

Alienation and Search for Self-Identity: A Feminist Reading of Sefi Atta's *News From Home*

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ABSTRACT

Sefi Atta is a Nigerian-American novelist, short story writer, and screen-writer. *News from Home* is a short story collection published in 2010. It is a collection of eleven different short stories which deals with the themes of diaspora, identity, alienation, and grief. The protagonist of the short story "News from Home" is an African nurse who migrates to America for better life. Though she is a trained nurse, she is unable to practice her profession as an immigrant, and is forced to work as a nanny to an American family. Sefi Atta explores the complexities of the African immigrants in America. The nurse receives news from her home often about happenings in the country and her family. But migration creates an emotional detachment from

her family. This paper aims to portray the emotional imbalance and the cultural conflicts of the immigrants in America.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Alienation, Migration, Immigrants.

Sefi Atta is a Nigerian-American novelist born on 19 January 1964. She is also a short story writer, playwright, screen writer and the BBC has telecasted her plays in television. Her novel *Swallow* is inspired by Kunle Afolayan and directed as a movie and released on Netflix. She has won many awards and recognition for her novels and short stories. *News From Home* is a collection of eleven short stories published in 2010. This short story collection received the prestigious Noma Award for publishing in Africa.

The Protagonist of the short story is a Nigerian named Eve. Eve is a trained nurse from nursing school in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Her father is an electrician and mother had the coca-cola deal. Eve gets rejected from Summit Oil Clinic interview and lives jobless in Africa. Most of her friends who graduated nurse training along with her are also jobless and selling water bottles, bathing soap and tinned milk for their livelihood. Eve is also in the same position with no job for her daily life. Eve has a boyfriend named Val whom she wishes to marry. He is tall with good complexion and brilliance, for which he is accepted by the University of Port Harcourt. Later he gets job as a public relations clerk in Summit Oil terminal.

In Nigeria, Eve has a neighbour named Amen. Her father is a teacher. She wants to be a hairdresser but her father wants her to apply for nursing. Amen mocks at Eve "But look at you, Eve. Since you are graduated, you have no job" (Atta 183). Amen starts to behave abnormally. Her dressing, hair style and makeup change and she runs away from home one day. She is found arrested by the Naval Police and sent to Better Life Brothel in Port Harcourt. Amen's father abandons her and comes without her to the home town,

saying she is dead. Even an educated teacher can't help his daughter to come out of a bad life. This shows the typical patriarchal male dominated mindset of a father since his daughter refuses to listen to his words.

Val has relationship with another woman in the city. She is older than Val and gets pregnant because of him. After knowing about this relationship Eve almost becomes a lunatic and never leaves her home. Everyone makes her feel discomfort by talking about Val and their relationship. She wants to escape from that place and situation. Dr. Darego's grand-uncle helps her to get the job of nanny to Dr. Darego's family in New Jersey. "I thought going to America was as fantastic as going to Heaven" (Atta 187). This is her imagination about America before visiting there. She even dreamed of marrying Michael Jackson in her childhood.

Eve arrives in America where she experiences snow in her life for the first time. She admires white snow on the trees, buildings like granulated sugar and she enjoys the snow during night time also, since she never had this type of season in Africa. In Nigeria, they have a dry season. During Christmas and Newyear they have Harmattan winds. Eve works as a nanny for Dr. Darego's family in New Jersey. She struggles to adapt to the American climate, she gets flu and Pat helps her to recover with homemade remedies, since medical assistance without health insurance prices are heavy in America.

"It is Independence Day here in America. Hopefully, there will be an update on the demonstrators from my hometown" (Atta 169). Being in America, Eve expects some news from her hometown and she doesn't care for what is happening in America. "The broadcast ends without a word about my hometown" (Atta 170). She listens to the radio broadcast only to know about the news of her homeland. She compares everything in America to her home Nigeria, right from the climate, flowers, interior of houses, customs, traditional dress. Accents like 'gonna', 'wanna', television programmes, family structure, streets, and behaviour of the people is different in America to her.

Dr. Darego and Pat are an unhappy couple with two kids Alali and Daniel, who are eight and five years respectively. Dr. Darego is busy and tired due to his work and unable to spend his time with his family. This makes Pat more irritable and often they quarrel with each other. Pat gets upset as Dr. Darego doesn't come to spend time with them to barbecue in the park. It is a day off for Eve. Since her husband doesn't make it, she asks Eve to accompany with her to take care of children. Eve gets upset since she doesn't have a good place to stay and enough holidays to take rest. She stays in the basement of their home. "Living in a basement is like living in an underground tomb" (Atta 171).

Eve makes the kids ready to the picnic with the Nigerian community where most doctors and their families live. They wear same T-shirts to play, eat and spend time together like family reunion. Mr. Darego and Pat want their kids to spend time with other African people in their community to know their roots, since it is easy to forget their background after settling in America. Dr. Darego never wants to return to Africa because he says it is like jungle, in contrary, he is not satisfied or fulfilled with American life also. But he is happy for his dream house and his kids being considered as Americans.

The first meeting of Eve with Daniel and Alali was unpleasant because they look at Eve as a different person unlike themselves. Alali commented on Eve as she belongs to the people who call candy as sweets and cookies as biscuits. American English is different from African people's English. Daniel expresses his idea of imagining Africa through what he heard is "And the boy had no hair, and his belly was swelled up, and he lived in a hut, with, no windows, and I don't like Africa. African women have droopy boobies" (Atta 174). Even though the little boy makes funny comments, it portrays the image of Africa registered in the minds of American people even with children away from their home country.

Eve is excited to see gigantic malls for the first time in America. She gets surprised to see shops for pets and different kinds of breakfast cereals and pancakes with many flavours of honey, blueberries, nuts

raisins and choco chips. In Africa she passes through every unhygienic environment considering it as natural but on seeing scented toilet paper in American malls, she is quite surprised and sometimes she feels happy to work in America. Americans usually ask her if she is from Algeria or Liberia to which she replies simply Africa, without specifying Nigeria. Some people look at her suspiciously while some smile and moves away. "She is the other" (Beauvoir 26). She worries why she looks suspicious in the eyes of Americans for being an African or black woman or working as a nanny after completing nursing course. She has the feeling of the otherness.

Pat wants Eve's passport for visa extension while talking in the park. Eve couldn't tell the truth that she doesn't have proper documents to work in America since she came illegally. They return from the picnic and unpack the things they have taken for the picnic. Eve reaches downstairs to search for her passport and she checks the letter from her home. First letter she wants to read is that of Angie, her best friend. Val is dismissed from his job due to the woman he has an affair with, as she has an affair with Val's boss also. Val gets arrested but he escapes from police. Angie advises Eve not to come back to Africa since there is nothing left for her back home. She asks Eve to contact Charity to get help for nurse job in America. Eve contacts her and she advises her to prepare for exams secretly without the knowledge of Pat. Eve being loyal, doesn't have the mind to come out without telling them, but Charity advises to find the way to stay in America legally. She also advises Eve to get nurse job to stay in America, and earn money to send back to home in Africa. Pat calls her to show the picture of Eve's mother in newspaper, since Eve always wants to know about the happenings back in home. Eve feels some warmth in holding the hands of Pat and she wants to tell the truth and it finishes with a positive tone.

This short story is analysed through the female characters mainly Eve and Pat. The other female characters like Angelina, Amen and Madam Queen help to understand the situation of African country. Madam Queen creates an awareness on how the oil companies exploit the country and how the people must

be aware and react to the situation. "We are dying of our air, We are dying of our water. We are dying from oil" (Atta 191). Madam Queen voices out for the native people to understand how they are being exploited by the owners of the oil company. Amen portrays the failure of the African society to provide job to the educated women which misleads girls to other professions. The parents also do not support their children to go other to profession, like hair-dressing, which Amen wants to. While she gets arrested by the police, her father is not ready to identify her as his daughter, and abandons her, and tells everyone that she is dead, being afraid of his name being spoiled in his country, and not caring for his daughter. Angelina gets job through her aunt who works as a mid-wife in Summit clinic. She misses Eve while she moves to America. She works very hard since many people are affected with various skin diseases, malaria, kwashiorkor in children, chronic respiratory diseases and weeping sores. Women suffer from miscarriages and die during labor. These were the result of lack of nutrition and proper diet. Angelina works for the people but they sometimes curse her since they have to wait for a long time for their treatment due to the crowd.

Pat came to America with her husband's visa seven. She also works in the hospital. Even after seven years she is unable to get green card. She is rich but unhappy with her husband in her marital life, and sometimes she wants to leave him also. She expects him to share her work burden at home and take care of the kids, which is neglected by her husband. He never does any household chores or takes care of children for which she calls him a 'Bushman', which means he still behaves like a normal African man with a patriarchal feeling. "To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility" (Hooks 24).

Pat wants to move to hospital quarters to make her husband understand how hard she works for their family. He must learn to take care of children and know her value towards their family. She asks Eve to help them for six months only. Pat being rich and educated, undergoes unhappy life same as Eve. Pat tries to attain her self-identity and respect at home.

Eve is a girl who is unfortunate in everything in her life. She doesn't get a job as per her qualification in her own country. Her lover leaves her for another woman after getting good job. She wants to immigrate to America, a country she imagined as a heaven but couldn't move there without proper immigration. She works there illegally as a nanny. Even in her nanny job she doesn't get a good place to stay or a proper day off. She mostly uses the term WE to say anything about her own country people. While talking with Pat, Eve seems to be quiet sometimes, because, she says, "My mind is at home" (Atta 189).

Women get affected by changes that happen in the society or family. "Women, we are always the first affected and the last heard" (Atta 189). Eve wants to get her nurse job in America for supporting her family in Africa. With an aim of attaining her self-identity through her eligible nurse profession, she starts working on it and the story ends with a positive note for a positive beginning.

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