

SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES AND THE QUEST FOR FEMALE GENDER: SUBSTANTIAL CHALLENGES IN SEFI ATTA'S *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

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Abstract

The relation between individuals and their socio-cultural environment set the limits of their identities. These ways of life are altered and can be influenced by cultural and environmental situations. Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* reveals the dynamic diversity in accordance with the social class. This situation leads to misunderstanding by changing people's relationship into prevalent problems. This work highlights women's quests and exposes the unfairness in the patriarchal system whereby female characters are subjugated. The critical lens through which I will be looking at the text is womanist criticism. This analysis will yield a positive outlook on women's ability to become self-sufficient and challenge social strains.

Key words: Challenge, Discrimination, Female Gender, Responsibility, Socio-Cultural

Résumé

La relation entre les individus et leur environnement socio-culturel affermissent les barrières de leurs identités. Ces modes de vies sont modifiés et peuvent être influencés par des situations culturelles et environnementales. Sefi Atta, dans son œuvre intitulée *Everything Good Will Come*, révèle la diversité dynamique eu égard à la classe sociale. Cet état de choses conduit à un malentendu transformant les relations interpersonnelles en problèmes courants. Ce travail met en lumière les quêtes des femmes et expose l'injustice du système patriarcal auquel les personnages féminins sont assujettis. Le cadre théorique de cette étude repose sur une critique féministe. Cette analyse donnera une perspective positive sur la capacité des femmes à devenir autonomes et à défier les tensions sociales.

Mots-clés: Défi, Discrimination, Genre Féminin, Responsabilité, Socio-Culturel

Introduction

The socio-cultural dimensions and the living environment of some individuals determine their personalities. These aspects are customs, lifestyles and values that identify a society or group on the basis of class disparity, generation, gender, language, and tradition. In this framework Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* addresses the negotiation of contemporary female identity by showing the negative effect of outright illegal activities and attitudes that come at a cost, as social cohesion is threatened.

The diversity of opinions on gender role and identity bring about a consciousness raising and disagreement. Concerning this controversy on gender issue, various critics from distinct historical and cultural credentials have conducted an inquiry toward gender relations in social, political and economic spheres of precolonial and postcolonial Africa. Regarding women avowal of patriarchal hegemony, K. P. Choudhary (2008) considers that the status of women would improve only if they grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before. Then, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of women in the total development of the country. Also, S. S. Boukari (2006) turns around gender issues within the context of African culture on the one hand and the concept of gender on the other hand, related to socio-cultural and economic factors. M. B. Ba (2006) examines Soyinka's view of the African woman's role and status. Similarly, M. Gueye focuses his study on the comparative nature of an analysis of resistance and negotiation justified by the common experience of gender, slavery, and colonization. In this sense, these elements are helpful in my work because they can be a source of a vast change to correct social political and economic wickedness toward women. Thus, these opinions above are of great importance to my paper, as they enlighten my discourse.

This work underscores the image of the gender female from a womanist standpoint. It explores the traditional concept on women and highlights how women look for what they want and exposes the unfairness and inequalities in the patriarchal system whereby female characters are subjugated and exploited. It also explores a challenge for women empowerment. As it is said above countless studies have been devoted to the study of woman's image but the problem of female gender oppression remains and even persists. Then we deem it worthwhile discussing the issue. In *Everything Good Will Come* Sefi Atta displays the experiences of a female character 'Enitan' who struggles to find her identity in a conservative society.

The theoretical framework of this study falls on the socio-cultural and political perspectives through the womanist eyes. The point at issue implies patriarchy and feminism. For K. Agyekum (2013)

As far as feminist criticism is concerned, they [women] were intended to curb men's domination of literary art. Feminist criticism considers that literary language has expressed the dominance of the patriarchal society that shaped it and that the traditional literary critics have neglected this insight. Feminist critics consider literature as a tool to be used to contest the power and control, and an agent for social transformation (p. 218).

What ensues from this excerpt is that this theory argues that legal and social restrictions on women must be removed in order to bring about equality of sexes in all aspects of public and private life. Then women should express themselves through writing to restrain the exercise of power in ruling. Talking of feminism, S. Schneiders (1991) establishes women beliefs in connection with sex, that "Radical feminist analysis traces all the dominance relations in the social order to the system of universal hierarchical dualism [...] as well as its paradigm in the dominance/ subordination relationship between male household head and wife/ mother that is the principle of patriarchal family unit" (p. 24).

This passage implied that sex oppression is related to other forms of domination. This drastic hegemony pertains to many fields in our society. The ideology of womanism is promoting the idea of collaboration between male and female. A. Walker considers that a womanist is committed to survival and wholeness

of entire people, male and female (A. Walker, 1984 p. xi). According to A. Pewissi (2017) "Dialogue is what Walker introduces among races so that no human being can learn to hate the other. Instead human beings should work to eradicate the evil that transforms the other into an enemy" (p. 23). Thus, these tenants consider that it is vital for both males and females to survive and maintain their cultural distinctiveness. As a literary theory, womanism offers social, cultural and political alternatives that demand justice for all without harming the future. This work will examine the conception and misconception about women in the society under study. Besides, it will underscore the plight of female gender in the quest of identity and raise women's awareness.

1. Socio-cultural Conceptions about Women in *Everything Good Will Come*

Feminist writers had striven against socio-cultural conception. This tradition has deprived females of better condition in their society. It is clear that some customs do not approve of women's assigning some prerogatives. To the best of my belief, many African countries are involved in this issue which marginalized women in their community. Marxist feminism embraces a social order related to the status and gender roles. It is focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women could be oppressed through capitalism and individualism. Furthermore, A. M. Rutere retells Keith M. Booker's assumption (1998) in "Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Devil on the Cross*". He examines Wariinga as a model for women in Kenya. Subsequently, there is a need for women to be active participants in the revolution to the society for that women cannot be free so long as oppressive men continue to exploit them (p. 14).

Gender problems centre round the basic question of inequality. For example women are not associated in meetings. When properties are being shared women are being denied. A typical Igbo man in a will does not include his daughters. He considers that she will be married to another family. Then, only male gender is valued. Some instances show the issue whereby a woman who bears male children has a guarantee future life whereas the marriage of the one bearing female will break down.

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Sheri's uncle took over Alhajih Bakare's properties and impoverishes his family at his death. He menaced to drive Sheri and her step-mother away from home. It is a traumatic practice that many women experienced at their father's or husband's death. Male hegemony expressed here illustrates this standpoint whereby the narrative reads: "In my country women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selflessness to pass on their daughters; a startling legacy, like tears down a parched throat" (EGWC, p. 177). This statement hints the appreciation of the marginal conditions of the character Enitan.

Enitan was in conflict with religious morality. Her mother suffers from marginalization and a broken marriage. The constraints of female gender are obvious when it is given shallow education limited by dreams of childbirth, wedding and the role in the kitchen. In this framework, the narrative puts that education cannot change what's inside a person's veins (EGWC, p. 16). Women were and are still minimized. As regards this issue, the protagonist was not allowed to watch TV (EGWC, p.17). The traditional misconception about female gender relegates women to the second class as stated in *Second Class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta. In *Everything Good Will Come*, the customary society considers that women must be in the kitchen and take care of their children and their husband. In the process, the narrative crystallizes: "Eh! Women are not Presidents" "Why not," "Our men won't stand for it. Who will cook for your husband" (EGWC, p. 33)? This is how women are crooked in African society. Their roles and rights are restricted. E. Ngezem acknowledges that women suffer hardship. In this sense, he depicts:

a traumatic world where widows cleave to delusional wealth and grandeur, and are exposed to the menacing sternness of resilient traditionalists and uncompromising creditors [...] Custom and habit are understood to be determining factors in the way we perceive gender difference and only by exposing those prejudices can change occur to equalize relations between the sexes (E. Ngezem, 2008, p. 57).

This assertion lays bare discrimination and consequences of hurtful conventions and attitudes that women undergo, especially woe widows. The status of female gender is perceived as a biological construction. And religious beliefs sustained that a woman is from a *Crooked Rib* (N. Farah, 1970, p.1). "God made Man and the rest of the animals from dust. But he made the woman out of the bones of the man. God has decided to make woman from a crooked rib, a crooked bone." Genesis chap2 verses 19-22.

Sefi's narrative describes the harrowing experiences that women are subjected to in the hands of the macho persons. Sunny cheats on Arinola and his irresponsibility endangers the life of his son but denied this guilty. In this vein, Enitan lets out "Guilt never did show in my father's face. I'd seen. It was how he won cases. It was how he'd driven my mother to distraction. I'd seen that also. My parent's mothers were both in polygamous marriages" (EGWC, p. 50). Niyi, another macho believes in absolute submission to men, as well as separation of duties. He thinks that the kitchen remains the female sphere. Another character ill-treating women is Enitan's boyfriend. He takes advantage on her naivety and abuses her. Mike Obi also cheats on Enitan. Demola and his friends rape Sheri culminating in her barrenness. Mrs Williams's husband divorces her because she always attends parties and other meetings. Peter Mukoro cheats on his wife. A houseboy murders his female employer. A man throws acid into his lover's face. A man molests a female child hawker. There are many clues of atrocities. Therefore, one can establish that contemporary African writers must observe and interpret the norms, the values and the customs of society. So, there is a need to find an approach to encourage mutual understanding, forgiveness, cooperation and acceptance between both sexes as prescription of practical ways of ending any subjugation is undeniable. This can be done without embracing divorce or other measure that largely runs contrary to African ethos.

Throughout the above stances perpetrated by men against the female folks, one can establish that African culture has helped to maintain patriarchal hegemony. Then, it reveals ways to end female subjugation. These categories of men are identified through the following strands: "beaters, cheaters, lazy buggers and the so called descent ones who no one would encourage a woman to run like hell from" (EGWC, p. 249). All these terms coined by the novelist show that there is a process of depriving women of positive human qualities. This is a dehumanisation of female gender. And subordinate position of women is imposed by the institution of the patriarchal community. In a traditional society, there were some roles exclusively in female spheres. The division of labour and the position in this society are based on "a dual sexual management and governance" and the order is created via 'in-between' areas. On this matter, S.S. Boukari (2012) posits that:

In the description of Afigbo makes of precolonial Igbo society, one would be tempted to say that these in-between areas of interactions were also an opportunity for men to take the lead while women voluntarily sat behind. We will notice later in the description made of Igbo society that the women's sphere would gradually be eroded and ultimately, be replaced by men, with the coming of the Europeans who brought along with them their patriarchal culture in which women could only be valued through their husbands. Based on the Victorian ideology of the cult of 'true womanhood' which perceived women as home makers and men as 'bread winners', the former were considered inferior and thus, relegated to the less important roles in some social arena, mainly political, religious, and economic (p. 17).

The obvious reason of women inferiority is the appropriation of power in almost all African social political, and economic domains. To face these misdeeds women turn off the matter raised above and seek to be fully developed as a human being.

2. The Quest for self-hood in *Everything Good Will Come*

My concern here is to say how the living environment contributes to the quest for the protagonist. From the childhood Enitan is under her mother's control to whom she listened to and obeyed. In this context, she declares "From the beginning I believed that whatever I was told downright lies even about how best to behave although I had my own inclinations" (EGWC, p. 11). Enitan was considered as a weak and low

person. "I had always been motivated by fear, of lowliness of pessimism of failure, I was not strong" (EGWC: 300). When Enitan was sent abroad to receive an education which is better than that offered in Nigeria she affords the opportunity to juxtapose black and white relations. Her days in England dislocate her from home. This quest is seen through the protagonist voyages from childhood to psychological or emotional maturity. In this framework Tenome Bucklay opines that:

A son of some sensibility grows up in a country [...] He finds constraints. His family especially his father is hostile to his creative instincts and ambition. His real education starts with the preparation of career and love affair. The hero reappraise his values by the time he has decided after painful soul-searching. He has the adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation completes, he may visit his old home to demonstrate the success or wisdom (EGWC, p. 17-18).

This is to say that in our context, the growth of Enitan, the protagonist occurs according to the pattern and the tender intelligence. She left home underwent stages of conflict and growth, tested by crisis and love affairs and then finally finds the best place to use her talents. "She emerges along with the world and reflects the historical emergences of world itself" (EGWC, p. 23). Her condition of life limits her aspirations for future and this functions in mechanism to test the various compromises between self and society. There are some instances in her quest of identity such as defying fences to seek Sheri out. This is a way of seeing life in a new horizon. This changes her way of life. She recalled her life as having grown up in a fanaticism and indifference. In this process the narrative reads:

Between my mother's worship and my father's disinterest, I too had found my own belief, in a soul that looked like a tree [...] God was the light toward which my tree grew. But the God of my childhood, the one who stood like a white man, eight foot tall with liver spots and wearing a toga, kind as he was, he still a God I feared, beyond reason (EGWC, p. 115).

Enitan creates a symbol by representing deities as being the source of her misfortune. The quest for her personhood is due to the difficulties she underwent in her life and her marriage with Niyi. All the realities that Enitan met in her journey to adulthood were harsh. In London, Enitan had realized the social realities which women face daily. It is during her journey that she met some realities concerning her sexuality. In this perspective she affirms:

The first person to tell me my virginity belonged to me was the boy who took it. Before this I thought my virginity belonged to Jesus Christ, my mother, society at large. My boyfriend [...] assured me that it was mine to give it to him. In those brief seconds between owning and giving up my virginity he licked the walls of my mouth clean [...] after he pierced my bowels [...] (EGWC, p. 77).

From this standpoint, the protagonist in search for her personhood comes to a conclusion that her loss of true identity is caused by the moral debase of men. In this context, F. Orabueze (2004) posits:

The Nigerian woman's primary role is that of procreation, of having babies and yet male babies. But society does not only expect her to have as many babies as fertility makes provide, she is expected clearly and unambiguously to have as many male children is signal achievement through which she can raise her head high and feel a real sense of fulfilment (p. 108).

Here again, the image of women becomes dull and their society considers that "the estate is shared amongst children according to how the man lived his life not according to how the wives wish to live theirs. Wives are not always in agreement. These women just happen to be" (EGWC, p. 144). Throughout the woman's problems and all that Enitan experienced in her home and during her journey, there is a need to move out this patriarchal hegemony. She stands against male chauvinism by confronting her father as follows:

Show me one case, I said. 'Just one case, of a woman having two husbands, a fifty-year-old woman marrying a twelve-year-old boy. We have women judges, and a woman can't legally post bail. I'm a lawyer. If I were married, I would be entitled to discipline me with a slap or two, so long as he doesn't cause me grievous bodily harm (EGWC, p. 141).

Here, Enitan is questioning the attitude of male gender toward its counterpart. In this world, polygamy placed women in conflict. This is the case of Enitan and Sheri. This search celebrates the historical process and women come to consciousness of female identity as an oppositional force to social and cultural values. In nutshell, the plight of women in African society is what Sefi Atta is accounting. This is what patriarchal society resembles. Gender discrimination poses the problem of cooperation thus, womanism advocates gender synergy as a remedy for enhancing development.

Furthermore, womanism seeks to restore the balance between people and the environment and reconcile human life with the spiritual dimension (L. Maparyan, 2006, p. xx). It is clear that “womanism” supports the idea that the culture of the woman, which in this case is the focal point of intersection as opposed to class or some other characteristics, is not an element of her femininity, but rather in the lens through which femininity exists. Subsequently a female individual’s race is not a component of her feminism, instead a lens through which she understand her femininity L. Gillman (2006). There is a power relationship in favour of men who possess more privileges over women. This situation of hegemony oppresses women’s social, political, sexual and human rights.

These societal wrongful acts such as injustice, oppression, humiliation and torture are not favourable to human development. B. Roos (2002) reported by A. M. Rutere argues the role of women in the battle for a just society (A. M. Rutere, 2009, p. 8). Equally, quoting B. Lindford (1983) the writer contends that women are part of the correct course of modern revolution intended to overthrow the oppressors obsessed with corrupt power in post-colonial Kenya (Ibid. p. 10). Thus, to fight these evils the writer is raising people awareness so that there would be understanding and collaboration because “a woman is one half of society and the man the other” (A. Pewissi, 2017, p. 187). Harmony is a means of children fulfilment for a nation development. To reach this target women should be empowered instead of being submissive.

3. Women Awareness and Challenges in *Everything Good Will Come*

The pitiful environment with the institutions of the patriarchal society brings an unbearable life to female individual. Given that the latter is subjugated in the family and society, she uses various means to affirm herself. Women started changing the mind of their society, whereby female gender is considered as a domestic servant or an object. This state of affairs brings an awareness raising of both men and women to arouse the society’s sense of right. Instances are illustrated in the novel where “articles in *Weekend People* are used as a springboard for discussing the plight of women in the depicted country” (EGWC, p. 142). There is the awakening when Enitan becomes aware that her state of being restricts her desire to be fulfilled. She begins to display tendencies that she wants to transcend. This prompts the protagonist questioning her values as a human being her social status and her gender. She gains self-awareness through her relationships with a network of persons who guide her in becoming self-reliant in patriarchal society and begins redefining her identity as she journeyed in adulthood. From her childhood to the adulthood her community affects her. This status and situation provide the character with moral guidance to face gender adversity. She explores her position through the journey of self-discovery to become mature and independent.

In this sense, I. I. Uko affirms that African women actually transcend the shift from the peripheral to the central positions for women. They are largely concerned with the assertion of self, reaffirmation of female pride, authentication of African womanhood as well as search for an independent identity (I. I. Uko, 2008, p.67). In a conversation with her father, Enitan was expressing her will in future. But as time goes by she realized that it is difficult to materialize her dream. This is the regrettable effect of the male eagerness for superiority on women. The following dialogue between Enitan and her father is illustrative:

“I want to be something like [...] the president”

“Eh?” “Women are not president”

“Why not?” “Our men won’t stand for it. Who will cook for your husband?”

"I will drive him away"

"What if he refuses?"

"You can't" she said

Yes I can. Who wants to marry him anyway" (EGWC, p. 33)?

What is more, women deprecation is shown through Sheri who after being raped is ruined and robbed of her womanhood of which she should be proud. This issue brings the female characters to question themselves about human being existence. Enitan expresses her view point in the following lines: "Sheri had gotten pregnant from the rape. Didn't a womb know which baby to reject? And now that the baby had been forced out, how did it look" (EGWC, p. 73)? In normal circumstances, sexual intercourse should occur with the consent of both partners. But, here Sheri experienced a rape which is a kind of violence and shame. And this leads to a psychological effect. In addition to this inconvenience, she has undergone an unwanted pregnancy which is a way of destroying the femininity of Sheri. It is my belief that the misbehaviour of the male chauvinist is a way of mocking female gender and this can be caused by peer group or lack of parental care. By portraying Enitan and Sheri who underwent trauma, Atta wanted to show how bad the patriarchal society is and at the same time she is raising women awareness on this reality which should be banned. In this perspective, there is a call for parents who should educate their children in many fields. Enitan ignored her situation as a female person. She notices in her marriage the predicament of women. To face this matter she becomes an activist with a revolutionary mind. She wants to assert herself. Relating to this perspective, she argues:

In my 29 years no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I have seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens [...] and the expectation of subordination bothered me most. How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I'd seen? Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility like a fish bone down my throat (EGWC, p. 184).

The analysis of this excerpt is demonstrating the duties of women in marital life who should obey their partner but the latter must not threaten this right. Sefi Atta explains this in order to educate men and women about the attitude in the marriage. Among these, the duty to serve their husband. Women have a duty to serve their husband but not like Gods. The writer wants to erase the misconception about women and inculcate a good image. In this context, the narrative reads: "I would continue until I am heard" (EGWC, p. 198). The limitation placed on women is a barrier which should be broken. Then one should promote this literature which "reflects the dynamics of culture changes at a given time and in a given space which shaped specific literary values and traditions" (M. Kandji, 2008, p. 5). This challenge enlightens cultural history and gives rise to social welfare. By the same token, M. Conde (1972) notes: "the personality and inner reality of African women have been hidden under such a heap of myths, so called ethnological theories, rapid generalisations and patent untruths that it might be interesting to study what they have to say for themselves when they decide to speak" (p. 132).

Given what is established by the society, a change implies determination to have their say in many fields, to be resistant, not subservient and achieve self-fulfilment, and be self-asserted. This analysis demonstrates that one has to restore a notion of collaboration sharing experiences. In so doing the female gender will be promoted and has a new vision of life. This relationship is essential in a womanist outlook, T. B. Hansen as quoted A. Pewissi (2017):

[...] a woman is one half of society and the man the other. For example, an eagle, as long as his wings are balanced he will be able to fly in the sky. If one wing is slightly damaged he will be unable to fly [...] We are not asking for the same rights as men, but we should be strong enough to keep this balance [...] then society will be stronger, everybody will be [less] dangerous and feel compassion for all and work for all, irrespective of caste, class and creed, but be a [n African] and a believer in [Africanness] [...] Thus the bird will be able to rise up high [...] We consider the woman to be the navigator of the chariot of life. The man steers/drives, whereas the woman navigates (p. 187).

From this standpoint, there is a need for cooperation between both genders in order to settle social problems and have socio-political dynamism. In order to crystallize women awareness raising and its challenges, F. Nwapa (2013/2007) opines “ Our task should be to exploit elements of our indigenous traditions such as democracy, tolerance, sharing and mutual support in order to achieve our goal [...]There should be interdependence and some measure of understanding which blossoms to mutual respect and equality [...]” (p. 532). In this sense of self affirmation B. Emecheta, (2013/2007) re-examines the role of women in the kitchen which was seen as suffocating and debasing activity as follows: “In our kitchens we raise all Reagans [...] Nkrumahs [...] Jususes. We cook for them [...] to be grown men and women [...] In our kitchens they learn to love and hate What greater job is there? A mother with a family is an economist, a nurse, a painter, a diplomat and more” (p. 556). In this passage we are shown the importance of women. They are symbols of life, for the whole humanity is engendered by them.

Conclusion

In this work, an attempt has been made to examine the subjugation of women by men. Particular emphasis has been placed on how male chauvinistic tendencies greatly affect and oppress women as well as effort made by female characters in ending their repressiveness. The study has shown how the identity of female gender changes depending on the environment. Women also struggles to cope with the misdeeds of the patriarchal society for the sake of the society’s survival. As women face many difficulties, the study has used womanist theory in order to promote partnership and empower women to face and revisit hardships related to their gender and status. Thus, they should affirm themselves through their work and determination. It has also helped to redefine female identity in the process of personhood’s search. Subsequently, it has been maintained that this is possible provided that there is mutual understanding between both male and female for a stability, harmony and justice.

This analysis has given rise to gaining independence and having a positive outlook on a woman’s ability to become self-sufficient and successful against family and political strains. This has enabled readers to be aware of some ideals and positive roles displayed by women in attempt at changing some of the traditional beliefs and practices imposed on them by their male counterpart.

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