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SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY: A POST-COLONIAL INTERROGATION OF SEFI ATTA'S *A BIT OF DIFFERENCE*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates sexuality and identity in Sefi Atta's novel: A Bit of Difference. The paper notes that the issue of sexuality has not only occupied the front burner of global literary discourses, it has also polarized the entire humanity along the lines of sexual choices and identities. While the West emphasizes tolerance and inclusion of all individuals, irrespective of the sexual choices, Africa and some other black races harp strongly on heterosexuality as the ideal sexual identity and view any alternative sexuality as queer and non-normative. This has led to a marginal understanding of the concept of sexuality. It is against this backdrop that this paper is written to initiate an objective discussion on the subject, without vilifying one form of sexuality at the expense of the other. Through an in-depth analysis of the novel, this paper undertakes an unbiased assessment of sexuality, carried out from the dimensions of Post-colonialism. The paper concludes that there should be awareness on the diversity of the human race and the need for more inclusion and less exclusion.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Sexuality, Diversity, Identity, Humanity.

Introduction

An understanding of colonialism will aid a proper comprehension of the term Post-colonialism. Ann Dobie defines colonialism simply as the 'subjection of one population to another' (206). Following Dobie's definition, colonialism takes place whenever and wherever a group of people are subjected to the rule and will of another group of people, often involuntarily. The most outstanding exemplification of this is European occupation of the African continent in the early part of the eighteenth century, an occupation which continued till about the closing years of the twentieth century. During this period, most African countries as they existed today were administered from Europe, with Africa's resources – material and human – carted away to Europe. The period was also marked by the dispossession of the African self (Oko and Ndubuwa, 50). The French policy of assimilation, for instance, intended to completely erase African culture and force on Africa the culture of France. Africans were subjected to physical and mental abuse through European civilizing expeditions and through the imposition of Christianity and Western education. The result was that when the Europeans finally left, they left too much of their cultures behind that it became impossible to reclaim the African self (Udoka, Enang and Utin, 60).

This explains why Dobie's definition does not confine colonialism to conquest and occupation of territories alone, making it quite clear that colonialism entails so much more than that (Udoinwang and Akpan, 341). Ngugi Wa Thiong'o thus puts the full gravity of colonialism in proper perspective when he asserts that the "most important area of colonial domination was the mental universe of the colonized" (294). Niyi Osundare agrees with Wa Thinog'o; hence he declares: "though gunboats and cannonade played a crucial role in the conquest of Africa,

stories and images it was that opened up the ramparts of the African mind" (306). Indeed, colonialism was really about opening the 'ramparts' of the African mind, thus leading to an era of continued mental slavery of the African man to the European man. Post-colonialism was born out of the need to correct this (Oko and Umannah, 265).

A lot of heated debate surrounds Post-colonialism as a theory of literary criticism (Utin, 78). Stephen Slemon foregrounds this debate when he writes that Post-colonialism has been seen as, amongst other things, "the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings, the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power, and even a mere tag for literary activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called "Commonwealth" literary studies' (45). Slemon's satirical tone, no doubt, attenuates the scorching disdain with which the very term 'Post-colonialism' has been met by some scholars. Anne McClintock, for instance, vilifies the term because it, according to her, 'confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper,' making the latter 'the determining marker of history' (629). Tejumola Olaniyan lines up behind McClintock, positing that "Post-colonialism is charged with an unwitting Eurocentrism in privileging the colonial experience – and thereby the political and epistemological authority of Europe" (639). But if one looks beyond McClintock and Olaniyan's acidic tone, one will come to realize that they are actually saying that to be truly postcolonial, the term 'postcolonial' itself must first be disbanded, since it defines what it qualifies within the very rubrics of colonialism, from which the qualified seeks escape (Akpan, 1).

Derek Walcott fine-tunes this position when he writes, as Julia Udofia reports, that "if we continue to say, Look at what the slave-owner did, and so forth, we will never mature, 'because 'while we sit moping or writing morose poems and novels that glorify a non-existent past, time passes us by" (151). Wearing Walcottian lenses, one perfectly understands McClintock and Olaniyan's disdain for the term 'Post-colonialism'. But that notwithstanding, other scholars have taken up the cudgels for Post-colonialism. Helen Tiffin, for instance, explains Post-colonialism out of the asphyxiating box to which McClintock and Olaniyan attempt to confine it. She holds that:

> since it is not possible to create or recreate national or regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise, it has been the project of postcolonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged point of view within (and between) two worlds (95).

From all indications, Tiffin's stand is that colonialism has created a historic past from which Africans have not yet totally escaped. Therefore, she insists that Africans must constantly hold dialogue with this past; they must continue to peer into this past with a critical eye to see what went wrong and how it went wrong. This, she believes, is one of the ways to prevent other things from going wrong. Omolola Ladele agrees with Tiffin, hence the observation that "our histories, including the events of colonialism and the process of decolonization that we have engaged in as Africans and which continue to irrevocably resonate in our neo/postcolonialisms, need to be properly interrogated in order for us to redefine new and acceptable identities for ourselves" (71).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that scholars disagree on the very importance of a postcolonial theory, seeing that it privileges colonialism itself, or seems to (Enang and Utin, 59). However, it goes without question that since there has been the incident of colonialism, with its attendant evils, there needs to be a remedial plan of action (Atanang, Ekanem and Oko, 198). Post-colonialism is that remedial plan of action. It is with this in mind that Richard Stephenson writes that "Post-colonialism has no specific tenets; it rather summons critical arsenal to disprove the very claim of colonialism" (22). Thus, as a theory Post-colonialism attempts an examination of the situation of former colonies with a view to constructing definite identities. As the name implies, Post-colonialism deals with literature from the standpoint of the colonial encounter. Postcolonial theory examines the experiences of ex-colonies to see the extent to which colonialism affects them, and to see how the experience of colonialism influences their construction of identity. There are two major schools of thought in Postcolonialism: the first school blames the colonizer for the state of the colonized – this school argues that it was the encounter with Europe that caused the colonized to remain in positions of squalor; the second blames the colonized for their own bad condition – this school argues that it was the actions of the colonized that led to their own colonialism and attendant squalor (Usoro and Udoette, 140). Both schools however recognize two crucial facts: there was a colonizer that, one way or another, caused things to go wrong; and there are the colonized who need to get their lives back in order. Thus, Post-colonialism deals with the reconstruction of life after the experience of colonialism (Sibani and Oko, 30). Most cultures often begin this by creating a blissful past which the colonial encounter thwarted. Works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* examine this life. The relevance of such works is that they create a history prior to colonialism as a way of helping the colonized find a footing.

Postcolonialism will be used in this work to examine aspects of African culture and lifestyle that reflect upon issues of sexuality and identity (Oko, 188). Much has been said about homosexuality being un-African, making it clear that the subject comes into the domain of cultural studies. It is the position of many scholars that homosexuality – as well as many other non-heterosexual sexual identities – is a European invention imported into Africa during the colonial contact. This draws attention to the feeling of imposition surrounding the latter (Oko and Ogbodo, 19). This makes it imperative for sexual identity to be objectively examined from the perspective of Postcolonialism, to ascertain whether there are aspects of sexuality that may be attempts to subject Africa to Europe's rule yet again.

A Post-colonial Interrogation of Sexuality and Identity in *A Bit of Difference*

Like most contemporary African writers, Atta presents sexuality and identity in her novel, *A Bit of Difference*, in very subtle ways. The novel proceeds from the perspective of Deola Bello, the thirty-nine-year-old female protagonist, and touches on a variety of contemporary issues. Most of the issues presented in the novel border on the postcolonial–from the disillusionment looming around Lagosians in postcolonial Nigeria, to the asphyxiating racism Africans face in Europe and America (Enang et al). But the concern of this paper is with sexuality and identity and their manifestations in the work.

Sexuality itself can be described as an individual's orientation towards sex, including their sexual tastes and preferences. Phillis Hall puts this succinctly in the revelation that sexuality encompasses "a person's psychological position on sex", adding that "this has a lot to do with who a person deems a fitting sexual partner–whether someone of the same or opposite sex"

(22). Hall identifies two main sexualities or sexual orientations: heterosexuality (sexual preference for someone of the opposite sex) and homosexuality (sexual preference for someone of the same sex). The dominant sexuality is heterosexuality. James Okpiliya and Kufre Akpan aver that "any contrary sense of sexual familiarity is viewed as a disruption on the cultural norms and practices of the people" (1). To this extent, homosexuality is considered immoral in most cultures, especially considering the fact that it does not make room for procreation (Enang and Utin, 59). Thus this paper will look at perceptions of homosexuality vis-à-vis heterosexuality.

The first encounter with homosexuality in Atta's *A Bit of Difference* is in the first chapter of the novel. It is important to state that the first chapter is entitled 'Reorientation', which chimes in with the general reference to homosexuality as a sexual orientation. Symbolically, at the end of this chapter, the reader has a mental shift in his or her perception of sexuality, having come into a subtle encounter with alternate sexualities as presented in the chapter. The title of this first chapter of the work seems to say that the reader must, as matter of utmost importance, have a paradigm shift in his or her perception of sexuality in the current century (Akpan, Affiah and Udoette, 58). Hence, the protagonist reveals that '. . . it's a question of being able to reorient yourself. That's all it takes' (*A Bit*,10).In 'Reorientation', Deola Bello–who is an audit staff with LINK, a London-based charity organization–is on a trip to Atlanta in the United States of America to sort out issues with the accounts of the America branch of the organization. She is hosted by one of the company staff, Anne. On the drive to the hotel where Deola is to lodge, the two women engage in small talk on different subjects. Anne tells Deola about her desire to have a baby. She tells Deola that whereas she prefers a girl, her spouse, Ali, prefers a boy. Ali is a male Muslim name common to most African countries. Hence the novel records that

> Deola assumes Anne is married to a Muslim man, which makes her regret her moment of anxiety when, on her way to the bathroom on the plane, she saw a man who looked Arab reading an Arab-to-English translation dictionary (*A Bit*, 4)

However, it is revealed later that Anne is neither married to a Muslim, nor a man: "Ali is a woman–or a Southern girl, as Anne refers to her. Deola does not find out until later in the evening when Anne treats her dinner at a Brazilian restaurant. Ali is from Biloxi, Mississippi, and she is a florist (*A Bit*, 9)

It is important to note Deola's speedy assumption that Anne is married to a man: being African, and having a heterosexual outlook, Deola immediately settles to the fact that Anne's spouse is a man, especially given the name Ali. This is a pointer to her heterosexual consciousness, which demonstrates the dominance of heterosexuality over homosexuality, revealing the subjection of the latter by the former. Hence, heterosexuality becomes the self, whereas homosexuality becomes the other. This manifests a centre-periphery relationship which is comparable to the chequered relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.
It is important to note Anne and Ali's attitude towards their lesbian union. Unlike in most African societies where, according to Nguyemi, 'people fear to be homosexual, and only settle on it as a terminal reality when they discover that they are' (28), Anne and Ali are a happy couple. They speak very freely about their marriage and even contemplate making babies through artificial insemination or adoption. This reveals varying attitudes towards

homosexuality in different societies: abhorrence in African societies, and acceptance in Western societies. (Udoette and Akpan, 56).

Another point worthy of note is Deola's attitude towards Anne and Ali. One notices that Deola is indifferent towards the duo, taking no clear stand on their relationship. This indifference may be traceable to the fact that she has a Western background, having obtained her university education in London and lived there for a good number of years. Throughout Deola's stay in Atlanta, she makes no comment on Anne and Ali's relationship. Her silence manifests a tolerance that is reminiscent of the educated mind. However, the fact that Deola initially assumes Anne's spouse to be male reveals an inner conception of heterosexuality as right and homosexuality as wrong, which shows that despite the level of education, the African mind may always still be inherently abhorrent towards homosexuality.

Again, it is necessary to point out how crucial Anne and Alison's relationship is to the power structure of the novel. The novel begins with Deola's trip to America–which is a symbolic reference to the world power status of the United States of America–and the fact that the only American characters actively featured in the novel are lesbians is a symbolic reference to American consent to homosexuality as an alternative sexual orientation. It can be recalled that the United States of America on June 25th, 2015 legalized homosexual relationships with a bill which permitted homosexuals to marry. Afterwards the Obama administration of that day proceeded to coerce African nations to sign similar laws. This led to the signing of anti-gay laws in many African nations. Given this historical fact, the decision to take the protagonist to America and make her encounter a lesbian couple becomes an avenue to examine the colonial underpinnings behind homosexuality. Anne and Alison's relationship therefore becomes not just a representation of American consent to homosexuality, but also a representation of America's attempt to impose homosexuality on the rest of the world, especially Africa. This is accentuated in the following comment made by Anne: "America's way is best, everyone else be damned, the world revolves around us" (10). With this comment, Anne reveals the sentiment that what is held in America *should* automatically be held in the rest of the world. This manifests a neo-colonial tendency to subject the rest of the world to the whims and caprice of the West.

More so, Deola's trip to Atlanta and her contact with Anne and Alison ultimately reveal a crucial fact: America as a world power–with its history of slavery and racism to African-Americans–is in support of homosexuality and is also actively involved in imposing it on the rest of the world. This revelation performs a bipartite textual function: first, it shows the acceptance–or tolerance–of homosexuality in Western societies, despite its abhorrence in African societies; second, it reveals that homosexuality, even if it may not necessarily be a Western invention, is subtly being imposed on Africa by the West. Hence Deola's targeted passivity towards the matter during the conversation at the Brazilian restaurant. Homosexuality then becomes an identity which people in America–and the West by extension–associate with, but to which many Africans, like Deola, are simply indifferent.

The second chapter of the novel is entitled 'Actually', and in this chapter, the author reveals the depiction of sexuality in African society. By this time, Deola has returned to her home in London where she meets her friends with whom she came from Nigeria to the United Kingdom. The novel employs a restricted omniscient narrative pattern, such that the story is

told with the third person technique, with most of the narrative still confined to the mind of the protagonist. This makes it possible for much of the protagonist's thoughts to be explored. It is in one of such thoughts that the reader is introduced to the character of Bandele, a friend of the protagonist from way back in Nigeria. The author uses this character to reveal African perceptions of sexuality.

Bandele is the typical 'lost' African in postcolonial fiction. He draws parallels to characters like the fanatical Moses Unachukwu in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Eugene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*–characters who demonstrate a consuming desire to be Western. Amongst other things, Bandele dons an English accent that marks him out. Despite being Yoruba, he consciously mispronounces Yoruba names, pronouncing his brother's friend's name (Lanre) as 'Lanry', instead of 'Lan-ray' (*A Bit,* 32). It is later explained that he was "sent off to an old-fashioned school in England called Harrow. Now he was so lost that Seyi was ashamed of him" (*A Bit*, 32). The perception created here is that his early exposure to English culture leaves Bandele eternally distorted. But more so, it is perceived that his exposure to English culture distorts Bandele sexually. The full excerpt from which the extract above is taken reveals that:

> Bandele had the same features as Seyi's, but they were not nearly as symmetrical and he was shorter. Lanre later explained that he was he Bandele was Seyi's younger brother who sent off to an old-fashioned school in England called Harrow. Now he was so lost that Seyi was ashamed of him. Deola did notice how Bandele hung around the expat crowd at Ikoyi Club. They called him 'Daily Davis.' He called himself 'Daily Davis.' His English accent made him sound effeminate (*A Bit*, 32)

The description above presents Bandele as an eccentric character, one so engrossed in Europeanism that he hangs around foreign expatriates at the Ikoyi Club. He even joins the expatriates in calling himself 'Daily Davis', not minding the derogation the name evokes. But most significant is the observation that his manner of speaking makes him effeminate, which is revelatory of his reduction from a masculine position to a feminine one. This points to the perception of Bandele as homosexual, following the observation by Nguyeni that "men who behaved like, or were perceived to behave like, women were regarded as homosexual" (29) in most African societies. It is not surprising then that Tosan, Deola's ex-boyfriend, thinks that Bandele is gay. The novel has it that "Tosan was so convinced Bandele was gay" (*A Bit*, 33).

The perception that Bandele is gay is further heightened by the characterization which the author bestows on him. Bandele is a writer. As a writer, he is obsessed with James Baldwin and his works. Deola reveals the following: "Bandele is also a James Baldwin enthusiast, but he considers Baldwin's experiences American, unlike his, which he might describe as aristocratic English because his grandfather was knighted by the Queen" (36). James Baldwin was an openly homosexual African-American writer who featured very prominently in the Harlem Renaissance. He is credited with many outstanding novels, including *The Fire Next Time*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and the classic novel of LGBT fiction, *Giovanni's Room.* That Bandele is a writer and that he is perceived to be gay, and yet is an enthusiast of James Baldwin, an openly gay writer, is not just coincidental; it is as if the author were furtively leading the reader to the conclusion that Bandele *is* gay.

But much more than arguing whether Bandele is gay or not–since the novel does not say so explicitly–it is important to note certain fundamental indices about Bandele's characterization that reveal African perceptions of homosexuality: first, Bandele grew up in England; second, he speaks English in a very British manner; third, he has European mannerisms, even in his relationship with other Africans and fourth, he shares European sentiments about other places (for instance, he joins other Europeans to complaining about racism in America); etc. His European inclinations are so great that Deola's friends refer to him as the "*bobo* who went mad because he could not accept the fact that he was black" (39). With all these European affectations, Bandele is presented as gay.

The symbolic implication of this is that gayness is perceived as being foreign, as being European. Hence the description of Bandele as being lost to European ways. This explains why it is English that is described as making Bandele effeminate. English is primarily the language of Britain and America–two key Western states. To say that the language is a factor in Bandele's gayness is to symbolically imply that gayness is somehow associated with the culture that owns the language in question (Akpan and Udoette, 192). Thus, one could surmise that the characters consciously or unconsciously manifest the view held by many Africans that homosexuality is Western.

Atta takes the discussion on African perceptions of sexuality to a whole new level. In chapter three of this novel, which is entitled 'Foreign Capitals', Deola is back in Nigeria for her father's memorial celebration. She makes up with Wale Adeniran, a young hotel owner in Lagos. It does not take long before they go on a date and sleep together in one of Wale's hotels. Like Deola, Wale is unmarried and many of the people at a hairdressing salon that Deola visits think that Wale is gay. One of them, a male hairstylist, comments: "Wale might be gay, especially if he lives in Abuja. What? That is their home base. Everyone knows they go there to look for government contract" (81). Deola reacts to this by taking a series of internal monologues in which the following are revealed: "She will never understand Nigerian attitudes towards gays: even the most decadent and perverted Nigerians vilify them, while those who are more open-minded worry about their proliferation as if they were an infestation of mosquitoes" (81). After Deola's train of thought, the male hairstylist proceeds to reveal attitudes towards homosexuality, especially with respect to marriage: "Me, I have no problem with them, it's when they marry that I have a problem. I don't like confusion. It's bad enough man to woman. You have to declare your stance. That's all I'm saying" (*A Bit*, 81).

From the three excerpts featured above, it is clear that Africans perceive homosexuality to be a foreign lifestyle (Okpiliya and Akpan, 29). It is also clear that they also consider homosexuality to be the basest form of indecency, hence the comment that even the most decadent of Nigerians join in condemning homosexuals. Again, homosexuality is likened to the infestation of mosquitoes by the protagonist, which demonstrates the fear of its spread. This shows the fear that homosexuality, like a disease, can–but should not be allowed to–spread. This fear of homosexuality and homosexuals is what is referred to homophobia. And it is homophobia, and not merely hatred of homosexual people, that, in Nguyeni's view, is the root cause of violence towards homosexual people.

Looking at the asymmetrical relationship between Bandele and his childhood friends, as well as the perception of sexuality by hairstylists in the salon Deola visits, few facts are clear: first,

homosexuality is regarded by many Africans as something foreign to Africa–something that 'lost' Africans like Bandele contract upon continuous contact with the West; second, many Africans are afraid of homosexuals and homosexuality and do not wish for either to proliferate and third, many Africans are dismayed by the thought of gay marriage. Unlike in the West, as was seen in the episode when Deola visits Atlanta, homosexuality is vilified by many Africans. Homosexuality thus constitutes an identity to which many Africans do not wish to be associated.

Identity constitutes the indices that mark a person out and make him a distinct individual (Vaso Flenner, 23). Examined above are the issues of sexuality portrayed in Atta's novel. It needs restating that Atta's novel is not necessarily about sexuality; its subject spansa variety of issues on contemporary African life. Hence the seeming tenuousness of issues of sexuality (Akpan and Okon, 1). However, Atta's novel reveals certain crucial facts about sexuality. First is the fact that homosexuality constitutes an identity index with which the West is ready to associated, whereas Africa is not. The general attitude of Africans to homosexuality is that of disdain and contempt. From the foregoing, it is clear that many Africans view homosexuality to be something foreign and indecent (Akpan and Akpan, 29). The West, on the other hand, views homosexuality as an alternative mode of existence–a mere preference of the same sex to the opposite. This, therefore, constitutes the parameters by which the West may be identified, much like Bandele is regarded as a Briton who was unfortunately born Nigerian. But more than these, the attitude of Anne and Alison, placed against the backdrop of contemporary realities, reveals that homosexuality as an orientation is something that the West has attempted to impose on the rest of the world, especially Africa. Indeed, the criminalization of homosexuality seems to be a reaction to this perceived imposition.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to interrogate sexuality and identity in Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference.* As one of the new voices in African literary space, dealing with an almost a new concern in African literary oeuvre, the author deploys certain artistic dispositions to project the attitude of Africans towards homosexuality. Following the analysis of the text, this paper infers that sexuality is a subject that is still not being actively discussed in Africa. Even though contemporary African writers have broken the ice on the subject, they still fail to accord it full pride of place in their works. As can be seen from the analysis, the author only just mentions sexuality, without really giving it a pride of place in the thematic universe of the novel.

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