

# Gender-inclusive Language and Female Assertive Idiolects in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal

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**Abstract**—This paper looks into the language of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* from a sociolinguistic perspective. It aims at pointing out instances of gender inclusive language and assertive idiolects from female characters. In actual fact, most of the earlier literary productions, as argued by a few scholars (Ojo-Ade, 1983; Fonchingong, 2006 and Koussouhon 2009), have come to display features of sexist language with docile female characters in subservient positions. This investigation is carried out under the scope of inclusive language and female assertiveness, as advocated by feminists and exponents of language equity. It has basically consisted in identifying and analyzing passages of the novel in which instances of inclusive language and assertive from female characters are noticeable. The findings reveal that Sefi Atta avoids using male-dominating/sexist language and draws on inclusive idiolects to collectively refer to both male and female characters. Moreover, she portrays her female characters as most assertive as possible. This is why the work concludes that Sefi Atta, like other feminist writers, espouses the women emancipation cause.

**Index Terms**—gender issues, inclusive language, assertiveness, female idiolects, feminist writers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender issues have been keenly debated in the literary arena and even beyond. In fact many scholars (Ojo Ade, 1983; Ogunyemi, 1985; Humm 1991; Fonchingong 2006) vehemently criticize the all-pervading domination of men and male issues in African literature. They resent the fact that African literature has given little room for female issues and even censure the marginalization/exclusion of female writers in the African literary canon. The concern to change the status quo of the male domination in the African literature arena has gained currency and scores of literary productions have been published to help further the woman cause. In the light of the above pronouncements, it stands to reason to scrutinize Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* to find out how she partakes in the challenge to fashion a new and positive image for women in African fiction. This investigation into Sefi Atta's debut novel is doublefold. First, it focuses on the use of inclusive language and second, it provides an analysis of assertive female idiolects.

## II. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of male and female characters has gained currency among applied linguistics scholars; at least when one brings to the fore score of scholarships that have recently been published in that particular area.

Koussouhon (2009) deals with Anglophone East and West Africa discourses with a view to finding out how they are politically correct in their use of the English Language. Drawing on the rules of standard/educated English and Lakoff's (1973) characterization of female speech, he has arrived at the conclusion that most African male novelists use sexist language. This study also discloses how two female writers make use of inclusive language respectively in their novel and short story with their female characters highly assertive.

Analysing male and female personae both in their similarity and difference through the selection of various process-types in various circumstances in Sefi Atta novels has been Agbachi's (2015) concern. Drawing on the Hallidayan's lexicogrammar theory, the paper sets to look at choices made on the transitivity level by male and female characters in Sefi Atta's fiction to highlight the way experience is socially constructed by men and women or to explain difference and similarity in how gender is constructed. Among other findings, Agbachi (2015) points out that Atta portrays female characters as initiators of concrete actions about their plights and depicts them as the agents of their own restoration or ruin or the future possessors of all they want. He, then, infers from his investigation that the comparative study of male and female experience in Atta's novel does not buy the established ideologies regarding women portrayal which generally belittle women experience and achievements.

On their part, Akogbeto and Koukpossi (2015) have undertaken to probe the language used by male and female characters in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* to see how gender issues are grounded in this play. Using Hallidayan's

transitivity and Critical Discourse Analysis, they have showed that the identification of the processes indicates that the 1986 Nobel laureate has consciously or unconsciously portrayed male characters as strong and powerful. In truth, men in Soyinka's works are regarded as dominators in the public sphere with concrete and tangible actions. On the contrary, women are portrayed as goals or beneficiaries of men's actions. Quite interestingly, this article has pointed out the ideology behind such a state of affairs which are social institutions such as family, marriage and chieftaincy. They conclude that the set of the play which described men as dominators and women submissive is typical of the Nigerian Yoruba society in which the novel is set.

Over the view that gendered identities are socially constructed via speech, Allagbe and Allagbe (2015) attempt a critical reading of Daniel Mengara's *Mema* (2003). They draw on language and gender theories and insights to cross-examine how female masculinities and male femininities are represented in the novel. On the basis of a qualitative textual analysis, they have pointed out that the investigation reveals that the gendered representation of men and women discloses characters with subverted roles and attributes. To put it differently, while female characters are portrayed in roles that are stereotypically reserved for males, male characters are delineated in traits that are said to be female. It can be inferred that gendered identities as portrayed in *Mema* are intricate and do not buy the expectations of African culture.

By and large, this brief literature review has focused on the representation of females in fiction under a positive light. In addition to what has been argued about the portrayal of female characters, this paper sets to showcase how the use of a non-inclusive language on the one hand, and female characters assertiveness on the other, can epitomize Sefi Atta's challenge against the patriarchal norms in African literature.

### III. THE ANALYSIS

#### A. Inclusive Language

A down to earth definition of an inclusive language sees it as a use of a language that does not connote any sex-related discrimination or bias. An inclusive language can be equally termed a "non-sexist" language. The investigation into inclusive language stems from the fact that women are given a disparaging treatment or excluded from mention. The most significant manifestation of this discrimination is the use of masculine pronouns and its variants as in the sentence "Every child must love *his* parents than *himself*. *He* should honor them before God and men". Many studies bring about the fact that the use of the masculine pronouns "he/him" or the generic use of *man*, while referring to humans irrespective of their sex, can be very confusing (Malkey & Fulkerson, 1979; Martyna, 1980). Other scholars pinpoint the discrimination behind the use of generic pronouns and nouns since it reinforces the dominant position of men and therefore confirms their supremacy over the human species (Spender, 1980; Wolfson, 1985).

The most significant manifestation of the discriminatory use of the English language, as we recall above, is the use of the masculine pronoun "he" and its variants (him, himself). To put it bluntly, it is the use of the masculine pronoun and its variants to collectively refer to men and women. The following extracts from *Everything Good Will Come* show an inclusive use of nouns and pronouns viz. a use of nouns and pronouns which neither excludes males nor females. Here, we have showcased lexical items that reflect the use of an inclusive language by italicizing them in the extracts culled from the novel.

- (1) "Anyone who bullies you, beat *them* up." (p.42)
- (2) "Everyone told me I would stare and I believed *them*." (p.86)
- (3) "Everyone knows about Aphrodite, but ask *them* about Oshun" (p.114)
- (4) "If *anyone* was measuring any ingredient... that *they* really didn't know what *they* were doing" (p.124)
- (5) "If *someone* put *their* hands around a child's neck and applied the slightest pressure." (p.133)
- (6) "I cared for *someone* and I enjoyed showing *them* courtesy." (p.157)
- (7) "The child of a black *person* and white *person*" (p.159)
- (8) "They are looking for *someone*, *anyone* who can be *their* spokesperson" (p.163)
- (9) "Every African *person* in the world represented in Lagos" (p.163)
- (10) "Everyone said my mother-in-law was nice. I wouldn't believe *them* until I'd heard a true word pass her lips" (p.181)
- (11) "No matter how much money a *person* had, *they* would find their bowel" (p.196)
- (12) "If you detain *someone*, shouldn't you at least tell *their* relations" (p.238)
- (13) "But what makes a *person* cross the border of safety?" (p.238)
- (14) "Everyone is talking about you, *they* say you left for no reason" (p.323)

In (1), (3), (7), (12) and (14) the indefinite pronoun *everyone* has been referred to either by the subject personal pronoun *they* or the object personal pronoun *them*, a non-inclusive language will merely consist in the use of s/he to refer to the indefinite pronoun *everyone*. The same analysis is valid for (4) where *anyone* has been referred to by *them*.

In the same way, in the excerpts (5), (6), (8) and (10), the lexical item *person* is another telling example of the use of an inclusive language in *Everything Good Will Come*. In fact, by avoiding drawing on the lexical item *man* which connotes sexist, the novelist has abided by the general rules of educated English of the years following the politically correct speech debate of the late 1980s.

### B. Assertive Female Idiolects

Lakoff (1973), one of the major and early scholars in the field of the English language and sex has described six major characteristics of what she has termed “women speech”. It is nevertheless worthy to point out that Lakoff has based her claims on introspection not on empirical studies. The six characteristics are the following:

**-Lexical choices:** the use words devoid of any connotation of powers. These include terms such as “mauve” and “chartreuse” or adjectives like “great” and “terrific”.

**-Question intonation in statements:** non-assertiveness which consists in using question intonation in conjunction with declarative sentences.

**-Hedges and tags:** the former includes modifiers such as “like” or “sort of” in a sentence like “I’d sort of like to see that movie”. The latter is used to request the agreements of the interlocutors.

**-Emphatic modifiers and intonational emphasis:** use of modifiers “so, such and very” to emphasize their utterances.

**-Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation:** use of formal syntax.

**-Superpolite forms:** use of excessively polite forms.

The issue raised by the idiosyncratic features of female speech as described by Lakoff (1973) is that sex is variable in being assertive. In other words, women’s idiolects are devoid of bold and confident views. The extracts below from the novel under scrutiny do not buy this viewpoint. They are very bold and astonishing opinions held by female characters.

(15) “I want to be something like... like president

- Eh? Women are not presidents.

- “Why not?” “Our men won’t stand for it. Who will cook for your husband?

- “He will cook for himself”

- What if he refuses?”

- “I will drive him away” (p.33)

(16) “Which one of our men really treats women well?” I don’t know many” (p.103)

(17) “Now, where I differ from most women is, if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you God no go vex” (p. 107)

(18) “Next year, you’ll be paying your own rent. But this, this, I have to tell you is rubbish. You’re bright, you’re young, and this man is treating you like his house girl.” (p. 138)

(19) “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” (p.141).

(20) “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 women 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.” (p. 141)

(21) “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.” (p. 173)

(22) “Why can’t you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg !” (p.184).

(23) “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. So, what is it you want women to say.” (p.193)

(24) “My one rule, whenever I was hosting, was that the women should not serve their husbands food. That always brought a reaction, from them: “Well, you always speak your mind.” From their husbands: “Niyi, your wife is a bad influence! From Niyi himself “I can’t stop her. She’s the boss in this house” (p. 196)

(25) “From childhood, people had told me I couldn’t do this or that, because no one would marry me and I would have become a mother. Now, I was a mother.” (p. 317)

(26) “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... and the expectation of subordination bothered me most. How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I’d seen? Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility like a fish bone down my throat.” (p. 184)

Most of the theories discussed above bring about the idea that women are not assertive; a stance which Atta’s debut novel does not buy. In actual fact, what strikes any alert reader after a few perusal of the novel is the way female characters, regardless their social background, hold astonishing views.

Right in the first part of the four that the novel is divided into, the discussion between Enitan and Sheri, as illustrated in (15), is a telling evidence of female assertiveness. Enitan, from her childhood, has decided to pursue her career in a field which can lead her to the highest level of the society, turning down the stereotype which stipulates that women should be defined by their role in their household. Enitan’s opinion in (15) appears to be a need for women to break the ice wall that confines them in an inferior position. In the same way, Sheri, from a poor education background notwithstanding, holds the view that men are no longer charming princes who care for their lovers, which is why females should fight for themselves. Enitan, in (18), sides with Sheri since the former strongly advises the latter to find her way out by hardworking than behave like a house girl who is to be dictated the right way to go.

Excerpt (26) is another instance of how women view their relationship with their husbands. Enitan, here, refuses to play second fiddle since she blatantly opines that disobeying a man does not mean disrespect because if a man wants her respect and obedience, then he must earn it. The assertiveness of female characters in the novel seems to be all-pervading regardless generations. Enitan's mother, in sentence (21), out of the bitter experience which results from the her marriage break up, comes to conclude that women should not devote their lives caring for their male counterparts who, in return, are not ready to do the same.

The quest of independence or the need for women to free themselves from men's domination can account for the assertive views hold by female personae. For example, Enitan totally disapproves of the law system which favours women's oppression. In sentence (19), the same Enitan clearly indicates that the implementation of native law, while civil law exists, is nothing else but a deliberate way to belittle females. Besides, the fact that women should resort to their husband's consent before getting their passport, as shown in sentence (20), confers an advantage to men while it confines women to a subservient position. Any alert reader can wonder whether women are not intelligent enough to decide for themselves. On this very vehemently criticized law system, the heroin of Sefi Atta's debut novel maintains, in excerpt (23), that human rights should be rightly termed "men's right" since they advocate for men's right and turn a blind eye on women's issue.

Female assertiveness in Atta's novel has also been explored regarding the issue of kitchen and cooking. Enitan hardly understands why her husband always refrains from cooking or going to kitchen. Similarly, in (22), Taiwo's daughter speaks her mind by questioning the social convenience according to which women should serve their husbands food. The issue of kitchen is quite important in illustrating how Enitan, the main character in the novel, opposes the stereotype which fosters the idea that kitchen is a place to be kept for women while men are either making fun or sitting in front of the screen. Needless to argue that for Enitan, women role/responsibility should not be limited within the four walls of the kitchen/house.

#### IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The most significant manifestation of sexism in the English Language is both the use of generic terms to refer to individuals of indefinite sex and the use of generic masculine pronouns and their variants to address both males and females. The analysis of Atta's language shows that she has deliberately avoided the use of masculine pronouns to collectively refer to males and females. As discussed in the earlier section, the fact that *everyone*, *someone* and *anyone* have been anaphorically referred to by *they* or *their* is a sheer instance of the use of an inclusive language. In addition, the use of the lexical item *person* rather than the highly sexist *man* attests to the novelist's attempt not to exclude females from mention. Atta's use of non-sexist or male-dominating language reveals how the writer has kept abreast of the educated variety of the English Language decades after the heyday of political correctness in the 1980s.

It, all the same, stands to reason to emphasize a key aspect regarding the use of inclusive idiolects in *Everything Good Will Come*. Actually, the use of non-sexist language suggests gender equality. It brings to the fore the idea that the novel does not promote any domination or supremacy of the male gender over the female one. About the use of male dominating (non-inclusive) language, Koussouhon (2009) forcefully argues that most West African novelists and their East African counterparts use sexist language in their literary productions, thereby excluding females. Atta's deliberate use of a gender neutral (non-inclusive) language had not gained currency in those years, we can definitely account for the politically correct language drawn on in *Everything Good Will Come*.

Female assertiveness is a key issue in *Everything Good Will Come*. Atta's novel has given prominence to female characters. They are highly assertive and independence-prone. Women assertiveness stands as a need for them to break the patriarchal shackles of the society. Atta's fiction displays female characters that are fed up with coping with men domination and oppression. Those female characters do not want to live like their mothers and undergo the same ill-treatment from their male counterparts. *Everything Good Will Come* highlights a few stereotypes and patriarchal dictates which reinforce men's position and relegate women to an inferior position. Enitan's view about native law is a telling example about how she overtly criticizes the native law which reflects nothing else but societal dictates over women. The bold and astonishing view that Enitan holds has something to do with her education. But education per se cannot account for this assertiveness.

In actual fact, Sheri, Ariola and Mother of the Prisons who are from a poor/humble education background hold vibrant views on the same issue. Sheri, for example, explains that if a man happens to beat her, he will deal with him. (17). This is quite surprising since uneducated women are first and foremost described as docile wives. Quite surprisingly, Sheri flouts the sacrosanct principle which stipulates that a married woman will never raise a hand on her husband. Ariola (Enitan's mother), likewise, is somehow imbued with this assertive spirit. She has experienced a lot of hardships in her attempt to keep fanning the embers of love between her and Taiwo (Enitan's father). The marriage eventually fails and Ariola resorts to church as an escape mechanism. Ariola, from her bitter experience, advises her daughter not to make a sacrifice for a man (21). In other words, she tells her daughter that a woman should not experience sufferings and pains for the sake of marriage. This view strongly opposes traditional Africa dictates about marriage. In fact, in traditional African societies, mothers always plead with their daughters to save their marriage.

In the same perspective, Enitan's assertive views on the issue of kitchen and that of women serving food to their husbands needs to be scrutinized. The issue of kitchen reveals how women resent the idea of serving their men as gods.

Such an attitude, more than what Akung (2012) calls “a mild domestic protest”, is nothing but a rebellion against unquestionable society’s dictates. Such has been the case when Enitan made a move into the relationship with Daramola (27), thereby rejecting the belief that only a man can woo a woman. The above analysis attests to the fact that female characters are highly assertive irrespective of their social and education background. Kehinde, A. & Mbipom (2011, p. 69) corroborate this viewpoint as they opine that in demythologizing and reconstructing the stifling structures in a male oriented society, Atta instructs women on the way out of retrograde patriarchal domination through the practical actions of gender assertive Enitan, Sheri, Mrs. Ameh and even the Mother of the Prison.

Women assertiveness is then a way to break the patriarchal shackles of the society and fight for one’s emancipation. Female assertiveness in *Everything Good Will Come* also has to do with economic independence. Enitan, Sheri and Grace reinforce the belief that women assertiveness can only be achieved when they hold the purse strings. Enitan, owing to her Western education, finds out that women need to be economically independent if they want to carve a name for themselves. Either with Mike or with Niyi, Enitan resents the idea of being dependant on a man and she is ready to pay the price this attitude calls for. Imbued with this economically independent spirit, she has advised Sheri to drop Hasan, the brigadier, so as to start a business and become successful. It is only when one takes into account the fact that Hasan, the Brigadier, caters for Sheri’s needs that one understands the significance of Enitan’s advice. Similarly, Grace lives on her being a journalist. Kehinde, A. & Mbipom (2011) contend that this prosperity for women to succeed outside the traditional roles of wife and mother shows how Atta challenges the stereotypical literary portrayal of female characters.

This paper has surveyed gender issues in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*. The analysis has attested to the fact that the novelist has resorted to gender- inclusive language and turn down a systematic use of generic pronouns. Another striking outcome of this investigation into Sefi Atta’s language is the assertiveness of female characters, an attitude which is to be construed as a deliberate attempt of the novelist to portray her female characters as dynamic and ready to break the patriarchal shackles of the male-dominated setting of the novel.

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