

**VOCALITY IN SEFI ATTA'S WOMEN:  
A CRITIQUE OF *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME***

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**Abstract**

Courage spurred by assertiveness is the hallmark of feminist tenets. Despite discriminatory roles that challenge female consciousness for self-identity and liberation, self-fulfillment still occupies the center of female discourse within the entrenched cultural hierarchical gender inequality. Amidst negative and less significant portrayals of female characters in male authored texts, women writers have continually remained relentless in their effort at positioning women at the center of their artistic creations. Centrally positioned, these heroines are equipped with vocality for self-actualization and emancipation both at home and beyond—a spontaneous act structured to unweave patriarchal irrational ideology. This is achieved by placing the women characters in a beneficial position necessary for their assertive consciousness. Theoretically, this paper is hinged on feminist tenets and arched on the exemplary female vocality and its impact on self-actualization in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. The aspects of style are also discussed as the artist's sensibility in developing the themes.

**Keywords:** vocality, feminist tenets, self-identity

**Social Background and Atta's Creative Sensibility**

The social background of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* is set in Lagos during the military era at the first instance and civilian regimes later. Both eras are characterized by dictatorship of the Army and the fanatical zeal of corrupt civilians in power. Atta's choice of a protagonist, a girl of seven remains a unique aesthetic mode of detailing events and tracing the social, moral and psychological development from the purview of the narrator. Undisputedly, Enitan, the protagonist asserts and punctures the myth of male subjugation through her father's encouragement and education on the need to be liberated. She confesses thus: "from the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations." (*Everything Good* 1). The above personal ideology is intricately linked to Atta's title which summarizes Enitan's inclinations leading to her perceptual vocality and dream actualization at the end of the novel.

Enitan lives in a world of two divergent views—an excessively influential view of her father who insists she must assert herself by studying her books to avoid being confined to the kitchen as woman (Atta 20-21); and her mother, the true African woman who represents the African womanist, and teaches Enitan how to become a good wife through culinary skills in the kitchen as seen in the remark made by Enitan's father, "I see your mother is making you understudy her again" and her mother retorts, "It won't harm her to be in here" (Atta 20). Enitan's education also extends to various aspects of motherhood bothering on issues of "blood and babies and "sex" (Atta 23). These are the ways Erin Sunday, Enitan's mother accentuates the need for Enitan to grow up understanding and undertaking the roles ascribed to women by the society which are geared towards earning her a reputation as a good housewife. One thing is certain, the conflicting models of training in her home and her relationships with men contribute to Enitan's vocality and strength.

Enitan's graduation as a lawyer demonstrates her inner ability. She is indeed a dynamic personality—a lawyer in her father's firm (Atta 118), a credit control accountant in a bank (Atta 181) and the Bank's company secretary (Atta 190). In her relationships with men, Atta portrays her as a radical

feminist who would not tolerate the excessive ego of men or be naively oppressed and controlled in relationships. This is evident in her relationship with her husband, Niyi who claims to have phobia for the kitchen and allows Enitan do all the house chores while he sits in the living room reading newspapers and magazine. Even a simple gesture of bringing drinks for his siblings on visitation is dreaded by him. Enitan thus, challenges and dismantles the patriarchal belief of making the woman a slave to the man in all ramifications. This is achieved by a skilled mark of orality that solicits her husband's assistance in petty chores. She states: "You have hands", and Niyi responds, "My friend". "Show some respect" and she replies, "Go to hell" (Atta 186). Enitan's vocal ability enables her protest against domestic oppression—a perpetual engagement with domestic chores strictly left for wives. Her quest for complementarity equips her oratorical skill geared towards her liberation. She shouts: "Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg?" (Atta 187). Atta in the above discussion portrays the typical African man as proud egoist whose preoccupation is to lord and suppress the woman without an iota of human mercy. The detention of Enitan's father results to the crumbling of her marriage with Niyi. Enitan's inability of procreating early becomes an opportunity for Niyi to force silence on her. Enitan confesses: "that was how my thirties found me, in a silence state. I felt as though I'd been running in midair for years" (Atta 189).

Notably, Enitan's challenging pregnancy does not constitute a barrier to her father's freedom. She defies both her doctor's advice and her husband's recommendation and insistence on bed rest and equips herself with inner strength and self-induced vocality in fighting for her father's release from prison.

In the same vein, the house wives including Grace Ameh, the journalist also lend their voices and strength to actualize their self-worth. Their self-expressiveness showcases them as strong, assertive and powerful women. Their unity in vocalizing a collective decision becomes a strong force for the immediate release of the men in detention. The women resolve, "We would write letters to our president, asking for the release of our relations, whether or not he reads them. We will not stop until our relations are freed. There were other campaign groups like ours, and they often appeared in the press. Some were petitioning for the release of women journalists. We gained strength from their voices" (Atta 330).

The success of the women's struggle and subsequent release of their relatives is a source of inner joy to Enitan whose inclination propels a confession that—"Everything Good will Come..." (Atta 335). Enitan's achievements reassure her, that despite her rejection by her husband and family members, every good thing will come to her. The most penetrating appreciation of her vocality draws the title of the novel from her confession as captured in the above quotation. Indeed, we see a fascination borne out of courage and determination—remarkably, Enitan is armed with a good career, a child and a voice. Her revolutionary action protests the slanderous focus of her husband and in-laws.

### **Women and Vocality: The Feminist Streak in *Everything Good Will Come***

Against the docile and voiceless women portrayed in male authored texts, Atta in her novel showcases women who are assertive and are able to speak out for the world, especially the patriarchal domain which helps them gain their self-worth. The women through their vocal ability made choices that propel their development against patriarchal domination. Helen Chukwuma in her paper entitled "Voices and choices" posits that,

the female character in African fiction hitherto, is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household content to bear children, and unfulfilled if she does not.... Docility and complete submission of will is demanded and enacted from her. This traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially, in the background of patrilineage which makes most African society. (131)

The above assertion is true of most male- authored works and indeed in true life situations even in this contemporary age. Therefore "feminist writers... deploy diverse tropes to unsettle male-invented

conventions considered inimical to the self-development of the girl-child in the society” (Sule Egya 211). In Odinye’s view, the diverse tropes are summarized as “feminist consciousness which helps fictional readers to conceptualize authorial thoughts and feelings by allowing them to see how the discourse of girlhood or womanhood is partially part of the author’s memory” (42). Amongst African female writers, Sefi Atta has contributed immensely in role reversal in her novel thereby giving the woman a voice. Enitan from seven years is strong-willed coupled with her father insistence on her studying law as a ploy to inherit his profession (Atta 40). The choice of law and the decision to send Enitan to London to study is to give her a voice and to have an edge over her contemporaries. It is to make her live above cultural limitations in actualizing her self-worth in a male dominated society. To confirm the above, Egya, Sule posits that Enitan’s father seems to set her on the path of female liberation, ready to do all he can to see her free from cultural restrictions” (Atta 226). This crave to empower Enitan makes her father insist on her joining the debating society rather than Girls guides for as he puts it; “Girls guides are nothing but kitchen martyrs in the making” (Atta 40). Just like the law profession, the debating society entails constructive arguments. As such, right from the outset, Enitan is positioned for vocality as debates and law connote vocality. Hence, Enitan’s father from childhood prepares her through the debate society for her future profession which later lends her a voice in the society.

Sefi Atta also uses education as an instrument of vocality in the novel. Okereke aptly describes education as a, formal Western Education, a colonial heritage, which has been a positive liberating force for Nigerian women. It has equipped them for self-definition by raising their consciousness to their subjugation by a male-dominated society” (133). The above assertion vividly describes Enitan, a lawyer and Grace Ameh, a journalist, who have been equipped through education—a good platform for conquering male prejudices. Formal education is indeed gave them a unique voice which serves as a liberating force fighting for the release of the political detainees. This educational awareness leads the duo to attend the literary readings. In her address to the over forty attendees who are mostly male, Ameh eulogizes the assertiveness of Winnie Mandela, the wife of the political prisoner, Nelson Mandela and her contributions towards his release during the apartheid regime in South Africa which she basically achieves as a result of her education and awareness. Simply put, the women’s educational background contributes effectively to their vocality—a courage displayed through writings leading the eventual release of Enitan’s father and other political prisoners. During the literary readings, Enitan observes “I was in awe of the people I was listening to, that they wrote without recognition or remuneration, and more so that the denounced injustices as a group at the expense of their freedoms and lives... I thought that none of them could be fully conscious of the implications of speaking out” (Atta 264).

Grace Ameh is another woman who would not let the government’s intimidation cease her vocality. She achieves this as a correspondent with the Oracle magazine. Grace’s active participation at various conferences like the literary readings where she eloquently condemns the government who incarcerates innocent citizens without justice is not taken for granted. Her husband, Joe remarks, “My wife writes. She doesn’t get royalties, instead she gets locked up. You see my trouble.” (Atta 233). Sefi Atta through the narrator also presents a courageous woman, Kudirat Abiola whose vocality propels her to launch a campaign for her husband who is unjustly incarcerated after winning a free and fair presidential election – M. K. O. Abiola. The narrator states: “Abiola was campaigning for her husband’s release and for a re-instatement of our general election results. Kudirat Abiola had become the symbol of the Africa I’d been at odds with... fighting for her husband’s political freedom” (Atta 250). This *injection* by the author is to ginger Enitan to action in order to fight for the release of her father and other political detainees. Moreso, Grace Ameh’s play, ‘The Fattening House’ is an apt platform for the expression of her vocality despite the political intimidation. However, in the face of pervasive intimidation, she goes underground, yet remaining a voice for the Oracle magazine.

On the other hand, Enitan’s father who is a strong advocate for women liberation, is the force behind Enitan’s vocality. He regrets that women are not vocal enough because of their roles as wives and family managers. As such, he ensures that Enitan is well educated and assertive. In essence, despite warnings from her mother, in-laws and husband not to challenge the government when her father was

detained, she insists on going ahead with the fight for her father's release. And Grace Ameh charges her, "...Yes, yes, but you have a voice....use your voice to bring about change" (Atta 258-259) by this, Ameh encourages her to join other women, human rights and civil liberty organizations in the struggle for the release of her father and other political detainees.

Interestingly, while Atta encourages vocality in women as depicted in the characters of Enitan and Ameh, she castigates the likes of Erin Sunday, Enitan's mother and Mrs Toro Franco, Niyi's mother, who represent the voiceless African women. These older women, silenced by patriarchy devise various means of survival in their homes. For Enitan's mother, the church becomes her refuge, while Niyi's mother decides to dwell under her husband's oppression. This is evident in Niyi's mother's speech to Enitan as she tries to reconcile Enitan and Niyi after a misunderstanding; she states clearly "I was not born into this family. I married into it. It was not easy for me as a young bride....The Franco men are difficult. But you know my dear, when two rams meet head on, nothing can happen until one backs down", and further states, "What you did for your father, that was right but you were wrong not to consult your husband first. He is the head of the house" (Atta 302). The above assertion renders Niyi's mother voiceless as summed up in the words of Orié Chibuezu, thus: "notably the summary effect of patriarchal lordship is silencing the woman, muffling, unmuting her voice or browbeating her to remain voiceless" (160). The two women, Enitan's mother and mother-in-law represent the traditional African women who are meant to be docile, subservient, passive and powerless. Even Erin, Enitan's mother could not express her condition for the world to hear but is gradually withdrawn into her shell, moved out of her matrimonial home and died before the end of the novel.

Enitan's vocality therefore enables her command her brother in law, Big Foot, to join in serving food during a little family get-together. This earns her the name "women's liberator" (Atta 310) by Big Foot. Sefi Atta succeeds in breaking the silence through Enitan against the Yoruba custom where a woman is expected to keep silence. And Grace Ameh who comes from the middle belt region of the country also demystifies silence because of her exposure and education. Both women represent the radical African feminist. Florence Orabueze observes that Sefi Atta "tenaciously believes that silence is no longer golden in the face of oppression and degradation" (281). Sule Egya in a stronger term posits "Atta's new woman is also the professional woman but she expands the limits of the so-called radical African feminism to embrace the spirited, native commitment to the political struggles of her society" (225). Therefore, Atta reverses the role of her novel. She allows Sunday Taiwo to raise his voice against the government for the political detainees while the other men including "Uncle Fatai, Niyi, Alabo, Degogo and Debayo kept silent when the nation is burning and at the imprisonment of Sunny" (Orabueze 285). These men represent the voiceless, passive, and powerless citizens at a time there should be assertive and aggressive action towards the government that has unjustly incarcerated their friends, relatives and in-laws. The implication of this role reversal entails that a woman cannot be adjudged by her sexual biological roles but by her ability to face challenges and break the bounds instituted by patriarchy in actualizing her dreams and self-worth. This position is what Sefi Atta and other women writers like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbor, Chimamanda Adichie and others have set out to achieve in their respective novels.

### **Facets of Style in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come***

The aesthetic qualities of a good literary work depend largely on the style of the writer. Onukaogu and Oyenrionwu see style in literature as "everything the writer does to ensure that his work conveys the intended message effectively and at the same time create the level of beauty required of good art" (45). A writer may deploy different facets of style in transmitting his or her message to the targeted audience. These include proverbs, idiomatic expressions, flashback, language, portrayal of characters, narrative point of view and so on. For the purpose of this paper, different facets of style such as language, narrative technique and symbolism will be discussed. Sefi Atta weaves different facets of style to buttress her stance as a feminist with strong ideological portrayal of the woman as an independent, strong willed and vocal being. She negates the patriarchal ideals that subject the woman to a traditional kitchen, subservience and voiceless. Atta through style creates a radical, assertive and vocal woman. Sule Egya posits, "Atta's new woman is also the professional woman but she expands

the limits of the so-called radical African feminism to embrace a spirited, normative commitment to the political struggles of her society” (225). Through style, Attah projects a protagonist who will not give in to patriarchal and societal expectations because she is a female gender, but “believes that true freedom can only come when both men and women discard the webs of silences that ensnare them by raising their voices to be heard in protest and making sensible choices” (Orabueze 257).

Attah’s protagonist vehemently rejects the voiceless condition of women and she is placed side by side the older generation of women who represent the womanist and whose silence either destroys them or keeps them under patriarchal bondage. Atta, through style silences the men and empower the women to fight for the freedom of the political detainees. These detainees also symbolize the African woman who is imprisoned either as a girl child under her father and brother or wife under her husband. Hence, Atta’s narrative technique clearly shows that the woman is endowed with strength and vocality to change every situation within and outside her domain. These styles will be handled in the succeeding sections.

Language: language is the writer’s use of words in realizing the various element of the novel which includes theme, characterization, and narrative technique. It is the element used to distinguish one character from the other and a medium through which literature is expressed (Ezeigbo 16-17). Atta in the novel deploys various styles of language to capture women’s vocality, oppression and the domiciliation of the novel as a Nigerian and African Novel by expression.

Atta uses strong terms to describe the women’s situation in Nigeria and places side by side the voiceless and the voiced through language use. She creates in Enitan, her protagonist a young girl who places herself above others through vocal strength. She says to herself “At least I was a decent eleven-year-old. She barely reached my shoulder, even in her high heel shoes” (*Everything Good* 14). From childhood, Enitan sees and moves herself with some level of superiority as seen in the above quotation when height, and not age makes her feel superior to Sheri. This advantageous position of Sheri plays out in their later life as it concerns African feminism. In Enitan’s conversation with Sheri, she says “I want to be something like... like president” when asked who will cook for her husband, she says “He will cook for himself”, What if he refuses?” she answers, “I’ll drive him away” (Atta 30 & 31) and she adds, “Who wants to marry him anyway” (Atta 31). Atta creates in Enitan an unimaginable bold assertiveness and gives her powerful vocality from her young age because she understands what she wants as a woman. Furthermore, when Sheri asks her how many children she will want to have, Enitan answers “One” (Atta 29). Orabueze asserts that “Atta criticizes the customary dictation that motherhood must be the natural and biological quest for every woman” (Atta 260). The quest for motherhood has also swallowed up the voices of women in the society as portrayed in the novel and in the characters of Erin whose inability to give her husband, Sunday, a male child pushes him out of their home and Mrs Toro Franco whose voice is completely seized because of the traditional ideals in marriage and motherhood. Enitan states, “Toro Franco, she was one of those women who swallowed her voice since the day she got married” (Atta 183). Atta places the vocal and the non-vocal women side by side to achieve her struggle for women’s liberation. In her view, women can only be liberated when they come out of the shell of inferiority complex and subservient position through vocality.

Also, Enitan’s vocality gives her the impetus to pry into her mother-in-law’s state of being the ‘object of manipulation’ in a home full of men and boys. She tells her about the kitchen which patriarchy has designated to be a woman’s abode. “It’s hot in here”, Toro responds, “Don’t worry”, “The boys should help”, “What can the boys do”. She further questions, “don’t you ever feel lonely here ma? Isn’t the kitchen the loneliest room?” (Atta 183). Atta interrogates the question of subscribing only the women to the kitchen while men and boys idle away in the sitting room. Enitan protests this situation in her home when she openly tells her husband, Niyi to “Go to hell” (Atta 186) if he cannot serve his brothers drinks from the kitchen. And she further reflects about the burden women are subjected to in the name of respect. “I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their heads... and foreheads crushed. We their daughters were expected to continue. We had no choice.... But there was a saying, and I’d only ever heard it

said by other women, that books were not edible” (Atta 186). From the foregoing, Atta’s new women have rejected the old generation’s status quo of domestic servanthood. Enitan further reflects, “the expectation of subordination bothered me most. How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I’d seen? Touched? Obey without checking on my humanity, like a fish bone down my throat” (Atta 187). Atta’s Enitan rejects male dominance, subjugation and relegation to the kitchen. She breaks the bond of the old woman to emerge as the voice in her generation.

Atta also uses language to emphasize the tepid attitude of men and the constitution as regards the rights of women. Enitan’s father insists on the women waking up to fight for the detainees and Enitan reacts: “Women”, “We have our own problems”. No husband, bad husband, husband’s girlfriend, husband’s mother. Human rights were never an issue till the rights of men were threatened” (Atta 196). This implies that, women have been reduced to bother about irrelevant issues as mentioned above by the patriarchal society. The women do not care about their rights except it bothers on men. The above expressions show the level of voicelessness the women have been subjected to. In Orabueze’s view, “Enitan believes that true freedom can only come when both men and women discard the webs of silences that ensnare them by raising their voices to be heard in protest and by sensible choices” (Atta 257).

Through language, Atta showcases women as political voices and activists. The men like Niyi are portrayed as voiceless and hopeless. He argues with Enitan on the possibility of fighting for her father’s release. He argues, “If you have no sense in your head, at least I do. What, should I walk to the presidential palace and ask them to release my wife’s father? Please, sir. My wife’s father is locked up. Please release him, sir” (Atta 238). He warns Enitan to desist from playing fucking political activist (Atta 238). In strong terms, Enitan insists: “I said that I will. That I want to. It’s the chance that I’ve been waiting for” (Atta 325). Enitan’s vocality dismisses fear of divorce from her marriage because, “No one’s “no” is final than Niyi’s but I pressed further” (Atta 326). And she adds, “... Now, it was motherhood” (326). Enitan becomes the liberated woman and her prove of motherhood enhances her vocality.

Consequently, Grace Ameh’s career as a journalist earns her vocality which she uses to fight the oppressive government which earns her several detentions. She is the women’s voice and she encourages other women to rise to the challenge since the men have remained silence and docile. She charges Enitan , “...but you have a voice, which is what I always try to tell people. Use your voice to bring about change” (Atta 258). Ameh represents the radical female activists. She eventually gains victory for the fight of illegal political detainees along other women. Atta uses strong diction to portray women’s strong voices and political activism thereby emasculating the men and rendering them voiceless and helpless— unable to fight for their fellow men in the face of political oppression.

Atta also uses language to localize the novel as a Nigerian work. The use of pidgin is sparingly used and portrays uneducated characters and its acceptability in Nigeria. Sheri uses pafuka (Atta 14) in describing the execution at the beach to Enitan. Enitan also responds to Pierre, her house boy, “I beg, put am for there” (Atta 212) to come down to the level of Peirre’s education and understanding. The use of Hausa language also, localizes the novel as seen Enitan’s exchange of pleasantries with her gate man “sanu madam”, and “sanu, mallam” respectively (Atta 201).

Atta also showcases mother tongue interference through the M.D of Enitan’s bank. He describes Enitan as “segsy” for sexy, “sginny legs” for skinny legs and “mizeez frango” for Mrs. Franco. This interference is very prominent amongst Nigerians and Africans at large.

Atta uses imageries to further showcase women’s vocality and assertiveness in the novel. According to M.H. Abrams, “Imagery is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or work of literature...” (169). It is used to evoke the mental picture in a work of art. Atta uses the “president” (Atta 30) to place Enitan on the scale of vocality and superiority at an early age when Eniatn says she wants to become a president. This is because one of the major duties of the president is to address the Nation and direct the affairs of the country. This comes with vocal ability

which later becomes Enitan's lot. The choice of "actress" (Atta 30) by Sheri also depicts one who will be taking instructions from others. That is why she gained economic independence without the required vocality to fight for other women and citizens. Also, the children invoke military images playing. They joke with words like, "Halt. Who goes there? Boom you're dead" (Atta 29-30). These images represent the setting of the novel, which is during the military rule.

Atta uses the imageries of "blood, babies and sex" (Atta 24) to explain the inevitability of womanhood and motherhood as instituted by patriarchy and the society which has equally deprived so many women the required vocality to assert themselves. This fear causes Enitan to reject marriage and child bearing as she responds to her mother's counselling. "I will not marry".... "I will not have children" (Atta 23). Atta's use of language and style in her novel places her on the radical angle of the feminist struggle. She deploys powerful language and imagery to question male suppression and subjugation on the females and imbues them with the spirit of docility by their inability to act on a sensitive issue. She advocates the need for women to be expressive in order to gain a voice of liberation. Attah emasculates her male characters by empowering the women to take swift actions in times of controversy. This goes a long way in promoting complementarity which entails that both males and females must come together to assist one another.

### Conclusion

Women's vocality in women's fiction has moved them away from the status of docility, subservience, passiveness and powerlessness to becoming aggressive, powerful and a subject of utmost importance to her family and society. Atta through her characters has developed both individual and collective females who became voices for the oppressed and political detainees at a time when the country is facing military dictatorship. She emasculates the highly educated men making them exhibit their weaknesses and fears at a time when their aggressive nature and vocality are most required to fight for the release of friends and relatives. No doubt, Atta's women in the novel have specifically experienced a paradigm shift from the domestic sphere to the political domain for the unique purpose of achieving a voice of freedom—privately and publicly. Her aesthetic handling of the story is perfect as she weaves in so many issues in the country within the period into one volume.

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