



Research Paper

The Notion of Self and Gender Dimensions in Third World African Fiction

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ABSTRACT: Gender is a socially constructed order. It is socially constructed because the delineation of social roles and the way the two sexes – male and female are conceived attract different levels of distinctions. African literature constantly attempts at narrating the African experience, the struggles associated with gender and its relics of denigration and oppression which seem to remain visible features of post-independence Africa. An emerging reality in the African fiction is the redefinition or re-presentation of women's identity and sensibility. This is painted against the backdrop of various societal splits that seek to perpetually keep the status of the enslaved female and the lionized male in the continent's literature. The female character in African fiction has been portrayed as submissive, culturally handicapped against certain social behaviour, subservient and a second fiddle to the dominant male. The redefinition of the female gender in African fiction is a timely endeavour as women in real life experiences are continually breaking out from their neglected corners to contribute to society's development.

Nigerian women writings which project a preoccupation with socio-political and economic realities of the Nigeria can be described as creative imaginative works which criticise the deplorable state of Nigeria's socio-political and economic life. There seems to be a conscious awakening of the Nigerian writers, even in the Diaspora, to their responsibility as the conscience of their society. This paper redefines the female gender in African fiction as a timely endeavour to re-read women in real life experiences in *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) by Sefi Atta. She has established herself as one of the most engaging writers in the latest wave of Nigerian women authors. Living at different times of the year in the United States, England and Nigeria, she remains a committed writer across multiple genres and has bagged the Wole Soyinka prize for literature in 2006. This novel is subjected to textual analysis with a view to highlighting the enduring need for female discovery, assertion and self-realisation for survival in neocolonial patriarchal Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Africa, gender, identity, Third world literature, female writing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"African women have no voice, no platform and nobody cares... Therefore I feel that I must address them in my writing." (Tlali 69)

"Gender is a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities, not simply a system of categorizing people. And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations". (Eckert and McConnell- Ginet 305)

Representations of women and men in the literature on gender in Africa evoke contradictory images. Feminism in Africa has been born out of the marginalization and oppression of women, and the specific texturing by interconnections with a variety of class, ethnic, religious, sexual status and other divisions, within and across African borders and the African diaspora. It has also been drawn on the evolution of feminism outside the continent. She suffers from double colonization as she simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression, her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor. The 'third generation' of contemporary Nigerian authors retain a home within a lineage of Nigerian writing, engaging with and re-inscribing Yoruba, Nigerian, diasporic and female identities without stepping out of the home of those identities altogether. Their writings provide a composite portrait of emerging Nigerian women that are educated, career oriented and strong willed, while being wives, mothers and daughters.

Two discursive strands run through African literature, with trajectories that can be traced back to the colonial period. One, characterized in Mohanty's (79) critique of western feminist representations of 'Third World' women, tells an insistently negative tale of the voiceless victims of ever-deepening multiple oppressions:

"The African woman of the rural area is portrayed a little more than a slave, who goes about her tasks with silent acceptance. She has no past and no future, given the inherent backwardness of her society... She never speak for herself but is always spoken about" (Quanta 11).

The other is another set of images portrays African women as feisty, assertive, self-reliant heroines. Thus, they become the real stuff of women fables and men are also merged as powerful, dominant characters.

II. GENDER DISPARITY IN NIGERIA

Generally, African women writing within the framework revise misconceptions about the essence of narrow representation that have trapped women within male literacy discourse. This becomes the major preoccupation of African feminist writers committed to their art by a way of locating gender discourse as a fundamental element in literary texts. Unlike the Western feminism, African feminism does not negate men in their struggle to end discrimination against women but embraced men on the emancipation of women economically, politically and socially. Though, feminism exists in every society, it has a wide relation to the totality of historical material, culture and traditional fabric of the society. We can see that it is located through out the ages that African customs prefer women to commit to the marital institution where they live in total subservience to their husband. Consequently, women are oppressed through stereotypical notions which only allow the women's roles of house-wife and childbearing. They are never provided with the opportunity to explore the possibilities of life.

This paper suggests recasting the female identity in a third world patriarchal Nigeria which was once under the repercussions of Civil War, by analysing the novel *Everything Good will Come* (2005) written by Nigerian writer Sefi Atta. *Everything Good will Come* brought her fame and inclusion in the list of Nigerian authors who narrate their motherland from the Diaspora. *Everything Good* focuses on relationships and self-discovery that lead to the formation of strong feminine voices against the backdrop of the larger social factors which collude to stifle women's freedom of choice. Atta's novel begins with a declaration by her protagonist which alludes to the young girl's attempt to make sense of her role in life as a female growing up in post-war Nigeria. The novel charts the physical and psychological development of the protagonist Enitan, alongside her best friend Sheri who at age eleven appears more sophisticated and worldly-wise than the seemingly shy and reticent Enitan. The eleven-year-old Enitan must learn to navigate within a multiplicity of shifting paradigms-religious, social, cultural and educational, in order to understand her place as a young woman in Nigerian society who questions nothing. The novel unveils the different stages in Nigeria's socio-political life and amidst the varying tensions, also presents the reader with the notion that these tensions motivate, or at least characterize the experience of Nigerians at home. It seems to be sending the message that the fight at large is not about sex roles in society but rather a fight for human empowerment.

Agreeing the later views of Charles Nnolim (47) who argued that feminist writers and critics have fought successfully for the right of women, the dominant tenet of feminist writings is the liberation of the woman and the drive toward equality among the sexes. The Nigerian feminist novel differs from the Western brand of feminism. While considering Aduke Adebayo acceptance of the emancipating nature of feminism states that "the African feminist has discarded its violent and militant approach" (5). At a point Enitan begins to educate the women by conscientizing them of the need to know their rights which also include serving their husbands; "the women should not serve their husbands food" (Atta 196). This according to Enitan is a mild form of domestic protest. Atta is not calling on women not to feed their husbands, but they should not serve them like gods. When she complains to Sheri about her husband Niyi's attitude towards her: "the man behaves as if I'm his personal servant (204) she replies "show him sense jo" (205). Sheri is very bold to merge with practical decisions. When she chooses to avoid Harsan (Sheri's master), Enitan commends her "Sheri didn't need any man. I was there when she walked out of her Brigadier...I envied he freedom" (207). Atta urges that the woman must be economically independent. When Sheri left Hassan, she concentrated on her business, " within a year of starting her business she was able to buy herself one of those secondhand cars... and after two years, she was able to rent a place of her own" (207). This is adjacent to the views of Akachi Ezeigbo that :

In Africa in the period before recorded history women found close ties this helped to strengthen their position. In this way, they were able to take decisions and uphold them in matters that concerned their welfare (37).

III. QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The construction of gender has created, according to Enitan, a rift in the nationhood of Nigeria. Enitan's gender identity is, therefore, a layer of her identity that intersects with her identity as a Nigerian

national. Nation is always an engendered construct that forces women, through patriarchal domination, into socialised gender roles. Thus there is no doubt that colonialism presented African women with a variety of challenges and negative effects. However, as a display of their resilience, these women responded, in many cases, by learning to protest and stand up for their rights. They adapted as they needed to, and were determined to preserve their identities. The paper opines that the woman can achieve her dreams if she moves out of any space that limits her aspiration. Sefi Atta's authorial gender ideology which stems from both social and personal experiences is constructed, represented and presented in discourse. The author portrays woman as being at the mercy of man. The experience that comes with it, the status and roles these would have the woman perform, becomes problematic, resulting in chaos and conflict which were absent in these societies in the traditional period.

Thus, quest for identity has remained one dominant ethos of the feminist novel in Nigeria. The Nigerian woman now has a name of her own and she no longer feels any pride when her identity is tied to the man. In another sense, Uko (2006) argues:

Evidently, the coming of age of African literature is identifiable by the true and pragmatic feminisation of the literary vision as well as a way of correcting absurd female images in African literature and culture. Here, the female writer explores the inner fibres of the androgynous ideal, thereby establishing and justifying the position of women (Uko 82).

IV. CONCLUSION

Joy Bewaji suggests that "the most elaborate imperfection of the female gender in a developing society is that of self loathing" (80). The idea of victim victimizing victim should be done away with. At the end of the novel, Enitan is no longer a naïve girl but now fully matured and makes decision that affect her, not minding the consequences of such decisions. She became the speaking voice for the voiceless. When her father is arrested, she did not allow his business to fall. She joined the activism to get her father and uncle released. In spite of her pregnancy, she is ready to give up her life for the survival of her society. Societal rejuvenation is pivotal to her. Thus to conclude, it is utmost right to say that woman can achieve her dreams if she moves out of any space that limits to her aspiration. Atta is not bothered about what the society will say because:

"If a woman sneezed in my country someone would call her feminist ... She would continue to tear every notion they had about women... This will not be easy but she will continue: "I would not let go until I am heard" (Atta 198).

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