author presents a number of female characters. Atta considers her writings as a weapon to fight the oppression in the male dominated world.

It is a well known fact that feminism is a philosophy which works to liberate women from a system of male centered value and beliefs. Those who follow this philosophy should empower women to discover their own unique female identity. Women especially women from third world countries

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are really victims at the hands of an exploitative male dominant society. In this novel like every feminist writer Sefi Atta asks a series of question through the character Enitan to show her anger in treating women as second or lesser sex.

The protagonist of the novel is Enitan who is a replica of the author herself. This novel is truly a saga of the central character Enitan whose life and growth creates great hurdles. It also narrates how she becomes a survivor of the vicissitudes and harshest conditions in her life. In it, Atta dramatises the realities of human conditions namely marriage, religion, culture, and political instability. Sefi Atta through her novel also portrays the clashes between traditionalism and modernism in Nigeria. Atta, by creating strong woman characters with diverse natures, shows how they react against various situations.

Everything Good Will Come is actually a story of a girl growing into a woman in postcolonial Nigeria. Post colonial Nigeria which is really patriarchal in nature creates a tough space for women to grow and sustain. Every time the heroine loses her identity and she has to struggle hard to identify herself in the midst of her mother's strong religious beliefs and her father's manipulative ways. There is another female character Sheri who also passes through the same struggle. Both these characters have extremely different family background. Enitan was not allowed to lead a normal life because her parents with different views overpowered her with their views. Sheri led a life which is exactly opposite to Enitan. Sheri, the biracial child, has not given any proper advice regarding life. Thus she becomes the victim of a male dominant society. She expresses contempt of the epileptic nature with which the helms of affairs operate, a result of which is pandemonium chaos dilapidated infrastructure, political gangsterism and electoral fraud. In short this novel charts the fate of these two Nigerian girls, one who is prepared to manipulate the traditional system and one who attempts to resist it. It is evident in Enitan comments about her future plan, "I want to be something like... like president" (30) and in the response made by Sheri, "Eh? Women are not presidents" (30).

Sefi Atta through the character Enitan greatly lashes out at the institution called marriage through which male establishes their dominancy. For De Beauvoir, marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality and binds women to domesticity (85).

Enitan is a character whom can be completely fit into the mould of Simon De Beauvoir's image of ' the modern woman': the woman who would be the equal of men, who would think, work and act like a man and instead of bemoaning her inferiority to men she would declare herself their

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equal (54). Enitan who believes in modern woman concept was against these concepts and also against polygamy. Marriage as an institution has great influence in Nigerian society. Both Enitan and Sheri are forced to adopt the system of marriage, but they approached it in diverse ways. Sheri is a dependent and Enitan is a neutral. Sheri believes that as a woman she has to depend one man for her existence. But Enitan has a belief that if man wants to be respected he must earn it from his behavior or attitude towards woman. It is evident in the following line, “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 shouldering burdens” (184).

By uttering these kinds of dialogues, she raises her voice against the practice of polygamy especially the act of Sheri’s husband who considers her a mere servant. But Sheri never shows the courage to open her mouth. The lack of proper parental training completely ruins her life. That is why she has to go through the tragic plight of losing her pride and virginity. In that situation also Enitan shows the courage to question the existence of a woman.

“Sheri had gotten pregnant from the rape. Didn’t a womb know which baby to reject? (73). Sheri’s docility really ruins her life. After marriage also she follows the inferior position and experiences what Betty Friedan addresses in her book ‘problem with no name’- housewives’ secret sufferings. She has to be silent before her husband’s practice of polygamy. The black women are doubly colonized entities and they have to tolerate all kinds of subjugation and violence not only from their society but also from their own family. They have no good relationship with their husbands based on love. It is evident in the life experiences of the three main lady characters- Enitan, Sheri and Enitan’s mother Arinola. They are physically and mentally tortured and victimized in both their male centered society and by the domination of colonial power. Each of these characters tries their best to have their own identity.

Enitan through her words tries to fill assertive spirit in Sheri also. When Sheri complains of her husband, Enitan is ready to announce “drop him... you don’t need him” (132). Thus Sheri also becomes assertive and comes out of her limited space to the outer space. The following line shows her identity and courage: “raise your hand to hit Sheri Bakare and your hand will never be the same again. Stupid man” (169). Thus she realizes a woman’s worth and the value of her own individuality.

It is her father that imbued in her a revolutionary spirit: “anyone who bullies you beat them up” (42). But that ideal father also accepts the tone of a patriarchal figure in certain crucial situation. Though her father seems to be a supporter of women, the much sincere words of his own wife show

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his arrogance and dominancy: “if he is no good to me, he is no good to you” (91). As the story unfolds his cruelty becomes evident.

She became a revolutionary spirit and tried her best in protecting the women. Through Enitan she passes the message to future Nigerian women that modern woman must assert their individuality and should fight against the male atrocities. For making woman strong and dominant one Atta introduces several strategies through her piece of writing. At a particular moment Enitan exhorts people to form a group to raise their voice against male oppression.

Enitan openly questions all kinds of derogatory things are happened in that society especially the controversial issues of childbearing and joys of motherhood. She blames the concept of evaluating womanhood through motherhood and procreation, where procreation implies the male child principle. If they own male children they can raise their head without any shame. Atta seems to further question the African tradition whereby a bride is expected to weep at the point of her departure for her husband’s home during wedlock:” I didn’t shed a tear over leaving home”(178).

It is a fact that women are dominated by men just like colonized nations dominated by colonizers. Women as lesser sex are always forced to suffer the high handedness and cruelties of male figures. Sheri, Enitan and Enitan’s mother are greatly suffered at the hands of cruelty. Sheri has undergone a traumatical experience. She was the victim of gang rape. Enitan’s mother has suffered mental breakdown because of her husband’s philandering. It is experience that makes woman a woman. Apart from these entire hostile situations, Enitan is very much particular regarding her identity and creates her own identity. As Judith Butler put it: ‘Identity is performatively constituted by the very” expressions” that are said to be its results’. (1990: 24-25) Enitan creates her own identity unafraid of any social entities. Usha Bande and Atma Ram’s concept of a “true new woman” is good enough to describe Enitan:

... The new woman is one who shown of her ‘feminine mystique’ is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with a heightened sense of dignity and individuality..... (14). The picture that emerges is of a self reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited intelligent, confident and assertive.

Every Thing Good Will Come redefines African feminism by presenting us with a woman character who knows what she wants. Enitan is really a promise for future African feminism because she shows the ability of African woman to take her life in her own hands. Enitan never bases her

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happiness on what others think. Rather she is ethically informed and armed with her fierce intelligence she believes who ever has voice must use it' to bring about change' (259). Enitan believes that the ability to make change in society begins with that to affect a change in the family. Towards the end of the novel she shows the power of a woman in the role of a female lawyer. She successfully releases his father who has gone under imprisonment due to some political reason. Thus she once again proves the talent of a lady which was once mocked by her own father by commenting her as a senseless girl. Here she also shows the courage to speak and act against corrupted political figures in Nigeria.

For Sefi Atta feminism is all about caring about the other as a human being. This goal is not to dethrone man or enthrone woman on the seat of power. *Everything Good Will Come* is a real work that seeks the flourishing of communities with the liberation of women in the background. Through the female characters, Atta is able to shape the vision of an ideal African woman and also shows how they utilize all means to affirm their individuality. She exhorts woman to crack the shackle of cocoon and fight for her space both in home and society by abstaining themselves from silence, the destructive metaphor.

Post colonial feminism mainly addresses the problems faced by the women in third world countries. It seeks emancipation and empowerment, keeping in minds the cultural differences between the women. Like Wollestonecraft and Margaret Fuller, Sefi Atta too believed in education, employment and political rights of women. It is greatly projected in the protagonist Enitan.

Towards the end of the novel through the words of heroine, Atta tells women to adopt female friendship and sisterhood as these would be one of the ways they can win the war against inequality and tradition and all other patriarchal dictates. The novel ends on an optimistic note that 'everything good will come'.

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