Sefi Atta as a Social Critic of 21st Century Post-independent Nigeria in *Swallow*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the well-known Nigerian novelist Sefi Atta as a social critic of the 21st-century contemporary Nigerian society in her famous novel *Swallow* (2010). As a voice of her generation, Atta criticizes the societal issues of insecurity, injustice, corruption, and violence during the 1980s military government. *Swallow* depicts the life of Tolani Ajao and Rose who are from a poor economic background migrated to urban space in search of a job. But there they find power politics and corruption rampant in the society which disappointed them such as other Nigerians. Their hope for the better future gets evaporated when they lost their job after raising voice against the sexual harassment. The study highlights and unleashes darker side of the post-independence Nigerian society that Atta is pointing at. The author implies that even if the era of post-independence begins with honorable intentions, later it is devastated by the pretentious leaders who have become overly ambitious and corrupt to the point of harming their people for more power and wealth. In her works, Atta reads Nigeria as a postcolonial African country that has betrayed its citizens through undisguised corruption, nationalist propaganda, and the marginalization of women.

Keywords: post-independence Nigeria, injustice, insecurity, corruption, violence, disillusionment

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the major contributors to the corpus of English literature from the African continent and the birthplace of great pioneers in the African literary world. In the development of Nigerian literature, it is customary to refer to Amos Tutuola's novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) as the first survived English novel. Chinua Achebe is an internationally acclaimed writer who also has been called the "father of modern African literature" and Wole Soyinka became the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 (Owomoyela 4). Most of the first-generation writers were born in the 20th century when the colonial event was in full force. Therefore, these writers were exceedingly written about their experience during the colonization and the socio-political issues of their generation. Tutuola though had received only formal education wrote in Pidgin English which is a mixture of native and English languages. In the novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, he displays his knowledge about rich Yoruba oral tradition and African rural life. Chinua Achebe in his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) discusses the direct contact and clashes with the Europeans during the 1890s. While Cyprian Eekwensi in his famous novel *People of the City* (1954) is writing about the darker side of city life Wole Soyinka towards the end of the colonization period is writing about the perpetual disturbance in Nigerian politics in *The Interpreters* (1965) like in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). These great pioneers with others writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara inspired their younger generation to become the voice of their society.

A Brief History of Nigeria

The Nigerian fictional world is a reflection of the society of its time which is conditioned by colonial rule and the rise of neo-rich people who aped their colonial masters taking the nation to the brink of chaos. To understand post-independence Nigeria we need to know the history of the precolonial and the postcolonial Nigerian society. Nigeria was colonized by the British like other nations, which brought tremendous socio-political and economic changes during colonization from the 1800s to the 1900s. Before the colonization, Nigeria had its own administrative systems such as decentralized like the Nri kingdom of Igbo land and decentralized administrations like Ile Ife, the Yoruba land. Gradually in the 1450s followed by the Portuguese many Europeans traded with Nigeria but later in the 19th century, the British colonized the country as a consequence of the French and German invasion in the British-interested Nigerian territory and the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 where the Europeans shared African countries themselves like hotcakes.

British colonizers ruled Nigeria for nearly one and half a century in which period it had introduced English education which developed modern Nigerian English literature. The Nigerians attended English education which was in the beginning confined only to the rudimentary, later expanded even to higher education. The European-educated Nigerians were exposed to the world cultures and phenomena which had triggered nationalism. These intellectuals became the nationalists and spread awareness among the Nigerians, the value of independence which eventually resulted in the independence of Nigeria on October 01, 1960. All these developments have been discussed in the works of first-generation writers.

However, the young democratic nation, Nigeria was fragile and unstable, in many ways the country has divided between many ethnicities and religions. The major ethnic groups are Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the south. Nigeria remained only as a geographical expression of a nation to the outer world after independence. In the beginning, the Nigerians were cherished independence and dreamt of self-governance and freedom. But it had not remained the same for a long time. Once again the country has fallen into the oppressive and corrupt military and civilian despotic rulers such as Yakub Gowon, Muhammad Buhari, Babangida, Shehu Shagari, Sani Abacha. Instead of progress, the country was greatly damaged by political corruption, economic underdevelopment, civil war, and military coups. This kind of development takes back the country to even worst condition. The country had ruled by twelve military and civilian despotic rulers between the1960 to 1999 (the year of establishment of stable civilian government) which led the country to a pernicious condition. The younger generation of Nigerian writers who are born after the independence like Sefi Atta, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole continues the legacy of their predecessors as Madhu Krishnan argues the post-independence narratives are constructed by the experience of failed nationalism that has defined Nigeria's independent history and suggests that such texts are marked by the unfinished business of national reconciliation. Most of these writers are engaging in unending socio-political instability, military coups, despotic rulers, corruption, Oil boom, Nigerian Civil War or Biafra War (1967-70), ethnic conflicts, migrations, and displacement.

> Optimism over the end of colonialism soon faded, as economic independence lagged far behind political independence. Many Africans soon saw that their newly installed government officials were too preoccupied with feathering their nests to show concern for the poor and disadvantaged. Corruption was rampant, and with it came violence and military coups" (Owomoyela 28).

Sefi Atta is a prominent African novelist of our times in Nigeria. Her debut novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2004), narrates the ethnic conflicts, declining economy, and dictatorship through the growth of a young girl. The second novel *Swallow* (2010), tells a story of the poverty-stricken state of young women in politically devastated Nigeria. *A bit of difference* (2012) and *The Bead Collector* (2019) are other novels. And a collection of short stories, *News from Home* (2010, titled *Lawless in Nigeria*). This paper explores Sefi Atta's well-known novel *Swallow* (2010) represents the socio-political predicament of the Nigerians under the ruthless military dictators of the 1980s.

The narrative deals with Tolani Ajao and Rose, who suffer insecurity and injustice, witnessed the deplorable and devastating status of Lagos city during the military regime. Indeed the novel discusses drug trafficking in the period when the government's War Against Indiscipline and austerity measures were in full force. A succession of unfortunate events led the protagonists to tangle with drug smuggling. Heather Hewett, a critic says "[Swallow] explores lawlessness, suggesting that the disorder and violence of postcolonial Nigerian politics have manifested themselves in individual transgressions and private traumas" (26). She is depicting the contribution of post-independence Nigeria to an individual's suffering. Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1964 and has experienced post-independence circumstances. Reacting to Chika Unigwe's question regarding the motivation for her novel, *A Bit of Difference*, Sefi replies that she has been writing, right from her debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, about members of her generation who she describes as,

> having been born in the 1960s and grow up in Lagos. I call us the oil boom generation. Our childhood was marked by the civil war, our adolescence by military coups and we graduated into a recession. Some of us stayed in Nigeria while others went overseas. My motivation for all my works has been to chronicle our experience in the fictional form (Nigeria: A Chat With Sefi Atta).

Not only Atta but also the writers of her generation are showing the same disappointment towards their time such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila.

The independence did not bring a prosperous and peaceful life, instead descended a series of military regimes, civil war, corrupt civilian governments along violence. Tolani and Rose, women from different but poor backgrounds, migrated to urban space in search of work and a better life. In Lagos city, they have employed in a bank which represents the political and economic corrupt status of Nigeria. Here the novelist shows the economic disparity between the rich elite like Salako and Umar, the superior officers in the bank, and the poor lower class people like Tolani and Rose. Atta is sarcastically attacking the country's situation whereas a small class of politicians and entrepreneurs has become exceedingly wealthy via the oil economy; the majority of Nigerians remain in perpetual poverty. It mirrors in the words of Tolani,

> Federal Community, our bank on Board Street, was one of the small buildings in the city center. I worked on the second floor in the Loans department; Rose worked on the ground floor by the banking hall and Cash and Teller department. The bank was chartered in the year of independence, to cater to the masses. Now, almost twenty-five years later, profits still went to military governors and ex-politicians (Atta 14).

As Tolani works in the loan department, she has seen many unpaid loans which are not intended to repay and passed only namesake notices to the debtors. Though, the bank was established to serve the people, now in the pockets of the military leaders and their associates.

It is the 1980s that people are facing the consequences of the War Against Indiscipline which consisted of five phases, Nigerians were supposed to develop a sense of work ethics, patriotism, nationalism, anti-corruption, and patience. Buhari, one of the military dictators (1984-85) introduced WAI in his period to remove corruption and to install discipline which was a great failure. The policy just concealed the deeper social ills of the country such as widespread poverty and a lack of basic services. When Tolani and Rose get fired from the bank choose drug trafficking as an alternative means of making a living which is also against the policy. Meanwhile, Babangida's government (1985-93) has adopted IMF's Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986, which means to reschedule the repayment period of Nigeria's external debt and adopt the IMF-designed economic policies. As one of the SAP measures public services and subsidies were reduced, job opportunities and civil services were decreased. During Babangida's reign, civil servants, teachers, and university employees continue to go for months on end without pay, which prompted many strikes. Nigerians had to live without basic infrastructures such as electricity, water supply, and health care. In the novel Mrs. Durojaiye, a neighbor of Tolani, a midwife at a hospital in Lagos involves in a prolonged strike against the government to demand their unpaid salaries throughout the novel which is suppressed by violent ways. The government hospitals are in the worst condition with a lack of basic needs. Tolani exclaims the stinking condition of the hospital as,

> I couldn't imagine going to the hospital she [Mrs. Durojaiye] worked in. If I were dying, I would rather die at home. Patients had to buy their own medications, IV drips, and bandages. There were never enough beds and during operations they had power cuts. Patients died from a lack of simple oxygen. They had to pay deposits before they were admitted and they were given oily meals and slept on dirty bedsheets. To top it all, the nurses were rude. The hospital was, of course, not private but government-funded. One of our very best" (Atta 62).

The government blames the hospital staff for mismanaging the facilities and causes the death of patients. But there are no facilities to provide the patients. Atta calls this government hospital (where Mrs. Durojaiye is working) sarcastically "One of our very best" in the words of Tolani. Tolani and Rose are living in Lagos with utter difficulties with their mere salaries and without guarantee for their future, Tolani is hopeless and predicts her future, "Normally, I pretend not to see beggars, it was almost like seeing my future" (19). The uncertainty of their life journey reflects through the bus that they are traveling every day, which carries the board "Who Knows Tomorrow?" (20).

Sefi Atta portrays Nigeria's condition under military despotism through Rose and Tolani who are bear witnessed the brutal treatment of military soldiers under the name of WAI, "Quarrels, plenty. Chaos, unbelievable. Sometimes, the police showed up and horsewhipped people. They had always done that, but the government's War Against Indiscipline gave them a legitimate reason. Now, they could say it was part of their duties to ensure the public behaved in an orderly fashion. They treated us like cattle" (20-21). The Federal Community Bank where Tolani and Rose are working is the central spot for looting money to the corrupt bureaucrats and officials who do not come under the rules of WAI. Tolani's job is to typing loan return notices which never appear. Rose exposes how bank's money is disappearing into the pockets of their superior officers,

> All I know is Umar is a useless manager. He is fraudulent! And he's trying to cover his tracks! He and his accomplice, Salako! Everyone knows! Salako opens an account for Big Man. Umar gives Big Man a loan. Big Man gives Salako and Umar a cut. The loan is never repaid, and that is just the beginning. All those dormant accounts, I know Salako is using them as his personal accounts. He's a thief, like everybody else in this godforsaken country. Our oil revenues are missing. Where are they? Under my pillow? (23).

The intention of the WAI program was misled by the elites like Salako, Umar, and politicians themselves. This kind of fraud is named as '419' crime in Nigeria which is common. The bank which should serve the needs of the masses rather breeds a corrupt cabal and provides for corrupt military governors, government ministers, and ex-politicians, hiring and firing its unfortunate staff at will. The real intention of WAI to remove corruption rather it increases even more, ultimately failed to address any root causes. The writer attacks the fake politicians by puts forward a fundamental question that what does indiscipline really mean? Isn't it making looting money a profession? In contrast, they have considered an everyday struggle to survive is indiscipline and punish the common people with inhuman ways.

On various levels, the women are being abused and misused but there is no justice and protection for them. In the beginning, Mr. Salako, a manager in the Federal Community bank, tries to exploit Rose Sexually on an everyday basis. In reaction to avoid this atrocity, Rose writes complaints against him many times but does not get any response. Eventually, she slaps him hard. Consequently, he has fired her without giving any reason that nobody has questioned him. As furiously reacts to her dismissal she shouts "No justice. No Justice for people like us. You hear? Only for the wicked and the corrupt in this country. Look at Salako everything he steals from the bank, taking money from customers, taking bribes" (22). It sheds light on the true state of things in her country. Walter Collins, in the book *How Sefi Atta Illuminates African Culture and Tradition* opines, "Salako is not held accountable at all; in fact, he is even praised as a family man while she is labeled a loose woman who is a homewrecker" (40). Later, Salako has replaced Rose's position with Tolani as his secretary and continued his ill practice. When he tries to misbehave with Tolani as well, she writes a report on him but in vain. When he comes to know, he takes action "I am suspending you, Miss Ajao. For insubordination. From today. For two weeks. That will give you time to adjust your attitude, and if you ever contravene the rules of this office again…" (186). Now Tolani stands in an empty hand without any assurance for her future. In the name of War Against Indiscipline, these bureaucrats misused their powers against ordinary people who don't have a voice. The oppressive rulers silenced or cut the throat of justice.

Meanwhile, Rose gets introduced to a man called OC Okonkwo who returns from American, by one of her friends. Rose has impressed by his money and sugary words. She is a kind of flirtatious girl but the situation has made her pretend to be a bad woman. She feels ashamed being a Nigerian where there is no life and curses herself "she was born in the wrong country. She wished she had been born in Czechoslovakia because the name sounded sophisticated. Nigeria was uncivilized..." (11), and filled with violence everywhere and chaos. Not only Sefi Atta's character dreams of the European countries or the USA but also Adichie's characters in her novel *Purple Hibiscus* Ifeoma and her family leave Nigeria to live in the USA and in *Americanah* the protagonist Ifemelu and her boyfriend have left Nigeria for the USA and England respectively, which seem to promise a better life than in Nigeria. Rose, even wishes "We never should have been given our independence,… and we were a bunch of ignorant Africans who needed the British to come back and whip our asses" (216). After she gets fired from the job becomes one more burden to Tolani who is also jobless now. As Tolani has prophesied in the beginning they end up more or less like beggars. Rose starts to flirt with OC who he promises even to marry her. After a while, he offers her a deal to smuggle heroin overseas. Heather Hewett says, "middle-class respectability from impoverished desperation – a division made all the more precarious in the chaotic fight for survival in urban Nigeria, where frequent scams, a nonexistent social safety net, and sexist cultural norms conspire to tug women out of the middle class" (27). Her state of poverty easily convinces her to agree with him, where the real problem starts. Rose tries to lure Tolani who is recently suspended from her job, "He will give us drugs to swallow and arrange for us to travel overseas. We get there and come back. That's all we need to do and we paid, you here?" and continuous "One journey…That's all. A thousand five hundred dollars" (138). Tolani rejects to work as drug mules. But Rose justifies that she is not ashamed of drug mule rather being poor. Her sister Violet, who has worked as a prostitute in Rome, when she returns has her hair salon. The big men are not exceptional. She expresses her distress and discontentment;

> Our heads of state steal, our board of directors steals. Who asks where their money comes from? People praise them. They run after them and beg them to spread some of their wealth. I am tired of being poor. Every day is a struggle with this War Against Indiscipline and austerity measures. You sit in a compound stinking of shit. You walk down a street stinking of gutters. You're on a bus full of stinking people. You get to work and a man like Salako with his stinking… (139).

Both are convinced to work for OC and practiced swallowing a condom filled with cocaine with the help of palm oil which disgusted Tolani. Somehow Rose has succeeded in her practice so that OC will send her abroad. Tolani has been practicing and questioning her morality while Rose is on her trip. Unfortunately, Rose has died when the bag gets burst inside the stomach. Heather Hewett is defending the helplessness of the two women "Not evil, not criminal – just ordinary women forced into lawlessness because of everything around them. In other words, politics" (27). To find the news of the death of Rose, OC threatens Tolani to disappear from her apartment to escape from police inquiry. They have arrived in Lagos with a bag full of dreams but failed to find a peaceful life. Now Tolani is alone and decides to return to her village Makoku where her mother Arike is living.

Conclusion

Though the title of the novel Swallow deals with the theme of drug trafficking where the protagonists Tolani and Rose supposed to swallow cocaine-filled condoms and deliver them abroad, it questions the failure of independence in which people were disillusioned to have a peaceful life but disappointed to survive in chaos, violence, corruption, injustice, and insecurity. These are the predominant themes in the post-independence writings. The deeper social ills of post-independence Nigeria swallow the lives of vulnerable ordinary people. Instead of giving a promising and secured future it swallows all the dreams and hopes that people once had about freedom. As in Chinua Achebe's 1966 novel *A Man of the People* which portrays the failure of the political class through chief Nanga who loots the nation along with his associates and neglected the citizens to suffer. Similarly, Sefi Atta presents the country's collapse in the hands of the brutal leaders who forget their sole responsibility even in her times. By reminding the past decadence she throws a critical look at the society and expects reformation.

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