

Survival and Female (Ad)venturing in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*

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Abstract: *This essay examines Sefi Atta's second novel, Swallow, its narrative thrust in exploring and representing socio-economic issues in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates the impact, processes of (ad)venturing and survival engaged in the nation's deplorable state where the female folk dominate Atta's creative view as bearing the brunt of its socio-economic malady. My focus therefore investigates how Atta's deployment of feminist tropes and perspectives accentuate tensed female positions as asphyxiated between male dominated systems and deplorable socio-economic conditions that make survival an even more precarious imperative. Significantly, we discover, Atta's transnational status as a migrant writer in no way dims her creative focus, but compellingly heightens her re-invention of 'home' from the Diaspora, her affinity and awareness of the socio-cultural milieu irrespective of geographical dislocation from the narrated territory. Her novel's strength therefore lies in its ability to scathingly highlight social, gender and economic caste as means of subjugation in contemporary Nigeria and the need to survive this as the raison d'être for (un)successful transnational flight.*

Keywords: *Transnational, Survival, Diaspora, Home, Migrant and Raison d'être*

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for survival and the diverse strategies adopted to ensure the attainment of same as an imperative is usually not presumptuously disregarded in Africa. Quite aware of our common crises and a perpetual need to exist beyond the lingering bedlam that characterises our post-independence existence, writers of African Literature, reinvent these crises as we strive for survival and socio-economic wholeness. Sefi Atta's novel highlights moments in Nigeria's socio-historical life that compel pensive attention, "moments in history when events have seemed to loom larger than any individuals" (Lewis Nkosi 1981:31). Reinventing the impact of the SAP: Structural Adjustment Programme, its diverse economic reforms and policies of 1986 which was government's effort at controlling public and government expenditures through strict austerity measures that crushed the masses; Atta situates her narrative and explores the human condition and crude socio-economic existence in Nigeria. In other words, while Atta explores the moral development and reaction of her characters in the face of these debilitating crises, she emphasises their moral development, reactions and survival as crucial in these crises. Consequently, Atta does not seem to accord primal position to the historical antecedent which forms the background of her story but, rather, the moral and social development/destruction of her characters in the face of these unfolding events which test the individual character and the ability of each one to survive lingering national perilous times.

The novel expresses a sensibility molded predominantly in the eventualities of post-independence existence and the difficulty associated with fashioning out a sustainable government that can ensure development and the well being of its masses. Atta seems really interested in furnishing us with creative details of the travails of young women, men, mothers and their children as they struggle to survive this period of structural adjustment and other austerity measures which characterise the government and time Atta's *Swallow* is set in. The narrative seems subtle but engages pungent details and imagery in challenging those injustices common in the Nigerian society from the 1980s till date. *Swallow* is an existential story, because we see it exploring vividly the human condition in Nigeria.

2. (AD)VENTURING AND SURVIVAL IN *SWALLOW*

In *Swallow*, Atta focalises concerns which highlight the human condition while exploring thematic and narrative concerns from a largely gendered perspective. Atta, in an interview with Ike Anya, (August 6, 2008) unapologetically remarks: “I see the world from a woman’s perspective and I can’t help that.” Typically, Atta’s feminist vision influences her story and its characterisation. This perspective is palpable throughout the narrative as she maintains her focus in interrogating existence from the standpoint of Nigerian masses but also emphasizing that, in horrendous post-independence existence, women remain the most vulnerable to socio-economic victimization because of the social and cultural configurations that are largely associated with their gender, and are also determining factors of survival within the Nigerian polity. She outlines dramatically the plight of various women trapped professionally, socially and traditionally within the strictures of patriarchy and demonstrates the debilitating effect of these as motivating the need for survival and change in the female conditions.

Swallow 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. They work at the Federal Community Bank. Their superiors take advantage of them, and through their experiences, we see fraudulent bureaus and the corruption which defines bureaucratic processes in Nigeria despite the austerity measures adopted by the government. The narrative opens with Tolani’s narrative voice which lingers throughout the novel as an initial despondent survey of the existential struggles and frustrations of Nigerians through her view. She summarises in the frightful confession this despondency: “Normally I pretended not to see beggars. It was almost like seeing my future.” (20). Atta explores poverty, social decadence and breakdown of law and order in post-independence Nigerian amongst others, as she presents women’s future and invariably the nation’s future as hopeless, bleak and crippled.

In this richly structured narrative, Atta probes social class, avarice, gender bias and morality. The protagonist, Tolani displays admirable strength and courage in a world that constantly questions everything she believes in and holds as moral. Rose, Tolani’s friend and work mate seems to verbally set the pace for the tension and conflict which brews at the beginning of the novel till her tragic exit from the still unfolding plot line of the narrative with her commandeering statement: “no woman can afford to be nice in this place. It’s a war between men and us. A war you hear me? So...make sure your demands are met” (11). Virginia Sapiro (1986:52) suggests that “when one nation or class or people dominate another, we can usually reasonably assume that this situation was brought about and is maintained through competition and force.” In Rose’s opinion, the quest for survival is one made against the status quo of the male order and dominance which seems to be inimical to the survival of women in such tense socio-economic climate. As a result of this, Atta persistently identifies manhood with craftiness and deceit as we see through the characters of Mr. Salako, Alhaji Umar, biddable Sanwo, Ajao and OC Okonkwo; and conveys this overtly through her careful choice of words and sarcasm placing both genders at distinct ends.

Although the experiences of Tolani, Rose and other characters in the novel are experimental of Sefi Atta’s perception and projection of motherland. The agitation and the quest for survival which Atta reinvents account for the strong sense of exasperation and makes Atta’s narration of motherland from the Diaspora dystopian. Atta’s characters are real and easy to come by as typical Nigerian masses. They want ‘out’ and struggle to obtain freedom from inimical forces by whatever means. This stiffens the conflict and makes their (ad)venturing for survival rather compelling.

The narrative also reveals that in reinventing ‘home’ from the Diaspora, the city and its urban settlements which serve as formidable settings in this novel serve as microcosms through which the activities of the Nigerian nation are interrogated. Atta interrogates contemporary experiences in Nigeria against the backdrop of the city of Lagos which is defined by anomalies, considering the perceived notion and conception of the city as a place of enduring fulfilment. As Atta projects, Adeoti (2007:3) also maintains that:

The Nigerian city is the hall-mark of all that is wrong with the nation, the repository of post-colonial anomy. To understand in depth the socio-economic and political crises confronting the

nation is to closely examine life in the city in its multiple dimensions.

Atta succeeds in highlighting these through her novels which beam their search lights on the activities and tensions which define contemporary Nigerian city life. This also affirms Adeoti's (2007:2) position that "literature provides the analysis of Nigeria's socio-political predicaments in a manner, and to an extent, that cannot be ignored." The exploration of the Nigerian scenery with this technique alongside the first person narrative voice which Atta employs also calls up the authenticity and adds credence to the reality of this narration of 'home' from the Diaspora.

Survival is an imperative in this novel. When the pressure to survive becomes palpable, Rose, like many Nigerians, sees the possibility and opportunity of leaving the shores of the country at any cost to escape the social, political, and economic malaise of the nation as *raison d'être*. It is on this sad note that Rose makes plans to serve as a drug mule for OC Okonkwo. Rose is a courageous and confrontational woman, the alter ego of Tolani since she would rather confront oppressive systems, than die without making even the most life-threatening effort. Atta's scathing indictment of the failure of the post-independence state to provide opportunities for its citizens to develop projects the rather alarming conditions of living in Nigeria and engaged for leaving Nigeria.

On the other hand, Atta comments on the fortunate and unfortunate 'Andrews' (a notable figure in the War Against Indiscipline advertisement). In rather sarcastic terms, she raises the issue of migration and the probable factors responsible for this abandonment of 'home' in search of greener pastures. According to Tolani, 'Andrew' had become the national nick-name for Nigerians who lived overseas. They were not the good citizens like those of us who stayed and suffered." (*Swallow*, 54). At this rate, she not only seems to justify the search for greener pastures outside 'home' as a venture towards survival but derides with her choice of words and biting sarcasm the sanity and propriety of those good citizens who "stayed at 'home' and suffered." (54)

It is survival and (ad)venture which proves Tolani's mother's worth as an African woman and mother when she conceives Tolani from her brother-in-law for her sterile husband. Tolani shares in the pain and complexities which shroud her mother's existence as an African woman who must validate her biological status by her maternity irrespective of the fact that her husband is sterile. She however comes to terms with the harsh reality of her mother's morality and strategy at surviving societal demand.

3. THE QUESTION OF MORALITY

Swallow holds in it a questioning mood through which the authenticity and efficacy of government policies are scrutinized. Also sustained throughout the novel is the interrogation of the concept of morality in a society like Nigeria. Thus, Atta examines certain practices ranging from bureaucratic to cultural for what may be described as moral worth.

The question of morality in the course of survival is focalised alongside survival. Through her characters and the test of character each undergoes and the results which attend these, Atta makes statements on the moral development and state of Nigerians. The Federal Commercial bank which should cater for the needs of the masses rather breeds a corrupt cabal and provides for corrupt military governors, government ministers and ex-politicians, hiring and firing its unfortunate staff at will. Rose reacts to her immediate dismissal from duty hysterically and makes a statement that sheds much light on the true state of things in her country:

No justice. No justice for people like us. You hear? Only for the wicked and the corrupt in this country. Look at Salako-everything he steals from the bank, taking money from customers, taking bribes. (22)

Moral learning and ethical deliberation are vital in any society. However, Atta presents a thin line between morality, the quest and means of survival for the masses in her narrative. Consequently, with their drug deal, Rose and OC Okonkwo define a new Nigerian morality in a milieu where most wealth is ill gotten from shady deals, corruption, mismanagement of government funds and trafficking drugs.

On returning from life in the urban city of Lagos to the quickly metamorphosing Makoku village Tolani expresses dissatisfaction with life in the village also. The challenges of traditional beliefs, myths, practices and the confrontation which contemporaneity readily unsettles, a now perplexed Tolani admits: "Now on the one hand, I wanted to escape Lagos; on the other was the possibility that, in my 'home'town, I would discover that I was not my father's daughter." (164). At this point, the narrative, comments critically on gender equality and disparity, probing the propensity for traditionally generated practices to infringe on the rights of women as human beings. Sapiro's (1986:52) posits that, "the primeval struggle through which men have asserted their dominance over women is more deeply embedded in many cultures." The mystery behind Tolani's paternity is a source of concern for her. Tolani confesses to 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. (184)

Through Rose, Atta takes this further and overtly questions the extreme demands of African cultural practices and the docile nature of Nigerians who sometimes hold on tenaciously to these practices which frequently pose as threats to the existence of Nigerians and Africans at large. According to Rose:

It's rubbish. How many motherless children do we have around and we continue to see childbirth as the ultimate. You must born pikin, you must born pikin by force. That's what I have 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 an African existence. (185)

Against these backdrops Atta explores and contrasts the personalities and moral development of her characters. She probes the concept of avarice and how this propels the decision and activities of her characters. She seems to suggest that greed, rather than poverty, drives the typical Nigerian who takes to making ends meet through irremissible means. Consequently, she lumps our heads of state that steal, boards of directors, prostitutes and barons together. This again raises a question on morality and what it entails in the face of stiff austerity measures and economic difficulty which always privilege the already bourgeois class of society and not the proletariat. Atta, who repudiates greed and projects it as destructive, dramatises through the strong moral drive of Tolani, who though already lured into being a drug mule like Rose, re-examines her morality *vis-à-vis* her survival and turns her back on the deal through a change of event not unconnected Rose's fatal failure. Atta creates a survivor in Tolani when she rescues her and presents us with another possibility of survival as she passes her moral test. Tolani makes discoveries on which her progress and moral development are hinged. Atta seems to posit that the onus lies on women to be intrepid, hard-working and dogged even as they face the challenges and conflicts that ensue considering the fact that they act contrary to received status quo, in a bid to escape the denigration associated with their gender and socio-economic class.

Atta utilises a simple and fluid style .While exploring the dysfunctional socio-economic situation of post-independence existence, she focalises her female characters overtly. The narrative therefore explores looming gender biases and subjugation within the framework of socio-economic life. Towards the end of the first part of the novel, and in the second part of the novel, unmasking what may be described as manipulative patriarchal order and the several attempts of Atta's female characters to survive is critical and intense. When the narratives plot structurally comes to an end, *Swallow* still seems to be inconclusive. However, the inconclusive ending of the story seems to be an indication that unresolved issues in the nation, as well as the consequences, may linger until they are thoroughly and properly addressed, just like the many issues in *Swallow*.

4. CONCLUSION

Swallow examines the politics of survival in modern Nigeria and other similar issues from different angles of stylistic innovation. The quest for freedom, survival and the question of morality are at the centre of the narrative. Thus, for characters to survive, they are involved in

(ad)venturing through life. Her novel's strength lies in its ability to highlight these. These powerful literary creations reflect authorial commitment, affinity and awareness of the socio-cultural milieu irrespective of geographical dislocation from the narrated geographical space.

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