

ESCOLA DE HUMANIDADES  
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RAPHAEL DO AMARAL PIRES

THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF NIGERIAN GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH SEFI ATTA'S NOVEL: EVERYTHING GOOD  
WILL COME (2005)

Porto Alegre  
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**PONTIFICAL CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL – PUCRS  
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES – LETRAS / ENGLISH**

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Monography defended and approved on December 02, 2021

Committee:

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Prof. Ma. Debora Amorim G. Ardais (PUCRS)

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Prof. Ma. Arthur Beltrão Telló (PUCRS)

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Prof. Dr. Janaína de Azevedo Baladão de Aguiar (PUCRS)

## **Abstract**

There is a lack of studies regarding Nigerian literature in Brazil. Academically, African authors that are not from Portuguese speaking countries are left behind by scholars. The importance to look upon Nigerian authors, especially female writers, dwells in the fact that contemporary literature has been used by minorities as a platform to debate their rights, history and report their struggle against the oppression. The present monography intends to study how Sefi Atta – Nigerian author – depicts the struggles of women inside Nigerian Society through her novel: *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). Through a literature review of feminist and post-colonial theoretical authors and critical articles about Sefi Atta, the monography will unleash some lights on how the cultural, political, and social contexts portrayed in the novel interferes in the (re)construction of gender identity in Nigeria. The novel presents the saga of Enitan from 1971 to 1995, and along this period, besides questioning her role inside Nigerian society, the narrator presents the political and social turmoil momentum of Nigeria as the country constructs its national identity as an independent nation. After looking at how the author depicts the context in Nigeria and how the main character defines her own gender identity, the monography points that Sefi Atta is a post-colonial and feminist author, that brings to her novel one fraction of the multiple cultural Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; gender identity; nigerian society; Sefi Atta; post-colonialism; feminism.

## Resumo

Há uma lacuna no que diz respeito ao estudo acadêmico sobre literatura nigeriana no Brasil. Muitos dos estudiosos se dedicam apenas as produções em língua portuguesa e negligenciam o que é produzido em outros idiomas. A importância de se olhar para autores nigerianos, principalmente para a produção de autoras femininas, recai no fato de que a literatura produzida na contemporaneidade é utilizada como plataforma para as vozes minoritárias falarem sobre suas histórias, direitos e lutas contra as forças opressoras. A presente monografia busca estudar como a autora Sefi Atta – autora nigeriana- em sua obra *Tudo de Bom Vai Acontecer* (2005) mostra as dificuldades enfrentadas pelas mulheres na sociedade nigeriana. Através de uma revisão literária de autores teóricos pós-colonialistas e feministas, além de artigos acadêmicos e críticas literárias sobre a autora, a pesquisa lançará algum olhar sobre como os contextos sociais, culturais e políticos apresentados no romance interferem na (re)construção da identidade de gênero na Nigéria. O livro apresenta a saga de Enitan de 1971 até 1995, mostrando ao longo desse período, além de Enitan questionar o seu papel na sociedade nigeriana, a autora também apresenta o turbulento momento político e social que o país enfrenta, enquanto constrói sua identidade nacional como uma nação independente. Após analisar o contexto apresentado pela autora e como a personagem central define sua identidade de gênero, a pesquisa aponta que Sefi Atta é uma autora pós-colonial e feminista, trazendo em sua obra uma fração da multicultural Nigéria.

**Palavras-chave:** Nigéria; identidade de gênero; sociedade nigeriana; Sefi Atta; pós-colonialismo; Feminismo.

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## 1 Introduction

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”. This *Igbo* saying represents a lot of the post-colonial critics and feminist theories arguments when it comes to the Eurocentric perspective that dominates the social science analyses. World History has been told through a western perspective and the rest of other perspectives are left behind.

There is a lack of studies regarding Nigerian literature in Brazil. Academically, African authors that are not from Portuguese speaking countries are left behind by scholars. The importance to look upon Nigerian authors, especially female writers, dwells in the fact that contemporary literature has been used by minorities as a platform to debate their rights, history and to report their struggle against the oppression. Since 1958, when Chinua Achebe published his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, the academic community has been able to hear the voice of an African author talking about his own history. He opened the doors for other Nigerian authors, and most of them are female writers that are voicing a feminist perspective of Nigeria.

The present monography intends to study how Sefi Atta – Nigerian author – depicts the struggles of women inside Nigerian Society through her novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). The novel received the 2006 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature and brings the life story of Enitan from 1971 to 1995, the exactly historical moment in which Nigeria was ruled by a Military Regime, just after the cruelty of Biafran’s war and its independence movement of 1970. This book has been a reference for other female writers as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and besides speaking of post-colonization, it is a portrait of an African woman voicing her own history and talking about how Nigerian society is dealing with the constant clash between the traditional patriarchal values and the “modern” Occidentalized ones. The monography aims to show how Sefi Atta portrays the context of Nigeria, how it influences the gender reconstruction inside Nigerian society and how the author constructed a post-colonial and feminist novel.

This paper is going to develop an analysis of Sefi Atta’s novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). Articles and texts related to Nigerian Literature and history will bring theoretical support for the discussions. The method will be a literature review of authors regarding Nigerian Literature, Feminism, and post-colonial theories.

In the first chapter, I will talk about the context that Sefi Atta reproduced on her novel, showing the colonial heritage present in Nigerian Society and how it influences the construction of Nigerian national identity. *Everything Good Will Come* is considered a *bildungsroman* novel which conveys in a novel that explores the social, political, moral, physical, and psychological

development of a character. The main idea is to bring the context elements that mold Enitan's personality and identity, as her own country is attempting to rebuild its own identity as well.

In the second chapter, I will present the idea that gender in Nigeria's pre-colonial history has nothing to do with the conceptions pushed by the European perspective. The colonization created a social sphere in which women have no voice or participation, recreating the old Greek-society in which women were not considered citizens. The political education from the colonizer imposed a subordinative role for women in Nigerian society. The heritage from the colonial times created barriers and difficulties for women to speak from the kitchen. In the middle of a clash between western and traditionalist perspectives, Enitan builds her gender identity.

In the last chapter, I will bring the idea of *Everything Good Will Come* as a post-colonial and feminist narrative. The novel shows how Enitan develops her gender identity and how she struggles to change the place in which men placed women inside Nigerian Society. Enitan is struggling to reach equality between men and women in a society that was built into a biological difference and has placed women quiet in the kitchen.

In the conclusion, I bring the idea of literature, history, and society have an intrinsic relationship. By analyzing the novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) it is possible to comprehend the context in which the writer was inserted or experienced while creating her narration. Besides the lack of academic analyses of Nigerian literature in Brazil, there is an empty space when it comes to Safi Atta's production. She is a contemporary voice of feminism inside Africa and through her perspective it is be possible to understand a lot from African women and also have some glances of the black women in Brazilian society, as the tribes from Nigeria had influenced Brazilian culture and language. The *Yorubas'* and the *Igbos'* traditions can be found inside Candomblés, cooking practices and Portuguese language as well.

## 2 Chapter I – The cultural and social context of Nigeria presented on *Everything Good Will Come* (2005).

The anthropocentric perspective that dominates the sociological approaches is in fact, the point of view of white, male, and European researchers and they tend to classify every social product based on their values (CANDIDO, 2014). Novels are narratives that deal with causalities and temporalities (LODGE, 1992). The fictional aspect of a literary text represents the imaginary world created by the author that nurtures his creation with some glances of reality (AGUIAR E SILVA, 2004). In this chapter I will explore the social and cultural context of Nigeria that Sefi Atta depicts on her debut novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). I will show how the recreation of Nigerian national identity influenced the gender identity, as presented by the author. African novels present a dual characteristic: they can be considered a model of analysis, which conveys in presenting a synthesis of a specific social reality; and they are also responsible for causing some changes into society (ADEBAYO, 2005). Both perspectives go towards the existence of a strong relationship among history, narrative and representativeness, when it comes to literary production from a post-colonial perspective (BRUGIONI, 2019).

Sefi Atta's debut novel narrates the (re)construction of gender identity in Nigeria, as the national identity is being reinvented as well. The author shows through Enitan's voice, all the social and cultural transformations that Nigeria was going through from 1971 until 1995. The novel represents a source of information regarding Nigerian society, and it also points to the need of change when it comes to women's rights.

*Everything Good Will Come* is a *bildungsroman* novel, showing how a naïve and ignorant girl turns into a self-conscious and assertive woman, as politically, economically, and socially, the country faces chaos and violence. Sefi Atta enlightens the micro sphere of society (family) and presents the similitude of the problems Nigeria was facing from a macro perspective (society). The narrative starts using the voice of a girl, Enitan, and it is through her innocent perspective that she starts her observations:

From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations. At an age when other Nigerian girls were masters at *ten-ten*, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit partners with sudden knee-jacks, my favorite moments were spent sitting on a jetty pretending to fish. (ATTA, 2005, p. 7).

This passage indicates that Enitan likes to play alone, being individualistic inside a society that is communal. The narrator has a creative mind, as she pretends to be fishing instead

of playing with other children. Another relevant point is that Enitan lives in Lagos, where fishing is something seen as a male activity (COLLINS III, 2015). It is through a child's point of view that initiate the observations about Nigerian society.

Sefi Atta is from Lagos, capital of Nigeria, but she was educated in the United Kingdom and United States, where she started to write. She brought to her novel the tensions emerged from the clash between conservatism and western-traditions or modernism in Nigeria. She focuses on the problems caused by the patriarchal Nigerian society that imposed a submissive role to women. Indeed, she divided her novel into four parts: 1971, 1975, 1985 and 1995. Each one of these years has a connection to the political changes that Nigeria was facing, regarding the military dictatorial system that took place just after Nigeria's emancipation. (KEHINDE; MBIPOM, 2011).

Nigeria independence occurred on October 01, 1960. The colonization occurred in two separated districts – North and South that were unified by the Great Britain in 1914. (SHAKA, 2005). The British colonization occurred differently in the northern and in the southern regions. In the north, the ethnical groups were able to maintain their culture and Muslim heritage. In the south region, the Christian missionaries had total control, forcing the European values and culture to penetrate the ethnical groups. As a result, tension among different ethnical groups and religions were common from 1914 on (SINGH, 2011).

Literature in Nigeria was not introduced by the European invader, its origins came from the oral tradition of indigenous groups and tribes in the country. *Igbo*, *Yoruba*, and *Hausa* are the three most common indigenous languages spoken in the country, but due to the colonialism and the hegemonic policy of The Great Britain imposing English as the language of instruction in schools, English became the prestige and high culture language. There were some poems translated from indigenous language into English, but the new era for Nigerian literature began in 1958 when Chinua Achebe released *Things Fall Apart*. It was the first English narrative in which the African perspective of colonization enterprise was voiced by an African author. Achebe opened the doors for the first generation of authors.

The first generation of Nigerian authors (authors that wrote during and just after the emancipation process: around 1950 to 1960) was composed mainly by men, who wanted to share the African perspective of colonization. They were eager to cherish traditional values and show to the world that there were culture, philosophy, and literature in Africa before the European conquest. The themes explored by those authors were related to the clashes between urban and rural lives, westernization versus traditionalism; they were concerned in respecting and reconstructing the Nigerian identity, the one that existed before the colonization process.

Authors such as Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) and Wole Soyinka (*The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*) are main representatives of this generation that also brought counter-discourses to the colonial experience in Nigeria presented by European authors such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Josy Cary's *Mister Johnson*. (FASAN, 2010).

The second generation of writers (production from mid 1970s to the late 1980s) was composed once again by men, but some women appeared in a peripheral position and production, mainly focusing in showing how women were submissive and related to their own domestic lives, which conveys they were not involved in the national construction of a Nigerian identity. In general, women were not involved in political debate, as the male authors that started to focus on the disillusion caused by corruption, instability and violence coming from the conservatism that took control of Nigeria just after the independence movement. In comparison to the language presented by the first generation, the second generation of authors used a more people-oriented language. They assumed themes related to the social condition of Nigerians and poetry was strongly present. Niyi Osundare (*Moonson*), Odia Ofeimun (*Dreams at Work*) and Buchi Emechata (*The Bride Price*) are some relevant names from this period (FASAN, 2010).

The third generation of Nigerian writers (authors from the middle 1990 to the present moment) presents a robust number of female writers, most of them writing from the diaspora, caused by the economic, political and social instability and deterioration of their homeland. They seek a better life condition in different countries, specifically in the United Kingdom and United States. Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*), Sefi Atta (*Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow*) and Ayobami Adebayo (*Stay with me*) are some of those emergent names. They have changed the paradigm, as they switch the position once occupied by women in Nigerian literature: instead of being in peripheral position, they started to occupy a central position. Instead of bringing the idealization of the rural life, the submissive role displayed by women and writing about motherhood, they present a much more assertive female character that questions the status quo of gender inside Nigerian society (FASAN, 2010).

Sefi Atta with *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), when presenting Enitan's transition from childhood into womanhood, explores some feminist dimensions, showing domestic violence or problems as allegorical references of macro problems and violence that occur in Nigerian society. It is not more a narrative regarding a docile and fragile woman, but it is a

vibrant and assertive woman that is seeking a place somewhere else than the kitchen<sup>1</sup>. It embodies the contrast that women are facing in modern society: the clash of patriarchal patterns and the westernization, based on human rights and against gender violence (AKUNG, 2012).

Atta's debut novel talks about gender, violence, religion, tradition, dictatorial regimes, social classes, prejudices, friendship, and family, all presented by the narrator and principal character Enitan. The narrative happens from 1971 to 1995, simultaneously with the military regime that Nigeria went through just after its civil war and independence movement from 1970. All the political instability has an impact in the construction of Enitan's identity – her national identity and her self-identification as a woman. The position in which women are placed when it comes to political debate in Nigeria is depicted by Atta in the following passage when Enitan learns about her country political situation:

Sometimes they frightened me with their stories of western Nigeria (which my father called the Wild West), where people threw car tires over other people and set them on fire because they belonged to different political factions. Uncle Alex blamed the British for the fighting: 'Them and their bloody empire. Come here and divide our country like one of their bloody tea cakes. Driving on the left side of the bloody road...' (ATTA, 2005, p. 09).

Enitan has no idea about her own country past and the roots of Nigerian problems. No one tells direct to her about what is going on. She is always overhearing adults, merely men, talking about politics. Her mother does not attend or participate on those dialogues. When the Civil war exploded – the Biafran's War – she also learns that from the radio: "Over the next months, I would listen to radio bulletins on how our troops were faring against the Biafrans." (ATTA, 2005, p. 09).

Another central point of this story is that Enitan builds a friendship with her neighbor against Enitan's mother's wish. Her friend Sheri is a Muslim and from a poor family. In the beginning of the narrative, there is a moment in which the author presents how Sheri persuaded Enitan to relinquish her dream to become Nigeria's president. Although being raised in non-Catholic family and freer of parent's control environment, Sheri reaffirms the conservative feature in which women should not be involved in politics.

Enitan describes the political history of Nigeria:

I knew that our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had another Major General heading our country.

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<sup>1</sup> On this novel, the kitchen is an allegorical construction that represents the submissiveness of women. It is a place from where it is not possible to voice their opinions and their frustrations (AKUNG, 2012).

For a while the palaver had stopped, and now it seemed the Biafrans were trying to split our country into two. (ATTA, 2005, p. 09).

Violence is a constant tread inside political history of Nigeria. In 1966 the army perpetrated the first coup, when most of the previous leaders were killed or imprisoned. As the first coup represented only one ethnical group, the discontentment among other ethnical groups generated a second coup in the same year. In 1967 the Eastern part of the country declared independence from the union and generated the Biafrans' War (SINGH, 2011). Through Enitan's father, the author argues the following: "they fight their wars, and they retire to their barracks. That is what they do. The army have no place in government." (ATTA, 2005, p. 67). Trucks full of soldiers blocking streets and checking points placed in the middle of roads and other scenes of violence are described all over the novel:

Along the way, road blocks had been set up, as they always were after a military coup. Cars slowed as they approached them and pedestrians moved quietly. A truck load of soldiers drove past, sounding a siren. The soldiers jeered and lashed at cars with horsewhips. We pulled over to let them pass. A drive pulled over too late. Half of the soldiers jumped down from the truck and dragged him out of his car. They started slapping him. The driver's hands went up to plead for mercy. They flogged him with horsewhips and left him there, whimpering by the door of his car. At First the shouting scared me. I flinched from the first few slaps to the driver's head, heard my mother whisper, 'They're going to kill him.' Then, I watched the beating feeling some assurance that our world was uniformly terrible. (ATTA, 2005, p. 69).

In 1979, elections took place and a civilian – politician – assumed the role to govern the country. It collapsed in 1983 (SINGH, 2011). Enitan is in London in this period where she hears news from her country: "Ah, these civilians, they are worse than the military...they're nothing but thieves." (ATTA, 2005, p.75). During this same period, Enitan is recovering from a bad relationship in which she finds out that her boyfriend was simultaneously dating another person. The same frustration that Enitan is going through can be compared to the national frustration, as Nigerians were discovering that the civil government was an illusion, full of corruption and champagne parties. To combat all the indiscipline from previous government, the military forces launched severe decrees such as: anyone suspected of acts against the state security could be detained without charges; it was prohibited to journalists to publish news against the government and its personal. Nigeria has a long and turbulent political history, marked with violence and non-democratic orientation. Violence was a legitimate force that imposed the creation of the independent country (NNADI, 2012).

The national state of Nigeria is composed by multiple ethnical groups (around 350 ethnical groups), with three major ones: *Yoruba*, *Igbo*, and *Hausa-Fulani* (SHAKA, 2005).

Nonetheless, the political distribution of power was never equilibrated, although all Nigerian magna cartas establish that any source of discrimination based on ethnical origins, gender, religion, or linguistic trace is prohibited (NNADI, 2012). What Sefi Atta presents in her debut novel is that women were never represented on the political debates inside Nigeria and the traditional patriarchal societies expect a silent woman, that would spend most of her days in the kitchen, being responsible merely for reproduction (given birth to a male son) and feeding her family. As an example, Enitan only discovers the horror of Biafra's war when she was in London or at her school. At home, nothing is mentioned to her, and she is completely unaware about the cruel reality of Nigeria.

As Enitan starts to understand more about her own nation, she is also learning about herself and her position in society. Culturally, Nigeria is considered a male country: a place in which women are always in the kitchen completely voiceless (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). Her mother is constantly warning her about that, and her father is continuously motivating her to be independent and seek her career (more about gender construction will be covered in the Chapter II). This antagonist forces are molding Enitan's personally as the country itself goes under military coups and corruptive politicians' rules. Enitan describes the classes in Nigeria:

People said there was no middle class in a country like ours, only an elite and the masses. But there was a middle class, and all that separated us was a birthright – a ridiculous name for a right, because there wasn't a person dead or alive who hadn't been born at some point. We were a step-down society compared to those by which we would be defined. The Nigerian elite were middle class people. Few had the sort of wealth that would rank them amongst the world's elite, and they were usually government or ex-government officials. The middle class, in turn, were working-class people, and the masses were poor. (ATTA, 2005, p.226).

Enitan's perspective of Nigerian and African women grows as the narrative develops. She points that Nigeria does neither belong to East nor West, and it could be classified as a Fourth World instead of Third. "There was no greater disaster on our continent than the few who had control over our resources: oil, diamonds, human beings" (ATTA, 2005, p. 298). Oil is listed in the first place because there is a straight relation between lack of democracy and national development fueled by oil (SINGH, 2011). It is not the perspective of an innocent girl, but it is the idea from a woman, that is educated and seeks an equal treatment on her own society. She is not fitting anymore on the idea of woman placed in the kitchen and her silence is not convenient anymore (AKUNG, 2012). Another characteristic of Nigerian history dwells in the economic exploration of oil and gas from the Niger's delta region, that has a multicultural presence that was never fully represented by the central authorities. State, private and



international companies are some of the actors that play the role of influence in Nigeria (SHAKA, 2005).

The first portion of the novel (1971) shows the early ages of Enitan and her friendship with Sheri flourishing against Enitan's mother's wish. Besides that, the country had reintegrated Biafra as part of its geographical and political domains. It is the end of the Biafran's war. This conflict had around three million people dead. The independence tentative from Biafra was controlled by the central power of Nigeria with violence. It started a few years during the 60's when the militaries took over Nigerian political system twice. 1971 was the starter of the reconstruction of Nigeria after the civil war. The author symbolically uses a child as a narrator of those events. A naïve character that believes in everything that people tell her. She is not living the reality of her country but overhearing it from adult conversation about it.

The second piece of the novel (1975) is when a bloodless coup took place in Nigeria, but who orchestrated was murdered in 1976. In this moment, the narrator brings the rape episode with Sheri, showing how violence is something institutionalized in Nigeria. Gender violence is a common feature, and it is when Enitan discovers how plural her own country is. It is during school, when she learns about stereotypes: "Yoruba girls were considered quarrelsome; Hausa girls, pretty but dumb; Igbo girls, intelligent, but well, they were muscular" (ATTA, 2005, p.45).

In the third moment of the book (1985), Enitan studying in London, where she develops her sexuality and learns even more about her own country. It is there she learns more about Biafran's War and its consequences. Throughout this period, Nigeria was ruled by a civil (politician) government that was known by its corruption and extravagant parties. Meanwhile, Enitan goes through her first heartbreak experience. During this moment, Enitan returns to her own country and starts to face the gender reality: unequal payment, lack of structure, her parents are now divorced, and violence still present in Nigerian society.

In the last part of the novel (1995), the author shows Enitan's marriage and her refusal to be submissive. Indeed, Nigeria is going through political instabilities (it is a period in which military coups and civilian governments keep on alternating). There is tension between north and south of the country. Corruption still goes on, electrical power does not properly work, there is no public health system in place and another social discrepancy presented and narrated by Enitan, that now, is involved with feminist protests and engaged into political issues. It is also, during this period, that she has her first miscarriage and her first daughter as well.

Sefi Atta continues to unleash the voice of Nigerian woman inside a society that still survives the ongoing clash among conservative values – patriarchal, Eurocentric, and in

somehow recreates some colonial relations- and the modernized values – westernized perspectives, gender identity, pursuing gender and social equality on an uneven society. The third generation of Nigerian authors bring to the table this characteristic: talking about their homeland and not writing from their homeland. It is through novels such as *Everything Good Will Come* that authors, principally women, are capable to present their idealizations, what they would expect from their homeland to be like, to look like in comparison to the reality they still encounter (KEHINDE; MBIPOM, 2011).

“You live in this country, you suffer in someway. Some more than others, but that’s life”(ATTA, 2005, p.228). African authors in general tend to narrate African experience, bringing to their novels some verisimilitude with their own context in which they are living. Political instability, violence, aids, and other social issues are common themes that appear in African literature, principally post-colonial authors (KEHINDE; MBIPOM 2011). Sefi Atta gives to Enitan the voice of a woman watching the turbulent political and social background of Nigeria. She knows that women suffer more than men in a patriarchal society. Indeed, she presents the idea that men are adopting a coward attitude towards Nigerian political situation, as they sit in silence when military or civilians are destroying the country.

“Freedom was never intended to be sweet. It was responsibility from the onset, for a people, a person, to fight for, and hold unto.” (ATTA, 2004, p. 307). Throughout her novel, the author presents struggles, difficult circumstances that could be related to women facing a patriarchal society or Nigerian society pursuing to establish its own identity. Violence, undemocratic practices were frequently presented in Nigeria’s history and political background. It is possible to trace a parallel between gender identity and national identity through this novel.

This chapter attempted to bring some context from Nigeria that influenced the gender identity construction of Enitan in Sefi Atta’s debut novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). As mentioned, there is an intrinsic relation between narrative and history. Principally, when it comes to Nigerian literature produced by authors from its third generation. Sefi Atta is telling a history about a woman and her own understanding of womanhood. It is Nigerian history being told by a feminist perspective. In the following chapter, I will talk about the gender identity (re)construction presented in the novel.

### 3 Chapter II –Gender identity (re)constructed in Sefi Atta’s Novel *Everything Good Will Come*.

As Vítor Manuel de Aguiar e Silva (2004) mentions, the social context in which a narrative is constructed might generate two types of characters: a) those who embody the values and traditions that a specific society has; b) the opposite: those who represent the need of changing in society. This chapter will focus in how Sefi Atta constructed Enitan’s character, seeking to redefine what is to be a woman inside Nigerian Society, taking into consideration the fact that the patriarchal society represented on her novel is colonial heritage and that women suffered a double oppression: colonizer and their native men (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021).

Identity is an unfinished object that is complex, and it is constructed along someone’s life (BAUMAN, 2005). Indeed, it is an interpretation of “me” and its social and psychological relations. It is through identity that someone is capable to self-differentiate from the other one (GUIBERNAU, 1997). Sefi Atta’s debut novel *Everything Good Will Come* when voicing Enitan’s transitions from her childhood into her womanhood depicts how the narrator constructs or reconstructs her gender identity, as Nigeria is also revisiting and seeking to develop its own national identity. The novel brings a clear clash between conservatism and western values and an opportunity to question the roots of such conservatism principally when it comes to gender identity and women attempting to revisit their roles in Nigerian societies.

The western values and traditions are based in some scientific pillars and one of those is biology. Humans are biologized creatures, seeking into nature fundamentals to classify and categorize the world (HALL, 2020). The gender division based on biological features between men and women was introduced in Nigerian tribes throughout the colonial period. In the pre-colonial moment, the biological differences among men and women did not have any role in social hierarchy. Seniority had a much more relevant influence when related to social classification, principally among the *Yoruba* groups, it was understood as a principal in which who has arrived first would be served first as well. The tribal language had some differences to determine what was male and female, but the differences were merely distinctions and made some reference of reproduction methods and had no social denotation. (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). The submissive condition of the colonized people and the inferior position that colonized women were placed in Nigerian society were two products of the colonial period. Women became invisible inside Nigeria as soon as they were categorized as women by the colonial authorities. The seniority characteristic was replaced by the gender-based division or vision, which always considers the masculine power and authority imposed to the female population.

Colonized people have no control over their own history and most of the times, they are removed from their own history (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021).

The biological differentiation between women and men has influenced in the social sphere since the Greeks, as they believed that men were made of metals (gold, silver, and bronze) meanwhile women were made of wood, and they should never participate in the political debates or sphere. Indeed, women were not considered as citizens of old Greek cities (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). This old-fashioned thinking was carried into Nigeria by the colonizer that legitimized the local power of men, removing all women from the political colonial structures of power. Nigeria was portrayed as a masculine country in which the white women were dislocated: symbolically and physically speaking (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). During the entire colonial period, it was perpetrated into Nigeria society that the biological differences among women and men were important to set their social roles. Masculinity was projected as necessary to be involved in political decisions. In fact, women were considered naturally subordinated to men.

The Great Britain colonized Nigeria for centuries. As affirmed by Grada Kilomba (2010): “what a better way to colonize than to teach the colonized to speak and write from the perspective of the colonizer.” Besides not legitimating local women leadership in some groups, replacing their position to men, women were completely excluded from colonial education reinforcing the idea of male farmers and placing women in the kitchen (KORIEH, 2010). In the social division imposed by the colonizer, there were four positions: I – Colonizer Men; II – Colonizer Women; III – Native men (or colonized men) and at the bottom IV – Colonized women; which conveyed those Nigerian women suffered a double colonization: domination from Europe and domination from their own Nigerian men. They were dominated, exploited, and abashed as an African people and then as African women (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021).

The patriarchal colonial state remained untouchable after the independence process, which conveyed that Nigerian societies continued to perpetrate the submission of women in relation to men. Women were taught to know that men are superior. Being a woman means to a girl no access to formal education. The illiteracy rate among women in Nigeria, in 2018, was 62,02% (ABOLADE, 2021). Enitan, Sefi Atta’s principal character of *Everything Good Will Come*, depicts the changes that women are willing to conquer in Nigeria, principally those who had access to a high-level education and generally had studied in another country.

Enitan’s family presents the contradictions from the patriarchal traditions and the liberation of women in Nigeria. Her father, as his first-born son died, covers Enitan with attention, love, and protection and projects into Enitan the idea that she must have a great

education and pursue her career as a lawyer. Her mother became a religious person, practitioner in a primitive church that does not allow women to wear make-up and believed that women should be in the kitchen and involved only in feeding her family and procreating. The opposite points of view are presented in the novel, creating a distance from Enitan and her mother, as Enitan's father did not want her daughter to stay at the kitchen learning how to cook. In the following dialogue, in the beginning of the first part, the novel brings the dichotomy mentioned between the conservative patriarchal society and the modern society as well as it shows that her father wants his daughter to be different while he agrees that his wife follows the expected submissive role:

"I see your mother is making you understudy again."  
 I took another plantain and sliced its belly open, hoping for more of his sympathy. My mother shook a pot of stew on the stove and lifted its lid to inspect the contents.  
 "It won't harm her to be in here," she said.  
 I eased the plantain out and began to slice it into circle...  
 "You should tell her young girls don't do this anymore," he said.  
 "Who said?" my mother asked.  
 "And if she asks where you learned such nonsense, tell her from your father and he's for the liberation of women."  
 He stood at attention and saluted. My father was not a serious man, I thought.  
 "All women except your wife", my mother said...  
 He lowered the glass. "I've never asked you to be in here cooking for me."  
 "Ah, well," she said, wiping her hands with a dish cloth.  
 "But you never ask me not to either." (ATTA, 2005, p. 21).

Gender identity is something constructed based on biological terms as previously mentioned and it is also a social product of a specific society. It is a never-ending process in which the social interactions, needs, and roles assumed throughout history mold its definition (HALL, 2020). As marked in the passage above, Enitan's mother has the social idea of a woman as someone that should be in the kitchen fully engaged on the feeding activities. It is easy to identify how different are the ideas about women's roles in Nigerian society the father and the mother present to Enitan. In addition to that, the mother is expected to mold the young daughter to be, in the traditional patriarchal mode, a submissive housewife. Another dialogue from the novel depicts how Enitan's mother deals with sexuality and her own body:

My mother sat opposite me. "Do you remember, when you used to come to church with me, that some of the sisters would miss church for a week?"  
 "Yes, Mummy."  
 "Do you know why they missed church?"  
 "No."  
 "Because they were unclean," she said.  
 Immediately I looked at the air-conditioner. My mother began to speak in Yoruba. She told me the most awful thing about blood and babies and why it was a secret.

“I will not marry,” I said.  
 “You will,” she said.  
 “I will not have children.”  
 “Yes, you will. All women want children.”  
 Sex was a filthy act, she said, and I must always wash myself afterward. Tears filled my eyes... (ATTA, 2005, p.23)

There is a contrast with the image presented above when Enitan meets the girl next door, Sheri. Sheri is from a Muslim family, she does not have a mother, and lives with her two stepmothers and brothers. The narrator presents Sheri someone dreaming to become an actress. Sheri is responsible for teaching sexuality to Enitan. It is during a visit to Sheri's house, that Enitan used a piece of broken mirror to see her sexual organ for the first time. Sheri is described using make up and provocative clothes (generally pink clothes), meanwhile Enitan's mother prohibits Enitan to use make up and she is described as a religious person, using white clothes. Their friendship is something that flourishes against the will of Enitan's family. It is another trend from Nigeria society that Sefi Atta portrays on the micro sphere of the family and neighborhood that can be found in the entire Nigerian society: it is a multicultural country where local native religions exist besides Christianity and Islamic traditions. Enitan is raised protected from the external world, so she only discovers the multiplicity of religions, ethnical groups, and even other languages when she starts at the local school, as shown in the following passage:

I learned also about women in my country, from Zaira, Katsina, Kaduna who decorated their skin with henna dye and lived in *purdah*; women from Calabar who were fed and anointed in fattening houses before their weddings; women who were circumcised. (ATTA, 2005, p. 44).

A turning moment on Sheri and Enitan's relationship is when Sheri is raped by some boys from Enitan's school. Enitan imagines that it has happened because Sheri was using make up and provocative clothes. “There was blood on her pubic hairs, thick spit running down her legs. Semen.”(ATTA, 2005, p.63). Enitan's description of the rape was centralized in her own idea of sex: something dirty. She helps Sheri to take a bath and gives her some food. Enitan does not speak about the incident with her parents nor with Sheri, believing that they both could forget about the incident if they did not talk about it. Her parents bring to Enitan the reality that her friend was hospitalized because she provoked an abortion and revealed that she was raped. Indeed, Enitan gets angry with Sheri blaming her for allowing the rape to happen, by using drugs, and drinking alcohol. As the author presents in the following passage:

‘ We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys, following them around, thinking she was one of them. Now, I could smell their semen on her, and it was making me sick. It was her fault.’ (ATTA,2005, p. 65).

In Nigeria there are Constitutional structures that emphasize that rape and any other sort of gender violence is a crime and must be reprimanded and punished when occurs, however, most of the time victims prefer to stay in silence and not look for justice, as their conservative culture tends to place women in an inferior position towards men and also women avoid stigmatization. Enitan's reaction depicts the fact that in Nigeria most of women are blamed for being raped (NNADI, 2012).

Enitan's parents' reaction to this situation reveals some features of their culture. They must protect Enitan's virginity until the day she gets married. As if the parents were the protectors and the holders of Enitan's purity represented by her virginity. Enitan carries this idea until she meets her first boyfriend during her studies in London. "My first boyfriend, a first-year pharmacy student at London University, assured me that it was mine, to give to him." (ATTA, 2005, p.73). It is also during college that Enitan hears for the first time that rape is never caused by women, and that it is an act of violence, and she revisits her memories and asks herself why Sheri and other "*bad girls*" never took their situations to court. The author opens the second chapter of her novel presenting Enitan dealing with racism, as she is the friend with the afro-hair that could not be called black, because it was considered rude, and with sexuality. Her freedom to explore the last theme appears to be possible since the character is living in London far away from her parents.

Enitan's mother plays a fundamental role in the novel. She used to be a successful professional, she used to dress well, and used to be desired and disputed by other men, but just after she lost her first son, she became a religious person, always dressing white and not smiling anymore. Her relationship with Enitan changes along the novel. It starts as an odd relation, in which the mother is attempting to teach Enitan the women's role in the so-called conservative Nigerian society and that she must learn how to feed her family, staying in the kitchen place, As the author describes:

' We hardly see each other. She belongs to a church, a cult, actually. One of those, take your money and give you fear. She's been a member for as long as I can remember. I think she was drawn in because of my brother. She thinks I idolize my father' ...

'Our mothers were wonderful, mostly. They shielded us from the truths about our fathers, remained in bad marriages to give us a chance. But I'd seen, met, heard of daughters who admitted their mothers were vain, weak, bullying, sluttish, drunken. The difference between these daughters and I was that I did not know my own mother, and I had kept our lack of relationship hidden, often lied about it. (ATTA, 2005, p. 88).

It is during the third chapter (1985), that Enitan reveals that her mother has abandoned her career to save his first son that was sick and ended up dying. Her mother complains the lack of support and physical presence of her husband that caused her a lot of pain:

I had it all, but when your brother was born, who cared about them? Imagine the pain for a child? He would scream and scream, and we couldn't touch him. I couldn't touch my son. For what? For a man who wouldn't be kept. Going out all the time, as if my son didn't exist, as if I didn't exist. He said I stopped looking after myself. I did not have time to myself. He said I was angry all the time. Of course I was angry. It was like swallowing broking glass. You can't expel broken glass from your body. It will tear you apart (ATTA, 2005, p. 173).

Enitan is raised listening to two different voices: her father and her mother. The latter is always trying to show her daughter that women must be obedient, following the patriarchal control of males in Nigerian societies and their place should be restricted to the kitchen and the bedroom. (ABOLADE, 2021). The gender identity of being a woman in Nigeria is socially constructed and it is a socialization product, in which women are supposed to be submissive to men and stay silent in the kitchen, merely involved in feeding and reproduction activities. (OLONADE, 2021). Enitan receives from her father a lot of love, attention, and motivation to not stay on those places. Enitan's father is presented by the author as someone into women's liberation, instigating, and paying, for Enitan's education, influencing her to stay away from her own mother.

When Enitan returns from London, she has a different perspective of gender and sexuality. She starts to feel dislocated inside her own country, principally because she is refusing to accept the kitchen as her place. She is not willing to turn down her voice and she starts to experience some relationships and frustrations. Besides being cheated by her boyfriend, she perceives that her father is not such a liberal person when it comes to gender equality. During an argument about an article in a magazine, in which a woman exposes an important man, her father defends the idea that the woman was destroying her own reputation, as Enitan believes that she was destroying the man's public image. Sefi Atta presents in this dialogue the clashes between native law and custom and Enitan voices her willingness to change the culture and she asks her father if he could change their culture for her, because whenever a woman seeks protection from law, the judge and the lawyer are men, and they will hear and interpret the law by their male perspective.

The principal character's frustrations with her father get bigger, when she discovers that she has a brother and that her father has a different family and has hidden it from her and her mother for a long a time: "It wasn't uncommon for married men, especially from his generation,



to have children outside. But this? Lying for years? I recall how he punished me for lying as a child” (ATTA, 2005, p.150). Enitan starts to realize that her father was not different from other men inside Nigeria and that her mother has sacrificed her own career and her own life to protect her from the truth about her father. “I cursed our economy that didn’t give me freedom to sustain myself...My father would give me a car, but he would not pay me enough to buy myself one. (ATTA, 2005, page:152)”. Socially defined, the gender norms expected that men should always hold the central power of a family and inside Nigeria there is a trend to believe that men are superior to women (OLONADE, 2021). Her father starts to blame women for being silent during the turn oil in which Nigeria is going through. Enitan presents him the idea that men expect that women stay in the kitchen cooking in silence, but his father wants to hear their voice only when husband’s rights are threatened by authorities. (AKUNG, 2011).

Sheri continuous to present Enitan with a reality that is not in perfect harmony to what the principal character believes. When Enitan returns from Europe, with her gender identity and sexuality completed revisited by western values, such as women and men should be treated equally, she finds Sheri having an affair with an important military person. Enitan is desolated to discover that her friend allowed herself to go under a relationship, in which the man owns her life entirely, not permitting her to work and make her own profits. Sheri informs Enitan:

‘Maybe you don’t know this because you were raised by your father, but let me tell you now, to save you from unnecessary headache in the future. Forget that nonsense. Education cannot change what’s inside a person’s veins. Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against this wall, you will end up in the kitchen. Period.’ (ATTA, 2005, p.104).

Her unacceptance to stay in the kitchen is depicted after Enitan marries a Brazilian/Nigerian man and during one dialogue with her mother-in-law, Enitan asks her if she has ever felt that the kitchen was the loneliest room and Ms. Franco interrupts the dialogue abruptly saying “Enough now”(ATTA, 2005, p.183). Although her husband has a Brazilian origin, his ancestors were free slaves that returned to Nigeria, his mother belongs to a generation in which women should be subordinated by men. It was a colonial project: the creation of a public sphere in which only men could participate (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). Women were not invited to talk about politics, governance, and any other subject that was not involving feeding and motherhood. During Enitan’s narrative, there are a couple of dialogues that the principal character has with her mother, principally, that bring this circumstance. As for example, just after Enitan’s father was arrested, her mother tells her: “this is not a woman’s place. Not in this country. You don’t need me to tell you.”(ATTA, 2005, p. 222).

By stating that women should not serve their husbands food, Enitan wakes to the fact that women should affirm themselves as individuals that must seek for their own happiness, and they should not have the same life that their mothers had. Men should not be treated by women as Gods. Such attitude is not well perceived by conservative people “If a woman sneezed in my country someone would call her feminist.” (ATTA, 2005, p.200). Enitan does not consider herself a feminist because she believes that she does not need a word to describe her ordinary frustrations about how Nigeria treats women:

‘I’d seen the metamorphosis of women, how age slowed their walks, stilled their expressions, softened their voices, distorted what came out of their mouths. They hid their discontent so that other women wouldn’t deprive them of it. By the time they came of age, millions of personalities were channeled into about three prototypes: strong and silent, chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kindhearted. All the rest were known as horrible women. I wanted to tell everyone “I! Am! Not! Satisfied with these options!” I was ready to tear every notion they had about women,” (ATTA, 2005, p. 200).

Enitan wishes to be heard by Nigeria, in the same way she wants that women could be heard by men. She is someone seeking equal treatment and gets frustrated with her father, family, society, and government. “We accept the world we were born into, though we knew what felt right and wrong from the start”(ATTA, 2005, p.305). Enitan starts the novel as a naïve child that tends to believe in everything people say to her. She is manipulated by her father, nurturing for him a strong connection and love; however, she is always afraid of her mother due to her involvement with religion. These two opposite forces contributed for Enitan to construct her identity as a woman in Nigeria. Once she goes to Europe for education, she returned feeling different: she does not fit in the kitchen and in silence as it was expected by Nigerian society.

Enitan, almost at the end of her narrative affirms that Yoruba’s language has no distinction between male or female, which conveys that he or she are equals. Language is a social product in which can be found cultural values from a specific society (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). The patriarchal society is a creation of the colonization process, in which the colonizer forces the colonized to think, write, and speak following the colonizer’s ideas and values (KILOMBA, 2010). Hence, the so-called conservative that believe that women should be placed at the kitchen and in silence, are, in fact, promoting the values from the colonizer.

Sefi Atta’s debut novel *Everything Good will Come* represents the construction of gender identity of Enitan, in which she receives influences from her father – ideal of freedom to women and equality, but this equality is only valid to fight for men’s rights, outside this

sphere, she can have a career, but she must be submitted to men's authorities. Simultaneously, she learns along her life that her mother turned herself into religion as a protest against Enitan's father's moralism. The character claims her space in Nigerian society. The author is reaffirming the fact that women should be able to talk about their identity, and about national history as well. Enitan does not represent all women in Nigeria or Africa, as the character affirms: "I wanted to say that I didn't know how to think like an African woman. I only knew how to think for myself." (ATTA, 2005, p.294). She accepts the idea of a multicultural Nigeria in which diverse of perspectives are colliding everyday since the post-colonial moment.

The author worships the transgression that is necessary in Nigeria context, and it is a common resource for fiction writers, giving to their principal characters or narrators the voice of the need of social changes (SILVA, 1967). Enitan starts the narrative as a child and throughout the book, she embraces womanhood, which conveys that Enitan is a round character, and we can observe her changes during the narrative. (AGUIAR E SILVA, 2004). The text is presented in the first person, being a reliable narration, where the reader can follow each memory and acknowledge the changes into Enitan's perspective and construction of her gender identity (WOOD, 2008).

Sefi Atta brings to the table challenges that a woman faces in Nigeria, where society expects women to be submissive to men. Enitan is constantly going against the odds and questioning the status quo given to women. The character behaves as if she cannot fit in that submissive role anymore, and she is always promoting a reevaluation of women's condition in Nigeria. The author presents a character constructing her gender identity, not merely based on biological differences between male and female, as prescribed by the Eurocentric perspective, but an identity that is seeking equal treatment and opportunities. Silence is not golden anymore.

This chapter brought how Sefi Atta in Enitan's saga recreates the need of (re)construction of gender identity in Nigerian society. It showed that when women were classified as women by the colonial power, bringing only a biological concept of gender, they were subordinated by the colonial authorities and by their native men. The Yoruba language does not differentiate male or female and the biological characteristics have no influence in social or labor division. All the segregation and subordination are inherited from colonial times that society identified as conservative. These are products of the colonial politics and domination that is still present in Nigerian society. In the following chapter, I will talk about how Sefi Atta brings a post-colonial and feminist perspective in her narrative.

#### 4 Chapter III – A post-colonial feminist voice inside *Everything Good Will Come*.

*Everything Good Will Comes* (2005) brings a feminist perspective when it shows how Enitan starts to question her place in Nigerian Society, refusing to accept the submissive role. In the passage below, it is possible to observe that Enitan is a character and narrator that is not comfortable on her family, society, and country:

People say I was hot-headed in my twenties. I don't ever remember being hot-headed. I only ever remember calling out to my voice. In my country, women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selflessness to pass on to their daughters; a startling legacy, like tears down a parched throat (ATTA, 2005, p. 179).

Sefi Atta and other Nigerian authors from the third generation are seeking to present the saga of a girl entering the womanhood and defining by her own her role in Nigerian society (AKUNG, 2012). "In the feminist novel in Nigeria, the searchlight in literature has been turned on the wholesome woman who has attracted to herself recognition and acceptance. The feminist novel traces the female journey from ignorance and naivety to experience and selfhood"(AKUNG, 2012, p.115). . The aim of this chapter is to show how Sefi Atta reproduces a post-colonial and feminist perspective of Nigerian society, focusing on the role attributed to women. The colonization period is a history told through a masculine perspective. The colonial domain appears as a male prerogative, in which both elements (colonizers and natives) are seem like male characters (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). One of the main goals of feminist theories is to explain to woman and man how sexism works and how it could be challenged or even changed. Most women were socialized by parents, society, church, and state to accept the sexist ideology that dominates the social sciences (hooks, 2020).

Since her childhood, Enitan is told how to behave as a good girl. Although her relationship with her mother during this period of her life is not friendly, as she suffers much more influences from her father that prohibits her to stay in the kitchen, Sefi Atta describes how Enitan's mother molded her daughter:

‘Ah-ah? What is this? You’re wearing lipstick?’  
I placed my pen down, more embarrassed than scared.  
She beckoned. ‘Let me see.’  
Her voice softened when she saw the red ink. ‘You shouldn’t be coloring your mouth at your age...’ (ATTA, 2005, p.18)

In Enitan's mother idea, young girls should not wear makeup or wear provocative clothes. For her, being a girl is related to assume a specific behavior: girls should be in the kitchen learning how to cook and serve her future husbands and family. When Enitan disobeys her parents and goes to the party where Sheri was raped and Enitan's parents discover about it, Enitan's mother blames Enitan's father: 'Stop protecting her. You're always protecting her. Don't take her to church, don't do this, don't do that. Now look' (ATTA, 2005, p.67). Enitan's mother believes that Enitan's father prohibiting Enitan to stay in the kitchen with her mother, authorizes Enitan to behave different from what her mother is expecting from her.

Enitan starts to realize that her position as a woman inside Nigerian society is complicated. She has a degree in law, works for her father, but receives a lower salary than other male employees and surrounding her she has women financially dependent from men. As Sheri, that has talent to open a buffet service, but she can't, due to her relationship with the brigadier that pays her rent in Lagos.

'Thousands of single women are living on their own, all-over town.'  
'Well, I am not them and they are not me. I will go bac to England penniless before I live in a Lagos slum. What kind of country is this anyway? You graduate and you're privileged to live off your parents, or some old sugar daddy or some government contract. He should at least pay me enough'(ATTA, 2005, p. 116).

This lack of perspective is presented during the novel. It reflects some of the reasons most people from the Boom of Oil generation write from the diaspora. (KEHINDE; MBIPOM, 2011). Sefi Atta brings to her writing blending the fictional world and the real social conditions imposed to women in a patriarchal society. As Mentioned by Enitan:

Anywhere else in the world it would be hard to deal with, more so here. A woman was used to humiliation by the time she reached adulthood. She could wear it like a crown, tilt it for effect even, and dare anyone to question her. A man would hear his like an oversized cloak (ATTA, 2005, p. 168).

The fictional and the empirical worlds co-exist inside a novel. The fictional one is created as a reflection of the existing one, where characters and narratives are blended with historical and social realities. (AGUIAR E SILVA, 2004). Sérgio Costa (2013) affirms that post-colonial critics were born from the structuralists and post-structuralists debating about how knowledge is constructed in social science, forcing the use of Eurocentric perspectives to study social minorities and non-western societies.

The national identity is something not naturally created, it is something forced by a central power, and when it comes to post-colonial nations, it is an attempt to re-invent a social notion shared by different social elements (BAUMAN, 2005). During the colonial process, the colonizer's narrative seeks to describe the colonized population as inferior elements that only forcing the colonizer's ideas and perspectives, so they could be saved from savagism. The oppressor justifies their presence and politics to set the oppressed people free from their native culture (BHABHA, 1998). The post-colonial perspective was born from the voice of the Third World talking about their colonial experiences. It tends to revisit critically the relations among the Third World and the First World. It recognizes the complexity of cultural and political boundaries. Cultural identity is something obtained through an alterity process. Questions regarding cultural differences and race are bigger than sexuality and gender. (BHABHA, 1998). Stereotypes are constantly used in the colonizer's discourse, and they mold the national identity process of the oppressed people.

Uncle Alex had always said our country was not meant to be one. The British had drawn a circle on the map of West Africa and called it a country. Now I understood what he meant. The girls I met at Royal College were so different. I could tell a girl's ethnicity even before she opened her mouth." (ATTA, 2005, p. 44-45).

In the passage above, Sefi Atta reveals how multicultural and plural Nigeria is and how the colonization experience has forced all different ethnicities to live under the same political boundaries, not respecting the specificities of each ethnical group. The colonizer's perspective dominated the entire land through political practices that reflect in Enitan's childhood and womanhood conditions, as traditionalist groups reproduce the colonizer's discourse, instead of recreating the pre-colonial moment of the country.

The national literature is a form of national narrative that involves popular culture, symbolizing the common history shared among nationals (HALL, 2020). In Africa, the nationalists were seeking a specific goal: free themselves from the European dominion, reaching the independence of their countries. Once the colonized people found themselves free from the European direct power, they started to face several issues (economic, social, political and healthy) and besides that, they were struggling to create or rebuilt their national identity (GUIBERNAU, 1997). This willingness to rebuild or create a national identity comes from a common ground that most colonized people share there is a high level of inferiority nurtured by the denial of their local culture, adopting the colonizer perspective as the norm (FANON,

2020). Sefi Atta presents how women are seen by men as inferior and this perspective starts to be built during childhood.

All colonized and colonizer history and relations are unfolded through a masculine perspective, the feminist point of view is considered peripheral and tends not to show up (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). Sefi Atta through her character Grace Ameh states the following: “I’ve always said, men fight for land, and women fight for family”(ATTA, 2005. page: 295). When authors like Chinua Achebe were producing novels talking about the colonial experience, women writers such as Buchi Emecheta were talking about motherhood. (FASAN, 2010).

Childhood is something common to appear in African narratives and indicates that authors are voicing the need to seek into the past the roots to compose the future national identity. (BRUGIONI, 2019). Enitan does not accept her place as being submissive and quiet in the kitchen. She constructs her gender identity through her friendships (Sheri and other friends during school and university) and staying between the supposed free father and conservative mother. She believes that the way Nigerian society treats women is disrespectful. Sefi Atta voices through Enitan the post-colonial feminist discourse, in which women start to question the status quo given to them, when the colonial system has classified them as women and place them as inferior citizens. (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021). Enitan’s discontentment with how women are treated in Nigerian society can be spotted in the following passage:

In my 29 years no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how woman respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their heads, with their necks as high as church spires and foreheads crushed. Too many women, I thought, ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion: shift-shift, prod-prod and then nothing (ATTA, 2005, p. 186).

Enitan is the third generation of her family, and since her grandmother’s generation, women have been seeking careers and having degrees. However, women are expected to assume a subordinate role. She must feed her family, and mostly her husband as if he was a God. As Enitan’s says “it was an overload of duties, I thought, sometimes self-imposed” (ATTA, 2005, p.186). The kitchen is an allegorical construction that represents the submissiveness of women. It is a place from where it is not possible to voice their opinions and their frustrations (AKUNG, 2012). When talking about her marriage, Enitan brings the idea that her husband never comes closer to the kitchen and he is always forcing her to be there, asking to bring water, beer and serve his brothers when they were visiting. Another conflict in Enitan’s marriage is exposed by the narrator:

‘Better watch what you’re saying. Next thing they’ll be calling me woman wrapper’. Wrapper was the cloth woman tied around their waists. I thought he was paranoid. I said it was too bad. He was the very person who had encouraged me to be strong at work. He was asking me to fly within a specified perimeters (ATTA, 2005, p. 185).

The passage reinforces the idea that women should not speak louder than men. It is expected that a woman never holds a discussion with her husband and obeys and accepts his ideas and desires. Enitan is recreating the same conflicting atmosphere that she had as a child, watching her mother and father arguing about how to better educate her.

Sefi Atta criticizes the Eurocentric perspective of the so-called conservative presenting a dialogue between Enitan and her first boyfriend when she returns to Lagos. He is an artist, who makes mosaics with beads, portraying Yoruba’s old Gods. Although Enitan is Yoruba, she does not recognize any of them. “Everyone knows about Aphrodite, but ask them about Oshun...” (ATTA, 2005, p. 111). On this line it is possible to identify that the colonizer’s discourse and politics still have reflections in how Nigerian people deal with their own native culture. They are capable to know the Greek goddess of love, but they have no idea of their native goddess of love.

Writers such as Sefi Atta are bringing to their fiction some idealizations that they would expect to happen on their homeland. Children from rich families tend to study abroad and seek better opportunities outside Nigeria. The diaspora movement in Nigeria has started with the slavery market (which caused an involuntary movement) and continued in the post-colonial period. Sefi Atta wrote her novel in the United States and all her creation voices how women struggle against the patriarchal Nigerian Society. The author projected on her piece, her hope in social, political, and economic change for her country (KEHINDE; MBIPOM, 2011).

Enitan’s voice criticizes the heritage from the colonial period that is still a trace in today’s Nigerian society. The submissive role that women is still forced to occupy. The novel keeps bringing examples of how Enitan does not fit into the role that society expected her. Although the character does not have access to political information, she is observing adult conversations and through that, she gains awareness of her country’s political status. In addition to that, she goes to study in London, returns to Lagos and discovers that she is getting old, and people are not tolerant to her ideas anymore. Enitan shows surprise with the fact that her generation seems more conservative than their parents (KEHINDE; MBIPOM, 2011). Political scenario after independence in Nigeria was not stable, as presented by Enitan:



‘Politics in our country was a scuffle between the military and politicians. Both were conservative and so we were. Now our greatest contribution to our society was that we were more traditional than the people who had given birth to us.’ (ATTA, 2005, p.77).

The world history has been presented through Eurocentric perspective, in which the European states have saved the uncivilized people, sharing European ideologies, practices and religions (WALLERSTEIN, 2007). The post-colonialism was inaugurated in 1947 with the independence movement of India and it is intrinsically related to the emancipation movements in Africa and Asia. Its epistemological concepts were born in 1980. For some authors, the post-colonialism is a phenomenon described as a switch that occurred into global relations that emerged from the emancipatory movements (CURIEL, 2020).

The feminist theory seeks to reach the emancipation of women and their empowerment (COLLINS, 2019). Nigerian literature produced by women tends to bring as themes the quest for identity, not accepting anymore the definition given by men. Authors embrace the eager to give women voice in Nigerian society. Sefi Atta’s debut novel brings this quest and self-affirmation of Enitan as a Nigerian woman. Enitan is a character that does not accept the limitations men have placed on her (AKUNG, 2012). The author presents a character that is not a femme fatale figure:

Prettiiness could encourage people to treat a woman like a doll, to be played with, tossed around, fingered, dismembered, and discarded. Prettiiness could also make a woman lazy, if she were congratulated for it too often and remunerated too long. Sheri was the Nigerian man’s ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman’s station.” (ATTA, 2005, p.105).

In fact, as shown by the passage above, Enitan is the completely opposite of the femme fatale figure. She believes that prettiiness could make women even more submissive to their husbands and families. Enitan is someone seeking for her place in Nigerian society, but as a lawyer, running her independent business and having the equal payment and rights as men do. The author brings a deconstruction of the stereotype created by men about women: “the women in this novel are bold, courageous, assertive, economically empowered” (AKUNG, 2012, p.121). Enitan incentivizes Sheri to open her own buffet service, stating that she should not be dependent of the Brigadier; Enitan has her own career and refuses to serve her husband food;

Grace Ameh takes Enitan into the feminist movement; Enitan's mother used religion to rebel against her husband.

I began to count on my fingers. "No husband, bad husband, husband's girlfriend, husband's mother. Human rights were never an issue till the rights 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?" (ATTA, 2005, p. 196).

The passage above, belongs to a discussion Enitan is having with her father when he mentions that men have never heard the opinion of women about politics. The father believes that women should fight against what is going on in Nigeria beside men, but they should not voice for an equal treatment and respect inside their own house. As if the human rights of men should be protected from the State, but it is acceptable that human rights of women being disrespected inside their own houses, because as soon as they were classified as women, they were subordinated to men's authorities (OYEWÙMÍ, 2021).

Characters in African novels are presented as reflections and interpretations of the context in which the author is placed. Symbolically, they represent the author ideations and wishes for their homeland, principally, those who are writing from the diaspora. (ADEBAYO, 2005). Sefi Atta brings to her writing her disappointment with the political, social and economic conditions of her country after the independence movement. It is through Enitan's father that she voices her feelings toward her country:

'Twenty-five years after independence', my father continued. "And still this nonsense. No light, no water, people dying all over the place, before their time, from one sickness or the other.' (ATTA, 2005, p.108).

Sefi Atta metaphorically constructs the duality of politicians and militaries from the macro social perspective into a micro sphere of Enitan's family. Her father represents the politicians, the diplomacy, the hypocrites' defenders of women's freedom. Her mother used the discipline presented on her religious, that uses some sort of fear to impose respect, as the militaries use the weapons to impose the same things. Personal sphere is the same as political and social spheres (BHABHA, 1998).

The novel represents a feminist and post-colonial voice. It traces the national conscious formation of Nigeria, which conveys in cherishing values, traditions, memories from a common past, and sharing future (GUIBERNAU, 1997). National cultures give filters from which a

society can identify their own identity and norms (HALL, 2020). The critical perspective of the post-colonial theories points out that countries such as Nigeria, still have some colonial traumas, caused by educational politics from the colonizers that eclipsed their native culture perspective. As shown by Enitan's narrative, she knows much more about European references than Yoruba's history. Indeed, the so-called conservative groups, instead of defending the reproduction of the pre-colonial values, they end up perpetuating the European values, such as gender and religions.

The place designated to women in Nigerian society was not selected or constructed by them but imposed by men. As mentioned, Yoruba's traditions and language have not distinguished between male and female and on that society, the roles were not determined by biological differences. Women were classified by the colonizer as women and then subordinated to the colonizer and native men. The African narratives tend to present the childhood perspective as a symbolic form to assimilate the struggles that those countries are still facing after their emancipations. Public and private memories or spheres are used to show those conflicts and how they impact people and the national identity (BRUGIONI, 2019).

It is important to mention that the post-colonial theory has never developed a single theoretical perspective or possibility. It produces an interconnection of a variety of critical perspectives (BRUGIONI, 2019). Colonization was not a homogeneous practice in the world. Each country has experienced it differently, and this is the main reason for such a plural perspective. (CURIEL, 2021). As pointed by Sérgio Costa (2013), the common point that unifies all post-colonial perspectives is that all discourse produced tend to tear down the west/rest polarity in social science analyses, accepting other narratives further than Eurocentric perspectives.

Enitan places together the gender situation and the political situation in Nigeria. "But it was one thing to face an African community and tell them how to treat a woman like a person. It was entirely another to face an African dictatorship and tell them how to treat people like citizens" (ATTA, 2005, p.283). With this passage, it also portrays the fact that women suffer a double submission process: one from Nigerian government and the other from their own family. Nigerian men and Nigerian authorities are two forces against the liberation of women. Enitan understands that her government does not see her as a citizen or even as a person in the same way as her husband does not see her as an equal.

Sefi Atta closes her narrative without a conclusive end. It is a metaphorical construction in which the author reveals that identity is an ongoing process that never ends. In addition to that, as it is a Nigerian perspective of its own history, it indicates that society is still learning

how to survive not only after colonization but also after independence. The women and the nation are both still struggling to build or rebuild their identity, and both are seeking to reach independence and emancipation.

During one interview, Sefi Atta mentioned that her brother was the one everyone expected to become a writer and her family and even her, were caught by surprise when she started to write novels and plays (COLLINS III, 2015). Her debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) gives to the feminist perspective voice and tells that against all odds, it is possible to a woman to speak out her opinions and step out of the kitchen. It talks about gender, violence, religion, tradition, dictatorial regimes, social classes, prejudices, friendship, and family, all presented by the narrator and principal character Enitan. Sefi Atta is an engaged author that depicts the struggles that women still face in Nigerian society.

When Sefi Atta decides to write about a female character struggling to learn what it means to be a Nigerian woman, she is assuming a post-colonial discourse, questioning the submissive perspective that women have in Nigeria since the colonial experience. It is a narrative from an African perspective, written by an author in the African diaspora, comparing the idealized society with the real one. This chapter attempted to focus on showing how Sefi Atta depicts a feminist and post-colonial discourse on her debut novel, presenting how the third generation of Nigerian writers are concerned in presenting the social, political and cultural aspects of Nigerian society and how these elements interfere in the reconstruction of gender and national identity. Enitan is called as a not domesticated woman by her own husband, because she is speaking out loud her ideas and struggling to be heard. (ATTA, 2005, p.214).

## 5 Final Considerations

Antonio Candido (2014) affirmed that literature is a social product that presents some aspects of the social context from each historical period and society. When it comes to African literature, authors portray African experiences with colonialism, independency, post-colonialism, clashes between conservative values and the western ones, and the frustrations and struggles of the post-independence Africa (BRUGLIONI, 2019). African women write about the roles and status of women in African societies. To analyze Sefi Atta's novel *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), it is important to keep in mind that it is a story of the construction of a gender identity meanwhile Nigeria is struggling and constructing a national identity as well.

The monography presented an analysis of how Sefi Atta portrays the context of Nigeria and how it interferes in the gender identity construction. Indeed, the research points that the main character – Enitan – starts to question the status quo of women inside Nigerian society since her childhood when she has influences from her liberal father and a conservative mother. The feminist theoretical perspective points that gender was a concept imposed during the colonial period, and the so-called traditionalists are those who continue to promote the same European values. As presented by the feminist theorist – Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (2021), the *Yoruba* culture and society, before the colonial period, have no differentiation based on biological features, having no mark of female and male in its language. During the colonial period, the colonizer imposed the gender idea and colonized Nigeria.

Both, National and gender identity are unfinished products, as Nigerian society still struggles with heritage from its colonial period, such as the reminiscence of a patriarchal society in which women are treated as inferior and submissive in relation to men. The political instability and the violence legitimated and orchestrated by the State contribute to the lack of social equality. Besides historical violence, there is the economic interest involving the oil production, that has been suffocating democracy experience in that country. As it was shown, the pre-colonial society was not patriarchal and women used to figure as central role, but the colonial system has placed a social instruction in which only men could figure in central positions, classifying and defining women, and after that, women started to be colonized by the British Empire and their own local native men.

For better understanding of Nigerian women through Sefi Atta's artistic perspective, it is necessary to understand the place the author occupies in Nigerian literature, as it imposes some implicatures when it comes to comprehend all the passage rituals that the central character – Enitan – goes through, from being a naïve child to embrace the womanhood and challenge

the status quo of women in Nigerian society. It is a *bildungsroman* novel, as the principal character is constructing her understanding of what is to be a Nigerian woman. The context of Nigeria influences this process and is shown that simultaneously both identities are being constructed. The same eager that the character is seeking to understand her gender identity, her own country is attempting to relearn its own history and national identity.

The novel is a post-colonial literature that gives voice to a feminist perspective of Nigeria historical, economic, political, and social context. This perspective did not use to be exposed, as women inside Nigerian Literature used to talk about motherhood, live in the rural areas and they did not express themselves about their country's context. Sefi Atta belongs to a third generation of Nigerian authors that transcend that space and started from the diaspora to talk about Nigerian society, presenting ordinary dilemmas that belong to their reality. It is important to remember that Nigeria is a plural country with more than 350 different ethnical groups. As Enitan states on her narrative, she does not think as an African woman, she thinks and expresses herself as she learnt to do, which conveys that her reality represents a single perspective from a woman who studied abroad (Europe and U.S.) and returned to her own country.

The novel presents feminist dimensions, presenting Enitan's growth, from a naïve child, the education that she received in Nigeria and England, her social awareness, her struggle for her rights and for the womanhood rights when she became an adult. Along all this process of change, Nigeria just became a country free from colonization system, and it is ruled by a dictatorial government. Violence, corruption, social injustice, and economic differences are presented, and they have some psychological effects in Nigerians, principally in women.

The monography shows how Sefi Atta depicts the challenges and struggles that woman suffer inside Nigerian society, producing a post-colonial and feminist novel. Indeed, it presents how the author points the social, political, cultural, and economic features interfere in the (re)construction of Nigerian gender identity.

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Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul  
Pró-Reitoria de Graduação  
Av. Ipiranga, 6681 - Prédio 1 - 3º. andar  
Porto Alegre - RS - Brasil  
Fone: (51) 3320-3500 - Fax: (51) 3339-1564  
E-mail: [prograd@pucrs.br](mailto:prograd@pucrs.br)  
Site: [www.pucrs.br](http://www.pucrs.br)