

“The Lives of Others”: Trauma and Precariousness in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*

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Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* reconstitutes “Otherness” as a site of empowerment. In the early parts of the novel, the protagonist’s father, Sunny Taiwo, encourages his daughter (Enitan) to reject domesticity. She later admits that one of her fears is her mother’s call to assist in the kitchen. This gesture seems to reorient and empower a new generation of women to escape the thralldom of domesticity, and this explains why Enitan is almost always affectionate to her father and suspicious of her mother. A close examination of her father’s actions reveals a contradiction: while liberating his daughter, he enslaves his wife. Because of her suspicion of her mother, the protagonist is unable to understand her mother’s pain and indirectly becomes her father’s accomplice in alienating her mother, who already suffers from the traumatic pain of losing a son. Despite her mother’s numerous appeals for support, Enitan fails to recognize her mother’s suffering. Together with her father, Enitan forces her mother into the position of the “Other” in her own family. Ironically, her freedom is not enough to overcome her own pain arising from witnessing the rape of her friend, Sheri Bakare. However, Enitan, who has always taken her father’s side against her mother, later becomes sympathetic towards her after she discovers that her father is in fact the archetypal patriarchal oppressor. She also realizes that her own healing consists in developing empathy for those who have experienced traumatic events, especially her mother. In a belated but necessary reaction, Enitan becomes overwhelmed by her mother’s suffering, the guilt of which repetitively invades and disturbs her adult life. Fuelled by the pain of her father’s infidelity, the memory of her mother’s suffering, her mother’s untimely death, the cultural expectation of female subordination, the recklessness of the state’s military power and a traumatic past, Enitan severs her relationship to her husband and decides to devote her life to fighting against the oppression of women (and men) and the cultural normalization of female subjection. For her to achieve healing, the novel suggests it is necessary to care for the lives of others.

Sefi Atta has become a celebrated writer because of the publication of works such as *Swallow*, *A Bit of Difference*, *News from Home: Short Stories*, *Lawless and Other Stories*, and of course, the award-winning *Everything Good Will Come*. Her first novel, *Everything Good Will Come*,

continues to draw critical attention and has been translated into more than twenty languages, which evinces its more or less positive reception within and outside of the Nigerian critical domain. For instance, in her article entitled, “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel,” Jane Bryce argues that although realism has been called into question in African and Nigerian literary criticism, it is deployed in the new Nigerian novel as an ambivalent strategy for “performing new identities and revisioning old ones” (56). More specifically, Bryce suggests that the twenty-first century Nigerian novel, and Atta’s *Everything Good* in particular, redefines feminist activism through its characters’ implacable and defiant confrontation with state and patriarchal forces of repression (58). Similarly, Jonas E. Akung contends that rather than accept the limitations of domesticity, characters in *Everything Good* embrace education, career, and activism, which serve as markers of what he calls “the new feminist novels” (114). Like Bryce and Akung, Shalini Nadaswaran emphasizes the third-generation Nigerian novel’s challenge to the dominance of patriarchy and argues that in *Everything Good* specifically, there is a deliberate effacement of the mother, a phenomenon she calls, “the ‘absent’ mother” (26). She claims that “the Nigerian mothers in the novels ... and Victoria (*Everything Good Will Come*) may not necessarily be physically present, they are emotionally absent in their spiritual connectivity with their daughters. ... [T]his severance of maternal ties does not render the female characters void but instead equips them with emotional fortitude to achieve their sense of empowerment” (26).

These critical views have drawn attention to the ways in which Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good* has shaped Nigerian literary production by articulating its strategic use of realism, feminist challenge to patriarchy, and the protagonist’s empowerment. Because these articles are quite illuminating, they have made it possible to perceive other dimensions of suffering that they were not able to account for. Central to Atta’s *Everything Good* is the attempt to project the ways in which women suffer and experience pain such as rape, domestic servitude, physical and verbal abuse, and how these become the markers of women’s precariousness. In a more specific way, the novel also dramatizes traumatic suffering in terms of what Sigmund Freud has called the breach in the subject’s psychological defense system (See Santner 151-2), repetitiveness of traumatic memory (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4; “Traumatic Departures” 32), or the inability to signify the experience of pain (Scarry 4). In other words, the sense in which trauma is deployed here has to do with the rupture in the subject’s experience of self, time and the world in such a way that the subject relives the particular event whose repetitive memory reproduces the rupture (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4).

Although *Everything Good* is no doubt a novel that projects its characters as victims and survivors of traumatic pain, it moves beyond the thematization of trauma to show that women’s suffering serves as a catalyst that destabilizes cultural structures which enable the suffering in

the first place. For instance, one major event that propels Enitan into the domain of activism is her mother's experience of pain culminating in her death. Although she is unable to save her mother, at the end of the novel Enitan decides to devote her life to fighting for the healing and empowerment of other women. Therefore, following Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, this essay suggests that Sefi Atta's *Everything Good* demonstrates that healing the traumatic pain of others sometimes requires a willful entry onto the domain of the victims' precariousness. In other words, attenuating the traumatic experience of other women implies a sacrificial commitment to displacing their precarity and embracing the vulnerability of one's life. Before going any further, it is imperative to describe "precariousness" through Butler's theorization of the "face" and "otherness," which will be central to the interpretation of Atta's novel in this essay.

Precariousness of the Face

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler situates her argument within the context of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in the United States. One of her concerns is that the state's rhetoric of terrorism, which labels some countries as enemies as justification for reprisal violence, is insensitive to the suffering of the alleged perpetrators. According to Butler, for the US to heal, it is imperative to mourn the lives that were lost as a result of its own violence. Without this sensitivity to the pain of others, Butler claims it is almost impossible for the US to achieve its healing after the 9/11 attacks. Relying on Emmanuel Levinas's theorization of the "face," Butler argues that the "face" has to do with "how ... others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we cannot refuse" (131). She explains that the face "is the other who asks me not to let him [sic] die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his [sic] death" (131). In expounding her argument she quotes Levinas as follows: "the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" (134). For Butler, it is important to investigate whether it is the sheer vulnerability of the other that triggers the murderous temptation (135). She elaborates this ambivalence by stating that "[i]f the Other, the Other's face, which after all carries the meaning of this precariousness, at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from acting upon it, then the face operates to produce a struggle for me, and establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics" (135). Butler clarifies this argument by referencing Levinas when he argues that the demand made by the face requires a response that suspends one's natural right to self-preservation, which is why Levinas claims that the "ethical relation of love" emerges from the realization that the self "cannot survive by itself alone" (qtd. in Butler

132). Put differently according to Levinas, “[t]o expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question” (132). Ultimately, the vulnerability of the Other’s life produces in one the temptation to kill while at the same time demanding its opposite, which Levinas terms “peace,” that is, the experience of ethical struggle between self-preservation and one’s awareness of the other’s vulnerability.

Yet, Butler contends that the face does not speak directly in the sense that its speech is not necessarily a linguistic one that can be attributed to a speaking subject but rather “the wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation” (133). She argues that since the face does not speak in the same way that the mouth does, its speech cannot be reduced to the mouth or to anything the mouth has to say. For her, the utterance made by the face is untraceable to the mouth because its “speech does not come from a mouth [and] has no ultimate origin or meaning there” (133). Despite lacking conventional authorship, the address by the face not only provides the possibility for the emergence of discourse, it also suggests an important point, which is that the address is constitutive of one’s existence in the first place through the invitation to answer the call of the face (130). More importantly, precisely because one is addressed by the face, one enters into a relation with it, a relation through which one loses the will-power to kill, and it is this deprivation of will that situates the addressee in discourse (138). Butler elaborates: “To be addressed is to be ... deprived of will and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one’s situation in discourse” (139).

For Butler therefore, the important issue is not the subject’s agency for triumphalist liberation of the face but the ethical conflict that manifests in the subject’s fear of experiencing pain and the anxiety of inflicting pain. It is in this dilemma that the notion of precarious life lies, a conflict in which one is conscious of the demand to kill and the prohibition to murder. Butler explains further that:

There is the fear for one’s own survival, and there is anxiety about hurting the other, and these two impulses are at war with each other. ... in order *not* to be at war, and this seems to be the point. For the non-violence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence (137).

However, Butler is aware of some of the problems that this ethical conflict can generate, which is why she alludes to Derrida’s assertion that “to respond to every Other can only result in a situation of radical irresponsibility” (140). But apart from the temptation to respond to every “Other,” Butler also draws attention to another ethical issue, that of self-preservation, adding: “And the Spinozists, the Nietzscheans, the utilitarians, and the Freudians all ask: ‘Can I invoke the imperative to preserve the life *of the Other* even if I cannot invoke this right of self-preservation for myself?’” (140). Although she does not provide any closure to this question, Butler suggests that “the desire to live the right

life requires the desire to live, to persist in one's own being ... that ethics must always marshal some life drives even if ... ethics threatens to become a culture of the death drive" (140). Both critical responses to Levinas's notion of the face seem to validate the conflict between what Butler calls murderous impulses and the interdiction to murder precisely because a totalized death drive diminishes the possibility of heeding the demands of the face. Yet, absolute embrace of life not only ignores the pleading demands of the face, but also culminates in the transgression of the interdiction—thou shalt not kill—through which one becomes complicit in the violence inflicted on the other.

Although probably not in totality, Atta's *Everything Good* parallels the ethical conflict that Butler conceptualizes in *Precarious Life* in that the narrator-protagonist is called upon by the face, the mother, to intervene in her suffering. While being aware of the physical and emotional threat to her life, Enitan answers the call of the face and accepts the vulnerability of her being. In order to demonstrate how the novel dramatizes this entry onto the space of the Other, it is important to show how the mother's suffering constitutes traumatic pain that usually escapes grasp in the critical literature on the novel and how this experience of pain is similar to the call of the face described above. Furthermore, the article will analyze how the protagonist, who also bears the burden of her traumatic past and the memory of her mother's pain, accepts the call and self-consciously inhabits the space of the Other.

The Mother's "Face"

As a young adolescent, Enitan witnesses the rape of her friend, Sheri Bakare. Although the two friends temporarily go their separate ways, the violence that Sheri experiences in rape, and the pain that Enitan experiences as a witness refuse to keep them apart. The story of *Everything Good* has to do with Enitan Taiwo and her friend, Sheri, and how the two of them suffer and deal with the suffering. On her return from the United Kingdom Enitan struggles with accepting the reality of her parents' divorce. She reconnects with Sheri who has become a beauty queen. While being sympathetic to Sheri, who despite her success as a beauty queen is more or less a kept woman, Enitan finds herself drawn closer to her mother. Once she takes over her father's law practice after his detention for criticizing the military government, she uncovers her father's parallel family, the shock of which makes her connect with her mother's pain for the first time. Meanwhile, she marries Niyi Franco, but unreasonable matrimonial expectations such as excessive demand for sex and what Enitan calls kitchen martyrdom (the totality of domesticity) lead her to exit her marriage in order to commit her life to fighting for the women who struggle under the yoke of patriarchal repression.

Most critical reflections on *Everything Good* have focused on Enitan and Sheri for obvious reasons, one of which is their entanglement in the event of rape. Moreover, because *Everything Good* deploys a child-narrator like many contemporaneous novels by Nigerian women, critics are inevitably drawn to this tragic event and consequently try to account for this body of texts as *bildungsroman* (Okuyade, “Weaving Memories of Childhood”; “Trying to Survive”). Similarly, in “‘Ora Na-Azu Nwa’: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels,” Madelaine Hron suggests that the centrality of the child-narrator empowers writers to confront issues that may be difficult to engage within novels with adult narrators (27). Therefore, the dominant episode of rape tends to overshadow the story of Victoria, Enitan’s mother. Victoria’s tale becomes subordinated to her daughter’s precisely because of the vagaries of the hierarchy of discourses, which, according to Belsey in her discussion of expressive realism in *Critical Practice*, lure readers to accept the dominant narrative voice rather than the intermittent voices of other characters (Belsey 64). However, the important issue that makes it possible to efface Victoria’s story is much bigger than the structuring of the discourses and it requires a closer appraisal.

Right from the beginning of the story, the novel constructs the mother, Victoria, as Other. In the family’s triadic relation, the daughter, Enitan, aligns with the father (Sunny Taiwo) against the mother through a pedagogy that supposedly undermines patriarchal power and expectations. In other words, Enitan becomes interpellated by her father’s anti-patriarchal doctrines that aim to empower her to subvert domesticity. But Victoria complains that the father would “spoil” Enitan by preventing her from acquiring the skills needed to become a good cook, which will be necessary for her as a wife in the future. This paternal “pampering” is a much-welcomed development to Enitan, who has become estranged from her mother. She decides that “kitchen work [is] ugly” (20), stating that what she dreads the most “[is] to hear [her] mother’s shout from her kitchen window: Enitan, come and help me here” (7). She is so terrified of her mother that she says: “The mere sound of her footsteps made me breathe faster” (19). Obviously, she enjoys her father’s support and so gravitates towards him and develops anxiety, fear, and disaffection for her mother. Meanwhile, the pedagogy that attempts to help Enitan unlearn the patriarchal ideology of domesticity is itself at best ideological, and at worst, pretentious precisely because it omits the person who, ironically, is saddled with the burden of domesticity, Victoria. In her reading of recent Nigerian women’s fiction, Nadaswaran rightly observes that “[t]he young female character’s response to the father figure/patriarch in the family usually begins with undue admiration” (23), which, for instance, makes Enitan’s introjection of her father’s pedagogy of anti-domesticity understandable. Probably because of extreme fatherly indulgence, youthful indifference, and an inability to deconstruct her father’s discourse, Enitan not only becomes complicit in the production of her mother’s pain, she also inevitably misses her mother’s confrontation with

trauma. She fails to understand her presence at the primal scene of pain, which, according to Caruth, is the cardinal manifestation of trauma in the survivor (4).

Meanwhile, Victoria's traumatic experience is over-determined by a number of factors. Alienated by her daughter who interprets her love as overbearing, alienated by her husband's indifference, stigmatized by a culture that valorizes male children, threatened by anxiety about her marriage, tortured by the loss of her only male child to sickle cell anemia, and saddened by retributive reaction from her husband, Victoria Taiwo inevitably enters onto the domain of trauma. Trauma within the context of this essay is invoked from Cathy Caruth's point of view, not as the pain in itself, but in the repetitive re-experiencing of the event that leads to the subject's altered perspective of self, time, and reality (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). It is for this reason that Caruth maintains that "What one returns to, in the flashback, is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival" (Caruth, "Traumatic Departures" 34). In other words, it is not only the alienation, loss, or the social hierarchization of gender that form the basis of Victoria's trauma. Rather, what accounts for her trauma is her fruitless attempt to understand her pain, which makes her repress the memory of loss and abuse. Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of this repression is the eventual turn to spirituality, which mimics the mechanism of repression. Though Victoria's uncritical adherence to the church may have provided short-term relief, it nevertheless emphasizes her vulnerability, which in turn is exploited by the church through its manipulative doctrines. However, her otherness becomes unmistakable the moment the divorce produces spatial separation between husband and wife, a separation that serves as the medium through which the "face" speaks to Enitan.

It is important to acknowledge the significance of Judith Butler's theorization of the face here. First and foremost, even though the call seems naturally grounded in utterance, it refuses linguistic totalization by being irreducible to speech (133). Rather than Victoria calling out for help and pleading with the injunction, "thou shalt not kill," it is her silence in isolation that speaks out and it is precisely because she speaks in silence and solitude that Enitan is able to hear her voice. Victoria's solitude becomes unmistakable for Enitan as if it were capable of addressing her in and of itself as speech. Within the context of Butler's argument, the face is not what actually speaks because, according to her, "bodily parts ... are said to cry and to sob and to scream, as if they were a face with a mouth ... from which vocalizations emerge that do not settle into words" (133). Victoria's "utterance" is analogical to the call of the face and more so because it emerges from silence in solitude. This is the reason why Butler contends that "[t]he sounds that come from or through the face are agonized, suffering" (133). The divorce may have contributed to the articulation of the call, but it is the combination of silence and suffering that produces the deafening sound of Victoria's appeal, more deafening

than her previous and repeated castigations of Enitan's conspiracy with her father.

Although Enitan seems to have transcended the patriarchal expectation of domesticity and consequently exists in a horizontal relation with her father, the fact that she carries the burden of traumatic pain ensures that this horizontal relation is destabilized by the memory of her mother's pain. But Enitan's new-found relation to the mother becomes inevitable since, as Emmanuel Levinas has stated, "the self cannot survive by itself alone" (qtd. in Butler 132). So, Enitan's suffering becomes the unconscious motivation to alleviate the suffering of another. When the mother articulates her suffering through silence, that speechless utterance is amplified by Enitan's repressed memory of guilt. The moment she intercedes for her mother, it is clear that she already understands the precariousness of her mother's life and the vulnerability of her own. By saying that "[f]or the first time, I worried that my mother would die without forgiving me" (172), the repressed past of complicity has come to haunt her. This awareness marks Enitan's entry onto the space of the Other, thereby signifying her experience of the conflict as a result of the desire to save her mother, and the wish to preserve herself.

Enitan ultimately becomes a subject constituted by the face's contradictory address. It is in this conflict that her response to the face inheres. That is, heeding the call of the face implies being confronted by the precariousness of her mother's life and the vulnerability of hers. Being sympathetic towards the mother automatically means confronting her father and possibly losing the privileges of shelter and mobility, thereby assuming the space of Butler's ethical subject. Indeed, as Butler argues, "[i]f the impulse towards the other's vulnerability is the desire to kill, the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse" (137). Incidentally, it is at this point of "awakeness" to the precariousness of the Other that Butler's theory and Atta's novel part ways mainly because *Everything Good* self-consciously transgresses the frontier of "awakeness" in order to create the possibility for altering the material conditions that constitute the Other as "face" in the first place (137). The opposition between Atta's novel and Butler's *Precarious Lives* does not mean simply an attribution of idealism to Butler and of politically significant action to *Everything Good*. In contrast, being immersed in the ethical conflict is itself political in that the temptation to inflict violence slides under the prohibition. The difference between Butler's theorization and Atta's novels does not necessarily lie in their political choices but rather in the degree of awakeness to the suffering of the Other. Put differently, Atta's novel shows that intervention in a victim's life can be approached through awareness of suffering and socially grounded actions. What *Everything Good* does is to translate the ethical dilemma into a self-sacrifice that resists the temptation to kill, obeys the interdiction to murder, and intensifies both through material and symbolic intervention in the life of the Other. In Atta's novel, the temptation to kill can be found in younger Enitan's ignorance and skepticism of her mother's account of pain rather

than in any direct attempt to take Victoria's life. Killing the Other is a vicarious act in which one becomes an accomplice by ignoring the call of the Other. But once Enitan has been invited and constituted as an ethical subject, she transgresses the frontiers of the conflict by deciding to save her mother. She is now committed to the lives of others. So, it is important to explore how Atta's novel envisions the response to the call of the Other beyond the awareness of mutual vulnerability.

Sacrificial Commitment

Enitan's valorization of her father and vilification of the mother unravel once she returns from Britain, where she had traveled to obtain a degree in law, paving the way for perceiving the mother's "voiceless vocalization" of suffering signified by post-divorce isolation. The alleged iniquitous divorce settlement triggers the memory of Enitan's participation in her mother's alienation, which is why of all the manifestations of trauma in Enitan, the guilt of conspiracy functions as a major factor that sharpens her denunciatory voice against patriarchy. Despite such assertiveness, she is anxious about the dwindling opportunities to secure her mother's forgiveness (172). On discovering that the house the mother received in the divorce settlement remains in her father's name, Enitan, in a move that resembles a response to the address of the face, decides to pressure her father to initiate legal transfer of the property. Therefore, at the meeting where she assumes the position of her mother's advocate, she realizes that withholding legal transfer of the house perpetuates her mother's suffering. When she says, "I heard my mother's voice again accusing me of always taking his side and decided to pursue the matter" (109), Enitan becomes intent on rewriting the past. When later she encounters her father's friend's wife at a party she states: "Aunt Medinot hovered in the background. In support of my mother, she rarely came to the house. Just seeing her made me feel guilty" (123). Through her guilt, Enitan not only affirms her entry into subjectivity, but also intensifies her decision to answer her mother's call beyond the awareness of suffering.

Although she eventually secures the property for her mother legally, the significance of her advocacy becomes more apparent in the way she reconstructs the mother's story, transgressing the patriarchal grand narrative which she had previously internalized. Of course, her initial feeling towards her mother is fear/hate (during childhood), which is later replaced by pity (as a young adult), and finally by inspiration and idealization. However, this idealization does not necessarily imply over-romanticizing her mother but it functions as a narrative technique that helps Enitan enter into a relation with her mother, making it possible to grasp the knowledge of their common humanity and precariousness. It is an apprehension of truths that displaces the mother's image as Other, thereby destabilizing the father's pedagogy. Enitan transforms her

mother's narrative in a way that enables her to come face-to-face with her suffering when she says: "I imagined her with broken crystals in her stomach. They were there in her eyes. She was a beautiful woman. I had long forgotten" (175).

Perhaps the effective enactment of Enitan's answer to the call of the face is her self-conscious entry onto, and inhabiting the position of, subjection. This realization becomes possible when Enitan discovers that being a direct victim of patriarchal oppression or being a beneficiary of paternal indulgence are actually interchangeable conditions of subjection. Both represent disempowerment through repressive male force and through introjection of the patriarchal imaginary respectively. She says:

I had always believed my mother chose to depend on my father. The evidence was there in her dusty certificates ... Now I felt no different from her, driving the car he had bought. My father would give a car, but he would not pay me enough to buy myself one. If my mother took a house, two houses even, she deserved them. The power had always been in my father's hands. (152)

She may have willfully entered onto the space of subjection but she certainly refuses the identity of the subjected. Being able to connect her father's mechanisms of tyranny and indulgence makes Enitan aware of the double manifestation of subjection, which suggests that while defending the mother, she is also defending herself. By connecting with her mother's suffering, Enitan obliterates the Manichean divide between self and Other. This transformation becomes almost unequivocal, especially when Enitan converses with Sheri regarding her suspicion that her father might desire her sexually. The discussion goes as follows:

'I can't trust him, not even with my friends.'
'Which friends?'
I pointed.
Her eyes widened. 'You think your father is after me?'
I imitated him: 'My dear this, my dear that.'
'He does the same to you.'
'Well, I know him. He thinks I don't, but I do.'
I stood up, aware that I was sounding like my mother. (172)

Although the last statement suggests her resistance to exhibiting her mother's suspicion and criticism, it is an identity that she later embraces in her fight against the forces of patriarchy and state oppression, which she believes must be fought simultaneously. The fact that she later discovers her father's hidden truth—his relationship with another woman and his son, Debayo—convinces Enitan that her mother and herself inhabit the position of the subaltern in the hierarchical power relations that orders the social production of gender.

Moreover, rewriting her mother's story to accommodate Enitan in the space of subjection reaches its climax when the latter deserts her matrimonial home and occupies her deceased mother's home. By occupying the space of the Other, the novel signals the significance of

listening, answering, and dedicating oneself to saving the Other, whose call initiates the possibility of discourse and subjectivity. Saving in this case may immediately resonate with the colonial narrative (“white men are supposedly saving the brown women from brown men”) that is deconstructed in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Spivak (296), however, its signification is determined by other factors that mitigate the colonial rhetoric such as class as can be seen in the elastic spectrum of women characters in the novel. For instance, Enitan discovers that women cannot be homogenized because they occupy various social and economic positions. Therefore, her sacrificial commitment to mitigating the plight of other women is never about triumphalist optimism. In other words, her mother’s death, the willingness to educate and liberate other women from the thrall of domesticity, and the fact that the salvation of the self consists in the salvation of the Other, re-territorialize liberation beyond a narcissistic agenda. More importantly, despite refusing to totalize or embrace a romanticized vision of the liberation of women, the protagonist gradually occupies the space of the Other and, in fact, appropriates the Other’s identity as can be seen in the quotation below in which she re-imagines her mother and reconstructs her own identity:

One morning I found an old picture of my mother and me. She was carrying me and I was about six months old, wearing a dress with puffy sleeves. She was wearing a mini dress and *her legs were as skinny as mine*. My mother once said she whispered words of guidance into my ear, when I was born. She never told me what she said. She said that I had remembered. *I whispered into my daughter’s ear like that, in my mother’s house*. I told her, “I love you. You have nothing to do but remember.” (331; my emphasis)

In this passage physical similarity intersects with discursive unity. Both complete Enitan’s assumption of her mother’s position, which creates a space for common liberation by vacating the patriarchal domain of subjection she once shared with Niyi, her husband. Meanwhile, the space of subjection also functions as site of empowerment precisely because Enitan is able to reconstruct the past and empowers herself to fight female subordination. The fact that she “whispered” to her daughter in her “mother’s house” already signifies the power of women’s discourse to subsist in women’s space. The passage emphasizes the resilience of women’s counter-narrative that has the potential to undermine the power of the state and patriarchal grand-narratives of domination.

Moreover, self-consciously inhabiting the mother’s domain has to be interpreted as a political act through which Enitan mediates the power relations that all along have subordinated women’s subjectivity. Enitan suggests that marriage empowers men but sometimes strips women of agency, which is why she states that “Niyi wouldn’t have had to leave me to do what he wanted” (332). Therefore, leaving her husband is a strategic act that is based on domestic power relations which had previously incapacitated her, unlike the reporter Grace Ameh, who fights state repression because her family supports her. Although Niyi has warned her

repeatedly about joining the campaign against the state's repression, she eventually defies his order. So, after achieving political awareness through her myriad experiences, she accedes to Grace's later request to join the campaign. She explains, "I remembered Niyi's warning. 'Yes, I want my father out of detention'" (295). The novel seems to show that in order to achieve healing from the pain of witnessing Sheri's rape, to overcome the guilt of her part in her mother's suffering, and fight cultural and state repression, Enitan needs to go through a rite of passage, which is transgressing Niyi's injunction, a decision that requires sacrificing her marriage.

It is for this reason that her desertion should not be interpreted as a self-serving act but as a reaction to the enormous weight of oppressive marriage expectations. Undermining her husband's interdiction already implies alienation, which ironically empowers her to challenge her culture. When criticizing male anxiety about women's resistance she says:

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. ... 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!' (200).

Enitan justifies her mission by stating that "I was ready to tear every notion they had about women, like one of those little dogs with trousers in their teeth. They would not let go ... and I would not let go until I was heard" (200). She laments the magnitude of the challenge and says: "Sometimes it felt like fighting annihilation" (200). Before emerging as Butler's ethical subject she asserts, "surely it was in the interest of self-preservation to fight what felt like annihilation" (200). From Butler's argument, self-preservation evades the address of the Other and in support of this evasion, Enitan displaces her militant criticism to her youth. This displacement accounts for her statement: "but that was in my twenties. These days, if I ever carried on that way [...] it felt like an exercise in vanity, childish, in the scheme of dangerous living" (200). However, towards the end of the novel Enitan reverses her stance and regardless of the outcome and the dangers inherent in her campaign, she offers herself as weapon for protecting the voiceless.

Conclusion

In his critique of Emecheta's representation of men and African culture Eze observes that Emecheta represented "African men and African culture in harshest terms imaginable" (107). This observation might have some validity to it especially in *Second Class Citizen* where the narrator says: "All that Francis needed to be taken for a gorilla was simply to bend his knees" (86). Although not as direct as Adah's criticism of Francis in

Second Class Citizen, Enitan's sometimes vitriolic descriptions of men seem to suggest that women writers are trying to direct the spotlight to the pain that some women suffer at the hands of men. Most especially in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good*, the radical decision to leave her husband's home, and even the more radical act of occupying her mother's home are not incidental. Rather, they challenge not only the culture of silence that more often than not obliterates women's suffering from canonical male-authored novels, but also resist female subordination and normalization of domesticity as women's manifest destiny. In order to appreciate Sefi Atta's revolutionary rewriting of patriarchy, it is necessary to understand that temporary or permanent relocation of a married woman to her parent's home (*Ilemosu*) as a result of a misunderstanding or divorce attracts social stigma dreaded in Yoruba culture. In *Everything Good*, Sefi Atta further violates interdictions against this practice not only by causing her protagonist to return to the family house, but also by making Enitan return to her mother's house rather than her father's, thereby desecralizing the naturalization of fatherhood as the ultimate signifier of a child's identity.

Atta's *Everything Good* is not a lone voice in the wilderness: Ofunne in Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* decides not to return to her husband after losing her first child as a result of syphilis she contracts from Oko, her profligate husband; in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*, Lola Ogunwole discovers through agonizing experiences that the family's signification as a place of security and comfort has undergone disturbing changes; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* undergoes traumatic pain in the hands of the person she admires the most (her father) and it takes a vicarious patricide for her to begin the process of healing; and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* demonstrates that most people, including family members, are unable or unwilling to listen to silent vocalization of suffering expressed by women who have been victims of sexual violence. One remarkable thing about Atta's *Everything Good* is its audacity to privilege the lives of Others, who, though unable to articulate their suffering as speech, nevertheless give expression to their pain through non-verbal utterance that addresses other people. *Everything Good* is a testament to the hope that lies, according to Butler, in the others' inevitable entry into the ethical domain in which mutual vulnerability becomes discernible. But Atta's novel also shows that being aware of the knowledge of the self and the Other's precariousness needs to be complemented with absolute dedication to that helpless Other. The protagonist-narrator of the novel, Enitan, finds herself in a state of ethical dilemma but chooses to fight on the side of the Other, whether it is her mother, other women burdened by domesticity, or men who are victims of dictatorships. For her, the rest of her life is worth sacrificing for the lives of others.

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