

Chapter - V

Summation

Literature is the quintessential embodiment of human imagination and creativity. It is a mirror that reflects the complexity of human thoughts, feelings, and experiences. From epic poems to modern novels, literature has the power to transport people to different times, places, and perspectives, allowing them to explore the infinite possibilities of the human experience.

Throughout history, literature has served as a platform for expressing cultural values, social norms, and political ideas. From Shakespeare to Toni Morrison, writers have used their craft to critique and challenge the status quo, amplify marginalised voices, and inspire change. Literature also offers a window into the past, enabling people to understand and appreciate the ways in which their predecessors lived, thought, and felt.

The literary tradition in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the vibrant oral storytelling customs of the African people. It serves as a treasure trove of contemporary social and political commentary, passed on through a plethora of expressive media such as myths, folk tales, fables, proverbs, idioms, dances, and songs. Despite the tumultuous disruptions caused by colonialism and imperialism, African literature has served as a potent influence in shaping the cultural and social identity of the continent. Notably, Nigerian literature has evolved to encompass a diverse array of genres, including poetry, drama, and novels, as writers seek to articulate the distinctive perspectives and experiences of their people.

The literary landscape of Africa is currently being illuminated by the brilliance of Nigerian women writers, who are garnering well-deserved recognition for their exceptional literary contributions. These female writers have played a pivotal role in

shaping the literary scene of their country, deftly venturing beyond traditional feminist themes to explore a range of broader societal issues such as politics, war, and the economy. As these writers engage in a dynamic process of reimagining their own narratives and excavating the intricate interconnections between various cultural formations that exist in women's writings, new concepts such as "womanism," "motherism," and "femalism" have emerged, serving as tools to further their exploration and expression of diverse and multifaceted experiences (Malumfashi).

Alice Walker's concept of Womanism is anchored in practical application, highlighting the significance of a Womanist's conduct and outlook on life. A captivating feature of womanism is its frequent application in comparison to its documentation since its origin. This implies that womanism is often accessed and conveyed through intuition rather than through analytical reasoning. While some may view this as a concern, there are convincing arguments for it. These reasons underscore the exceptional character and distinct attributes of womanism, setting it apart from other perspectives that may be erroneously conflated or associated with it.

Alice Walker's explanation of womanism highlights the strength and resilience of Black women, which may lead some to believe that womanism is solely focused on the experiences of women who have suffered from systemic oppression. However, a thorough examination of the existing body of womanist literature, including Walker's own work, reveals that womanism encompasses much more. Womanism is a multifaceted philosophy that extends beyond gender to address the complex intersections of race, class, and other social identities. It is not limited to women alone but embraces the

perspectives and experiences of all individuals who have been marginalised and oppressed by societal structures (Phillips xix).

In the pantheon of African literary giants, Sefi Atta shines as an extraordinary Nigerian writer who delivers an exceptional perspective to the stories she tells about the privileged strata of Nigerian society. Atta's works offer a nuanced depiction of the intricacies of life in Nigeria's affluent and middle-class echelons, delving into themes of identity, gender roles, culture, and societal expectations. With her singular voice and perspective, Atta has made a substantial contribution to the African literary canon, emerging as a prominent figure in the literary realm.

In Sefi Atta's body of work, each of her five novels explores different themes, ranging from surviving after trauma and female empowerment to drug smuggling, diaspora, transculturation, and the American Dream of Nigerian immigrants. Despite the variations in themes, Atta's novels consistently highlight the experiences of women, shedding light on the intricacies of gender dynamics in society. Through her writing, Atta offers a rare insight into the world of women, capturing the complexities of their daily struggles and the different means through which they navigate the socio-cultural expectations placed upon them. From her examination of female empowerment to her portrayal of a friendship between a native elitist and an American expatriate, Atta's works remain a testament to the resilience and determination of women in the face of adversity.

Enitan's contemplations in *Everything Good Will Come* reveal a profound insight into the complex social dynamics of her native land. In particular, she notes how Nigeria is not only grappling with the enduring legacies of colonialism in the form of imposed

religious and governmental structures but also contending with the disruptive influence of foreign family structures.

Enitan grapples with not only the lasting effects of colonialism but also the gender-based double standards ingrained in her society, as evidenced by her father's inconsistent views on women's status and her husband's disingenuous support for women's rights, which belies his father-in-law's regressive attitudes towards women.

Despite the challenges, Enitan refuses to remain silent and becomes an advocate of women's rights, seeking support and solutions to overcome societal obstacles. Atta's portrayal of Enitan highlights the need for women to speak up for themselves and others, with her character serving as a potent example of the resurging potential of women's voices. Through her novels, Atta champions women's rights, freedom, equality, and self-respect.

The mention of Tolani's childhood fear of the European man in *Swallow* underscores the lasting legacy of colonialism on Nigerian society, including systemic inequality, oppression, and social division. Tolani's fear is emblematic of the broader sense of apprehension and mistrust towards the colonial powers and their influence that pervades the Nigerian psyche. The reference serves to highlight the ongoing struggle of Nigerians to reconcile their identity in the face of historical trauma and cultural dislocation, underscoring the enduring impact of colonialism on contemporary Nigerian society.

Tolani experiences discrimination when she reports sexual abuse by Salako and faces victim blaming from colleagues who refuse to acknowledge the truth due to her gender. Through her journey, Tolani comes to the realisation that women's liberation is

often limited, as evidenced by the lives of Arike, her mother, and her great-aunt Iya Alaro.

Tolani is inspired by her mother and her friend Rose, who motivate her to resist the unfair treatment given by a patriarchal society. She consciously chooses to break free from the bonds of oppression and subjugation, refusing to conform to traditional norms of subservience and silence. Tolani takes a stand and speaks out against the male-dominated system.

Sefi Atta's first two novels are centred on two women, who through their lived experiences, acquire a healthy sense of disbelief and begin to see through the patriarchal infrastructure of neo-colonial Nigeria. They embark on a different dance, a dance of independence, liberation, and disbelief. Enitan, the protagonist in one of the novels, performs a revised proverb, narrative, and blessing - *Everything Good Will Come*. By taking on the role of a dancer, Enitan ushers in a new paradigm and ideal of justice, creating a new parade of ideas and values.

Enitan and Tolani, the two main characters of Atta's first two novels, symbolise a new wave of women who are challenging the patriarchal infrastructure of Nigeria and advocating for gender equality. Through their dancing, singing, and newfound beliefs in themselves, they represent the possibilities for women to break free from societal expectations and become agents of change. However, their journey towards empowerment is not without obstacles, as they face resistance from men who do not want to relinquish their power and privilege.

Enitan and Tolani continue to dance, defy, and disbelieve the status quo, inspiring other women to join them in the fight for justice and equality. Their stories serve as a call

to action for women to take ownership of their lives and create a better future for themselves and future generations. As Atta suggests, women must continue to tell their stories and refuse to be silenced if they are to achieve true freedom and create a world where “no story should remain untold” (Swallow 294).

Through the characters of her novels, Atta highlights the struggles of women in Nigeria and portrays their journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. These women are faced with societal and cultural expectations that limit their autonomy and perpetuate gender inequality. However, as they navigate the complexities of their lives, they gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them, ultimately challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to suppress them. Atta’s works celebrate the power of women and offer a message of resilience and hope in the face of adversity.

At the heart of Atta’s novels lies a profound understanding of the collective nature of progress. Her protagonists inherit a legacy of struggle and empowerment from the women who came before them, and they build upon it with their own experiences and insights. Through their stories, Atta presents a vision of progress as a trans-generational movement that is fueled by the courage, determination, and resilience of women. Each generation of women builds on the achievements of their predecessors, pushing the boundaries of what is possible and creating new spaces for empowerment and self-determination. By highlighting the continuity and evolution of this movement across generations, Atta underscores the crucial role that women have played and continue to play in shaping the future of their communities.

Atta’s novels often refer to the traditional masquerade ceremonies in Nigeria, which highlight the male embodiment of gods through the performance of masqueraders,

dancers, and drummers. The patriarchal nature of these ceremonies requires women to submit and believe in the power of these male gods and their representatives. However, Atta's female protagonists develop a composite consciousness that challenges this patriarchal tradition and empowers women to reinvent themselves as lead dancers or even deities within the masquerade. This allows for a more pronounced shift towards a woman-centred environment, exemplified by Enitan's lead dancing in the streets of Lagos or Tolani's belief in her own power rather than that of the men around her.

Sefi Atta's literary works are marked by her critiques of the Nigerian elite, who inherited power from colonial settlers but failed to use it for the betterment of their own people. She highlights how Nigerians have trapped themselves in dividing themselves based on ethnicity and religion, rather than focusing on mutual care and understanding. This is particularly evident in her novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, where Sheri, a Christian, invites Enitan, a Muslim, and her family to celebrate Eid al-Fitr with her family. Atta emphasises the importance of genuine friendship based on compassion and respect, rather than displaying one's religious or cultural identity.

The third literary masterpiece of Sefi Atta, *A Bit of Difference*, epitomises her consciousness, and it is evident in the portrayal of the female lead, Deola Bello. Deola Bello is a Nigerian woman from the upper echelon, residing in London and working for an NGO that concentrates on African initiatives. She is an astute accountant whose job demands extensive research on the viability and dependability of the African groups she collaborates with. This duty takes her back to Nigeria, her place of birth, which leads to a poignant struggle between her Nigerian and English identities.

The crucial element in *A Bit of Difference* is the author's portrayal of the characters' perspectives and conversations that shed light on their experiences as part of the Nigerian diaspora. Sefi Atta's choice to narrate the story in the third person, a departure from her previous works, allows her to maintain close proximity to Deola's experiences. The narrative is so intimately crafted that Atta herself admits to feeling as though she has written the novel in the first-person (Vega).

The novel portrays Deola's struggle with identity in the wake of post-colonial trauma and the persistent comparisons made between Nigerian and Western lifestyles. While Bandele's Afropolitan ideology and complex sexuality fuel his contempt for Nigeria, Deola's willingness to learn and grow enables her to appreciate and ultimately embrace her Nigerian heritage. This stark contrast in attitudes towards Nigerian identity serves to highlight the complexity and diversity of the African experience.

The novel depicts characters such as Graham and Kate who exhibit subtle racism and a biased mentality towards Black individuals. Deola proposes microfinancing as a means to empower Nigerian women, but Kate dismisses the idea due to her association of Africa with poverty. This limited perspective perpetuates the oppressive desire to view Black individuals as inferior. Despite being a woman in a patriarchal society, Kate fails to support her fellow gender who face oppression based on their race and gender, revealing a lack of sisterhood termed as "sisterarchy".

Deola's decision to leave her job and return to Nigeria to pursue her goal of empowering Nigerian women aligns with the womanist principle of individual autonomy. This principle emphasises women's agency over their own lives and the importance of

defining and interpreting their own reality. Deola's adherence to this belief system reinforces the significance of autonomy as a tool for personal and collective liberation.

Atta's disdain for the politics and favouritism inherent in the Nigerian writing community is evident in the character of Deola. Through Deola, Atta expresses her frustration at how even issues related to charity are politicised in Nigeria. Similarly, Atta's own criticism of the Nigerian people for confining her as a "feminist writer" and confining her writing to a specific genre is echoed in Deola's own contempt for the Nigerian people and their narrow-minded ideas about charity.

Sefi Atta has been reluctant to be associated with the label of a feminist writer, and she strongly believes that Nigerian feminism is far from inclusive. In her opinion, the exclusion of non-binary individuals from the movement makes it elitist and classist. During an interview with Podcaster Chude, Atta expressed, "I'm looking for feminism that is first of all less elitist and classist and more inclusive of non-binary and people of other walks" (Atta and Chude).

Sefi Atta's conscious and unconscious beliefs and aspirations for a utopian society are often reflected in her literary works. Her autobiographical experiences, feminist ideologies, and personal values are expressed through the actions of her characters and similar life events. An apt illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the life of Deola, a character in Atta's literary oeuvre. It is considered a semi-autobiography of Atta. Similar to Deola, Atta herself has spent a significant portion of her life living as a Nigerian expatriate in both London and the United States. Apart from her other novels, *A Bit of Difference* is the only work written in the third person narrative. In her creative pursuits, Atta ardently endeavours to depict the struggles faced by Nigerian

women, while also illuminating the complex realities of the Nigerian bourgeois class, a facet that is often overlooked by many writers in the genre. Through her work, Atta focuses her attention on the multifaceted experiences of Nigerian women and to the intricacies of Nigerian society, a task which she masterfully accomplishes with finesse and nuance. In various interviews, Atta acknowledges the connection between her personal beliefs and the traits of her female protagonists. Although Atta refutes the claims that her characters directly mirror her own life, a psychoanalytic reading reveals the intentional presence of her unconscious desires through symbolic characters, parallel events, and settings in her stories. Hence, Atta is a Womanist writer who unconsciously transmits her ideologies and beliefs through her works to promote women's and human rights.

The Bead Collector provides an insightful and thought-provoking exploration of the ongoing struggle of individuals to reclaim their cultural identities amidst the overpowering influence of Western norms. The story centres around the brief but meaningful friendship between two women, one a Nigerian mother yearning to contribute to her nation's growth from the comfort of her home, and the other an American art collector who is drawn to African culture. Through their interactions, the novel delves into the complexities and tensions of postcolonial life, highlighting the competing desires for progress and a return to cultural roots.

Atta's skilful use of dialogue between the two main characters, Remi and Frances, provides a fascinating exploration of the diverse attitudes and opinions held by individuals from different regions on a range of subjects. These conversations, presented at the end of each chapter, cover a wide variety of themes, including the role of women in

politics, gender roles in society, marriage, polygamy, and civil marriage. The result is a captivating and nuanced portrayal of the complexities of cultural identity, power dynamics, and human relationships. Overall, *The Bead Collector* is a captivating read that offers valuable insights into the ongoing struggle to reconcile tradition and modernity in a globalised world.

Tunde's persistent suspicion regarding Frances' true identity portrays the pervasive insecurity and unease that characterise the Nigerian psyche in the face of foreign presence. This apprehension is a direct result of the post-colonial trauma that Nigeria and its people have endured, which has instilled in them a deep-seated sense of caution and fear when confronted with outsiders on their own soil. The psychological impact of this historical legacy is reflected in the acute sensitivity and mistrust that many Nigerians display towards foreigners, a phenomenon that is captured in Tunde's unrelenting scepticism towards Frances.

During her conversation with Frances, Remi bares her emotions by revealing her dissatisfaction with domestic duties, expressing how she finds them monotonous and ungratifying. She cites her tireless efforts in raising the children and supporting her husband, which often go unnoticed and unappreciated. This serves as a poignant reminder of the often-overlooked contributions of women in the home and the imperative for greater acknowledgement and recognition of their efforts. Furthermore, it brings to light the psychological strain that can stem from the unrewarding, repetitive work of domestic life, ultimately resulting in the sense of disillusionment, weariness, and an overall feeling of futility.

Remi's business acumen is a source of pride for her, as she views it as a meaningful way to impact her home country positively. Her unwavering commitment to her work, her family, and her nation underscores the interconnectedness of these different facets of her life and illustrates the pivotal role that women can play in shaping and strengthening their communities. Through Remi's inspiring example, Sefi Atta challenges conventional gender norms and celebrates the invaluable and multifaceted contributions that women can make in both domestic and international spheres.

The Bad Immigrant is a stirring tale of the Ahmed-Karim family's migration to the United States from Nigeria in the hopes of providing a better future for their children. Lukmon Ahmed-Karim, the central character, is an unsuccessful writer and professor who, together with Moriam, his wife and children Taslim and Bashira, relocates to New Jersey in 1999. The family grapples with the challenges of assimilating into American culture, with the children adopting new accents to fit in, while Moriam works as a nurse. Lukmon, on the other hand, struggles to secure a suitable job despite his PhD in literature and eventually takes up work as a security guard. His career trajectory shifts to being a househusband before finally landing a teaching job in Middlesex, Mississippi, near the end of the decade.

Lukmon's deep-seated apprehension of losing his cultural identity is a reflection of the anxieties that are often experienced by those who migrate to foreign lands for better economic prospects. His worst fears come true when he realises that his wife and children have adapted to American customs and culture, while he feels increasingly estranged from them. This is a common struggle faced by immigrants who grapple with the daunting challenge of assimilating into a new cultural milieu, while still trying to hold

onto their roots and heritage. The process is both complex and emotionally taxing and requires a delicate balance between adaptation and the preservation of one's cultural identity.

The novel delves into the multifaceted challenges that women face in conforming to societal expectations, which serve to restrict their ability to lead an autonomous life. Traditional African society enforces rigid gender roles on women, thereby curtailing their ability to express themselves freely. Lukmon, for his part, bemoans the fact that Nigerian society is intolerant of homosexuality and that women do not have the freedom to dress as they wish. Through Lukmon's perspective, the status of women in Nigeria is laid bare, where his sisters are relegated to the kitchen, while he is afforded greater liberty simply because he is a male. Despite his own divergence from societal expectations, Lukmon remains unable to fully disentangle himself from the deeply ingrained gender roles and cultural customs of Nigeria.

Moriam displays an unwavering attitude towards the discriminatory actions she encounters as she works hard to provide for her family. Her tenacity and ability to focus on her goals despite the challenges she faces serve as an inspiration to those around her. Meanwhile, Lukmon and his family, despite their migration to the United States, continue to hold on to certain traditional gender roles from their Nigerian roots. Lukmon contemplates the disparity between gender roles in Nigeria and the United States, both within the home and the larger community.

The exemplary fortitude and tenacity that Moriam displays in the midst of adversity are truly remarkable and serve as a source of admiration and inspiration.

Despite the limitations imposed by Lukmon's expectations, she is empowered by her work ethics and determination to provide for her family.

One of the striking features that distinguishes Atta's works from the Western perception of African literature is her portrayal of Nigerian society. Unlike the typical portrayal of Africa as a poverty-stricken continent with drought and struggle, Atta takes a different approach by shedding light on the affluent and elitist parts of the society that are often overlooked. Her focus on the Nigerian middle and upper class challenges the Western-centric stereotype of Africa and showcases the diversity of the country's social hierarchy.

Through her works, Atta emphasises that poverty and struggle are not the only facets that define Nigerian society, but rather it is a multifaceted society with complexities and nuances that deserve recognition. By highlighting the less explored aspects of Nigeria, Atta brings to light the often-understated realities of the middle and upper class and provides a new perspective on the country's socio-economic landscape. Through the words of Lukmon, Atta critiques, "Living in the suburbs, I could understand their preoccupations with drug abuse, alcoholism, extramarital affairs and divorces, but no self-respecting African writer could get away with focusing on issues like that. They would at least have to address a dictatorship or a civil war, especially if they wanted attention from Americans" (TBI 171).

Atta vehemently rejects the notion of authors catering to Western audiences and using tales of pity as a means of achieving literary acclaim. Instead, she adopts a distinctive approach that defies the stereotypical portrayals of Nigerian culture that have historically been propagated in the Western literary world. Her works are a bold and

unapologetic representation of the multifaceted realities of life in Nigeria, showcasing the complex experiences of its people in a nuanced and authentic way. Through her writing, Atta courageously challenges the prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about Nigerian culture, resolutely refusing to compromise on the integrity of her craft in order to garner international recognition.

Atta's writing explores contemporary issues faced by Nigerians both in their home country and abroad. Her stories delve into the aftermath of the Civil War and its ongoing impact on the lives of Nigerians, while also addressing the challenges they face in adapting to new cultural environments while still holding onto their traditional customs and beliefs.

Atta's writing reflects a more nuanced and complex view of Nigerian society, exploring the struggles and triumphs people across all social classes face every day. Her focus on contemporary issues brings a fresh perspective to African literature, portraying a more dynamic and multifaceted portrayal of the continent. Rather than simply dwelling on the past, Atta's writing examines the present and looks towards the future, offering a unique and compelling perspective on modern African life.

Atta's novels boldly portray women as the architects of their own destinies, with the power to shape their lives and the world around them. Their decisions, whether economic, social or personal, are integral in determining their future. Through her works, Atta challenges gender norms in African societies and highlights the complexity of women's struggles on the continent. Instead of presenting easy solutions, Atta portrays women as resourceful problem-solvers who navigate their circumstances based on their experiences, cultural and religious backgrounds, and available resources.

Atta's characters are united in their pursuit of self-determination within their culturally specific communities, and they hold these communities in high regard, which means they are unwilling to dismantle the existing order completely. Instead, they develop a composite consciousness that enables them to employ both traditional and modern resources to create opportunities for themselves as women of agency within their communities. These women are catalysts of change, but they also make calculated compromises that allow them to remain within their cultural contexts. It is crucial to recognise that these characters are shaped by their national situations and cultures, which means that their struggles and achievements may differ from those of women in other post-colonial contexts. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge the cultural specificity when analysing women's liberation in these contexts. Furthermore, this analysis highlights the potential for further exploration of the development of a composite consciousness by female characters in women's fiction across the post-colonial world.

According to Soyinka, literature, art, and activism, all serve as different ways to express the fundamental struggle to redefine both self and society. In this context, Atta's novels serve as a reminder of the importance of the composite consciousness of culture-specific women. This consciousness helps women to access both traditional and modern resources to achieve empowerment (De La Cruz-Guzman 210).

Sefi Atta's masterful portrayal of her female characters in her literary works subtly conveys the idea that female assertiveness and empowerment can be attained through education and economic freedom. Atta emphasises that women should not quietly accept gender oppression but instead speak out against it to liberate themselves from the chains of bias and discrimination. She emphasises that a woman's voice should

be heard not only for her own benefit but also for the advancement of other women. Atta emphasises that everyone, regardless of gender, should be aware of their cultural heritage and establish their identities to achieve self-reliance, self-realisation, and empowerment.