

Chapter - IV

Women's Sense of Self-worth and Social Change

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.

- Audre Lorde

The term “womanist” holds a confessional nature, in which it cannot be imposed upon an individual, but rather must be claimed by them. This highlights the importance of an organic process of continuous self-reflection, specifically within the context of one’s theological reflection. It is important to note that individuals have to claim for themselves instead of categorising other women as womanists. It is therefore inaccurate to label Black women from the nineteenth century as womanists, despite many women like Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett using an inter-structured social analysis of womanism in their activism. It was not until later that the term ‘womanist’ was coined and claimed by Alice Walker. However, the work and ideas of these women embody a nurturing form of womanism which provides a rich framework for womanists in the present era to build upon in their theological reflections.

In her seminal work *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), theologian Katie Cannon provides a comprehensive framework for womanist liberation ethics. She contends that literary tradition of Black women, particularly the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, offers the best resource for comprehending their religious and social experiences. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates ethics, literary studies, history, and political economy, Cannon provides a systematic analysis of how race, class, and sex

intersect in Black women's lives. Her ultimate goal is to demonstrate that Black women's moral agency differs from the dominant ethics of White men, owing to the triple oppressions of race, class, and sex that they face (Townes 165).

Unlike dominant ethics, which assume the freedom of choice, Cannon contends that those in situations of oppression have limited options. Therefore, what may be considered a desirable norm in dominant ethics, such as frugality, becomes an essential reality for poor Black women. While making this argument, Cannon makes a clear distinction between womanist ethics and dominant ethics. She argues that womanist ethics is better suited to deal with the unique experiences of Black women and their struggles for liberation.

Womanists have primarily focused on the black women's experiences during and after the period of American slavery, particularly with regard to racism, sexism, misogyny, and economic exploitation. As Alice Walker has pointed out, women in the womanist tradition have generally demonstrated remarkable mental and emotional strength, a deep sense of self-determination, and an unapologetically bold and sassy attitude. They have been adept at surviving difficult circumstances and have shown love and care for both other women and women of their communities. Additionally, they have often been recognised as leaders, possessing the trait of being in charge. (Burrow 42).

In this chapter, it can be seen how the women characters navigate through the complexities of their lives while trying to maintain a sense of self-worth and empowerment. They challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations that have been placed upon them based on their gender and race. They also prioritise the needs of their families and communities while striving for personal growth and self-

fulfilment. These actions align them with the principles of womanism, which emphasises the importance of community, family, and self-love in the empowerment of Black women.

Sefi Atta could be considered one of the most prominent woman writer of the century and the most influential representation of not only Nigerian society but also the literary world. Sefi Atta's debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, is a shining feather added to the cap of contemporary Nigerian fiction. Set in the tumultuous year of 1971, immediately following the devastating Biafran war and amidst the oppressive grip of military rule, the novel expertly weaves together the story of Enitan Taiwo, a fierce and intellectually gifted young woman and Sheri, an impulsive opportunist. Through her indomitable spirit and unwavering determination, Enitan embarks on a journey towards self-discovery and empowerment in a culture that still clings to the patriarchal ideal of female subjugation.

The novel *Everything Good Will Come* "charts the unusual friendship and fate of these two girls [Enitan and Sheri]; one who is prepared to manipulate the traditional system and one who attempts to defy it" (Myriad). The novel also serves as a powerful reflection of society's agonies and struggles, as it paints a vivid picture of a world where the marginalized are relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder, with a culture that is both noble and savage. "In a graded world, there was a place for us, right there at the bottom: third, slowly slipping into fourth world. A noble people. A Savage culture. Entire books dedicated to the salvation of African women's genitals" (Onwukwe). The author, through Enitan's character, masterfully illustrates the protagonist's journey towards self-discovery as she resists the traditional norms that perpetuate social and gender

exclusions. Enitan's growing awareness of the societal norms and her determination to challenge them leads her to question the status quo; It becomes evident that she stands for female empowerment, equality, and independence, which is reflected through the encounters she has with each and every character. Sefi Atta, through Enitan, seeks to ignite a change in the attitude of society towards women.

Sefi Atta expertly traces the steady progression in her journey towards self-discovery and personal growth. Throughout the novel, Enitan crosses the various milestones of her life - from a young adult woman to a wife and mother - all the while grappling with the weight of society's expectations. However, despite the pressures she faces, Enitan remains resolute in her determination to make her own choices, right from the friends, who surround her to the man she ultimately chooses to marry. These decisions are not made hastily, but, rather, taken after careful consideration and thoughtful reflection.

Atta's novel *Everything Good Will Come* goes beyond being simply a portrayal of Enitan's journey towards self-realization. It also proves to be a powerful representation of the individual struggles of Nigerian women as they navigate the societal expectations placed upon them. The novel shines a spotlight on the limited space society defines for women, both within the domestic sphere and in the larger community. It highlights not only the struggles of Nigerian women but also the importance of female empowerment, equality, and independence and the societal norms that limit their opportunities.

This theme is brought to the limelight through the poignant conversations between Enitan and her friend Sheri, as the latter succinctly articulates the harsh reality of the social

constraints placed upon women when Enitan scolds her for confining herself to the kitchen without bothering about anything else:

. . . you were raised by your father, but let me tell you now, to save you from an unnecessary headache in the future. Forget that nonsense. Education cannot change what's inside a person's veins. Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against this wall, you will end up in the kitchen. . . . now where I differ from most women is, if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you. God no go vex. Secondly, while I am there cooking for you, I won't be thinking of dropping some poison in because you've gone to eat another woman's stew. (EGWC 104)

The patriarchal Nigerian society is one in which women are often relegated to the periphery level, diminishing their significance and worth in the eyes of men and society as a whole. The novel *Everything Good Will Come* masterfully illustrates this attitude through the conversation between Enitan and Sheri, as they delve into the nature of the treatment and expectations placed upon women. Sheri, in particular, poignantly highlights the societal expectation that women should confine themselves to their domestic chores, and to the kitchen, rather than coming out to flourish and shine in the public sphere. This conversation serves as a powerful reminder of the systemic inequalities and discrimination that continue to plague Nigerian women and the importance of challenging and breaking these oppressive norms for the betterment of all.

Enitan's quest for equality and human rights for all people leads her to draw parallels between the plight of women in prison and in society. The novel illustrates how women in the public sphere are often denied their basic rights, and Enitan becomes a vociferous advocate for them, working tirelessly to give them a voice. Through Enitan's

observations and experiences, the novel highlights the myriad of problems faced by women, from financial struggles to domestic abuse. As Enitan states, “We worry about no money, no light. . . . No husband, bad husband, husband’s girlfriend, husband’s mother. Human rights were never an issue till the right of men were threatened. There’s nothing in our constitution for kindness at home. And even if the army goes, we still have our men to answer to” (EGWC 193). Throughout the novel, Enitan serves as a shining example of female assertiveness, her professional and personal achievements serving as a powerful retaliation to stereotypes about women’s roles. She stands as an embodiment of female empowerment and a strong-willed woman, who is determined to transform the society that limits women’s opportunities.

Sefi Atta exquisitely portrays Enitan as a woman of indomitable spirit and unshakable strength. Through her character, the author illustrates the defiance of a woman who refuses to play a subservient role to anyone and who, instead asserts herself with her strong opinions and beliefs regarding the societal expectations placed upon men and women. Enitan’s character exemplifies the idea that disobedience to a man does not equate to disrespect, but rather, is a stand for autonomy and self-determination. She firmly believes that respect should not be demanded, but rather, earned through one’s actions and character. Throughout the novel, Enitan’s unwavering determination to speak the truth and to stand up for herself serves as a powerful inspiration, and she becomes the embodiment of female empowerment. She says:

In my 29 years, no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their heads, with their necks as high as

church spires and foreheads crushed. Too many women, I thought, ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion: shift-shift, prod-prod and then nothing. . . . It was an overload of duties, I thought, sometimes self-imposed. On the expectation of subordination bothered me most. . . . Obey him without checking on my humility like a fish bone down my throat. (EGWC 186-87)

Enitan's relentless pursuit of freedom and independence from male dominance is a central theme throughout the novel. Through her character, the author illustrates the ways in which the law along with society suppresses and oppresses women. Even the system of civilians and native laws are used to put down and restrict women, as Atta vehemently points out that such human rights are often referred to as "men's rights."

Atta's novel highlights the ways in which women are fed a diet of domination, bias, and oppression from a young age. Atta's words are powerful and thought-provoking as she seeks to change societal attitudes toward women through her female characters. Enitan's mother, Arin, advice, "Never make sacrifices for a man. By the time you say look what I've done for you, it's too late. They never remember" (EGWC 173), serves as a remarkable reminder regarding the significance of self-empowerment and the dangers of yielding to the domination of men. Throughout the novel, Enitan's character is an inspiration to readers struggling to find their voice and assert themselves in a society that still represses them with patriarchal norms.

Atta expertly and poignantly critiques the native law and societal systems that deny women their rightful place in society. The novel highlights the significant role of education as a way of empowering women and enabling them to challenge these systems.

Enitan in particular stands out for her education and her determination to fight for women's rights. However, when Enitan finds herself imprisoned, she has ample time to ponder over the injustices of the system. The harsh conditions of her confinement, without proper ventilation or light, serve to heighten her sense of insecurity and oppression. The sounds of crickets chattering and mosquitoes buzzing around her ears constantly remind her of her captivity. Enitan reflects on the working of the government and its priorities and criticises it saying that it is, "dedicated to eradicating opposition [when they had so many other things to eradicate]. A country without a constitution, a judicial system choking, even over commercial matters. Sluggish, sluggish as an old man's bowels" (EGWC 274).

Grace Ameh, also known as 'The Mother of Prisons,' expresses her disgust and repulsion at the inhuman treatment meted out to individuals by government officials and the protectors of national law. Through her interactions with Enitan, she poses powerful questions that make Enitan wonder about the state of affairs in the country. Grace Ameh tells her, ". . . since you've come in here, smelling so clean and speaking such good English, if I came to your office to see you, would you turn your nose the other way? Say that I smell? Ask someone to show me out? Would you drive past on the streets when I was walking and wonder? Had I eaten? Had I rested? Did I have a roof over my head?" (EGWC 272). The novel illustrates that when human beings are treated with such indignity, the plight of women is even worse as they are already marginalised in a patriarchal society. It needs extraordinary courage on the part of women to rise up, speak out and fight against the system. For instance, Sheri, who initially expresses her determination to stand up for herself if attacked, ultimately becomes the victim of rape.

This incident highlights the harsh realities of the patriarchal society that tests women in all possible ways, physically weakening them. However, Enitan becomes an embodiment of a woman who rises above the forces that try to stifle her and continues her journey towards self-realization and empowerment.

Enitan's mother, Arin, is a source of confidence and strength to her daughter. The novel brings out the various hardships that Arin has faced in her own life, as she works to keep the love between her husband and herself alive and fresh, though her efforts become futile. Arin finds comfort and solace in the church as a defence mechanism for her broken marriage relationship. Through her experiences, Arin advises her daughter, Enitan not to sacrifice for a man, as men are ungrateful by nature. This advice gives an understanding that Arin wants Enitan to be independent and not to refrain from expressing herself and her opinions in the name of marriage, which is completely contrary to the treatment given to women and the traditional customs of marriage in Africa. Arin stands out as a unique African mother who encourages her daughter to save her marriage at any cost, though she also advocates female independence and empowerment.

Atta's characters are notable for their composed nature and assertiveness as they protest against the societal norms and rules that bind them without valid reasons. Enitan, in particular, speaks out against the native law and its oppressive nature towards women. She expresses her frustration to her father, saying, "I don't know why we continue to follow native law anyway, when civil law is in existence. It has no moral grounding, no design except to oppress women" (EGWC 139). Through this statement, Enitan illustrates the ways in which traditional laws and customs are used to oppress and

marginalise women and the need for a change in the societal norms that limit women's rights and opportunities. She asks her father:

Show me one case . . . Just one, 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 need my husband's consent to get a new passport. He would be entitled to discipline me with a slap or two, so long as he doesn't cause me grievous bodily harm. (EGWC 140)

The renowned philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex*, provides a poignant and insightful analysis of the struggles and plight of women within society. She says, "Woman . . . is required by society to make herself an erotic object. The purpose of the fashions to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires; thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them" (506).

Sefi Atta, through the portrayal of her characters in the novel, seeks to deconstruct and re-imagine the societal norms that oppress women in a patriarchal society. She empowers her female characters to take bold and practical steps to break free from the chains of gender bias and societal expectations. This female assertiveness is shown to be closely tied to education and financial freedom. Enitan, in particular, becomes the representative of this idea as she has the ability to stand up for her rights, but it is her profession, education and economic independence that greatly strengthen her fighting spirit. Atta, through Enitan's character, challenges the stereotypical literary portrayals of women by showcasing their potential for success and prosperity outside the traditional

roles of wife and mother. She illustrates that a woman can stand on her own, and need not be dependent on a man for everything.

The novel encompasses characters who stand up for their survival and rights, enabling them to revisit the conventional rules against gender equality. The voices from women of all spheres become clearly audible through the depiction of Grace Ameh, the journalist, who is also called the Mother of Prisons and Enitan. Enitan's evolution as an activist is something that Atta tries to instil in almost all her prominent women characters. Resilience and courage make women overcome their obstacles and move on in their journey towards self-assertion.

The gender shift in society makes Enitan endure much agony and pain. She stands out as a loud cry of womanhood and brings out the struggle of African women in the male dominating Nigerian society. Enitan looks up to many sources of support, tries to identify solutions, and succeeds in finding them. Through the compelling character of Enitan, Atta conveys that a woman should not be silent for a long time; she should voice out her opinions not only for herself but also for other women. Her loud voice can be heard through her works which are strong records of women's rights, equality, self-respect, and freedom.

For many black female writers, the challenge of space and time has been a significant obstacle to their craft. Without a dedicated room to gather their thoughts in private or free moments for relaxation and reflection, they have struggled to find the space and quiet time necessary for creative inspiration. Moreover, the social environment in which they live has not been conducive to women's artistic expression, making it difficult for them to reveal their talents. However, the 1960s and 1970s marked a turning

point for black female writers, who began to emerge as a powerful force in the literary world. Grace Ogot and Flora Nwapa were among the first few to publish works of fiction, paving the way for other trailblazing writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, and Efua Sutherland.

Among these luminaries of the literary world, Sefi Atta stands out as a distinguished voice, particularly for her focus on the experiences and struggles of women. Through her writing, Atta brings to light the complex challenges women face in a world that has often been hostile to their aspirations and ambitions.

Sefi Atta's *Swallow*, published in 2010, offers a striking portrayal of the complex and often fraught experiences of modern women in contemporary society. The novel grapples with the ongoing struggle of women to assert their identities and voice in the patriarchal society which seeks to silence and subjugate them.

In *Swallow*, Atta fearlessly explores the myriad ways in which women are oppressed and marginalised and the daunting obstacles they must overcome to find their place in the world. She reveals the harsh realities of life of many women, who are forced to fight for their survival and struggle to be recognized for who they truly are. Throughout the novel, the characters are forced to confront the many challenges and injustices that confront them in their daily lives, from the domineering male society that seeks to stifle their voices to the internalised self-doubt and self-criticism that can hold them back.

Yet in the face of these challenges, the female characters in *Swallow* stand strong and refuse to be silenced. They assert themselves with fierce determination and an

unyielding spirit, fighting for their rights and living their lives on their own terms. Their struggle for female empowerment and independence is at the heart of the novel, and Atta's vivid and powerful prose captures their courage and resilience with remarkable clarity and depth. Through *Swallow*, Atta has crafted a powerful and moving testament to the strength and spirit of women and a powerful call to action for greater gender equality and social justice.

Joy Nwiyi, in her article "Survival and Female (Ad)venturing in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*," says how the two friends are brought together. According to her, the novel "tells the story of two friends, Tolani and Rose, working-class ladies from entirely different backgrounds whose struggle not to be crushed by the society in which they find themselves unites them" (2). Nwiyi highlights how the characters' different social backgrounds and experiences shape their lives and ultimately unite them to fight against the societal forces that seek to oppress them, muting their voices.

Through their friendship and shared experiences, Tolani and Rose find strength in each other as they navigate through the many challenges they face in their lives as women in a patriarchal society. Their journey is a powerful testament to the resilience and determination of women in the face of adversity, and Atta's vivid and evocative prose clearly and remarkably brings out their struggles. Nwiyi's analysis sheds light on the many themes and issues at the heart of *Swallow*, and her insights offer a valuable perspective on the novel's enduring significance and impact.

Sefi Atta's novel, *Swallow*, offers a vivid and poignant exploration of the lives of two primary women characters, Tolani and Rose, as they embark on their journey towards self-realisation. Through her finely crafted prose and keen attention to detail,

Atta brings to life the complex and often fraught realities of their personal and professional lives. Set against the backdrop of Nigeria's cultural norms and expectations, *Swallow* offers a nuanced and insightful examination of the challenges that women face in this context. While women in Nigeria are permitted to pursue education to a certain extent, the cultural expectation remains the same as they prioritise house chores and domestic responsibilities over their professional pursuits.

The pervasive influence of gender dynamics in Africa dates back to ancient times. Life in Lagos during the 1980s was incredibly challenging, with even the Royal family having to abide by the military government like everyone else. Outside of their immediate circle, no one paid much attention to them. However, prior to the military coups and the country's independence, there was a unique tradition within the Royal family. Any unmarried girl who made it to the palace would become a wife of the Royal Throne, and her family need not worry. The author notes, "Traditional rulers had not yet been totally undermined by the colonials. All unmarried girls in Makoku Town were warned to watch where they went: the stream to fetch water, the next compound. If they ended up in the Palace, no one would come to look for them" (Swallow 90).

This practice in Nigeria exemplifies the deeply ingrained gender roles that permeate the culture. Men could have multiple wives, and traditional norms dictated that if an elder brother passed away, the younger brother would inherit his possessions and his family. Such practices highlight the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, where men hold significant power and women are not free to offer even their opinions due to discrimination. The abduction of young girls in the name of marriage, as described in the

passage, serves as a stark reminder of the inequalities and injustices that continue to pervade many cultures and societies worldwide.

Atta explores the post-independence era in her novel and introduces Iya Alaro, a revolutionary character hailing from pre-independent Nigeria. The people of her clan viewed her as a witch and feared her harsh and venomous words due to her mystical and magical abilities. However, she shared a close bond with Tolani's mother, Arike and encouraged her to marry Tolani's father, despite the Royal policy of taking young women as wives into the Palace. Arike, on the other hand, expresses her desire to escape the traditional norms of getting married as she narrates to her daughter:

The worst thing for a woman was to be married. Yes, I knew I would be one day. All girls did. You reached a certain age and you were married off. Your family arranged that. They received your dowry: cloth, yams, palm oil, goats, or whatever your husband's family could afford, to show his appreciation for your upbringing. It was a token, nothing more. You moved into his home, had children and took care of them. (Swallow 44-45)

She then decides to pursue her education in Lagos to escape societal boundaries.

In the society portrayed in Atta's novel, the rights and freedom of women are severely restricted, leading to their submissiveness. The women are allowed to earn only a small amount of money through domestic work. Moreover, their profession must be an indoor one and not visible to the public eye. However, Atta's character, Tolani, is encouraged by her mother's adventurous deeds. Her mother is severely criticized for riding a bike like a man because society expects her to conform to its norms and be

‘swallowed’ by them rather than rebel against them. But Tolani and her mother see that as an act of empowerment.

Rose is depicted as a strong and brave woman who stands in contrast to Tolani, who is shown in the beginning as a timid character; she struggles to navigate the difficult circumstances she faces. Through the character of Rose, Atta highlights the rebellious nature of women who refuse to be submissive in a patriarchal society. Rose demonstrates her anger and frustration with the system, which considers marriage and childbirth as the goals of women’s life. She tells Tolani:

It’s rubbish. How many motherless children do we have around? Yet we continue to see childbirth as the ultimate. You must born *pikin*, you must born *pikin* by force. That’s what I’ve always said: we Nigerians, we follow blindly. Meanwhile, the whole system is a mess because not everyone agrees, and when we follow without thinking, we all enter the same black hole. . . .The black hole of the African existence. (Swallow 204)

Atta’s novel delves into the pervasive gender bias and inequality that stem from the deeply ingrained traditional practices. These practices flagrantly infringe upon women’s basic human rights. What Sapiro says emphatically in her work, *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, regarding such traditional practices is worthy of consideration in this context: “. . . the primaeval struggle through which men have asserted their dominance over women is more deeply embedded in many cultures” (52). The protagonist, Tolani, grows up in a society where women are taken for granted. Her paternity is unknown, and she shares this secret with Rose, “I think my father’s brother is my real father, Brother Tade. You know that if a woman is infertile she

can't hide it. If a man is sterile, no one has to know. Understand? The wife finds someone else to father her child, and keeps the whole thing a secret... She never talked about when I was born, only trouble because she had one child. Never from my father" (Swallow 203). This demonstrates the double standards of society – one for men and another for women and how women are compelled to 'swallow' men's secrets to preserve their honour in society.

The societal cage that women are confined to often results in their struggle to break free and earn their own livelihood. Unfortunately, the male-dominant society does not allow them to come out of their confinement; if they come out, their wings are cut off. Women are once again trapped and treated like mere puppets to cater to the wishes of men. This patriarchal society expects women to endure the misdeeds of men and 'swallow' the resulting bitterness. Even when women expose the injustices they face from men, they have to put up with the resultant suffering. In Atta's novel, Rose, working as the secretary to the Federal Community Bank branch manager, Mr. Salako, faces consistent disrespect and harassment from him. While this harassment persists for a considerable amount of time, Rose reaches her boiling point and slaps Mr. Salako in front of everyone. As a consequence, Mr. Salako dismisses her from her position on the basis of subordination. Despite knowing the fact that Mr. Salako is in the wrong, no one is ready to support Rose. They blame her for being bold and for slapping Salako. Frustrated, Rose gives vent to her anger, "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" (Swallow 22). In spite

of his corrupt and evil ways, men like Salako continue to flourish with the support of society.

Mr. Salako's pattern of sexual harassment is not limited to Rose but extends to Tolani when she takes up the position of his secretary. However, Tolani's reaction to this abuse is different from Rose's, as she suppresses her feelings of anger and frustration. The harassment takes a significant toll on her mental health. Yet, when she tries to report the situation to her senior colleague, Ignatius, he threatens her with dire consequences if she tries to do anything against Salako. When Tolani begins to resist Salako's advances, he suspends her from her job.

Swallow highlights the progress of women towards self-determination in their society across different generations. The character of Iya Alaro, Tolani's great-aunt, is a perfect example of this progress. She faced the societal obligation to marry her father's choice as her husband and bear children. However, her husband's early death liberated her from this obligation, and as an independent woman, she took charge of her life, organizing the women in her community and to demand for their fair treatment. With the help of her co-op (the group she has organised), she tried to protect women and children in her town; thus she became a model of leadership for the younger generation to emulate. Arike, her niece (Tolani's mother), describes, "My aunt, Iya Alaro, was my mentor. She trained me to be a cloth dyer" (*Swallow* 45). Through her mentorship, Iya Alaro taught young girls in the village a trade, giving them valuable organisational skills and training to improve their economy. Thus, Iya Alaro's legacy of mentorship and advocacy paved the way for future generations of women to achieve self-determination in their society.

Young Arike is fortunate to receive valuable guidance from her aunt, Iya Alaro, in the traditional village of Makoku. While Arike's mother is too overwhelmed to offer her daughter more than domestic tasks, Iya Alaro imparts a valuable trade and a vision of solidarity to the young girl. Arike learns that while one must be self-sufficient, it is essential to ally with others to combat social issues such as child abuse and domestic violence, which are widely prevalent in their society. Iya Alaro demonstrates that women are strong when they work together, enabling them to promote more communal values that empower women and demand equal treatment. This cooperative approach allows women to supersede male power but only within the parameters set by society. The power of individual women stems from their ability to be self-sufficient and to mobilise those around them to fight against injustice. However, a woman's power always presupposes the approval of her community and is implicitly based on a coalition of women, as exemplified by Arike's great aunt and her mother. Through Iya Alaro's co-op, women and children are treated fairly and justly, with the community's approval allowing them to enforce these standards with impunity.

The novel portrays the theme of transgenerational empowerment of women, as demonstrated by Arike's journey towards independence and her ability to assist Tolani in making progressive choices. Arike's aunt Iya Alaro, who is a widowed village elder, teaches Arike the importance of self-sufficiency, organising those around her, and fighting against injustice by forming alliances with other women. As a result, Arike is empowered to become a skilled cloth dyer and to mentor other young women in the village.

Moreover, Arike is able to follow in her aunt's footsteps by improving the status of women in the village. As a village elder, she is in a position to support other young women, like Tolani and Peju's mother, who are ushering in a different order for women. Thus, the progress of women in achieving more self-determination in their society is evident in each generation portrayed in the novel. Through the transgenerational empowerment of women, the novel illustrates the importance of women supporting and mentoring each other, and the positive impact this can have on future generations. Arike, an exemplary woman, is able to support and gain support from others to demand and achieve greater rights and opportunities. Her commitment to assisting other women in the next generation is akin to the guidance and support she received from her aunt. One day, while trading in the market, Arike was approached by a well-travelled merchant who made a remark:

"I've traversed this country and it's the same all over. We women, we sabotage each other: mothers against daughters, sisters against sisters, friends against friends. If there is no unity between us, how can there ever be progress? It's a spiral that will never end, and I don't need the gift of prophecy to say this. I have eyes, ears and a mouth to talk. God willing. I've seen you, Sister Arike. You're doing well. You are taking the right steps. One should not rely on a man for anything, to provide or to pamper, not even to procreate. Is that not true?"

(Swallow 210)

The comment alludes to the unfortunate reality that some women collaborate with patriarchal structures. Arike, who has experienced this firsthand, knows that some women may even work with oppressors to hinder the progress of other women, particularly those

who advocate for change. Despite this, Arike chooses to use her voice to empower women in the ways she can.

According to Tolani's mother, there are possibilities for women's empowerment within the traditional framework of their society, but these are only restricted possibilities. Hence, it is the responsibility of each generation to pass on their knowledge and to aid the next group of women in making more significant advancements. In Tolani's case, her mother Arike guides her as to how to alter her outlook on society and how to recognise her worth. This is demonstrated by the following conversation between Arike and Tolani:

“A mother makes more than her fair share of compromises. How fair is that?”

“That is the way of the world,” I said.

“What way?”

“For a woman to compromise. Her worth, for one.”

“Did I not raise you to value your self?”

“I am not accusing you of anything?”

“Then how come you've come to that sorry conclusion already?” (Swallow 292)

The mother emphasises to her daughter that a woman's self-worth is the foundation of her strength. While women may have to make concessions in order to live in society, it is crucial that they remain aware of these concessions and maintain their sense of self-worth. This is essential not only for their own success but also for their children's. Tolani had previously viewed her mother's compromises as a form of weakness, but after discussing the matter with her, she comes to realise that the sacrifices were made by her great aunt and mother to provide her with the freedom to choose. Then,

it is up to Tolani to value herself and to decide if she wants to have children and challenge societal norms.

Tolani's refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations puts her own livelihood in jeopardy. Realising the extent of patriarchal oppression in Nigerian society, she seeks her mother's guidance and understanding of their family history. By returning to her mother's compound in Makoku, Tolani is able to immerse herself in a matri-centric environment where she can reflect on her own choices and examine her mother's agency within a patriarchal system. This experience helps Tolani develop a sophisticated sense of self and empowers her to envision a future free from the constraints of her relationship with Sanwo. Through this process, Tolani and her mother are able to grow as more independent and stronger women, equipped with a composite approach that integrates their own experiences and the wisdom of their ancestors.

Society would easily categorise the act of resisting patriarchy as the conduct of "horrible women." However, the protagonist of the novel challenges this stereotype by presenting it as a psychologically healthy alternative for women who refuse to comply with patriarchal norms. Although such a position may be marginalised in society, it provides a way to resist patriarchal expectations and propose new roles for women through gynocentric activism, self-sufficiency, and empowerment. In essence, it creates a safe haven where the subaltern can speak up and exercise agency, and where women can find healing and seek empowerment (De La Cruz-Guzman 110).

The novel's social environment is harsh for women, as the patriarchal system is firmly established, with women expected to be subservient to male patriarchs. This tradition is evident in the way of life in Makoku, where women have limited agency. The

misogynistic system in Nigeria is further reinforced by legal procedures and policies, as exemplified by the bank's grievance procedures and the Oba's ability to kidnap and marry women without their consent. However, women in *Swallow* are slowly but steadily forging new possibilities and challenging male expectations, as seen in the choices made by Peju's mother and Tolani. Despite the social backlash and being labelled as "witches" or "troublemakers," these women are questioning the patriarchal norms, making different decisions, and gaining support for their actions. They also realise the power of female solidarity, forming cooperatives in families, companies, and communities, as demonstrated by Iya Alaro, Arike, and Tolani.

The use of motherhood as a tool for social transformation in womanism can be traced back to African cultural traditions. However, it is important to disassociate motherhood from its strictly biological and gendered connotations. Motherhood is a complex construct in the African context and it encompasses various meanings not typically recognised in Western societies. Motherhood, essentially, is a collection of behaviours centred around nurturance, caretaking, education, management, conflict resolution and spiritual mediation. Anyone, regardless of gender, age, parental status, or sexual orientation, can engage in these behaviours and take on the role of a mother. By doing so, each person has the potential to contribute towards the goals of womanism, which include promoting societal healing, reconciling the relationship between humans and nature by achieving and maintaining the common good (Phillips xxix).

Tolani draws strength and motivation from the life of her mother, who served as her inspiration, and the lesson learnt from the life and experiences of her friend Rose, whose experiences taught her a valuable lesson. Tolani consciously decides to snap the

bonds of oppression and subjugation and refuses to silently endure the unfair and unequal treatment imposed upon her by the patriarchal society. She decides to take a stand and speak out against the male-dominated system rather than conforming to the traditional norms of subservience and silence.

The life of Tolani reflects the same thoughts and aspirations of a womanist called Zora Neale Hurston. Her literary contributions have been particularly influential to womanist scholars such as Cannon and Alice Walker. Her upbringing in the first all-black town, Eatonville, Florida, played a crucial role in shaping her writing style and celebrating the cultural richness of her community. Lucy Ann Potts, her mother, who was a school teacher, instilled in Hurston a powerful womanist ethos to always strive for excellence and aim high in life. As Hurston herself reflected on her mother's teachings, "We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground..." (Hurston). This quotation captures the essence of Hurston's womanist philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of reaching for the sky and striving for one's fullest potential, even in the face of adversity.

Despite the challenges of growing up in the deep South during a time when Black people were expected to know their place and submit to the authority of Whites, Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Potts, instilled in her daughter a strong sense of individuality and self-worth. This was particularly revolutionary given the additional pressure on Black women to be subservient to men of all races. Potts' teachings inspired Hurston to continuously strive for personal growth and development, a pursuit that defied the societal norms of the time. Her mother's teachings were a powerful influence on

Hurston, shaping her worldview and becoming a driving force behind her literary works, which celebrated the unique culture and identity of Black Americans.

Despite her father's insistence on conforming to the beliefs and values of the white South, Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Potts, continued to teach and encourage her daughter to be self-reliant, self-motivated, and independent until the end of her life. As a the Mayor of their town and Baptist preacher, Hurston's father held a significant position of authority and power, and his expectations for his daughter reflected the societal norms of their time. However, Potts remained steadfast in her efforts to instil in Hurston a sense of individuality and personal agency, even in the face of prevailing racial and gender hierarchies. She writes about the significance of Potts' teachings, which were revolutionary for their time and contributed to Hurston's development as a groundbreaking writer and thinker (Burrow 43).

Hurston was forced to become independent at a young age due to her circumstances, being essentially on her own since she was nine years old, and running away at the age of fourteen. However, this experience helped her learn the skills needed to survive, and be resilient and be self-determined. Her ability to sustain her own dignity and personhood during the times of persecution and great odds was noted by Alice Walker, who referred to it as "unctuousness." This characteristic was seen as a required principle for the formation of womanist ethics by Katie Cannon.

What Hurston makes clear is that it is the quality of steadfastness, akin to fortitude, in the face of formidable oppression that serves as the most conspicuous feature in the construction of Black women's ethics Hurston portrays this moral quality [of "unctuousness"] of life not as an ideal to be fulfilled but as a

balance of complexities so that suffering will not overwhelm and endurance is possible. . . . Creatively straining against the external restraints in one's life is virtuous living. (Burrow 43)

The portrayal of Atta's characters challenges the traditional social patriarchal norms of society. Her female characters are not willing to passively accept gender oppression; instead, they choose to give their voice of resistance to break free from the bonds of gender bias. Empowerment in this context relies on a woman's access to education and financial independence.

In Atta's third literary offering, *A Bit of Difference*, Deola Bello, the protagonist, takes centre stage. A Nigerian-born woman who resides in London, Deola is an unconventional woman whose beliefs and practices are not in tandem with traditional Nigerian values. Even at the age of thirty-nine years, Deola remains unmarried; she is employed as a financial reviewer in an international charity organisation, LINK. Though she has the identity of a Nigerian expatriate residing in London, she prefers London to Nigeria, which she also regards as her homeland. Deola embodies the quintessence of Afropolitanism; having attended a British boarding school, she has participated in Switzerland summer camps and pursued her college education at the London School of Economics. She is a cosmopolitan, and successful African woman with vast knowledge of the world.

Deola's preference for London to Nigeria stems from a variety of factors, and experiences, the chief among them being the conservative and patriarchal attitude that is prevalent in Nigeria. Additionally, the country's infrastructure and services are dysfunctional, making life difficult for its citizens. Furthermore, there is a pervasive lack

of empathy and social consciousness amongst Nigerians, which is particularly pronounced for migrants who have gained a British education and speak posh English. Such migrants are often viewed as part of an elite group, further exacerbating the class divisions and societal inequalities that are a legacy of colonialism in the continent.

At the onset of the novel, Deola's character is aptly described by the author as "powerful" and self-assured. In fact, Atta goes to great lengths to portray Deola's strength through a photograph that Deola carries with her; the image depicts an African woman standing amidst desert terrain, her head adorned with a striking yellow scarf. The author describes her uniqueness by saying, "The great ones capture you. This one is illuminated and magnified. It is a photograph of an African woman with desert terrain behind her. She might be Sudanese or Ethiopian. It is hard to tell. Her hair is covered with a yellow scarf and underneath her image is a caption: 'I Am Powerful'" (ABD 1). This serves as a telling indicator of Deola's indomitable spirit, which allows her to defy societal norms and overcome the oppressive constraints that are typically imposed upon educated women in Nigeria. Despite the numerous obstacles that confront her, Deola ultimately chooses to remain in her homeland, demonstrating her tenacious resilience and determination to effect change.

Deola's self-awareness and unwavering commitment to her roots are evident in her conversations with her "Nigeriaphobic" friends. Despite the suffocating nature of traditional values that often shackle women in Nigeria, Deola is resolute in her decision to return to her homeland. Her willingness to confront the pitfalls that plague Nigerian society, from politics to economics and charity, is indicative of her acute awareness and relentless determination to effect change. Deola's desire to return to Nigeria does not

preclude her from recognizing its flaws; instead, it is precisely because of these shortcomings that she feels compelled to act, make a difference, and inspire others to do the same.

Deola always has the notion of discomfort over the fact that ‘developed’ nations have a stereotypical sympathy towards Africa, especially regarding economic situations. She criticises her International charity foundation, LINK for only funding money for poverty and not for the promotion of self-development; she feels that funding like microfinancing would help them to lead their lives. This becomes evident through her conversation with her neighbour Subu; “So why don’t we solve our economy problems instead of begging for funds all over the place? Why should Africa always be seen as a charity case? Can’t people invest in Africa instead?” (ABD 205).

Deola tries to convince her foundation to microfinance the African people instead of just giving away money in the name of charity. She visits Nigeria to look at the prevalent conditions in Nigeria to make her report authentic, “. . . while knowing her report won’t make a bit of difference” (ABD 218). The authorities of LINK right from the beginning have been looking for ways to fund poverty-related issues; moreover, the sponsoring countries also have the mindset that Nigerians are only poor. Hence they fail to see the potential in her idea to empower the Nigerian people. All these things make her quit the job at LINK and she decides to make a difference by staying in her homeland as it “is a place to escape from” (ABD 334) the world and contribute as much as she can to the development of her country.

No matter what her friends’ apprehensions about Nigeria are, Deola remains firm in her conviction that it is her home, stating “It’s home for me” (ABD 50) and that she

will eventually settle there. Demonstrating a mindset of resilience, she expresses her refusal to cater to the demands of society as a woman, boldly proclaiming, “I can’t live up to their expectations. Why should they live up to mine?” (ABD 239). Her mindset is a testament to her resilience and courage, displaying her unwillingness to be overcome by the pressures of her environment. Her statement serves as a powerful reminder that individual convictions should always be respected and protected.

Deola’s progressive way of thinking and her education make her a truly admirable human being. She stands against the patriarchal society, which often finds itself giving women labels based on men’s perspectives. During the course of her conversation with Wale Adeniran, when he comments on his experience in Abuja saying, “The first time I went there, all we had were the politicians and their entourage. Kingmakers, government contractors and prostitutes” (ABD 107), Deola immediately corrects him to use the more accurate term “Commercial sex workers”, emphasising, “That’s the correct terminology” (ABD 107). Her open-mindedness shows her respect for everyone around her, irrespective of their occupation or status in society. Deola is an example of how progressiveness can help create a better world where people are respected for who they are.

At various junctures, she ably demonstrates that she can exist without a male presence in her life and that her life is deemed ‘successful’ by her own standards. However, the elderly members of the Nigerian population such as her mother and friends disregard this success and view her as an old woman who is yet to commit to marriage, as if she is perpetually in an ‘incomplete’ state in her life. To elderly Nigerian women, marriage, wifhood and motherhood are more important than anything else. Deola’s

friend, Ivie, whose mother states, “All this career, career will get you nowhere as a woman” (ABD 172). She advises Deola to forget about her career and focus on having a child.

Despite the fact that Nigerian cultural values attempt to restrain her from exercising autonomy over her life choices, she staunchly maintains her position. She eventually becomes pregnant, yet refuses to hastily wed simply because of a child conceived out of wedlock. Rather, she opts to wait for the man who loves her and wants to be part of her life before agreeing to marriage. Consequently, she chooses not to marry in spite of the pressure from her mother and friends to do so.

Deola’s perspective and stance towards her own life align with the central theme of the womanist ideology of individual autonomy. Her thoughts and beliefs embody the womanist principle of self-determination, which emphasises the importance of women defining and interpreting their own reality. This notion highlights the idea that women should have agency over their own lives and be empowered to make decisions for themselves. Deola’s adherence to this belief system reinforces the significance of the womanist concept of autonomy as a tool for personal and collective liberation. In 1986, Jacquelyn Grant discussed the importance of the term “womanist” in describing the theology of black feminist. She emphasised that this term stresses the individualism of black women and their ability to assert themselves. To her, being a womanist means being true to oneself, interpreting reality from one’s own perspective, and speaking out on behalf of oneself. It is a means of asserting one’s identity and advocating for oneself in a society that often ignores or marginalises black women (Burrow 48).

Atta's fourth novel, *The Bead Collector*, published in 2018, skillfully delves into the insidious impact of colonialism on Nigerian society even after gaining independence from Western powers. The novel's characters remain entangled in a web of postcolonial thinking, unable to extricate themselves from the pervasive influence of Western cultural standards.

The narrative is set in Lagos in January 1976, six years following the conclusion of the Nigerian Civil War. The country is now under a new military regime, which has been in power for six months, but rumours of a countercoup are rife. Remi Lawal, a Nigerian entrepreneur who owns her own greeting-card business, encounters Frances Cooke, a purported art dealer from the United States. Frances claims to have come to Nigeria to attend an art exhibition in the affluent district of Ikoyi and to collect rare beads. As they converse, they develop a friendship and over several weeks, share their aspirations, relationships, loyalty, and views on motherhood with each other. Eventually, Remi invites the enigmatic Frances into her social circle.

The novel brilliantly captures the characters' complex interplay as they navigate the challenges of postcolonial identity, grappling with the legacy of colonialism and its effect on their self-conception and social positioning. *The Bead Collector* is an insightful exploration of the ongoing struggle to reclaim one's cultural identity in a world dominated by Western standards, making it an insightful and captivating read.

Tunde, Remi's husband, expresses his apprehension that Frances, like other Americans in Lagos, may be a CIA agent gathering intelligence. However, Remi dismisses his concerns, sceptical about the perpetual instability of the country and the elitist self-absorption of the city's upper class. She shares her thoughts and opinions

openly with Frances, engaging in candid discussions. Nonetheless, the assassination of General Muhammed on February 13th prompts Remi to reevaluate a particular conversation she has had with Frances. She begins to suspect, Frances, the bead collector may not be the one she claims to be, leading to a renewed sense of patriotism, which overrides her disappointment.

Sefi Atta's expertly crafted novel reframes the global espionage narrative with subtlety and wit, focusing on the drama and politics of family life. *The Bead Collector* is a poignant story of a brief friendship that portrays a Nigerian mother's yearning to contribute to her nation's growth from the comfort of her home, amidst the legacies of violence and uncertainty. The novel is a compelling exploration of the tensions between the desire for progress and the reality of postcolonial life, and how individuals navigate these competing impulses.

Sefi Atta employs the dialogues between Remi and Frances to bring forth the contrasting attitudes and opinions of people from different regions on various subjects. These conversations, presented at the end of each chapter, cover a variety of topics, including the role of women in politics, gender roles in society, marriage, polygamy, civil marriage, and many more.

Through Remi and Frances' discussions, Atta expertly captures the complexity of these issues, showcasing the various perspectives that exist even within a single community. The dialogues provide a glimpse into the diverse ways in which people think about these topics, reflecting the underlying social, cultural, and historical factors that shape their views. Atta's use of these conversations allows the reader to achieve a clear comprehension of the intricacies of Nigerian society and its ongoing struggle to reconcile

tradition with modernity. *The Bead Collector* is a thought-provoking exploration of the interplay between individual values and societal norms, and how these dynamics affect personal relationships and broader societal progress.

Through their conversations, Remi becomes increasingly fascinated by the apparent freedom that Frances enjoys in her life. Despite juggling her responsibilities as a businesswoman and a busy mother, Remi can not help but envy the seemingly unencumbered existence that Frances leads. She begins to imagine all the possibilities that might have been available to her had she not been bound by the conventions of married life. She says, “Her [Frances] lifestyle intrigued me. I imagined how much freer I would be to run my business without a husband and children” (TBC 23).

Atta’s portrayal of Remi’s yearning for a different life highlights the tension that exists between personal aspirations and societal expectations, particularly for women. Remi’s desires reflect the broader struggle of Nigerian women to balance their individual ambitions with the traditional gender roles and expectations that continue to shape their lives.

The spectre of political instability and the fear of being left destitute loom large in Remi’s life, casting a shadow over her daily existence. This persistent sense of uneasiness has led her to become fiercely independent, determined to rely only on herself and her own resources. Remi narrates:

Running my own business was ideal, meanwhile, though he [Tunde] often complained it was taking up too much of my time. He was used to having me at home, but I assured him that those days were over. I still had nights when I woke up panicking over what would happen if he died. I was forced to become a

businesswoman, even if I didn't consider myself one. . . . My life continued to revolve around the usual events in Lagos, except my social diary was now more of a work diary. (TBC 26)

Despite the weight of her worries, Remi refuses to give in to despair or to be paralyzed by fear. Instead, she channels her anxieties into a fierce determination to face each day with strength and resilience. It highlights the resilience and tenacity of ordinary people as they are forced to navigate the complexities of life amidst ongoing instability and change.

In one of her conversations with Frances, Remi confides that she feels that her efforts to maintain a stable and comfortable home for her family often go unappreciated. Despite the amount of work and care that she invests in creating a welcoming and harmonious environment, her children and husband seem to take it for granted. Remi's frustration with the ingratitude of her domestic tasks highlights the often unacknowledged labour of women in the home, which is frequently undervalued and marginalised. She vents:

To be honest, Frances, I was no good at being a housewife and I found housework such a thankless task. You raise children, you support your husband. They might love you and thank you for your efforts, but they really don't appreciate the sheer drudgery of your work. You put food on the table, they eat and they're hungry again. You clean up their mess and they make more mess. Day after day. You begin to think, What is the point? (TBC 148)

Remi's distaste for the traditional roles assigned to women in the home does not diminish her drive to assert her independence and pursue her own ambitions. Through her

successful management of a greeting-card business, she is able to carve out a space for herself outside of the confines of domestic life, while still fulfilling her multiple roles of being a wife and mother. She tells Frances:

Most Nigerian women take care of their homes and go to work. They have to. My duties as a wife and mother have not changed because I won a shop. My focus on what is important has. The moment I started working for myself, I had a better understanding of what I ought to be doing at home. I wasn't just running home. I was meant to be running a successful one. The responsibility to face your husband and speak your mind – 'I agree with such-and-such.' 'I don't agree with such-and-such.' The responsibility to guide your children — 'This is the way to go,' 'This is not the way to go,' or 'Go wherever you want.' These are the duties in which I take the most pride. (TBC 148)

By embracing both her entrepreneurial spirit and her familial obligations, Remi refuses to be confined by rigid gender norms or limited by the expectations of others. Her determination to chart her own path speaks to the resilience and strength of Nigerian women, who have long fought to assert their agency and autonomy in the face of cultural and societal barriers.

Remi, as a woman who deftly balances her personal and professional lives, also takes her commitment to her country seriously. She recognizes that her success as an independent entrepreneur not only benefits herself and her family but also contributes to the greater good of her community and nation. She says, "I'm not the best mother, I'm not the best wife, but I can make that small contribution as a Nigerian woman. I don't

care what anyone says. You can't build a nation from a head of state's house, but you can begin to build one in yours" (TBC 148).

In fact, Remi takes pride in her ability to contribute to her country through her business, seeing it as a small but important way to make a positive impact. Her dedication to her work, her family, and her country demonstrates the interconnectedness of these different aspects of her life and highlights the important role that women can play in shaping and building their communities. Through her example, Remi challenges traditional notions of gender roles and highlights the means in which women's contributions can be valuable as well as meaningful, both at home and in the wider world.

In her latest novel, *The Bad Immigrant*, released in 2022, Sefi Atta captures the story of a Nigerian family who migrates to the United States in search of better opportunities for their children. Lukmon Ahmed-Karim, the protagonist, is a failed writer and professor who moves with Moriam, his wife and their children, Taslim and Bashira, to New Jersey in 1999.

The family faces the challenge of fitting into American society, with the children adopting new accents to blend in, and Moriam finding work as a nurse. However, Lukmon struggles to find a suitable job, and despite his PhD in literature, he ends up working as a security guard. He later becomes a househusband before finally landing a teaching job in Middlesex, Mississippi, towards the end of the decade.

Atta portrays Lukmon as an unapologetic "bad immigrant" who does not aspire to become an honorary white person but rather embraces his Nigerian heritage. The novel highlights the family's struggles with racism and xenophobia, and Lukmon's ignorant perspective on these issues is presented with wicked satire. The unfiltered and raw

expressions coming from Lukmon are captivating and alluring. The satisfying portrayal of Taslim and Bashira, who succeed on their own terms, even if Lukmon may not always comprehend their choices, is a profound and thought-provoking perspective on the immigrant experience. The narrative highlights the complexities of forging one's own path in a new and unfamiliar land, where expectations and traditions often clash with personal growth and self-discovery. Ultimately, the novel presents a poignant and compelling exploration of the nuances and challenges of immigrant life, offering an insightful and powerful commentary on the human condition.

Despite immigrating to the United States, Lukmon and his family continue to adhere to traditional Nigerian gender roles to some extent. Lukmon reflects on the differences between life in Nigeria and the United States, particularly with regard to gender roles both within the household and in the wider society.

Lukmon reflects on his mother's belief that her duties revolved around their children – taking care of them and teaching them Koranic lessons: “My mother, dear woman believed her only duties were to take care of our family and teach Koranic lessons. . . . I was no smarter than my sisters, but she gave me special attention because I was a boy” (TBI 11). This quote highlights the gender roles and expectations prevalent in Lukmon's Nigerian household, with his mother prioritizing his education and future potential over that of his sisters due to his gender.

Lukmon observes that gender bias also extends to household activities in his family, with his sister Sherifat being expected to cook while he is not. This reveals a discrepancy in the way responsibilities are distributed based on gender in their household.

Despite being equally capable, Lukmon's sister is expected to perform certain tasks because of her gender. He narrates:

Sherifat would get angry with me because I wasn't expected to cook. I was only expected to clean. She was two years my senior and hated cooking. Whenever our mother called her to the kitchen, she would drag her feet and whine. She once asked Fausat, "How come he knows how to eat, but he doesn't know how to cook?" I was standing right there, so she was really asking me the question. Fausat, who didn't mind cooking, explained that boys didn't have to learn how to cook because they would one day get married and their wives would cook for them. (TBI 31)

This underscores the way in which gender roles are deeply ingrained in Lukmon's upbringing and continue to impact his family's dynamic even after their move to the United States.

In spite of his education, Lukmon initially struggled with rigid gender role expectations, taking a job as a security guard in Manhattan while his wife Moriam worked as a nurse and managed household duties. However, as he became more acclimated to life in the United States, Lukmon began to challenge his own biases and assumptions, recognising his own male chauvinism. As he reflects, "I had to acknowledge my own propensity for inverted snobbery and inherent male chauvinism. . . . I called outspoken women troublesome. America constantly challenged my perceptions and opinions, even when I lapsed into old ways of thinking" (TBI 256). This shows the evolution in Lukmon's thinking and his willingness to confront his own biases, as well as

the impact of the cultural differences between Nigeria and the United States in his perspective.

Through Lukmon's perspective, Atta criticises the Nigerian writers for being repetitive in their focus on themes like preserving culture, sovereignty, and reclaiming language, while neglecting women's concerns. Lukmon observes:

After the first generation of writers, to which Achebe and Soyinka belonged, and owing to the damage done to intellectualism and freedom of expression by the very governments they had championed, African literature was not exactly bountiful. You didn't need much effort to keep up. The issues that writers like them raised remained conveniently unresolved: the lack of sovereignty, the quest for equality and the need to reclaim language and culture. Every academic I know wrote books on the same topics. Women's rights were usually left to female lecturers. (TBI 42-43)

Moriam is portrayed as the main provider for the family, educating their children and taking care of the household. Lukmon sees even his small contributions, such as doing dishes and dropping off the children at school, as 'sacrifices' and 'progressive.' This emphasises the challenge of reconciling traditional gender roles with new expectations in a foreign country, as well as the need to challenge one's own biases.

The novel sheds light on the murders happening in minority communities like the Nigerians in America due to the stressful life in a foreign land. Moriam's coworker Bisi notes, "Oddly enough, they were all employed in healthcare. A man crushed his wife's hand in a garbage disposal unit. His wife was a nurse. Another man beat his wife to death with a baseball bat. He was a pharmacist. Some other man shot his wife to death. She was

a doctor and was he” (TBI 76). This emphasises that men are predominantly the perpetrators of such crimes and that women often fall victim to men’s uncertain emotional state.

In Nigeria, women are expected to conform to societal norms and follow the established rules. However, the novel presents instances where women yearn to lead their lives constructing their own terms without any societal restraints. Sadly, the traditional African society, which is deeply ingrained with stereotypical gender roles, impedes their desire to lead a peaceful life. According to Lukmon, Nigerian society is not tolerant towards homosexuality, and women do not have the freedom to dress as they wish. He says:

Back home, Osaro and I had a few female students who dressed like men. One called herself Firefly. I didn’t know if she was gay or not, but her head was shaved and she wrote gender-unspecific poetry. She was so popular with the English faculty that we sided with her when a group of born-again Christian students called her an abomination. They demanded that she grow her hair and wear dresses. She refused to and all Osaro had to say about her was that she needed a man to straighten her out. (TBI 96)

Moriam faces a challenge in balancing her Nigerian values with the expectations of the new country where she lives. Despite this, she remains a strong and dominant figure who provides for her family. When her friend Nia suggests that Bashira should seek counselling for her eating disorder, Moriam initially rejects the idea, saying “We don’t do that in Nigeria” (TBI 143). However, Nia explains, “Listen, counseling is nothing to be ashamed of. The teenage years can be hard on a girl. . . . Teenage girls here

have major image issues. it's all that pressure to conform to the blond and blue-eyed ideal — by the way, even white girls can't live up to" (TBI 144).

Moriam's attitude towards racism is unflinching as she navigates the challenges of providing for her family. She does not allow the racism she faces to deter her from concentrating on her work and earning a living. Lukmon reflects on Moriam's perspective, "I once asked why she wasn't offended by racism and she said, 'Because I don't rate racists.' She was being sincere and the idea that she truly believed she had the power to determine whether they offended her or not fascinated me" (TBI 186).

Moriam's resilience and strength in the face of adversity are admirable and inspiring.

Lukmon, frustrated by Moriam's disregard for his male chauvinistic attitudes, threatens her that he would send her to Nigeria and find another woman who could perform "wifely duties." He says:

I warned Moriam that I would send her back to Nigeria and get my sisters to fly over a village woman who would cook, clean and fulfill her wifely duties if she wouldn't. She found that funny. . . . She was too comfortable in America; that was the problem. In Nigeria, she would be afraid of the competition. She would have to perform her wifely duties on a nightly basis in case some other woman might. So, like every frustrated American husband, I started doing DIY jobs around the house. (TBI 189-190).

Moriam finds this funny and continues to defy Lukmon's expectations, empowered by her ability to work hard and provide for her family.

In the novel, Ranti Shonubi, who was also a co-PhD scholar of Lukmon at the University of Ibadan, is portrayed as an empowered character through the perspective of

Lukmon. He refers to her as a “feminist” and adds that “yet she was always in one revealing outfit or another. She walked as if she were daring someone to call her a slut and made every woman around her look boyish” (TBI 202). This highlights the common societal stereotype that being a feminist requires dressing in a certain way that is deemed “modest.” Lukmon’s use of the word “yet” suggests that there is a contradiction between being a feminist and dressing in revealing outfits. However, Ranti Shonubi’s confidence and disregard for these stereotypes show that being a feminist does not require conforming to societal norms and expectations.

Ranti is a strong-willed individual who continues to hold her own beliefs without being swayed by societal expectations. She chooses to follow the African-centred womanist ideology, as she believes that the feminist movement does not include the voices of Black women and only focuses on white women. Ranti states, “These *oyinbos* don’t want to know what African women have to say. They don’t even want to hear that you might have a different point of view. All they want you to do is patronize African women with simplistic messages of empowerment and demonize African men” (TBI 204). She stands firm in her conviction to ensure that African women’s voices are heard worldwide, not just in Africa.

Ranti discusses the poor status and powerlessness of women in society, highlighting that even developed countries like America have not made much progress in improving their conditions. She notes:

They think feminism begins and ends in the West. . . .Once I realized that, my eyes opened. Look at the most powerful women in this country. How many female CEOs of major corporations do they have? How many female managing

directors? Let us not bring up the fact that America hasn't yet produced a female president. Hillary Clinton is not even allowed to talk. All she is allowed to do is smile and wave. If she does more than that, they vilify her. In Hollywood, they make more money than any women in the world, but they're retired by the age of forty. So what do they do? They mutilate their faces and bodies. America is a sexist country. In fact, I would go as far as to say it's misogynistic. Yes! But they're always ready to point fingers at Africa! (TBI 204)

Ranti asserts that feminism is not limited to the Western world and that the most influential women in the United States are still not given the same opportunities as men. She points out the lack of female representation in high-ranking positions and the unfair treatment of female politicians like Hillary Clinton. She also highlights the pressure for women in Hollywood to conform to certain beauty standards and retire early, which reflects the sexist and misogynistic nature of American society. Despite this, the United States still criticises Africa for its treatment of women, which Ranti finds hypocritical.

The purpose of this discourse is not to imply that these behaviours and beliefs are exclusive to men of any particular race, or that all men partake in these forms of mistreatment. However, it is evident that these oppressive practices and attitudes towards women have been recorded in almost every society where both women and men co-exist. It is irrelevant that numerous men and occasionally a few women choose to deny that such conduct takes place in their community or household. The truth remains that numerous women have testified to the contrary. As a result, womanists pledge not to put up such abuses any longer, or at least not without putting up a fight (Burrow 47).

Women face a lot of struggles in their journey towards empowerment and self-realisation. Through the experiences of Enitan, Tolani, Deola, Remi, Moriam, Ranti, and other women in Atta's novels, it could be seen that the pursuit of equality and social change is not an easy one, especially in patriarchal societies. Despite facing challenges and criticism from society, these women refuse to conform to societal norms and instead shape their own paths.

The stories of these women serve as a reminder to stress the importance of women's empowerment and their role in bringing about social change. It is through their determination, resilience, and unwavering spirit that women are able to challenge the status quo and pave the way for future generations. Empowerment is not something that can be given to one; it has to come from within.

The journey towards empowerment and self-realization is a continuous process. The stories of these women point out that the power of resilience, self-belief and the need and importance of supporting each other become inevitable in the quest for equality and social change.