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## Mapping Identity and Existence in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*

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### **Abstract:**

The novel "Swallow" (2008) by Sefi Atta thoroughly explores political identity and societal influences by examining the political context and the repercussions of corrupt systems on themes of survival, resistance, and personal encounters. The political context in *Swallow* tremendously impacts the development of the characters' identities and personal experiences. The tale depicts the socio-political environment of Nigeria during a time of military governance, analyzing the subsequent influence on its population. Most of the criticisms of the work have been positive, praising the complex psychological portrayal of the female characters and the use of poetic methods to illustrate ordinary parts of life. The novel explores how politics shape human identities, the consequences of corrupt institutions on survival, and the significance of resistance and action. This research investigates the influence of political identities and social factors on the main characters' experiences.

**Keywords:** Negotiation, Survival, Swallow, Identity, Gender.

Through the portrayal of Enitan's matricentric empowerment in *Swallow*, Atta constructs the character of Tolani as a protagonist who rapidly loses her belief in her father as a supernatural messenger and guardian. Atta's writing contributes to the character's growth in this specific domain. As she ages, she acknowledges that the intergenerational assistance she

had from her mother and great aunt IyaAlaro is more influential in her self-empowerment than the help she received from her father. Subsequently, Tolani chooses to renounce the patriarchal norms upheld by society and relinquishes the belief that a woman's purpose in society is contingent upon either marriage or motherhood. The main character of this book is even more resolute than Enitan in challenging the societal norms imposed by patriarchy. She does this by cultivating her emancipatory potential through a shared awareness and a framework of female unity transcending age groups. *Swallow* fosters a woman's holistic understanding and participates in a cross-generational movement within her Nigerian community to attain a heightened sense of autonomy, building upon her mother's strength. When they encounter an advancing masquerade, Tolani first assumes the role of a community member and a passive observer at the beginning of the game. She is deliberately kept ignorant of the inherent societal privileges that males possess since she has been taught to avoid making judgments about men, similar to how a participant would behave in the presence of a god figure at a masquerade. Her father was a renowned drummer specializing in ethnic music.

She highlights the issue of women being exploited. There is a lack of cohesion among individuals throughout the country. She asserts that the status of women in the region is analogous to that in Nigeria, and it is imperative to enhance it. She contends that women are integrated into the patriarchal culture. Due to their role in upholding patriarchal norms, they participate in rivalry with other women instead of collaborating for mutual progress.

The first step on Tolani's path to self-determination is to become aware of life's harsh realities and recognize her value as a person. After getting fired from her job by Mr. Salako and ending her relationship with Sanwo, her lover, she decides to remain in Makoku with her mother. This decision comes after Mr. Salako dumps her. Tolani can comprehend the unfortunate circumstance in which her mother finds herself and makes an effort to come to terms with it once she returns home. She had the impression that her mother had the opportunity to reveal her father's impotence to the outside world. However, Arike has had to make concessions and give things up throughout her life.

On the other hand, she has had considerably more freedom than the other ladies and has regarded keeping the secret as a privilege. At the end of the book, when she is about to tell her the secret, Tolani interrupts her and says, "Your story is already told" (Atta 295). Therefore, it does not matter to Tolani when or how she was born.

The beginning of a process that results in Tolani's increased self-awareness and empowerment is marked by her acceptance of her previous life. She is acutely aware that her mother's unconditional love has served as a source of nourishment for her. Her mother is the genuine person in her life with whom she feels comfortable discussing anything. She can recover her true worth, dignity, and identity with the assistance of the hope and level of self-assurance that were instilled in her by her mother from a young age. Because of her close relationship with her mother, she can adjust her perspective on life. As a result, she abandons the plan to coerce Arike into confessing the truth about how she was conceived. Tolani has decided to support her mother in her employment because the struggle for survival has become an urgent priority. In Makoku, she attempts to participate in the arts and crafts of the Adire people. She has even entertained the idea of creating placemats and tablecloths in collaboration with other ladies. In order to give herself more control over her life, she and her mother decided to launch a business together. In this way, towards the end of the story, she demonstrates that she is a survivor who strives to survive despite her harsh realities and challenges. She develops into an adult who is mature, strong, and able to handle life's challenges.

### **Swallow: Globalization's entrails**

The narrative also indicates that in the process of reinventing 'home' from the Diaspora, the city and its urban settlements, which serve as imposing settings in this novel, serve as microcosms through which the happenings of the Nigerian nation are examined. It is something that the narrative discloses. Atta questions the current events that are taking place in Nigeria against the background of the city of Lagos, which is distinguished by its anomalies, taking into consideration the apparent notion and conception of the city as a location of enduring fulfillment. Atta successfully brings these aspects to light through her novels, which shine their searchlights on the activities and tensions that define life in contemporary Nigerian city settings. The investigation of the landscape of Nigeria through the use of this method, in conjunction with the first-person narrative voice that Atta adopts, is another factor that lends credence to the realism of this account of "home" from the Diaspora and calls up the authenticity of the experience.

“Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes, to construct . . . forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference.”(Clifford 251). *Swallow* considered a classic example of diasporic African writing, is less explicitly concerned with the colonial past than other works of the contemporary age. Instead, it focuses on the logic of globalization and its repercussions on an African post-colony, Nigeria. The story deals with the impact of globalization and poverty in a third-world nation such as Nigeria. Rose, Tolani's friend, takes cocaine-laced condoms and swallows them to smuggle them into the United Kingdom using their bodies. As the story develops, we learn Tolani cannot swallow the condoms. Sister Arike pays no attention to what they have to say.

Permit me to tell you, I've traveled throughout this country, and everything is the same everywhere you go. Both "We women, we sabotage each other instead of working together" and "We don't come together.... we sabotage each other" stem from the same root. Shouldn't we? We are unable to, and then, when the appropriate moment arrives, we question why we are falling so far behind the males. (Atta 45)

In addition, her father has instilled in her the belief that males are valuable, capable, and supportive of women in all aspects of their lives. Mrs Durojaiye is a single mother raising three boys in a two-bedroom flat in one of the slums of Lagos after being abandoned by her spouse, who had been cheating on her.

She works overtime to feed and clothe the boys instead of being with them. Instead of spending time with the boys, she works extra hours to meet their needs. Instead, the demands placed on her cause her to become so overworked that she eventually resembles a mask in the sense that she becomes ragged, haggard, pale, and sad. This allusion to an egungun or masquerader serves as a grounding mechanism to remind Tolani of the reality that she must dread this specific thing: a nice woman who is mistreated by the corrupt patriarchy that exists in Nigeria.

It is not Mrs. Durojaiye herself that she should fear, but rather what she represents, and the men in her life are to blame for the misogynistic tyranny she faces. Tolani eventually realizes that her father did have a message from the gods for her when she refused to comply with the orders of those in authority and began questioning their motives. It was a message of patriarchal privilege, the subjugation of women, and a clear agenda to make this power

invisible. Those were the key takeaways. The indigenous guy, who is crooked and entitled, is the greatest threat that women have to be afraid of.

Tolani looks up to and takes cues from Arike, her mother, more than any other woman. Because of this, she is an elder in their native Makoku community; now an adult, Tolani considers her “almost a man” and incredibly strong. As a result, her worth is no longer based on her ability to carry children; instead, it originates from the wisdom she possesses as a communal mediator. Arike's condition and the tale of her life serve as a significant source of motivation and encouragement for her daughter. At the end of the book, it will serve as a model for progress across generations and motivate her daughter to reach her full potential in developing a liberating composite consciousness.

In Sefi Atta's "Swallow," political identities and social influences alter the protagonists' lives. The story examines how politics shapes identities, how corrupt systems affect survival, and resistance and activism. In "Swallow," political identity and societal forces are explored via the political background, the impact of corrupt systems on survival, and resistance and activity. "Swallow"'s political setting shapes the characters' identities and experiences. The story depicts Nigeria under military dictatorship and its effects on people. Political persecution, censorship, and civil freedoms plague the characters. As the protagonists manage political limits and threats, their political and personal identities become linked. "Swallow" discusses corrupt systems and survival. The novel shows how corruption affects economics, governance, and social systems. The protagonists must survive bribery, embezzlement, and injustice. Corruption perpetuates societal inequality and forces people to sacrifice their values and participate in immoral behavior to survive.

### **Identity of a Culture in "Swallow"**

Specifically, within the Nigerian setting, "Swallow" by Sefi Atta examines the complex cultural identity processes. The story explores how cultural expectations and traditional practices affect how people manage their sense of self. This part will focus on the problems that result from the collision between modernity and tradition and evaluate the role of cultural identity in the book. A complex tapestry of cultural identities distinguishes Nigeria as a diverse country. Using people from different racial, religious, and socioeconomic origins, "Swallow" explores the difficulties of cultural identity. The book offers readers a prism

through which they may see the complex makeup of Nigerian society and its citizens' wide range of experiences.

The characters' identities in "Swallow" are significantly shaped by societal norms and expectations. Family relationships, gender roles, marital rituals, and religious activities are all included in these traditions. People frequently find themselves in a difficult situation due to the impact of traditional norms and societal expectations. They must choose between upholding their legacy and accepting the changing world. The clash between tradition and modernity is a recurrent motif in "Swallow." People in Nigeria are trapped in a conflict between the draw of traditional values and the appeal of modern lifestyles due to the country's social, political, and economic upheavals. Characters in the book face tension and difficulties due to the conflict between these two forces, causing them to negotiate the nuances of their cultural identities. In "Swallow," Sefi Atta depicts cultural identity, highlighting the difficulties people confront while attempting to manage their sense of self within a broader social context. The book encourages readers to consider how cultural expectations and conventions affect personal identity and people's decisions in their quest for happiness and satisfaction. In "Swallow," Sefi Atta explores cultural identity in Nigeria in greater detail by giving complex portraits of the characters' various experiences and viewpoints. Readers learn about the challenges of negotiating cultural identity and how people manage their sense of self in a fast-changing culture via their encounters with them.

### **Transgenerational Empowerment of women and the capability of enforcing more robust communitarian principles**

The first step on Tolani's path to self-determination is for her to become aware of life's harsh realities and recognize her value as a person. After getting fired from her job by Mr. Salako and ending her relationship with Sanwo, her lover, she decides to remain in Makoku with her mother. This decision comes after Mr. Salako dumps her. Tolani can comprehend the pitiful circumstance in which her mother finds herself and tries to accept it once she returns home. She had the impression that her mother had the opportunity to reveal her father's impotence to the outside world. However, Arike has had to make concessions and give things up throughout her life.

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tell her the secret, Tolani interrupts her and says, "Your story is already told" (Atta295). Therefore, it does not matter to Tolani when or how she was born.

The beginning of a process that results in Tolani's increased self-awareness and empowerment is marked by her acceptance of her previous life. She is acutely aware that her mother's unconditional love has served as a source of nourishment for her. Her mother is the genuine person in her life with whom she feels comfortable discussing anything. She can recover her true worth, dignity, and identity with the assistance of the hope and level of self-assurance that were instilled in her by her mother from a young age. Because of her close relationship with her mother, she can adjust her perspective on life. As a result, she abandons the plan to coerce Arike into confessing the truth about how she was conceived. Tolani has decided to support her mother in her employment because the struggle for survival has become an urgent priority. In Makoku, she attempts to participate in the arts and crafts of the Adire people. She has even entertained the idea of creating placemats and tablecloths in collaboration with other ladies. In order to give herself more control over her life, she and her mother decided to launch a business together.

In this way, towards the end of the story, she demonstrates that she is a survivor who strives to survive despite her harsh realities and challenges. She develops into an adult who is mature, strong, and able to handle life's challenges. These issues include but are not limited to the abuse or neglect of children, violence in the home, and the corruption of royal officials. Iya Alaro demonstrates that women are powerful and capable of enforcing more robust communitarian principles in a communal setting. These values aim to empower women and demand that they be treated equally. Together, girls may also overpower male authority, but they must do so while adhering to the norms and expectations that their community has established. The strength of an independent woman stems from her capacity to provide for herself and to motivate people in her immediate environment to participate with her in the struggle against oppression. Therefore, a woman's power is always presupposed by a community's approval of her actions, and it is implicitly based on a coalition of women, as illustrated by Tolani's great aunt and her mother. A woman's ability to bear children is always presupposed by a community's approval of her ability to bear children. Therefore, IyaAlaro's cooperative ensures that women and children are treated reasonably, and it can do so without fear of repercussions because the community endorses the practice.



### **Arike utilizes her authority for women's liberation within society.**

Regarding Tolani's future, Arike educates her to make more independent decisions, including choosing her marriage. However, in her new position, she also advances women's liberation within society by stating, "It's up to each woman to decide if she wants to be on her own or not." (Gagiano 55). She believes that "marriage is optional for a woman, but motherhood is not." As a result, she submits to patriarchal norms to achieve society's expectations. Arike utilizes her authority as a village elder to make it possible for women of the following generation, specifically Peju's mother and Tolani, to exercise this choice. The fact that a woman must give up her body for a man to get pregnant is undeniably debilitating. However, the fact that this is practiced means that Nigerian culture values marriage and having children. Because a male is only required for insemination and not as a companion, this choice gives women more independence and control over their reproductive lives. However, since having children is still a prerequisite for membership in the community, Arike's model is still oppressive. Arike maintains that having children is not a decision that should be left up to a woman. It is a societal expectation, and women like Arike, who can bring about change without destroying their social system, continue to bear the weight of this expectation.

### **Swallow's Self-Discovery Experience**

Their absence reawakened Tolani's long-repressed concerns about her father's manhood, her mother's honor, and her mental stability.

In these conditions of acute need, drug smuggling makes its alluring appeal. This occupation represents both positive and bad possibilities for Nigerian women. It appears to face positive possibilities because of the comparatively high compensation, which gives options for self-advancement unavailable elsewhere. However, it poses negative possibilities due to the undeniably humiliating characteristics of the activity. This enticing conundrum is especially crystal evident to Tolani, given the circumstances she finds herself in. Her uncontrollable companion, Rose, is a fervent supporter of the advantages of the situation. Tolani's natural reticence makes it challenging for her to persuade. Ultimately, she chooses not to participate in this narcotics-related adventure more out of instinct than out of any high-minded ideas she may have about what constitutes ethical activity.

My conscience does not let me to engage in illegal trade. I have made an effort, but I am unable to swallow. I've been asking myself, "Why am I not able to do this?" Why?' My tongue was not mine to speak with. What exactly does that tell me? That I must have been mad, really crazy, to think of doing such a thing, concealing narcotics in my stomach, then hopping on a plane to fly to another country to spirit out. That was the only explanation. (Atta 206).

### **Beginning the process of self-examination cultivating a new sense of self-worth**

Her willingness to face the demons in her past marks the beginning of a process of self-examination in which she will look closely at how her family and personal history have shaped her, which will, in turn, help her move into the stage of self-awareness. She is cultivating a new sense of self-worth, and as a result, she can muster the bravery required to confront her despicable boss: "I was ready to battle... I had to start out by addressing the root of our woes... after I was done with him, he would not soon forget my name....(Atta 258) The fact that she is able to use the witch stereotype, which is frequently used to victimize women, to stop her own victimization is indicative of the level of self-awareness that she possesses. The catastrophe that befalls Rose, who passes away as a result of the medications she is carrying rupturing inside of her, contributes to the growth of her sense of self-awareness. She realizes that her sadness is truly focused within, against herself: "... I vowed that I would not cry for Rose any longer. I would not cry for anyone else." She never sobbed for herself, and I wasn't even sure who I was sobbing for in the first place. ... I was so upset over my own misfortune and anger that I started weeping." (Atta 258) This tough-minded sense of awareness enables her to achieve self-acceptance, which she does by turning down her boyfriend's belated offer of marriage and finally confronting the question of her paternity. Her boyfriend had proposed marriage to her after they had been together for several years. As a result of her decision to turn down Sanwo's sincere apology, Tolani realizes the extent to which traditional notions of marriage as the pinnacle of female accomplishment had shaped the way she thought.

### **A renewed focus on connections and sincerity**

Tolani's newfound commitment to being truthful in her interactions has extended to her investigation into her birth circumstances. Ironically, the confrontation that was supposed to take place with her headstrong mother ends up being more of a collaboration between

them. Tolani realizes that the propriety of her mother's actions in the past matters less than the sincerity of purpose that underpinned them as she confides in her mother her intention to delay marriage and learn the cloth-dying trade. As she does so, Tolani hears her mother say how lies hide between words and the truth need not draw attention to itself. This realization brings her closer to her mother. It is thus superfluous to go into detail; Tolani must be well on her way to completely comprehending who she is as a foundation for the sort of person she wants to develop into.

## Conclusion

It is far too focused on the existing difficulties of dysfunctional Nigeria. This nation does not have much to offer regarding the agential potential for modern urban women. *Swallow* does not cultivate aspirations of a cosmopolitan future. The tone, which may be laconically humorous, helps communicate this nonutopian impression. In addition to the national and local levels, the novel discusses the global world order and how it exploits the plight of individuals in "the 'wastelands' of transnational operations of neo-colonial globalization." It is possible to argue that cosmopolitan practices cannot exist without the global being deeply embedded in the locale of Lagos, which serves as a necessary precondition for such practices. However, in this case, "elsewhere" in the local urban space refers primarily to consumer goods and questionable ways of making a living created at the point where the local and the global collide. In a passage where Tolani is concerned about Westerners who take drugs smuggled by women like Rose and herself, the realities depicted in the novel come closest to the cosmopolitan ideals of boundary-crossing dialogue and responsibility. It is ironic given that the novel portrays the realities as far removed from the cosmopolitan ideals.

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