
Refocusing Women Education for Sustainable Development: Sefi Atta's use of Language in Her Novel, Everything Good will Come

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of language in refocusing women education for sustainable development using the literary theory of feminism as viewed in Sefi Atta's novel, "Everything Good Will Come". This paper is designed to be descriptive and interpretative of the language of oppression as derived from the feminist's perspective. Feminism in this work is viewed as a protest against all forms of discrimination and oppression against women in a patriarchal society. The female characters in the novel are portrayed as growing up from adolescent to adulthood and are misrepresented, neglected, dehumanized and underestimated by their male counterparts. This has given the girl-child the concern to question the essence of her existence. This paper therefore shows how Atta has used language in her novel to showcase and condemn oppression and particularly female subjugation in an African patriarchal society setting, and projects women as embodiment of virtue, hard work, resourcefulness and strength. It reflects the need to train the girl-child in the face of the age-long culturally assigned role in the society. This will help to refocus the education of women for sustainable quality education .

Keywords: Language, Refocusing and Feminism

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Background to the Study

Language serves as an instrument of communication. It is a medium used in conveying or expressing ideas and information. Writers of literary texts thus find it useful as they deliberately and creatively employ it in their texts to communicate their thoughts to their readers. Language is therefore a basic tool in all the genres of literature be it poetry, drama or prose. Since literature involves an artistic use of language, Sefi Atta's use of language in her works is therefore worthy of note. Atta has adopted the prose genre of literature (the novel) to communicate her thoughts to her readers. The novel is regarded as a narrative that tells 'about' people and relationships, power tussles institutions and so on. Her novels are influenced by the socio-cultural relevance of the day to day happenings in her surroundings. Her thematic concerns therefore borders on contemporary issues such as oppression, dictatorship, corruption, hypocrisy and many others in Nigeria and other African states. Atta has used her novel, "Everything Good Will Come" to expose different oppressions women suffer in a patriarchian society which include subjugation, degradation and all forms of inhuman treatment. This is why Atta has therefore been portrayed as a feminist writer who uses her works to question these ills meted out to women and calls on women to rise up against these challenges and claim their right. In view of this, this paper thus examines the issue of feminism as it relates to Atta's novel, *Everything Good Will Come*.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this is to examine the use of language in refocusing women education for sustainable development using the literary theory of feminism as viewed in Sefi Atta's novel.

The Concept of Feminism

Charles Fourier, a French philosopher is credited to have coined the word "feminism" in 1837. The word feminism advocates and supports the rights and equality of women and has since spread to other parts of the world [Wikipedia 2016]. Feminism is defined as a social theory or political movement supporting the equality of both sexes in all aspects of public and private life; specifically a theory or movement that argues that legal and social restrictions on females must be removed in order to bring about such equality [Wikipedia 2016]. There are different types of feminism. One is the liberal feminism, which advocates a movement "towards a deeper identification with a female essence" (Rivkin & Ryaan, 2000: 529); radical feminism which advocates a departure from the way women have been portrayed by patriarchy; Socialist/Marxist feminism; liberal and psychological feminism.

Feminists all over the world have different causes and goals. To some it is aimed to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women; and to others its goal is to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. These causes and goals have thus generated into movements. This has made Western feminists historians assert that all movements that work to obtain women's rights should be considered feminists movements. Feminist's movement is divided into three 'waves'. Each wave dealt with different aspects of the same feminist issues.

The first wave comprised women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This wave advocates for women's right to vote. The second wave was associated with the ideas and actions of the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s. This wave campaigned for legal and social equality for women. It encouraged women to understand and view aspects of their life as deeply politicized.

The third wave started in the 1990s with a continuation of and a reaction to the perceived failures of second wave feminism. It therefore advocated for the following:

*“To achieve women's equality in education, marriage, careers and legal rights.
For the reform of family laws which gave husbands control over their wives and
Ending discrimination against women.”*

Feminist movements have yielded feminist theory which aims to understand the nature of gender and inequality by examining women's social rules and live experiences. Some forms of feminism have been criticized for recognizing only white, middle-class and educated perspectives. This has led to the creation of ethnically specific or multiculturalists forms of feminism (Wikipedia 2016). In view of this, some African writers have tried to adopt different concepts and titles for feminism.

Emezie (2012) feels that feminism “represents” a call from a major change in social thinking and politics and questions people's understanding of men and women and the social structures which maintain their differences”. Emezie feels that there are really no intellectual differences between the male and the female except biological differences. He opines that:

Feminism is better appreciated and accommodated as a conviction about the equity of the sexes coupled with resolute will to exterminate sexist domination and change the philo-centric social order.

Emezie agrees with Chukwuma's (1994) assertion that:

Feminism means....a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. it seeks to give the women a sense of self as a worthy effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women, which deny them a positive identity (ix)

Echerho (in Acholonu, 1995:7) lends credence to this when he asserts that feminism “can be appreciated as being much more than the concept: it is at once a doctrine, an ideology (with its social, economic and political ramification), a theory, a method, a technique, a movement and a call to action. Echerho feels that women should rise above dominance and be aware of their role in the society and not be subjected to the background .They should rise up and challenge issues that subjugate them as women.

Maduka (2001) is of the opinion that:

Feminism is systematically assuming a strategic position in Nigerian cultural discourse. This is largely due to the emergence of female academics/critics that have consistently used their works to challenge the dehumanizing tendencies of the patriarchal socio-political institutions in the country (226).

Some African critics have observed that feminism from the western perspective does not capture the typical African experience. Among these critics include Kohrs-Amissah (2002) who believes that Western feminism is nothing but sexual politics. She feels that feminism should transcend beyond the issues of sex. This has led many African female critics to modify the term 'feminism' in order to capture their own perception. Some of these concepts include, "Africana feminism" (Hudson-Weems, 1993), "Womanish" (Walker, 1983), "Stiwanism" (from the acronym, STIWA -'Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1989) and "Motherism" (Acholonu, 1995).

Walker and Ogunyemi in Kohrs-Amissah (2002) define womanism within a black contest as the coming of age of a young woman which brings about the emergence of femaleness. This position recaptures the theme of Seffi Atta's novel of two young women coming of age named Enitan and Sheri.

Kolawole (1997) asserts that "African womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of Africa descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women" (25).

Acholonu (1995) feels that 'Motherism' best describes western feminism as it extols the virtues of the woman as someone who mothers, nurtures and aids growth from every positive sense of the word 'growth'. He asserts that:

Africans alternative to western feminism is Motherism and Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture. Motherism is a multidimensional theory, which involves the dynamic of ordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavour (110-111).

According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1989) the term 'Stiwanism' enables her "to discuss the needs of African women in the tradition of spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of the woman" (230). From these critical points, it is obvious that feminism, whether African or western is a challenge against all forms of oppression and degradation against women by their male counterparts. African feminism is not at variance with western feminism. They both aim at extolling the virtues of the woman. Boyce-Davis (1990) asserts that: "The obvious connection between African and western feminism is [that] both identify gender-specific issues and recognizes woman's position internationally as one of second class status and 'otherness' and seek to correct that" (10). Feminist's movements have and continued to promote women virtues and rights: right to education, to have equal rights within marriage, right to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. These movements have given rise to "feminist theory".

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Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. (Wikipedia) The aim of feminist theory is to understand gender inequality and focus on gender politics, power relations and promotion of women's rights and interests. Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary sociological theories, which analyzes the status of women and men in society with the purpose of using that knowledge to better women's lives. It is most concerned with giving a voice to women and highlighting the various ways women have contributed to society. From the ongoing assertions of African feminism, it is obvious that African critics see the feminist theory as the struggle of women against all forms of oppression, dehumanization and self degradation imposed on them by patriarchal society. In the African setup, it is believed that it is the man's world and that women are there to meet the man's needs. The feminist theory is therefore a theory that cuts across a variety of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and many others. The aim is to showcase feminist struggle against oppression and male domination in the socio-political, economic and even religious background. It also aims at promoting women's rights, interests and wishes.

Atta uses her creative ingenuity to portray female characters and how they are subjugated in a male dominated society. This paper is based on the three main types of feminist theory that attempt to explain the societal differences between men and women as captured in Atta's novel, *Everything Good Will Come*. They include: gender difference, gender inequality and gender oppression.

Thematic Exploration of the Text

"Everything Good Will Come" portrays the protagonist's journey of becoming a woman in a male dominated world. The novel reflects the growing up of a child from adolescence to adulthood. It examines the post-independence Nigeria and the general social and personal turbulence of the 21st century African country. Atta uses her communicative skill to showcase the socio-political state of the nation since independence.

The novel is set in Nigeria and specifically in Lagos in the 20th century, under military regime. Lagos reflects a microcosm of the great country Nigeria. The novel reflects what happens in the city of Lagos and examines the society from the past to the present. The story is told from the first person point of view, a female narrator, Enitan who happens to be the major character in the text. The story reveals Enitan Taiwo at age eleven waiting for school to reopen. Enitan enters into a friendship with Sheri Bakare, a girl next door. The story thus revolves round the lives of these two young Nigerian girls who are brought up in their homeland that is bedeviled with male chauvinism. Enitan's parents are separated and so she is raised in a divided home and thus struggles to free and identify herself in a patriarchal society. As an only child after the death of her brother, Enitan is caged and prevented from having a normal childhood life. But she becomes rebellious and defies her mother's wishes and leaves the house on Sundays while the mother is away to church to play with the next door girl Sheri, a mulatto from a Nigerian father and a white English mother. Their relationship is terminated temporarily when Enitan is sent to school abroad, and only to be reunited when Enitan returns as a lawyer to meet Sheri as a

mistress to an authoritarian Muslim Brigadier, Hassan who provides her needs. Enitan marries a divorcee, Niyi Franco who is separated from his only child by his ex-wife. After much struggle to conceive, Enitan bears a baby girl. Tension heightens as Enitan and Niyi's differences stretch because Enitan refuses to submit herself to the demands of Niyi who expected her to play the traditional role of a housewife and refuses to assist her. This led to their separation. Enitan struggles to free herself from male domination and harassment and continues to fight against obnoxious laws that disregard women's rights and enslave them. The novel highlights different themes of the novel such as subjugation, corruption, dictatorship, and many more. It reflects in detail the experiences of women in all areas of life ranging from cultural norms, degradation to all forms of harassment such as rape, battery and many others. The language of the text captures these themes but mostly the female stance in the area of oppression and its consequence on the characters. Female subjugation is one of the contemporary issues in the society that the text portrays vividly. We shall examine the language of oppression as it relates to social injustice, gender discrimination, political discrimination, political deprivation, rape, female subjugation exploitation, domestic violence and segregation as reflected in the novel under the three main types of feminist theory-gender difference, gender inequality and gender oppression.

Gender Difference

The gender difference theory focuses on how women's location and experiences of social situations differ from men's. For instance, the cultural feminists examine the different values associated with womanhood as a reason while men and women experience the social world differently. The existential and phenomenological feminists examine how women have been marginalized and defined as the "other" by the male counterparts. Women are regarded as "objects" and dependents and are subjected to various social injustices in the society. Female subjugation has become a contemporary issue that the literary voices have captured in their literary works. They have tried to kick against all social injustice meted out to women by their male counterparts on the bases of gender discrimination. The men tend to portray the women as been weak and have been discriminated socially, politically, economically and even religiously. The Nigerian women are regarded as a second-class citizen by their male counterparts; even when both the female and the male attain the same educational level, the female is still looked upon as inferior while their male counterparts are regarded as been superior. Many female writers have therefore used their literary ingenuity to portray the female predicament in the society. One of such writers is Sefi Atta. Atta has used her novels to capture the female predicament in a patriarchal society and has reached up to women to rise up and challenge obnoxious practices that relegate them to the background.

Commenting on Atta's novel, *Awase* (2008); attests to the fact that:

...Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* has revealed that she is unmistakably a writer of the feminist tradition, strongly convinced that the rights of women are being trampled upon and determined to awaken the society to this fact (56)

Awase believes that the novel is a call to awaken the psyche of the woman, to celebrate her strength and reject any form of oppression. Sefi Atta's novel explores the social degradation conditions the female characters are exposed to in the novel. The society sees feminine traits as inferior to naturally masculine traits due to the social construct of gender roles. "Enitan struggles against the socialization of gender roles, even as a growing child, she desires to be the president of a nation. She asserts, "I want to be something like...like president" (33). To which her friend Sheri quickly explained "Eh? Women are not presidents", and further explains, "Our men won't stand for it. Who will cook for your husband?" Enitan in her tender age replied that "He will cook for himself" (33).

It is believed that one of the culturally assigned roles to women is the domestic chores like cooking and taking care of the home. This assertion is later debunked by Enitan after her education in London, having been equipped with knowledge that education offered her, Enitan re-establishes relationship with her childhood friend, Sheri Bakare. And so when Sheri informs Enitan about her cooking routine for Brigadier Hassan, Enitan gets angry. But Sheri has this to say; "Education cannot change what's inside a persons veins. Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against this wall, you will end up in the kitchen period" (106). But as the relationship grows Sheri comes to realize that education can bring a lot of change and awareness in the life of an individual.

The issue of gender role is also seen in the marriage of Enitan to Niyi. Niyi believes that it is the duty of Enitan as a wife to do everything in the house and so he does not assist her in doing anything. When his brothers came visiting, he is at home and just back from work, he asks Enitan to give his brothers "something". Enitan replies Niyi thus: "you have hands" (184). Niyi sees this as a joke and calls on Enitan: "my friend..., show some respect". But Enitan tells Niyi bluntly: "Go to hell" (184). Moreover, when Enitan loses her mother and falls ill, it is Niyi who goes to the kitchen to prepare food for her (310). This shows that the man Niyi can equally do well in the kitchen but because of pride and his perception about gender roles, he is not willing to assist his wife in the kitchen.

Traditionally, men see women especially their wives as commodities to be owed and expect them to be submissive to their demands. The men see the women as inferiors and dependants who need to follow their leadership and instructions. They (men) therefore dictate to women what to do and what not to do. This is portrayed in the character of Brigadier Hassan who symbolizes authority and dictatorship in the society. When Enitan asks Sheri if Brigadier Hassan treats her well, Sheri replies "which one of our man really treats women well" (P. 103). To Sheri, a woman must be under a man since society recognizes this even if you (the woman) have to do every other thing in the house. She tells her friend Enitan", listen, I take care of my family, I even take care of Ibrahim (Hassan) Sheri takes care of Brigadier Hassan Ibrahim just for her to have him. However, Enitan did not see the rationale behind Sheri's being subjected to the dictatorship of Brigadier Hassan for whatever reason. She tells Sheri: "You're better than this, Sheri. Anyone you want, you can have" (104). This is because Enitan sees Sheri as very hard-working and does not actually depend on Brigadier Hassan for survival yet she (Sheri) has become a

“kitchen martyr, and may well have forgotten how to flaunt her mind” (107). This is a clarion call to women to question any obnoxious laws that tend to relegate them to the background.

Enitan's father is also portrayed as a dictator in his home. This is seen in the way he maltreats his wife, Enitan's mother despite her submission to him. He even divorced Enitan's mother for failure to give him another male child after the death of the only male child. He is also reluctant in giving her his duplex (146). This divorce led to the separation of Enitan and her mother. He even blames Enitan's mother for causing their divorce. This culminates in Enitan's mother becoming grey haired and hypertensive. She warns her daughter Enitan thus: “Never make sacrifices for a man. By the time you say, 'look what I've done for you', it's too late” (173).

Gender Inequality: this theory sees woman location and experiences as different and unequal to men's. The liberal feminist believes that women have the same capacity for moral reasoning and agency as their male counterparts but due to patriarchal patterning of division of labour has denied women the opportunity to express and practice this reasoning. Women are not allowed to partake in the public sphere but have been relegated to the private sphere of household duties and child rearing. The liberal feminists also focus on marriage as gender inequality and assert that women do not benefit from being married as their male counterparts do. They observe that married women are more subjected to higher level of stress than unmarried women and married men. Atta in her text, locates the struggle of women in the political process and their quest for power and authority. The patriarchal society believes that matters concerning politics are meant for men. This is seen when Enitan's father is imprisoned, she seeks to fight for the release of her father. But her husband, Niyi does not support her because he feels that Enitan should be more concerned about her family than think of her father's detention. Even her mother also is not in support of her. She tells her this, “Be careful” “This kind of thing is not a woman's place. Not in this country. You don't need me to tell you” (219).

Enitan's mother also suffers in the hands of her husband and becomes frustrated and hypertensive simply because she chooses to play the traditional role of a reserved wife who never counters her husband's decision (172). Even when her husband refuses to release the documents of the house to her, she still remains silent until Enitan fought her father verbally before he releases it to her. The society also places preference to the male child than the female. To give birth to only girls in a patriarchal society such as ours spells doom for the woman. The result is that the husband will secretly or openly seek an alternative means of getting a male child from another one so that his lineage does not go into extinction. This is captured in Enitan's father getting another son from another woman after the death of Enitan's brother, since Enitan's mother could not bear another son (287). This is revealed to Enitan by uncle Fatai this way: “you know, em, you're not a child anymore, Enitan. Your father, he em, always felt bad about your brother....But you know, an African man cannot die without leaving a son....it is time you met your brother” (287). Enitan speaks strongly against this when she confronts her father on this issue of women oppression (141).

Childlessness is also blamed on the woman. Atta reveals this thus: "Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren" (105). A woman who is unable to bear children in a patriarchal society goes through untold pains such as humiliation, intimidation, mockery and stigmatization. Such a woman is not respected in the society. It is the woman that goes seeking medical help to see that she bears a child. This is seen when Enitan is unable to bear a child after marriage; her family becomes worried; her mother invited her to her church for special prayers and her father even offers to send her overseas for medical attention.

The novel also captures gender inequality in widowhood practices which tends to degrade and humanize the widow. This is seen in the mother of prisons who narrates her experience of widowhood which has bruised her psyche (270-272). This is contrary to what men pass through at the death of their wives. Sheri's family is not left out in this practice. At the death of Sheri's father, her uncle claims all the properties that belong to her father leaving the women and children to fend for themselves.

Gender Oppression

From the traditional society up to this modern age women have been victims of various oppression ranging from domestic to public life. Gender oppression theory argues that the society sees women as unequal to men, and are actively oppressed, subordinated and even abused by men. This theory consists of psychoanalytic feminism and radical feminism. Psychoanalytic feminists explain disparity in power relations between men and women as it affects human emotions and childhood development. Radical feminism identifies physical violence against women by men as the base of patriarchal society. They call on all women to brace up and "recognize their own value and strength, establish a sisterhood of trust with other women, confront oppression critically and form a female separatist networks in the private and public spheres" (Wikipedia). Atta beams her searchlight on the issue of physical violence in the society. This is seen in the life of Sheri. At a tender age of fourteen, Sheri is raped and is blamed for it. However, Sheri becomes an independent woman after packing up with Brigadier Hassan. She believes in herself and does not care about what the society thinks or says about her. She also sees herself as a serious-minded business woman who is determined to succeed and she goes about her business without fear of molestation from any angle.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the language of female oppression as portrayed in Sefi Atta's "Everything Good Will Come". It discusses the three main feminist theories of gender difference, gender inequality and gender oppression as they relate to the novel. From these theories it is believed that patriarchal society subjugates and relegates womanhood to the background. This is typical of the Nigerian society from where Atta takes her setting from. Atta vehemently opposes all forms of social injustice and portrays the evil side of patriarchy. She believes that women cannot passively expect men to change their traditional gender biases and so she challenges women to brace up and 'fight' any concept that tramples on their right. She portrays this confidence in the lives of her two major characters, Sheri and Enitan. Sheri, after her separation from her husband became strong,

industrious and resourceful while Enitan becomes strong-willed and disentangles herself from a marriage that tries to muzzle her. Atta has used language in this novel to showcase and condemn all forms of oppression and particularly female subjugation in the society. She advocates for refocusing women education in order to reshape their vision towards the traditional norms of relegating them to the background. This will enhance sustainable development of, not only Nigerian women but also, women all over the African continent at large.

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