Patriarchy, Sexual Harassment, and Gendered Violence in African Society: A Radical Feminist Reading of Sefi Attah's *Swallow*

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Abstract

This study examines the persistence of patriarchy and its harmful consequences on women and the girl-child in African society. It focuses on patriarchy and its undeniable connection to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. It is against this background that Sefi Attah's novel *Swallow* is selected as a case study. The novel is undertaken to assess patriarchal oppression and parental irresponsibility, aided by the doctrines of Africana womanish. Attah explores the plight of girl-children and women in African communities, dominated by irresponsible men and careless parents. Likewise, the study surveys the birth of feminism, and the ways it has been helpful in women's battle for equal rights. To this effect, the theoretical framework is from a radical feminist perspective. Using both primary and secondary sources of data collection, the study discovers that African women contribute significantly to the development of the community, both in the traditional and modern eras. They are described as the foundation and the feeders of the nation. Such contributions, therefore, confer on them prestigious roles in society, yet they face relentless oppression. The paper concludes that it is essential to challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. It recommends recognizing women's contributions and empowering them as it is crucial for societal progress.

Keywords: African; Patriarchy; Sexism; Female; Sexual harassment.

Introduction

Sexual harassment is intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature. It may also be defined as the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favours. The legal and social definition of what constitutes sexual harassment differ widely by culture. Sexual harassment includes a wide range of behaviours from seemingly mild transgressions to serious forms of abuse. Some forms of sexual harassment overlap with sexual assault.

In the African society, women were consistently bruised and brutalised by the oppression- from men and societal demands. This was mostly imposed on them by their male counterparts. Women were regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. Two evidences are seen in the beginning of creation as recorded in the Bible, in the sense that God created the first man (Adam) before he created the first woman (Eve). The implication of this is that man is seen as the lord and hero to the woman.

According to Ebere Ezenweke in her book *A Hindrance to Women Potentials'* "women have suffered tremendous marginalisation and show of superiority complex in the past. A traditional orientation of many cultures of the world testifies to this assertion" (2). In this regard, she indicates that women's problems vary in the impact of negative cultural practices. In the same vein, Nworgu Patrick in regard to Ebere Ezenweke's claim, emphasises that:

> Educationally, women are discriminated against. Parents prefer to send male children to school to the exclusion of the girls ... In the traditional society; women are not allowed to control their hard-earned income. It is considered normal for

> wives to hand over the hard earned money to their husbands for proper control, disbursement or safekeeping. If the woman dares raise an objection to such unholy practice, she is maligned, cajoled and criticised as a social misfit. Such a woman may stand the risk of being sent packing (74).

From this view, women are helpless in the society because they are right-less and voiceless due to the cultural practices of the past which still constitute serious conflicts and tragedy in our contemporary society. In fact, this is a societal tragedy whereby a child is beaten and at the same time prevented from crying. All through history, the oppression of women is invariably constant, a part of global dilemma, ageless, systematic and deep rooted. Truly embodied within the economic, cultural, political, social and ideological global attention and becomes the subject of numerous investigations. However, Ezenweke posits that:

> Extensive local, national and global network of women have succeeded in putting women's concerns on the global agenda. Notwithstanding such positive development, women are still grossly discriminated against. Decision making and a relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls continue to wreak havoc in every corner of the world (36).

Sexual assault, sexism, gender violence and female oppression are problems that still exist in present day society. The fact that we live in a modern world with monumental technological advancement has not changed the grim reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal molded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy thereby

ensuring the continuation of the domination and repression of women.

Literary artists in our society therefore, try to expose the violence, humiliation and abuse of womanhood by the men and make efforts to redeem these deplorable conditions of women in their literary works. They also try to give answers to many questions raised on women's emancipation and the level of success recorded so far. The position of women in society has been a frequent focus of Nigerian female writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi- Adichie, Flora Nwapa, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Catherine Acholonu and a few modern ones like Chika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Kaine Agary, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ada Agbasimalo to mention but few who have engaged in literary polemics, using their arts to defend the positions of women in the society. These writers present women as victims of gender discrimination, societal oppression and spousal abuse. Their works have shown them as advocates and defenders of the rights of women. Emeka Nwabueze in his article "Woman Being in the African Society," traces the trajectory of female domination to the traditional African societies where heroic duties such as warring, hunting, and cultivating were reserved and performed by men while women were limited to cooking, hewing wood and fetching water. This was because men were considered to be more muscular and brawny than women, who are still regarded as weak and feeble.

This paper is therefore, a critical exploration of the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal African society. The African society that discriminates against women and the girl-child.and makes them perpetual tragic victims of its cultural traditions forms the fulcrum of this discourse. African women contribute significantly to the development of

society both in the traditional and modern era. They are described as the foundation and the feeders of the nation. Such contributions, therefore, confer on African women prestigious roles in society. It is against this background that this study is undertaken to examine the tragic consequences of sexual harassment and exploitation as depicted in Sefi Atta's *Swallow.*

Conceptual Framework

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole. Building on the theories of biological evolution developed by Charles Darwin, many 19th-century scholars sought to form a theory of unilateral cultural evolution. This hypothesis, now discredited, suggested that human social organization "evolved" through a series of stages: animalistic sexual promiscuity was followed by matriarchy, which was in turn followed by patriarchy.

Sexual Harassment

J.C Campbell in "Forced Sex and Intimate Partner Violence" defined Sexual Harassment as "an act in which a person intentionally sexually touches another person without that person's consent, or coerces or physically forces a person to engage in asexual act against their will. (24) It is a form of sexual violence, which includes rape (forced vaginal, anal or oral penetration or drug facilitated sexual assault), groping, child sexual abuse or the torture of the person in a sexual manner.

Sexual/Gendered Violence

Sexual violence includes Rape defined as physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration (even if slight) of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts

or an object. The attempt to do so is known as attempted rape. Rape of a person by two or more perpetrators is known as gang rape. Sexual violence can include other forms of assault involving a sexual organ, including coerced contact between the mouth and penis, vulva or anus.

Sexism

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Sexism is the belief that women are weaker, less intelligent, and less important than men. Sexism, prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls. Although its origin is unclear, the term *sexism* emerged from the "second-wave" feminism of the 1960s through '80s and was most likely modelled on the civil rights movement's term *racism* (prejudice or discrimination based on race). Sexism can be a belief that one sex is superior to or more valuable than another sex. It imposes limits on what men and boys can and should do and what women and girls can and should do. The concept of sexism was originally formulated to raise consciousness about the oppression of girls and women, although by the early 21st century it had sometimes been expanded to include the oppression of any sex, including men and boys, intersex people, and transgender people.

Sexual assault and Female oppression is a problem that still exists in present day society. The fact that we live in a modern world with monumental technological advancement has not changed the grim reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal molded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy thereby ensuring the continuation of the domination and repression of women.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is feminist criticism or feminism. The ideas of feminism have catered effectively to the movement of women for social, political and educational emancipation of women and their equality with men. Such and similar movements have been rightly termed as feminist criticism. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines feminism as: "the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. It is an organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" (456).

According to the *World Book Encyclopedia,* "Feminism is the belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men" (71). It is an organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Cynthia Cockburn in her *In The Way of Women* says that the story of modern feminism began with the American Revolution in 1784 which embodies the aspiration for equality, liberty and fraternity, shaking the old feudal and monarchical order. She further stated that the first feminist document was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792* in which she opposed men.

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Revolving around a young Nigerian lady of the mid 1980's, SefiAttah tells a story of a Nigerian yet bubbling but already beneath the weights of tyranny, wickedness and oppression. The main character TolaniAjao who in search of greener pastures found herself in the dirt of Lagos with no relation whatsoever but her ever agitated roommate, Rose whom her ex-boyfriend calls "the rumbling Rose" (8).

Tolani who grew up in a remote part of Nigeria had gone to Lagos to find a work and take care of her mother who to her was

the only thing she needed money for, but being a young girl with her own troubles and nightmares she fell for Sanwo, a good for nothing man who dresses awkwardly, lives with his uncle and his family in their boys quarters, runs errands for them and has only his numerous business plans and ideas as his only asset.

On the other hand is Rose, Sisi's daughter who believes that a man's love is measured by "…what he has done for her", by the time she was introduced to us, Rose had already dated eight men and has broken up with them all, including a Lebanese and a married man. She is inconsiderate, brash but very loyal. Tolani points out that no one ever talked bad about her in the presence of Rose without getting tongue lashed.

It is around these two and their ordeals that Sefi Attah weaves her *Swallow* on. They became roommates because Rose's former roommate, a Calabar girl could not cope with her bad attitude of littering things around and her bad temper too, but because Rose is unapologetic and saucy. She calls the girl a "Calabar witch" and saw her departure as good riddance. Being work colleagues and roommates too gave them the chance to bond with each other and fight their demons together, bad boyfriends, dirty neighbourhood, and expensive tastes. Despite their empty pockets, they fought them all together and while they conquered some, some drove them mad. The quest for money and better life in particular drove them apart, while one survived at last, another perished to the afterlife bearing the name of another person.

From the very start of the novel the readers are introduced to two women whose life have been greatly influenced by another man. Rose, who changes boyfriends just the same way she changes her views was advising Tolani to talk her boyfriend into marrying her or give him an ultimatum of six months to do so. When Tolani tries to remind

her that he has promised to do so, she asks "for how long?"(14) andTolani ashamed to say "two years"(14) didn't have much of a choice than to agree to what Rose has said. They discussed other issues involving men and women, marriage and dowry and at a point Rose say that the system of dowries should be abolished totally as it is primitive, to this, the man seated beside her eyed her.

The very day the two characters were introduced to us, played a very important role in the development of the plot and the effects of sexual harassment. It was on that day which they were nearly killed in a road accident that Rose was fired from the office because of "insubordination" as described by Mr. Ignatius, Tolani's colleague and the eldest amongst them. To some extent, the entire story line is woven around Rose's sack from the office and what led to it. Nothing else led to Rose's sack apart from the fact that she slapped Mr.Salako for a reason of sexual harassment.

Tolani was posted to replace Rose, she, just like Rose got a sexual harassment from Mr Salako but she never said a word of what happened between him and Salako to anyone. She thought that Rose would be happy to hear it and her boyfriend would blame her for letting it happen to her. She too didn't confront Mr. Salako because to some extent she blamed herself for wearing "sexy shoes" and "fashionable clothes"(61) as if it was a crime to wear those. This was the novelist's way of ridiculing our very society and echoing the injustice women faced; a society that blames a lady for getting sexually abused and harassed; a society where the likes of Sissy expose their daughters to men at a very tender age, she will say to Violet, "dance for uncle"(73); a society where the lady even blames herself for being harassed simply because she wore "sexy shoes and fashionable clothes"(61).

Tolani's second harassment was rather ironical as it came from a man who

called her “daughter”(80). Colonel Daodu, a former military man who constantly criticized the government for being despots. He was injured during the civil war and had to be helped up the stairs by Tolani. She describes him as a very tricky man who would touch her lustfully while she helped him up the stairs. She says “one minute, his fingers where on my shoulders; the next they were on my backside…”(81). The novelist could have used anybody but she opted for a man who criticized the government constantly, a man who was injured and has to be helped up the stairs and still a man who calls Tolani “daughter”. This was her way of saying that our society has decayed to the core and every man no matter how deformed or principled is still capable of harassing a woman sexually. Mr. Salako in all his sophistication and use of big words had one weakness; he was scared of juju and was always careful not to get charmed. That was the reason he appointed Tolanito replace Rose in the first place. He knew that what he did to Rose was a grave injustice and he thought that she would retaliate by poisoning him

Because Rose was sacked, broke, with a lot of bills to pay, she allowed herself to be molested and abused by O.C a drug trafficker who according to Johnny was based in the United State (US). She didn’t mind so long as the money is coming, after all its all she ever wants. Slowly, O.C turned Rose into a mini prostitute whom he could harass, abuse and insult yet still gets her laid. However, Rose has her own sense of pride and dignity. It didn’t take long before she got tired of being mistreated by O.C. She realized that money will make her regain her dignity and decided to make her own money by all means instead of waiting on men to take her bills. She decided to make it big and easy through drug trafficking. It was very easy for Rose to be put through into the drug business because her boyfriend was a trafficker. She

tried to get Tolani to swallow cocaine with her and travel to Europe, sell it and make a fortune but Tolani refused. Rose died on her way to Europe bearing a false name because the drug had busted in her belly and caused her complications which lead to her death. In Rose's case, the novelist is rather brutal and straightforward. She insinuates that a woman living in a society where the male folks are in charge must in one way or the other become a victim of sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, the case of Tolani ascertains that there might be hope for women who are sexually harassed because unlike Rose, Tolani handled her own case quite differently and in the end she was not doomed. The novelist used Tolani to make a stand on women harassment and also state that it is very possible to come out triumphant no matter how long or how often one is harassed. Tolani started witnessing sexual harassment even from a very tender age and that was the reason she didn't tell anyone about Mr. Salako's filthy advances towards her. She was thirteen when a boy in her class lifted her skirt and ran away, when she reported to the teacher, the teacher admonished her saying, Tolani, "How could you let such thing happen to you?" (55). As if it was her fault that a boy in her class was already spoilt.

This is sadly the society we live in. A society where a lady is blamed for getting sexually harassed by a man or even a boy who lacks self-control or is ill trained. A society that even the way a woman walked was enough to get her sexually harassed. However, Tolani was quite different from Rose when it concerns the matter of sexual harassment, being exposed at a very young age to the ways of men and knowing very well that it is sadly her duty to take the blame whenever she is harassed by a man. Therefore, she was more mentally prepared to tackle the harassment from men unlike Rose who was never at fault, she always has

a way of taking the blame off herself. According to her "No one cares about Rose; every man wants to use Rose…"(72).

This is what makes Tolani very different from Rose. Tolani already has a very low expectation from men and even when she gets involved with one, she does not find fault in him to leave at the slightest provocation. By the time Tolani was introduced to us, she was already in a relationship with Sanwo whom she once saved. Rose was seen advising her to give Sanwo an ultimatum to pay her bride price or leave him for another man but Tolani was not having any of it. She was ready to stick with Sanwo even though he was jobless and lived in his uncle's boys quarters, does not dress well and always has a bad haircut. Tolani wasn't ready to leave him, she was even ready to give him her savings so that he would be able to pay her bride price but Sanwo refused, he was a principled man who wouldn't want to exploit his woman, although he later took the money and invested it in a business which yielded nothing.

Tolani's experience with men however showed that there is still hope for a woman who lives amidst the sexual predators called men, the way she handled her own situation with Salako was what made her different from Rose. The first time she was sexually harassed by Salako she never believed it could happen to her, she called it the "worst" thing that happened to her that month and at the same time she didn't allow the incident break her like it did to Rose, she kept her calm and waited for the next time amidst all the gossip circulated by her colleague, Franka.

Tolani was soon suspended from the bank after she requested for a vacation and got turned down even though it was her right to get the vacation but because she didn't consent to Salako's advances she was denied. In retaliation, Tolani scared him with diabolic items and in response Salako suspended her

from the bank, a suspension which later materialized into a permanent dismissal from the office. All these because Tolani refused to open her legs to Mr. Salako

A detailed comparison of the two main characters of Sefi's *Swallow*; Rose and Tolani shows that it is inevitable for a woman living in Lagos to be completely alien to the harassment of men, especially those in power. Rose was harassed, got sacked and because of her dismissal from office she got involved in trafficking and died. Tolani Ajao was harassed, got suspended, nearly became a trafficker but didn't and instead of her life being ruined by a man's libido, she went ahead and embarked on a journey of self-discovery which helped her a great deal. The fictional lives of this two women asked and answered a question of the inevitability of a woman facing harassment from man, their two lives also illuminated the importance of self will and how long it can go in helping one recover from the shocks of sexual harassment, while Tolani did recover, Rose did not.

Conclusion

This research has shown tremendously how the feminist female literary writers have come up to condemn the exploitation of women by their male counterparts and some fellow women who have allowed themselves to be used to perpetuate various unspeakable acts of violence against their kind. They have pleaded that women should not be seen as totem for the society's sacrifice. Sefi Atta just like other female writers of African origin, have succeeded in demanding that the rights of a girl child should be respected as a full-fledged member of the society. And not to be violated by any man or woman; that the woman should be given equal educational empowerment alongside her male counterparts.

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