

The Emergence of Female Identity in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

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ABSTRACT

Everything Good Will Come (2006) is the debut novel by the Yoruba author Sefi Atta. She investigates the different transformation that occur in the life of Enitan, the female protagonist of the novel, while she makes her tedious journey from the beginning of adolescence to adulthood. For a long time, women have almost played secondary roles in the Nigerian novel in the struggle to address socio-political and economic challenges. However, since the beginning of the 2000s, Nigerian fiction has presented women in leadership roles in their societies. In fact, a new generation of authors has emerged. Atta has become a famous and internationally acclaimed writer of this series in her quest to demonstrate how the identity of a woman can originate from various hostile factors that affect her environment. She suggests that this can only happen if and only women are self-affirming, become fully aware of unlocking their tremendous inner potential which is essential to reverse the trend of a fiction plot dominated by men. Indeed, *Everything Good Will Come* is a counter-speech to the almost pitiful image of the woman in works mainly masculine.

Keywords: Female identity, hostile environment, education, social awareness, activism.

INTRODUCTION

New generation Nigerian female novelists offer their readers the opportunity to discover a new approach of women's roles in addressing social and political issues in their country. By so doing, these female novelists oppose what male generation writers used to deliver. For instance, in nearly all his literary productions, Chinua Achebe, particularly in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), presents women as virtually playing minor roles in the decision-making arena. Even in his last book, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012), he hardly mentioned the outstanding role played by women during and after the Nigerian Civil War (6 July 1967-15 January 1970); because after the war, there was a need to survive the peace. However, in *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), Buchi Emecheta openly criticizes how women suffer from abuses

committed by men; this confirms that men are generally prone to nurture the deliberate desire to dominate women.

And so, the third-generation Nigerian female writers, especially after the country's independence in 1960, are struggling hard to recentre the place and role of women in the decision-making sphere. That's how in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents Kambili, Amaka, Mama (Beatrice) and Auntie Ifeoma as playing key roles to free themselves from the fetters represented by Eugene Achike. Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, a lecturer at the University of Nsukka, Nigeria, is a sole parent who struggles to bring up her three teenagers after her husband's death. In her second novel: *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie presents brave and amazon women such as the twin sisters: Kainene and Olanna. Here, the novelist eulogizes their warlike efforts to participate in the "Win the War effort"; the objective being to support Biafra in succeeding to gain secession from Nigeria. During the war, tens of thousands of women spared no effort to feed Biafran soldiers at various war fronts; Mrs Muokelu, for example, played an active role during that gloomy period of Nigeria. Indeed, Adichie magnifies the role of women, making them transcend the stereotypical traditional roles to become very active 'soldiers' in the thirty long months' war and even beyond.

Like Adichie, Sefi Atta offers women a notable and privileged position in their quest for restoring the female identity and dignity. In *Everything Good Will Come*, (2003) the reader discovers Enitan and Sheri struggling hard from adolescence to adulthood because of various factors that affect their environment and particularly due to the socio-political and economic hardships prevailing in Nigeria.

The leading roles of women in their societies are also presented by Atta, in *Swallow* (2010), with the rich and also tragic experiences of female characters namely Rose and Tolani.

In this article, I intend to highlight the characters of Enitan and Sheri to show how family environment and many other societal factors and forces may positively or negatively influence the identity of woman from adolescence down to adulthood. I will also endeavour to pinpoint the symbolism behind these two female characters.

ENITAN: A CHARACTER IN CONSTANT STRUGGLE

A quick research through Google suggests that: "The name Enitan is both a boy's name and a girl's name meaning "**person of story, famous person**". Enitan's origins are in the Yoruba language of Southwestern Nigeria. It has a lovely meaning, referring to **a person of notoriety**".

It transpires that the choice of Enitan by the author is deliberate. Based on her family environment, health history, degree course, marital life, involvement into politics, we learn that Enitan has successfully taken up many of the various challenges which were to undermine the course of her life. By so doing, she boldly defies many socio-cultural prejudices that worked towards discriminating women in a male-dominated society.

Enitan in a Hostile Family Environment

Enitan, the narrator of the plot and also the heroine of the novel, was only eleven years old at the onset of the plot, as she was born in 1960, the year of Nigeria's independence. Unfortunately, Enitan's father was rarely present at home because of his tight schedule in his law firm. Most of

the time, Enitan was with her mother. The reader can notice that she faced perpetual fear because of her mother who would not let her discover and adapt to her environment, specifically the neighbouring children, namely Sheri from the Bakare family. "I glanced around the yard, because my mother didn't want me playing with the Bakare children" (7). 'Glanced' evokes both the narrator's desire to do what her mother banned and the fear of challenging her mother's authority. There is therefore a contrast which shows the absence of freedom in a Nigeria torn by hydra-headed problems, mainly the war of secession and the vicious circles of coup plots from the mid-sixties up to the late 1990s. At this juncture, the reader may be tempted to think of Jaja and Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) where the protagonists are forbidden to socialize with their environment. In fact, a category of people are targeted not to mingle with Eugene's children.

It therefore follows that the society has established specific standards which do not necessarily meet children's aspirations. Attempts by children to forge their personal identities are banned. No doubt, Enitan sets the scene when she eventually defies her mother's authority to become Sheri's bosom friend. By so doing, Enitan becomes Sheri's *Aburo* (younger sister (20). Enitan's reaction can be compared to the behaviour of Jaja and Kambili in the Achike family. The children eventually visit their grandfather, Papa Nnukwu, despite their father's ban to do so.

The same way Papa-Nnukwu is viewed by his son Eugene like a devilish person to avoid, so is Sheri like a plague to Enitan. These situations indicate that there is a rebellious take-off that encourages children transcend a sort of patriarchal paradigm. Of course, this definitely triggers a change. Enitan has learnt a lot from Sheri with her first experience of self-discovery. This happened when Sheri eventually encouraged Enitan to discover her own private parts:

Sheri's eyes were wide 'You haven't seen it?

I've seen mine. Many times' she stood up and retrieved a cracked mirror from a drawer.

'Look and see'

'I can't'

'Look', she said, handing me the mirror.

'Lock the door'

'Okay', she said, heading there.

I dragged my panties down, place the mirror between my legs. It looked like a big, fat slug. I squealed as Sheri began to laugh' [...]

I pulled my panties up, wondering whether I was angry with her, or what I'd seen between my legs (32-33).

Similarly, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Jaja and Kambili, also made their tedious journey to self-discovery after challenging parental authority – indeed, Eugene's authority. This happened thanks to their visit to Auntie Ifeoma and also to their 'pagan' Papa-Nnukwu. We note that Eugene calls his own father 'pagan'. But as matter of fact, his father is not a pagan, but a traditionalist from whom the children have learnt a lot. As Ifeoma suggests: "Your Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist" (89). Furthermore, Jaja and Kambili openly voiced out their strong determination to visit Nsukka despite the opposition of their father: "We are going to Nsukka today. We will spend Easter in Nsukka" [...] I did not hear what Papa said, then I heard Jaja say, "We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow. If Kevin will not take us, we will still go. We will walk if we have to" (265). This may suggest that depending on some circumstances or events, children sometimes learn to forge their own identities when they come face to face with some

realities that meet their expectations as opposed to the models that some people try to force on them. The time has come for Enitan to take control of her destiny. Indeed, Enitan reverted the traditional image of invisible women's roles in the Nigerian fiction of unrest and tragedy.

Enitan: Education and Social Awareness

A corner feature in the making of new type of women in the Nigerian novel is that of their bookish education. Until the 1970s, the taboo that the place of a woman is in the marriage household was still more visible than today. In the context of Africa in general, fewer women than today completed their degree course.

Armed with her father's instruction, Enitan at the Royal College, became wiser and more experienced. She met girls from different backgrounds.

I learned also about women in my country, from Zaria, Katsina, Kaduna who decorated their skin with henna dye and lived in purdah; women from Calabar who were fed and anointed in fattening houses before their weddings; women who were circumcised. I heard about towns in western Nigeria where every family had twins because the women ate a lot of yams, and other towns in northern Nigeria, where every other family had a crippled child because women married their first cousins. None of the women seemed real. They were like mammy water, sirens of the Niger Delta who rose from the creeks to lure unsuspecting men to death by drowning (48).

At Royal College, the girls learned more about their families and environment. This also enabled Enitan to address the present challenges and anticipate on the ones ahead. This stage of her growth is the evidence that education is key. Education offered her an opportunity to be aware of what was going on in her country. "Outside our school walls, oil leaked from the drilling fields of the Niger Delta into people's Swiss bank accounts. There was bribery and corruption, but none of it concerned me ..." (50).

There is an interesting quality in Enitan's father. He was in favor of women's empowerment through education and Enitan was not an exception. In his article: *Everything Good Will Come (2005) de Sefi Atta: a Bildungsroman féminin (trans)national*, Cédric Courtois highlights this quality in Enitan's father: "Le père d'Enitan, quant à lui, fait preuve d'une apparente ouverture d'esprit lorsqu'il s'agit du sort réservé aux femmes et notamment à sa fille." The expression: 'sort réservé aux femmes' is an indication that Cédric recognizes the existence of the male mentality to look down on women. Enitan's father anticipated the disappointment of a woman when she is undereducated like Sheri or not educated at all like many other women. His broadmindedness has greatly contributed to shaping the character of his daughter who, among many other women, acquired a very good education: "I'm for the liberation of women" (21). We also note that Enitan's father warned her against pervasive behaviour that might entangle with her studies. "You do not go to Saint Agnès Girls' School to study 'boy ology' (42). Of course, early boy friending can lead to drastic consequences like teenage and unwanted pregnancies. For example, one of Sheri's major handicaps that interfered with her schooling is her rape experience during a beach party. The aftermaths are her barrenness.

Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren. We have both been raised to believe that our greatest days would be: the birth of our first child, our wedding and our

graduation days in that order. A woman may be forgiven for having a child out of wedlock if she had no hope of getting married, and she would be dissuaded from getting married if she did not have a degree (105).

Enitan succeeded in having a brilliant education in England. The strong belief in the power of education has prepared her to become the leader of her school debate club under her father's leadership. Of course, this paves her the way to study in England where she graduated as a lawyer. "For me, coming home to Nigeria was like moving back to the fifties in England (105). Of course, her mixing with other cultures at school and in the university abroad helped Enitan to broaden and sharpen her mind and have the intellectual strength which infallibly empowered her enough to defy her husband Niyi. One can say that her personality started rising.

Enitan: Marital Status and Political Activism

After a critical analysis of *Everything Good Will Come*, Cédric Courtois describes it as *Bildungsroman* féminin". This consideration helps to delve into the meaning of the terminology with reference to two approaches.

For Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World* "[The Bildungsroman is] a specific image of modernity: the image conveyed precisely by the youthful attitudes of mobility and inner restlessness (5); while Bakhtine specifies that "[the hero emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. [...] [He is on the border between two epochs, at the transition point between one to another. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being" (23).

Based on these two ways to clarify what is meant by "Bildungsroman feminine, it is clear that the terminologies 'modernity', 'youthful', 'mobility', 'transition', and so on are illustrative of Enitan's adventure from teenage to adulthood, previously a mere girl and now in divorce with an established social order which she sees as incompatible with her expectations of a fulfilled woman. She opposes the so-called male privilege to subjugate women. Enitan is not ready to consider prejudices featured by an incapacity to get married because of her condition of 'sickler' that she however fought to overcome. Also, she cannot understand why on earth she would be blindly submissive to her husband, Niyi. For Enitan, marriage as her experience with Niyi shows, is an occasion to see how she rejects the image of submission. Most of her time of married life from the onset to motherhood was rather dominated by misunderstanding and quarrels; for Enitan, being married is virtually a waste of time; which means that she has no joy, contrarily to the traditional assumption that what matters most for a marriageable woman is a husband and children. Her rebellious attitude in Niyi's household is an indication of her yearning for a change that she advocates for the Nigerian modern woman. This conversation between Enitan and Niyi is self-explanatory:

'I care about my family', he said. 'Only my family'.

'So did I', I said. Once. But that has changed now. I wasn't worried about my mother. Who are we fooling? The state our country is in affects everyone. [...] (325).

This discussion looms the break with past patriarchal paradigm. In the following conversation, Enitan has challenged her husband and is ready to head directly to her goal to be involved in politics, no matter Niyi's refusal.

"I was not looking for a compromise. He had to change his mind. I was desperate enough to force him. From childhood, people had told me I could not do this or that, because no one would marry me and I would not become a mother. Now, I was a mother. (326)

'I'm not the same', I said.

'What?'

'I'm not the same as I used to be. I want you to know' (326).

The past simple 'used to' specifically shows a total break with the past habit, with the traditional concept of the image of a dominated Nigerian woman. From now on, there will be no business as usual; hence her behaviour is in tune with the attitudes of the youth in the transition between two epochs. Enitan succeeds in triggering change; which is materialized by her involvement in politics. Politically speaking, the mobility and restlessness aspects of the Bildungsroman present Enitan in her clockwise movements from the day she broke with her mother's prohibition down to the release of her father from prison on political grounds. She challenged her husband's authority, defied the police because she was intellectually armed enough to manage police harassments at checkpoints.

[...]Your lishense", he said.

I reached into my glove compartment. He flicked through breathing heavily and handed it back. "Insh-wurance".

I passed my insurance certificate and he held it upside down.

"Sister, why you stop like dat?" he asked, giving it back.

"Where?"

"Yonder"

[....]

The policeman screwed up his face attempting to look angry.

"Sistah, you no fear? I can arrest you right now".

"What for?"

He snatched my arm and I snatched it back.

"I'm a pregnant woman. Be careful how you handle me".

His gaze dropped.

"Yes", I said. "I am" (236).

As microcredit initiative may empower women, so does education. Ngugi wa Thiong'o comprehensively underscores the importance of education which is the key to the future. In this 'match' between the police officer and the learned Enitan, Atta clearly present a barely educated police officer. This is noted through his illiteracy-coloured pronunciation: 'Insh-wurance' for 'insurance', 'lishense' for 'licence', 'sistah' for 'sister' and his non-respect of syntactic rule while inverting the verb and its subject in a direct question: "Why you stop like dat?" (236).

Atta could have chosen a female police officer instead of a male. The choice may suggest that Atta is determined to break with the patriarchal male image with a risible, barely educated policeman who hides his intellectual lacuna under the traditional authority embodied by the police uniform. An ordinary, under-educated woman or man would have panicked. No wonder the policeman asked Enitan why she did not panic. He was defeated by the sophisticated arguments proffered by Enitan. Her struggle continues until she ended up in a prison cell with

the journalist Grace Ameh because of political activism. Their aim was to free political prisoners among whom Bamidele, Enitan's father:

They threw us into a cell, Grace Ameh and I. They said we had disobeyed public orders. The police stormed the reading and ordered people out at gun point. They arrested Grace Ameh; she was the one they came for. They arrested the four men who came to her rescue. I was arrested because I was the first person they saw (258).

However, there is something rather astounding in Enitan's fate. Her father ended up being released from jail, as she, too, did. The father eventually renounces to his political activism because of the hellish moments both spent in cells: "There was mumbling and more slapping. Someone complained about the smell from the woman who had gone. Tears welled up in my eyes. I sank lower. If I had been made to lick a toilet bowl, I could not feel sickle (261). Enitan rather swore to continue. Her father swore never again to live such a punitive timing in cells. "What my eyes have seen, I will never be the same again". "Me too", I said (325).

Men symbolized by Enitan's father used to raise voices to decry abuses. Women like Enitan in the past, used to be silent. Now that politics is silencing men, it is rather stirring women up. The change therefore symbolizes the dawn of emerging women. Even the title: *Everything Good Will Come* is self-explanatory. Enitan fought for her father's release. The title is in future tense. This suggests that many achievements are ahead of Enitan because she is free as she was born in the year of her country's independence.

SHERI: SYMBOL OF A BROKEN DREAM

The name "Sheri" has been chosen on purpose: Google suggests that "Sheri means a real charmer, a visionary, somebody who tends to make a lot of money and lose it fast, a freedom-loving, a compassionate person who feels things deeply "you are your own person, ambitious and freethinking, a person who likes life in the fast lane..."

Although Sheri and Enitan are friends, they represent two characters of contrasting fate. Enitan fulfilled her dream of transcending traditional norms that deny women the opportunity to unleash their potential. On the contrary, Sheri failed to do so. Atta certainly intends to show how both environment and perhaps the strength of mind can help to shape female identity in the modern Nigerian fiction.

Sheri and her Family Background

Unlike Enitan, Sheri, unfortunately, is an orphan from childhood. "Sheri did not know her own mother. She died when Sheri was a baby and Alhaja raised her from then on, even after her father remarried" (36). Alhaja was a tradeswoman and could not have the necessary time and energy to mould Sheri like her biological mother could have done. Sheri was nearly wayward in her ways. She could very often do what she wanted without much fear as opposed to Enitan. That was how she ended up being raped by hemp-smokers at a beach party. "Sheri was lying on the seat. Her knees were spread apart. The boy in the cap was pinning her arms down. The portly boy was on top of her. His hands were clamped over her mouth" (66).

Later, the reader discovers that the rape could be the cause of her barrenness. And rightly, the day Sheri's barrenness was provoked was that very day Enitan, who had long been worrying whether she was a hermaphrodite, had her first menstruation: "I worried that I might be a

hermaphrodite, like an earthworm, because my periods hadn't started" (55). The contrast between the two girls was sharp because of the provocative and eventful Sheri's beauty as a half cast: "Sheri was no longer a yellow banana. She could easily win any of the beauty contests in my school, but her demeanour needed to be toned down" (60), was the source of her sorrow.

Rather, despite Enitan's initial comparative disadvantage, she found happiness at the same occasion "... and my mother killed a fowl to secure my fertility" (56). The opportunity is given to readers to see how the role of parents in educating their children is key in the process of building up their future identity. Enitan was successful because she benefited by her parents' private coaching, while Sheri had less success.

Sheri: Symbol of the Colonial Legacy:

Sheri's mother died early in her babyhood. The mother is a British. This early death may symbolize the end of colonization and Baby Sheri the colonial legacy in Nigeria. The colonial legacy is not necessarily intended to serve Africans. The colonial paradigm is here symbolized by Baby-Sheri. She was raped and that condition interfered with the brilliant future she was supposed to achieve because of her potential: beauty, openness and so on. Unfortunately, she had to be under the custody of her grandmother. Perhaps, this means a good seed has been sown on a barren soil. Sheri was raped by immature and bad guys. Atta seems to suggest that the colonial legacy has been poorly managed by those who are supposed to take over the affairs of the country. The rape on Sheri is due to a male force that crushed her down. This may imply that if women are confined to secondary roles, men are the very responsible for this, since Sheri's barrenness may be attributed to male domination over the female class.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the growth of Enitan from adolescence to adulthood. The various growth processes make it possible to sharpen the awareness of Enitan and other women in *Everything Good Will Come*. Just a naïve girl in the beginning, Enitan grew up to be a political activist; indeed, the voice of voiceless women. She becomes empowered through education and her relationship with other women such as her mother, Sheri, Grace Ameh and many others. In her marital condition, she would not allow her husband, Niyi, to scorn her. Eventually, it took her long enough to get pregnant, but she is not bothered and finally gave birth to a baby girl; it is the symbol that the struggle for liberation will be taken over by other generations of women. It also provides hope and expectation that: "**Everything Good Will Come**". Of course, the 'will' expresses the future. Enitan gets rid of her husband's influence and reclaims her dignity. The paper suggests that women can realize their dreams if they manage to overcome the major societal barriers that undermine their expectations; only the sky should be their limit.

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