The Discursive Construction of Gender Identity in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

[a] **Ghevolor, Asa John,** [b] **Stephen Magor Ellah,** [c] **Godwin Oko Ushie**
Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar
ghevolorasa@yahoo.com, Stephenellah534@gmail.com,
godddddyushie@unical.edu.ng
+2348038696994, +2348051617235, +2347064951126

Abstract

Several studies in language and gender have asserted that language is not mere words, but a system of cultural values, lifestyle, perception and a world view which assigns roles and identities to people in the society. This paper, entitled "The discursive construction of gender identity in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come",* seeks to explicate how the above acclaimed functional impact of language in society, is reflected in the novel. Privileging the social constructionist theory, this paper reveals that gender identity is not equated with sexual identity since the two belong to two separate systems: the former social, and the latter biological. The study shows that sexual identity as well as gender bonding is binary as it has been differentiated into male and female sub-cultural groups, whereas gender identity is multiplex as it can assume diverse/varied forms depending on the sociological and physiological factors that influence and impact upon it. The study further reveals that the talk-style, actions, reactions, interaction, exposure, education and experiences of individual males and females influence and impact upon their individual gender identities. This study submits that gender identity is not static or fixed, but flexible, changing and diverse as constructed in interaction. Put differently, language (talk-style) influences and impacts upon gender identity.

[a] **Ghevolor, Asa John,** [b] **Stephen Magor Ellah,** [c] **Godwin Oko Ushie**

Introduction

The study of gender has been influenced by diverse fields like psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, literature, linguistics and sociolinguistics, among others. Mellor (2010) submits that in recent times, researches into language and gender consider how language impacts upon how society informs and interprets gender. To Paltridge (2006, p. 20) gender "is not a result of who people are but a result of, among other things, the way people talk and what people do." Earlier, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003 p. 4) submit that "gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gender identities…." It follows then, that one's gender identity is reflected in one's language use. Put differently, gender identity, like many other identities is constructed in discourse rather than predestined as conceived by the essentialists. This ultimately reinforces the argument that "language and identity are intricately linked to each other such that it is difficult to separate them" (Ellah, 2021, p. 77).

Language in the context of this study is not mere words, but a system that teaches cultural values, life styles, perception and a world view, and equally a resource which assigns social roles and identities to people in the society. Conformably, Ghevolor and Nta (2018) submit that "ways of talking (idiolects) are actually ways of identity, since how one speaks is how one should be/is identified, hence, each speaker acting/performing their identity." Identity, is operationalised here as "the subjective way in which an individual or a group sees and categorises themselves" (Ellah, 2021, p. 77). The categorisation of selves as conceptualised in the above definition is usually constructed in interaction. This study, therefore, examines the construction of gender identity in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come* (henceforth, *EGWC*). It accounts for how individual character's multiplex manifestations of identity are realised linguistically in discourse.

2. Language and gender studies

Issues in language and gender studies have been termed ephemeral, dynamic, changing and a moving target, since changes in language translate to changes in gender identity (Mellor, 2010). Mellor (2010) affirms that language and gender has been studied in diverse ways each reflecting the social milieu of the time. She identifies four Ds, representing Deficit, Dominance, Difference and Discursive approaches to language and gender studies. These four approaches reflect how men and women differ in their use of language at different points in history. These differences also represent and perpetuate the social divisions between men and women in society, even conversations, since language in social context is really through conversation.

The first "D" otherwise called the Deficit Approach is connected to Otto Jespersen (1922) who published his book, *Language: Its nature, development and origin.* During this period, patriarchy defined sex and gender; man was regarded as "Nature" and the woman, the "other". The idea of 'male as nature' also known as the "natural order" flourished, where the masculine gender was considered more worthy than the feminine gender. Patriarchal language therefore ascribed Normative (Standard) and Deficient (Non-Standard) roles to feature users of language. Male language is said to be Normative while the language of the others (the child, the foreigner and the woman) is said to be deficient.

The above misogynistic attitude of the patriarchal age presents itself in the literary parlance. Man who wrote literature years before women produced works that extremely marginalized, oppressed and trivialized women. Women were left at the periphery of literary works and social events. In her study, Kolawole (2000, p. 115) affirms that, "Literature was a largely male affair while women were predominantly objects that were marginal to the central themes. It was a world of male heroism and female timidity".

ᵃ Ghevolor, Asa John, ᵇ Stephen Magor Ellah, ᶜ Godwin Oko Ushie

The Second D, also called the Dominance Approach, is attributed to Robin Talmach Lakoff (1975) who presented her *Language and women's place.* In the text, Lakoff instigated an ideological and revolutionary change for women's language since she ascribes the language variance between men and women to the dominance of men in society. Here, women's language parallels their lack of power in society as their language lacks authority and seriousness, conviction and confidence; whereas men's language is seen as having vividness and authority which also parallels their display of power and authority in society.

The third D, also known as the Difference Approach, was popularized by Deborah Tannen (1990) in her book, *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation.* The Difference Approach deals with two-culture model of men and women differentiated talk-styles. The Difference Approach proffers that the differences in the talk-styles of both sexes arise from the fact that boys and girls are socialized into separate linguistic cultures. This sub-cultural approach to language and gender studies, insists on essentialist binary opposition of concepts such as points of similarity and difference which often brings about miscommunication in mixed-sex talk. The Difference approach sees women's language differently from patriarchal schemes, since it views women's indirectness as sensitivity and not subservience.

The Fourth D also called discursive approach, is more recent and moves from binary to multiplicity. It considers how sociological factors such as race, ethnicity, class, education, exposure, etc., influence how people construct gender. This approach does not depend on sex differentiations alone in determining gender but also through language orientation within a socio-cultural framework.

In furtherance of the dynamic and changing nature of gender issues, recent years have also recorded substantial shifts in the kinds of gender roles available to men and women in society. Although there is still a preponderance of traditionally sex-typed roles, they are no longer the only ones, in that, gender roles now include characters who step outside of narrowly defined, conventional roles of being male

and female. Today, we see some female genders who are strong as well as sensitive, and some male genders who are also sensitive, as well as strong. As a result, there is some form or level of elasticity surrounding views of men and women in this present generation, as there exists a gradual moving away from stereotypic images of the ways to be a man and/or woman. Consequently, this paper seeks to employ the fourth 'D' to language and gender studies, also known as the discursive approach, to delineate as well as identify characters who embody or deviate from traditional gender roles constructed by culture for their sex category by either removing old themes or adding new themes to the on-going cultural gender communication.

Ekpang (2015) explores the role of language habits in creating identity among immigrants in Chimamanda Adiche's *Americana*. The study reveals that the "the promotion of hybridization rather than complete assimilation will check the trend and reduce the possibility of individuals lost in the sea of identity crisis" (p.88). In another study, Ghevolor and Ekpe (2016, p. 188) using a discursive approach in studying Maya Angelous's *Gather Together in My Name,* assert that "gender identity is constructed through language in a sociological framework, and no longer through the subject of sex differentials." Interestingly, all the above studies attempt to establish the relationship between language and gender identity which is also the concern of this present study.

3. Summary of Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*
Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come* is a bildungsroman that chronicles the growth of two young girls, Enitan and Sheri from childhood to adulthood during the military regime in post-independent Nigeria from 1971 to 1995. Despite their different background experiences, exposure, faith, class, education, family life and individual character, the two girls find enduring friendship in each other. Enitan, the protagonist of the novel is represented as a strong female who challenges traditional norms for women in her society. She is seen as an educated, career woman who before the end of the novel abandons her marriage to lead a group of women who agitate for the release of some political prisoners.

[a] *Ghevolor, Asa John,* [b] *Stephen Magor Ellah,* [c] *Godwin Oko Ushie*

4. Previous studies on Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* has received scholarly attention from both literary and linguistic fields. For example, Akung (2012) considers the female characters in the text and how their awareness of their environment influences their individual feminist identities. The study concludes that women must speak out against all forms of oppression since silence is no longer golden.

Edebor (2014) examines the image of male gender in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come* against the backdrop of oppression of women by men. The study concludes that it is possible for both genders to cohabit equitably without one gender being subsumed in the other. Agbachi (2015) carries out a contrastive analysis of male and female gender construction in the text. The study uses Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) to account for the lexicogramatical choices made by male and female characters. The study evinced that the text does not represent women in tradition norm roles, but as assertive and resilient women who know and exercise their rights. Koutchade (2016) adopts a sociological approach to explore the language of Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*. The study reveals that Sefi Atta like other feminist writers espouses the women liberation mantra by avoiding the use of male dominating/sexist language but rather drawing on inclusive idiolects to capture both female and male characters.

From the above review, it is clear that the previous studies are relevant to the present study. However, this study is different from the previous ones because of its application of social constructionist theory in accounting for the gender identities in the text.

5. Theoretical orientation

This study is based on social constructionist theory (SCT) of identity. Social constructionists conceive identity as being "fluid, non-fixed and discursive categorisation of people in situated discourse. In this sense, identity is negotiated, discursive and progressive" (Ellah, 2021, p. 77).

This implies that identities are complex, constantly changing and emergent in discourse rather than static. This view is succinctly expressed by Hall (2000, p.17) thus:

> identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. What this means is that an individual could construct multiple identities in different contexts of an interaction. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

The SCT emphasises that identity is jointly negotiated and constructed by discourse participants in interaction. The theory sees identity construction as a process rather than a product. This process involves social practices such as language. Put simply, "social constructionist perspective looks at how interlocutors construct and negotiate their own and each other's' identities in and through talk, and how they portray themselves (and each other) as particular kinds of people in their discourse" (Ajiboye, 2018, p. 69).

Kendall and Tannen (2001, pp. 556-557) submit that "a social constructivist paradigm has prevailed in gender and discourse research. That is scholars agree that the 'meaning' of gender is culturally mediated, and gendered identities are interactionally achieved." The social constructionist theory, is, therefore, considered most relevant to this study because of its ability to account for the discursively negotiated gender identity in the selected text.

7. Analysis and findings

The findings reveal that two main gender identities are discursively constructed in the text, namely male (masculine) and female (feminine) gender identities. The characters discursively construct their gender identities in interaction based on their established

ᵃ Ghevolor, Asa John, ᵇ Stephen Magor Ellah, ᶜ Godwin Oko Ushie

societal norms as well as based on their deviation from such established norms. The findings also show that some male characters contrary to expectation, construct feminine identity, while some female characters also enact masculine identity in the text. The two main gender identities identified are discussed in turn.

7.1. Male (masculine) gender identity

Male identity in this study is indexed by the socio-cultural and psychological expression of masculinity in discourse. It reflects the expression of male superiority over female gender. This type of identity is discursively constructed in the following example in which Enitan's husband, Niyi expresses his male identity

Excerpt 1:
Background: In this excerpt, Enitan comments on Niyi's behaviour

> Niyi bullied his brothers the same way he bullied me, but he could easily be vexed in the middle of our playing. Then he would call me aside and warn, "Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me woman wrapper" (*EGWC,* p.182)

In Excerpt 1 above, Niyi discursively constructs masculine identity. His linguistic choices portray him as a macho-male with a bloated ego. This male gender identity is expressed in the directive act of warning: "Better watch what you are saying" which is issued to "assert [his] power and authority" (Ellah, 2020, 154) over his wife, thereby constructing male superiority over female gender. The male gender identity is further evinced in the expression "they'll be calling me woman wrapper". The expression "woman wrapper" is a Nigerian pidgin derogatory expression for a weak man who is controlled by women. Niyi's abhorrence to being referred to as "woman wrapper" is in tune with the ideology of male superiority over female. He doesn't want to be seen as weak because weakness in a male dominated environment is considered to be an attribute of females.

Edebor (2014, p. 49) describes Niyi as a person "who believes in absolute submission of women to men, as well as separation of duties. He believes the kitchen remains the female sphere, hence he refuses to lend helping hand to Enitan".

It is Niyi's belief in complete submission of women to men as an indexical for masculine identity that makes him to warn his wife "watch what you're saying". This warning is to construct his superiority over her. Let us consider another example.

Excerpte 2
Background: In the excerpt below, Enitan, a female character refuses to obey her husband, Niyi who requested her to serve his brothers.

> "Go to hell", I said."…why can't you ever get them drinks for once? Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg? (*EGWC,* p.184).

Excerpt 2 above illustrates how Enitan discursively constructs male gender identity of strong will, assertiveness and revolt against established gender stereotypes for females. As a strong-willed and assertive character, Enitan first and foremost collides with her mother who tilts towards accepting stereotyped female subjugation and later with her husband, Niyi who also wants her to imbibe and perform the cultural norms for women in society. She sees no reason why a man should not go to the kitchen and cook or serve himself when a woman is around. She is, therefore, pissed off whenever anybody hints that household chores (home-space issues) are the exclusive preserve of the female in the home. She vehemently challenges this view, making it clear that there is nothing in the male to prevent them from helping out at home.

She, therefore, cuts out an image of a macho-woman in character and in words, always questioning the status quo about women folk; she

has one rule during celebration of birthdays, holidays and christenings: "whenever I was hosting …the women should not serve their husband food". This draws for her a pejorative sobriquet "a bad influence" to other women (p.196). Thus, in an attempt to reconstruct a desirable female identity from the following stereotypes: "strong and silent" chatterbox but cheerful "weak and kindhearted" as those outside these were considered horrible, she declares "I! Am! Not! Satisfied with these Options!" (*EGWC,* p.197). Such rejection and assertiveness are characteristics of male gender, therefore, Enitan discursively constructs male gender identity.

Excerpt 3;
Background: Mr. Sunny Taiwo tells his wife to train their female children on how to behave in the 21st century.

> "You should tell her young girls don't do this anymore. And if she asks where you learn such nonsense, tell her, from your father and he's for the liberation of women" (*EGWC, p.*24).

Excerpt 3 above presents Mr. Taiwo who advises his daughter, Enitan to revolt against male domination. He seeks to liberate her from socio-cultural roles assigned to women in the society. This is interestingly shocking, because Enitan's father as a biologically male sexed character should be concerned about making his daughter imbibe societal values, norms and beliefs. Rather, he creates an avenue for her to be estranged from such traditional roles for women, thereby constructing male gender identity for her.

Enitan's father's identity is, therefore, considered ambivalent. At one end, he is seen as one who believes in the sympathy for the female cause, as he attempts to socialise Enitan, imprinting in her the identity of a non-conformist gender stereotype by not consigning her to be among kitchen martyrs in the making (p.42), that is, one who would be made to suffer as a sacrificial victim in the kitchen to please the society. He tells Enitan to rather "join the debating society, not the girls' guide" because girls guide "are nothing but kitchen martyrs in

the making" (*EGWC*, P.42). This revolutionary impulse gains ground in her over the years to give her the will she exerts. According to Akung (2012, p.121), this shower of love on Enitan by her father is so that she can continue to see him as an idol.

7.2. **Female (feminine) identity**

Female identity in this study relates to the portrayal of females as unassertive and inferior to males. It also shows that women are restricted to the kitchen and certain traditional games. The following examples will be instructive:

Excerpt 4:
Background: In this example, Enitan narrates her childhood experiences

> From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies   even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations.   At an age when other Nigerian girls were masters at ten-ten, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit partners with sudden knee jerk….My worst was to hear my mother's shout from her kitchen window: "Enitan, come and help in here" (*EGWC*, p.11)

Excerpt 4 above shows the gullibility and unassertiveness of the female gender as represented by Enitan who accepted everything that she was told including lies. This unassertiveness is captured in the expression "I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even" to construct the female gender identity of not engaging in protests, especially against the male gender. Enitan also constructs female gender identity in accounting for the female gender specific game, "ten-ten". This game as stated by Enitan was identified by "Nigerian girls", hence, it a gender-based traditional African game. Also, from the excerpt, we see that Enitan's mother calls her from the kitchen window for assistance with cooking and other kitchen chores. The fact that Enitan and her mother

are both females, shows that the kitchen is associated with the female gender. Let us consider another example.

Excerpt 5
Background: In this excerpt, Enitan who has come to dissuade her father from confronting the military government, thinks about the preoccupation of women in the society.

> I began to count on my fingers. "No husband, bad husband, husband's girlfriend, husband's mother. Human rights were never an issue till the rights of men were threatened….There's nothing in our constitution for kindness at home. (*EGWC,* p.193)

In Excerpt 5 above, Enitan discursively constructs female gender identity for the women by enumerating their predominant topics of conversation "No husband, bad husband, husband's girlfriend, husband's mother". She presents the women as conformists who do not question the violation of their fundamental human rights. She also constructs male gender identity for the men who now challenge the authorities for infringing on their human rights. The men are overtly confrontational in speaking against the military government that has begun clamping down on the citizens. This identity construction reveals that women are unassertive and submissive to authority, while men are assertive and confrontational to the authority. .
In Excerpt 6 below, we see how male and female genders are discursively achieved through the linguistic choices.

Excerpt 6
Background: Enitan talks about the different topics that dominated male and female conversations.

> Whenever we came together, the women sat on one side, the men sat on another. The men chatted mostly about cars and money; the

women about food prices; pediatric medications, work politics and Disney toys… We bought to hoard, to show off, to compensate for affairs, for ourselves. We bought what someone else had bought, what someone else was buying (p.195).

Excerpt 6 above reveals the bond that exists among the people. It also shows the lexical collocations that index gender identity. The women preoccupy themselves with home-based lexical items as seen below:

Lexical Item	Domain
(No) Husband	Home space
Food Prices	Home space
Pediatric medications	Home space
Disney toys	Home space
Buying items	Home space
Consumerism	

Men, on the other hand, chatted about cars and money:

Lexical Item	Domain
Car	Means of Transportation
Money	Economic Activity

Enitan uses the above lexical distinctions, between men and women to construct their genderised identities. The male and female lexical distinction is strategically and pragmatically deployed to activate the construction of their gender identities in interaction.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have demonstrated that language and gender identity are intertwined. The paper has also shown that gender identity is not necessarily biological, but a behaviour, attitude and performance embedded in an individual's linguistic choices in interaction. The study has revealed that gender identity in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come* is multiplex, discursive, and subject to change due to its ephemeral and dynamic nature. The fluidity of gender role and gender identity arises from the varied and diverse linguistic options and choices available to an individual. The paper has

ᵃ Ghevolor, Asa John, ᵇ Stephen Magor Ellah, ᶜ Godwin Oko Ushie

further illustrated that "Doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures. It recognises that performance of gender both structures human interactions and is created by them as it takes place in everyday social interactions and contexts.

References

Agbachi, F. (2015). Gender representation and linguistic choices in some selected excerpts from Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*, Swallow and A bit of difference. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Universite d Abomey Calavi

Ajiboye, S. O. (2018). A pragmatic investigation of identity, justice and ideology in   university law clinics in southwestern Nigeria. PhD thesis. English, Arts. University of   Ibadan, Ibadan.

Akung, J. E. (2012). Feminist Dimensions in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come. Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (1): 114-122.

Atta, Sefi. (2006). *Everything good will come*. Lagos: Farafina.

Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press

Edebor, S. A. (2014). "Images of the Male Gender in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come". POLACJELF*, Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil, 1 (3): 43-57.

Ekpang, J. N. (2015). Identity and immigrants in Chimamanda Adiche's *Americana*. CAJOLIS: Calabar journal of liberal studies. 19(1): 74-88

Ellah, S. M. (2020). Illocutionary functions of language in the healing miracles of Jesus Christ. *LWATI: A journal of contemporary research*. 17(3): 148-163.

Ellah, S. M. (2021). Locher and Watts' relational work theory. In S. A. Akinwotu, et al (Eds.). *Politenes concepts, models and theories (Theory and practice of pragmatics series. 2)*. Ilorin: Pragmatics Association of Nigeria. 65-82.

Ghevolor, A. J. & Ekpe, S. (2016). Third wave feminist linguistics: a discursive approach to female specific interests in Maya Angelou's *Gather together in my name*. IJAH: International Journal of Arts and Humanities Vol. 5(2) 181-189.

Ghevolor, A. J. & Nta, E.G. (2018). Feminist stylistics in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*. Washington D.C.: Paper presentation during the 49th ALA conference, May 23rd-26th 2018. Unpublished.

Hall, S. (2000). Who needs Identity? In P. Du Gay, J. Evans & P. Redman (Eds.). *Identity: a reader*. London: Sage. 15 – 30

Jespersen O. (1922). *Language: Its nature, Development and Origins*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Kendall, S & Tannen, D (2001). Discourse and gender. In D. Tannan, H. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.). *The handbook of discourse analysis.* 2nd (ed). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Kolawole, M. E. M. (2010). Feminine preoccupation in African Literature: a theoretical appraisal. In D. Opata and A. Ohaegbu (Eds.) *Major themes in African Literature.* Nsukka: AP Express Publisher. (pp.115-130)

Lakoff, R.T. (1975). *Language and Women's place*. New York: Harper & Row.

Mellor, B. (2010). Deficit, dominance, difference and discursive: the changing approaches to Language and Gender. *Diffussion.* 4 (2). http://atp.uclan.ac.uk/buddypress/diffusion/volume-4-issue2/deficit-dominace-difference-and-discursive.   January 5,2013.

Paltridge, B. (2006). *Discourse analysis: An introduction.* London: Bloomsbury.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*. New York: William Morrow.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society,* 1 (2): 125-151.