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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Unveiling the Depths of the African Woman Experience: An Africana Womanist Interpretation of Sefi Atta's *Swallow*

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| ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to analyse Sefi Atta's novel *Swallow* (2010), from an Africana womanist perspective. The objective is to contribute a deeper and more unique understanding of the African woman's experience. Additionally, it seeks to challenge the superficial labelling of S. Atta as merely a feminist, based on Western standards. The research adequately demonstrates the key features of Africana womanism that are effectively integrated by the female protagonists in *Swallow*. The traits of these womanists encompass authenticity, true affiliation via sisterhood, compatibility with males and a natural aptitude for mothering and caring. This study assesses the African woman's struggle against patriarchal oppression and subjugation, aided by the doctrines of Africana womanism. The research highlights the importance of Africana womanism as an essential theoretical framework for evaluating women's experiences and accomplishments in African and African American literature, using the principles of Africana womanism.

| KEYWORDS

Africana womanism, black woman writings, Sefi Atta, *Swallow*, motherhood, Gender complementariness, sisterhood.

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### 1. Introduction

It is through the efforts of third-generation Nigerian women writers, like Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Rosemary Esehagu, Chibundu Onuzo, Lola Shoneyin and others, that the unvarnished dimension of African woman reality is unveiled. They meticulously portray the socioeconomic instability of African women, addressing the consequences of global and transnational business for the country with the hope of redemption (Nadaswaran 2014, 381). Living abroad during the 1980s, in search of education and employment, these writers exhibit transnational identities, multiple exposures and postmodern dislocations. However, these diasporic writers are keen to keep a connection with their mother country by demonstrating a sense of commitment to expose the chaotic dark side of post-independent Nigeria. Undoubtedly, these writers possess sufficient reservoirs of anguish and bitterness against the oppressive forces that subjugate women in postcolonial Nigeria. However, instead of adopting radical feminist concepts originating from the Western world, they ground their women in African values and beliefs. The works of third-generation Nigerian women writers reconstruct established conceptions of women as occupying subordinate and stereotypical roles, delineating the development of female protagonists and the means by which they attain autonomy and self-determination. Their writings present a comprehensive depiction of Nigerian women who are educated, ambitious and determined, while still fulfilling the roles of wives, mothers and daughters. This combination challenges the traditional notion of women's domesticity that has historically influenced the portrayal of women in Nigerian literature. In the same vein, Nadaswaran (2011) opines that "Their female metamorphosis and self-discovery begin from adolescence, marking a shift from earlier representation of female characters" (19).

Sefi Atta, a third-generation women writer, was born in 1964, in Nigeria, just after the country gained independence. For 14 years, she resided in Nigeria, during which time she developed a profound curiosity for the lives of her contemporaries. Abdul-

Aziz Atta, her father, held the positions of Secretary to the Federal Government and Head of the Civil Service, until his demise in 1972. He was a Muslim from Okeene, whereas her mother, Iyabo Atta, was a Christian and belonged to the Yoruba ethnic group. Nevertheless, despite her parents' differing views, Atta was consistently exposed to both, which caused her great confusion in her childhood and beyond. Hence, Atta and many Nigerian authors of the third generation frequently explore the theme of ambiguity via their heroes (Atta & Collins 2007, 123-24).

Atta first embarked on her creative career as a playwright, achieving fame for her plays in both Nigeria and London, where they were broadcast by the BBC. Her plays were staged for African performances on the BBC in 2002 and 2004. Atta has authored many plays, including *Makinwo's Miracle* (2004), *The Engagement* (2005), *A Free Day* (2007) and *The Cost of Living* (2011). She acquired significant popularity as a playwright, to the extent that she was considered to be the rightful successor to the renowned Nigerian Yoruba celebrated dramatist, Soyinka. Subsequently, Atta switched to the realm of fiction and was soon recognised as a talented novelist and short-story writer. Atta's literary works have received prestigious awards from Zoetrope, Red Hen Press, the BBC and PEN International. In 2006, they were selected as finalists for the prestigious Caine Prize for African Literature. Additionally, her first novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, published in 2005, won the esteemed Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. Afterwards, Atta published two further books, namely, *Swallow* (2010) and *A Bit of Difference* (2012). Her short stories have been published in many well-known journals.

Atta's writings primarily focus on Nigeria as a post-independence state, highlighting the tension between traditional and Western cultures and the oppressive patriarchal structures in Nigerian society. Refusing to be labelled as a feminist, Atta declared in an interview with Ike Anya: "I see the world from a woman's perspective." By embracing a realist approach to writing, she focuses on the everyday challenges faced by women, such as repressive parents, abusive husbands and restrictive in-laws. She prioritises these issues over national problems like despotic rulers, military regimes and intruding security forces. This is because women experience oppression within their immediate family environments. Nevertheless, Atta is aware of the tyranny that extends beyond the confines of the family and portrays the repressive social, political, religious and economic systems in her writings.

Atta's novel *Swallow* abounds in womanist characteristics. Nevertheless, the majority of the current research on the novel under scrutiny uses similar techniques and methodologies for assessing its literary worth. Nwiyi's (2014) "Survival and Female (Ad)venturing in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*" and "The African Woman's Struggle and Survival: An Analysis of Sefi Atta's *Swallow*" by Ganyo (2023) employ feminist perspectives to examine woman's imperative need for survival, despite social, gender and economic oppression. A study entitled "Lagos Landscapes and the Shifting Discourses of Aesthetics in Sefi Attah's *Swallow*" by Peverga & Shija (2022) highlights Nigeria's postmodern literature twist and realism's role in creative writing, despite the cosmopolitan environment's influence on Nigerian literature. In this particular quest, it is impossible not to see a distinct lack of research. Conducting an examination of Africana womanist principles in *Swallow* is therefore relevant. Therefore, this study employs Africana Womanism as an appropriate and adequate discourse to appreciate Atta's novel *Swallow*.

Published in 2010, *Swallow* offers insights into the city lifestyle in Nigeria, focusing specifically on Lagos. It portrays the unpleasant realities of the city, including its foul-smelling environment, dangerous highways, the questionable behaviour of some of its residents, a corrupt military government, dishonest bank employees and alluring mafia drugs. It explores the lives of three female protagonists: Tolani, her mother, Arike, and her friend, Rose. The novel portrays the lives of two generations of women who face the oppressive forces of colonial and post-colonial patriarchy, which seek to suppress them at every stage of their lives. These women navigate the demands of marriage and career at different points in their life.

The novel is set amid the turbulent social, economic and political conditions of 1980s Nigeria. These circumstances heavily influence the lives of the two friends, Tolani and Rose, and the events that unfold in their lives. However, Arike, the ambitious mother of Tolani, serves as a lens through which the novel portrays the experiences of a woman who observes the transformation of the town of Makoku from the colonial era to the post-independence period. Her narrative depicts the realities of life in colonial Nigeria, with a particular focus on the progressive evolution of rural communities.

## 2. Theoretical framework of Africana Womanism:

After African independence, there has been a persistent desire, particularly among the intellectual elite, to reject the ideological influence of the Western world. Anglo-American Feminism is perceived as harmful to indigenous African communities. The concerns of feminists are often perceived as separatist, originating from Western cultures, and believed to cause fragmentation, as emphasised by Sherley Anne Williams (1986), referring to "...an already divided and embattled race, as trivial mind-games unworthy of response while black people everywhere confront massive economic and social problems" (218). African critics of feminism argue that the majority of Western interpretations of feminism are not applicable to their women in a wider context, since they fail to acknowledge the social, economic and cultural difficulties experienced by women in non-Western nations. Ifi Amadiume (1987), a Nigerian writer, criticises white feminists for participating in a form of "victim imperialism" because they use the suffering of black women to further their gender-focused anti-discrimination agenda. In fact, thinkers such as Ogunyemi

(1985) vehemently object to the frequent comparisons of white women to black women in Western feminist discussions, since they believe that this parallel unfairly exploits the passion, ambition, and energy of the black movement. Furthermore, the comparison avoids, within its rhetorical obscurity, the severe reality (60).

The womanist philosophy places significant importance on the principles of sharing and caring (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, 1988). Okonjo-Ogunyemi wants to represent the requirements of Black women within the framework of patriarchal, colonial and post-colonial encounters. According to Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1998), the primary goal of womanism is the unification of black individuals, regardless of their location. She emphasises that a womanist is dedicated to fundamental principles and actively advocates for the well-being and survival of both genders in society. Men play a crucial role in women's lives, and their ongoing presence is certain. Hudson-Weems (1993) asserts that womanism differs from the white patriarchal principles advocated by feminism:

Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana Womanism is not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women ... The primary goal of Africana women, then, is to create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and in action. (pp. 24, 50)

Therefore, the primary objective of Africana womanism is to promote the recognition and empowerment of the African race, emphasising their autonomy and genuine identity.

Joyce Ladner, as quoted in Humm (1994), argues that "black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be the oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women and children" (52). Therefore, it may be inferred that Africana womanism is a type of awareness that encompasses the intersections of race, economics, culture, politics and nationalism (Hill Collins, 1991; Phillips, 2006). Africana womanism embraces the concept of a "collective struggle" against all forces of subjugation and victimization. Promoting the value of genuine sisterhood, Toni Morrison (1992) states that women should support their fellow females against all forms of oppression and team up with men to find the ultimate panacea for racial oppression (137).

In brief, Africana womanism focuses on family relationships, motherhood and sisterhood. It promotes open-arms accommodation to all, welcoming and appreciating a male presence and participation in the struggle. The following discussion attempts to examine Atta's novel *Swallow* utilising the principles Africana womanism to explore the depths of African women's experiences with the aim of recognising and evaluating their struggle to attain emancipation and rights.

### **3. a. The Africana woman as male-compatible, mothering and nurturing:**

Examining the close relationship between the attributes of Africana womanism, such as prioritising family and qualities of mothering and nurturing and being compatible with her partner, Hudson-Weems (2008) elucidates that "The Africana womanist insisted on identifying herself as mother and companion ... The Africana womanist is family-centered, as she is more concerned with her entire family rather than with just herself and her sisters" (pp. 58–65). *Swallow* depicts a mother-daughter relationship that is characterised by harmony and reassurance between Tolani and her mother, Arike, who possesses qualities such as compassion, mentorship, support, decisiveness and self-confidence. The novel seems to intentionally align with Africana womanism, particularly in its portrayal of strong female characters, as described by Weems and Ogunyemi. Arike's life experience provides a remarkable source of inspiration for her daughter. Her story represents a narrative of the progression of women's emancipation throughout several generations. A woman's power stems from her capacity to be self-reliant and inspire others to support her in the fight against injustice and exploitation. In addition, Arike acquires knowledge about the traditional male-dominated system that oppressed her grandmothers, caused psychological harm to her mother, and is currently being perpetuated in a contemporary manner by supposedly educated professional men in Lagos as she grows into a young woman fit for marriage. Although Arike often expressed her desire to remain unmarried, her father was anxious about upholding the societal norm of matrimony for her. Arike serves as an exemplary figure for other women who strive to attain further rights for themselves. She assists her daughter and other women of the subsequent generation in a manner similar to the support her aunt provided for her.

After her husband's death in a car accident, Arike finds herself in a state of financial insolvency, compounded by the responsibility of raising her daughter, Tolani. Her proficiency in the textile dyeing industry elevates her to the status of a prosperous businesswoman and saves her household. The combination of her diligent efforts, innovative thinking and unwavering resolve yields significant rewards in her life. She grows resilient and unwavering, acquiring fortitude against adversities. Arike's announcement: "I will not wait around to be beaten" (Atta 2010, p 179) seems to encapsulate the will of women to resist and overcome all forms of tyranny. Atta's womanist stance is evident as she promotes the idea that all women should recognise their power and not allow others to oppress them. For Atta, mothers should strive to develop their own character strength, similar to Arike who serves as an exemplary figure for her daughter and the younger generation.

However, Tolani's mother acknowledges that the indigenous worldview has the potential to empower women, though it is undeniably limited. Consequently, it is the responsibility of each successive generation to educate and support the following generation of women in effecting further advancements. The novel illustrates how Arike instructs Tolani on adjusting her societal expectations and cultivating self-appreciation. Tolani's mother is a staunch advocate for women's rights and has the ability to assist her daughter in bringing about a transformative development for women by confronting and challenging injustices, while advocating for a new societal framework. Tolani's return to her hometown, after all the challenges she encountered in Lagos, obviously reflects the strong bond between mother and daughter.

The essential aspect of the male-female relationship in the womanist paradigm is the nurturing and supportive element. In this novel, Tolani is portrayed as the ideal example of a Nigerian woman who, instead of solely asserting herself, includes and supports her male counterparts in their struggle. Tolani can feel confidence in her man, Sanwo, describing him as "the man I trusted" (Atta 2010, p.37). The initial encounter between Tolani and Sanwo demonstrates the harmonious nature of their relationship. Tolani portrays Sanwo as a dutiful and conscientious citizen. She resolves to contribute her personal resources to him for investments, with the intention of using the resulting profits as a dowry for their marriage. As a typical African womanist, she wishes to accompany her lover in order to progress in life and defy all the shackles of victimization.

Tolani exemplifies the characteristics of a womanist via her genuine care for both individuals and the nation. Although she briefly entertains the idea of getting involved in drug trafficking as a means to earn more money and escape her financially unstable middle-class life, she ultimately rejects this temptation after engaging in deep self-reflection and seeing that she is not desperate enough to resort to such illegal activity. Her genuine concern for her people distracts her from indulging in this illegal conduct of drug trafficking, which can lead to massive corruption and threaten youth health and national development.

### **3. b. African woman as authentic to culture and people:**

Hudson-Weems (1993) argues that the black American community is characterised by its unique "...African cultural experiences, retaining the African ways in African-American culture" (p. 57). Hence, individuals of African descent commonly assign names and titles to both themselves and fellow members within their group. By doing so, they refuse to accept the inaccurate and misleading categorization of African women and men that was once "left in the hands of the dominant group" (p. 2). For example, in *Swallow*, the characters are given names drawn from African culture to reflect their status. The ruler is designated as "*Oba*", and a married woman is named "*Mama*". Atta also gives her characters indicative and symbolic Yoruba names to celebrate their African roots. Being rewarded at the end of the novel, the name "Tolani" indicates "one who deserves wealth". As a highly qualified and accredited woman and mother, Arike's name means "one who should be cared for" (most popular Yoruba names).

Atta's African womanist stance is clearly highlighted when she celebrates African indigenous culture as crystallized in her characters Arike and her aunt Alaro. Arike embodies the resilience of traditional African culture, which survived despite the long period of colonization. Atta examines traditional practices to demonstrate that African/ Nigerian women were not submissive throughout the colonial era. Instead, they played an active role in leading cooperative societies, as exemplified by Alaro, Arike's aunt. Through the character of Alaro, Atta depicts the Yoruba and Igbo pre-colonial communities, whose gender structures were very adaptable. Women in these societies assumed duties often fulfilled by males and gained the power and authority that were traditionally associated with men. Typically carried out by males, these activities allow women to obtain the power and authority normally and solely desired by men. In pre-colonial Yoruba and Igbo civilizations, her persona exemplifies the equality of males and females. Her characters demonstrate that within pre-colonial societies, the distinctions between male and female were primarily based on physical characteristics, without any underlying presumptions regarding personalities or psychology. Both Alaro and Arike serve as exemplary figures for the contemporary generation of women, as proposed by Atta in the novel. To highlight the significance of African womanist identification with the norms of African tradition, Tolani is very keen to promote an amicable rapport with her neighbours, thus demonstrating her deep regard for the Nigerian tradition of honouring the elderly, such as Mrs Durojaiye and Mama Chidie.

Tolani's recollections of her village, Makoku, attest to her passion for the rural life of her hometown during the pre-colonial era and the early stages of colonial control when people used to live in close harmony with the natural environment,

...with yam and cassava farms, streams where children bathed, rocks over which women beat their wrappers clean. Men fished where the riverbed dipped, and all around were bushes and plants, most of which were unnamed, but people knew which leaf was bitter, which leaf looked like chicken feet, which leaf held poison, and which leaf, if brewed with peppery tree bark could break a fever. (Atta 2010, p.38)

Tolani notes that the development of urbanisation is having a negative impact on rural life. The process of urbanisation is having a catastrophic impact on the economics of rural communities that rely solely on agriculture. Consequently, she is concerned about the diminishing size of agricultural areas in her town.

Tolani is also preoccupied with the deplorable living conditions in her neighbourhood. She feels very disappointed and utterly powerless regarding the state of the roads in Lagos city. At the outset of the work, she highlights the plight of individuals who traverse the roadways of Lagos. She criticises the government's inability to handle minor issues, like bus stops, and its failure to address the financial misconduct of politicians and bureaucrats who embezzle the nation's funds. Tolani witnesses the inconsistency of affluent Nigerians who refuse to assist the impoverished under any circumstances. For example, she wonders at an affluent customer's concept of getting the redemption money for an empty bottle of Coca-Cola and comments:

The redemption money for an empty bottle of Coca-Cola was a few kobs. Couldn't she find a beggar to give? Children of the elite were rather dumb. Out of common sense, why wouldn't they care about what was happening? They saw others looking hungry, poor, frightened, and all they cared about were foreign clothes. The whole country could be in flames, and they would be trying to get on the next flight out, packing their Ferragamo and Fendi into their Louis Vuitton bags, yet they couldn't sleep peacefully at night for fear of armed robbers. Wasn't that enough to think about? (Atta 2010, p. 200)

The above lines expose the uncompromisingly critical perspective of privileged individuals who boast about their purchases of foreign clothing, food, bags etc., but never exhibit any sense of loyalty towards their homeland or concern for their fellow people trapped in poverty. Atta intentionally delineates "a contemporary Nigeria where the rot of greed, lust for ostentation, and rampant power abuse produce a shallowness and dangerous shortsightedness in those who are better off, whereas the poor and the maimed live lives of shocking precariousness" (Gagiano 2013, p. 62).

At the end of the story, Tolani, the village girl, takes the decision that life in Lagos is very miserable and tainted by corruption and oppressive systems. As a result, she chooses to return to her hometown and begin over, with the intention of including her man, Sanwo, in her future, and also her mother.

### **3.c. Africana woman as genuine in sisterhood:**

The Africana womanist can cultivate intimate sisterhood. This attribute is defined by Hudson-Weems (1993) in the following:

This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody empathetic understanding of each other's shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. (p. 65)

*Swallow* delineates the exploitation and subjugation of women by gender-based violence, which encompasses sexual assault, domestic abuse and trafficking. These types of violence have a greater impact on women compared to other groups. The concept of sisterhood holds great significance in the lives of women, especially in pre-colonial African civilization. It alludes to the affiliations and interrelations among the female members of a specific tribe or community. Women have distinct obligations and responsibilities within their own societies. They routinely cooperate to assist one another in their everyday activities by collectively engaging in tasks like farming, cooking and raising children. In African culture, sisterhood is an effective instrument for fostering communal cohesion, reciprocal assistance and the empowerment of women. It is a crucial aspect of most African cultures that has contributed to the survival and unity of the community.

*Swallow* highlights the rapport of sisterhood and collaboration between Tolani and Rose. The narrator provides a comprehensive and intricate description of their daily routine, which involves sharing rooms, chairs, perspiration and chatter. The reader gains insights into their friendship, personalities, romantic relationships, collaboration and temptations. Tolani and Rose have chosen to establish themselves in Lagos, lured by the promise of liberty, affection and wealth. They are around forty years old, find life monotonous and really dislike their employment. Furthermore, due to their limited income, they can only afford a run-down flat located in a remote suburb. Consequently, they have to endure long hours of commuting in hazardous circumstances on overloaded buses, to and from their workplace. Life becomes even more dire when Rose loses her job due to her act of slapping her superior, Mr Salako. Following Rose's loss of her position, Tolani perseveres through her misconduct and attempts to maintain a kind and friendly attitude towards her. Tolani's sympathetic attitude towards Rose is intensified as she resonates: "...Truly. She had no job, no savings or relations to depend on. There was a month's difference between her and a beggar" (Atta 2010, p. 57). She pardons Rose's arrogant disposition and deficiencies and attempts to fully understand when she concludes: "...that was Rose, five times a girl, no explanations or apologies..." (Atta 2010, p. 26). Tolani's comments demonstrate her sincere and impartial approach, as she appreciates the nature of her fellow woman, acknowledging both her shortcomings and virtues. This showcases a genuine sense of sisterhood. She keeps warning Rose against indulging in the crime of drug trafficking: "Rose ... We have to be

careful. Too much is happening. When things go wrong like this, one after the other... " (Atta 2010, p. 114). Knowing about the sudden loss of Rose, she kept shivering and blaming herself for allowing Rose to join the drug mafia.

Moreover, sisterhood transcends individual relationships and involves collaborative efforts and the establishment of a sense of community. It entails women collaborating to bring about social transformation, either through grassroots action, political participation or organising endeavours that tackle women's concerns and advance women's empowerment (Okpokwasili 2023, p. 172). *Swallow* remarkably highlights the significance of African women's collaboration when Alaro leads one of the first successful campaigns against forced marriage by orchestrating a demonstration march to the Oba's Palace. This collaborative effort successfully avoided Arike falling prey to this exploitive patriarchal practice of forced marriage. Another example of women's collaboration to achieve activate transformation is crystalized in the character of Mrs Duorjaiye, whose active participation in strikes and union meetings, protesting against nurses' killings, makes the government concede women's pay demands and their civil rights.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the principles of Africana womanism, such as the importance of motherhood, the notion of gender complementarity, the strong relationship between women and authenticity and people and culture are profoundly employed by Sefi Atta in *Swallow*. Sefi Atta's female protagonists, Tolani, and her mother, Arike, in *Swallow* exhibit confidence, assertiveness and great determination as they navigate the challenges of establishing their identity within a patriarchal culture. However, they encounter racial and gender prejudice both within their own community and outside it. These women serve as role models for African women who are enduring ongoing subjugation and suffering due to patriarchal systems. They are able to cultivate strong connections with one another in order to flourish. Through mutual female bonding and friendship, women gain the courage, capability and moral support necessary to challenge the influence of patriarchy and effectively address other concerns. These black women provide support and guidance to one another, treating each other with equal respect. By embracing their culture and living harmoniously with their menfolk, they have the chance to forge their own identities within their families and society.

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