



Transnational Identities in Sefi Atta's *News from Home*

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Abstract

The postcolonised world has seen a massive movement of people from developing nations to developed countries in the hopes living a better life filled with opportunities. This paper tries to delineate the formation of transnational identities in the corpus of Black female migrants in the United States of America using the postcolonial feminist framework. It tries to decipher the assimilation of cultures and understand acculturation of hybrid identities formed amongst individuals in personal and public spaces. The paper also aims at depicting the development of identities in children of migrant parents and emergence of their own cognizance vis-à-vis their culture and the social dynamics that exist at home and the outside world. It intends to explore the power dynamics that exist in the society and how it eventually affects the creation of identity amongst migrants through a short story collection called *News From Home* written by Sefi Atta.

Keywords: migrant, identity, postcolonialism, transnationalism, hybridity

Transnational Identities in Sefi Atta's *News from Home*

Sefi Atta is a Nigerian-American novelist. She has authored various novels, short stories, plays and other works of fiction. She was the recipient of Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa for *Everything Good Will Come* in 2006 and the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa for *Lawless* in 2009.

News from Home is a collection of short stories. The stories though fictional in nature have been inspired by newspaper headlines and clippings from her native country, Nigeria. Atta has tried to capture the lives of transnational migrants and diasporic families living in UK and USA in a realistic and vivid manner. The stories navigate through an array of situations and scenarios, both grim and joyful descriptive of the reality of transnational migrants and their lives.

'Green' one of the short stories in the book *News from Home* is about a husband and wife living in Mississippi, USA hoping to receive their green cards. As the narrative moves forward, we get a glimpse of the lives of the dynamics at home. The narrator's mother is a professor and her father, a doctor and she is their only child. They are at the Immigration Centre where we see immigrants from different countries waiting in line to file their applications or check their status in the immigration process. The immigration center appears as a microcosm of the real world filled with various individuals and families who come to America to fulfill the American dream every year. Immigration center is seen as the final litmus test that decides whether a migrant has been successful or not in their journey, green card is the coveted prize. When the immigration officer asks the narrator if she was there to get herself registered, her mother promptly replies, "'No, she's the American in the family,'" Mom says and smiles." Characteristic of the pride she has for their child as an American citizen. As we delve deeper in the story, the reality of the dilemma that the protagonist faces every time someone asks her what it is like to be African becomes apparent in her interactions with the outside world. The innocence of the child brings out the dichotomy between the façade and reality as she realizes that no one understands her life. The conscious choice to hide her parents' food choices and even being embarrassed by them in front of her peers is a deliberate attempt to not be seen as an 'other'. The parents on the other hand, are afropolitan transnational immigrants with high-paying jobs who become legal citizens of the United States of America through the course of the story allowing them to travel according to their own wishes. It's interesting to note that the liberty and freedom of movement requires approval of a state authority which in most cases is difficult to access. Much like most afropolitans,

they are hyper-aware of the prejudices that exist in the host environment and leave no stone unturned to point out mistakes and rectify them whenever possible.

“My mom is for woman power. Everything in the world is her right. Even shopping is her right. In Mississippi, she argues in the mall whenever they ask her to show her ID. “That’s discrimination,” she’ll say. “That is dis-cri-mi-nation” In JC Penney too.”(291)

Double consciousness as W. E. B. Du Bois casts it as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (16-17). The protagonist in ‘Green’ feels ashamed and embarrassed of her parents’ eating habits. When enquired by her friends how does it feel to be African she doesn’t feel comfortable sharing them and answers that she doesn’t know. Even though her parents have tried to raise her into an aware individual who should respect people no matter what ethnicity or nation they come from, they cannot change her experiences which have developed into deep level of shame of being African, being different. She already has become protective of her parents’ whom she has come to believe are different from American parents and hence need saving from mockery and ridicule. This behavior can be seen as being stemmed from her interactions with her peers and the consumption of media which has shaped her idea of what categorizes as ‘normal’ or the ‘other’. For instance, when the teacher at school was showing pictures of clothes from different countries around the world, a classmate of hers asked, “Why are they wearing those funny hats?” when the display showed a woman from an African nation wearing an elaborate headgear and everyone in the class started laughing, the teacher didn’t intervene or try to make the students understand acceptance and sensitivity towards different cultures. There are no direct instances wherein the protagonist might have been a victim of xenophobia or racism but the story does have her mother stating that’s racist and unfair when she is treated differently in a public space or whilst shopping. Both her parents have high academic degrees and try to voice their concern and slam when treated differently paving their own way to a more equal and bias-free world yet the protagonist feel ashamed. Her behavior can be attributed to her young age and inane desire to not be seen as or deemed different is a feeling felt by many individuals borne of immigrant parents. Social acceptability is one of her primary concerns, she doesn’t wish to be seen as the ‘other’. Her only concerns are her friends, soccer and how whether her romantic interests will be reciprocated or not. She has become a part of the neocolonial mindset of her parents who do want the best for her and hence have enrolled

her in to all kinds of activities which her peers might also be a part of so that she doesn't feel different.

Another incident similar to this is mentioned in *News From Home* where Junior, a nine-year old states that

“I sawed the picture of Africa,” Daniel said. “And the boy had no hair, and his belly was all swelled up, and he lived in a hut, with, um, no windows, and I don't like Africa. Africa women have droopy boobies.”(250)

The same is the case for Alali and Junior, the Darego children in the short story *News From Home*, the Daregos are also an immigrant family living in the US. The children are alienated from the land of their parents and seem to find it as amusing and shameful, the lack of sensitization that should be inculcated seems amiss and they have already started viewing 'Africa' as the 'other'. Both the parents have busy schedules and don't have a lot of time to spare for their children so in order to compensate for their absence, they send their kids to all kinds of lessons; piano, soccer and multiple other in order to raise them to be model students good at everything. The children have become examples of their parents' neo-colonised mindset and the consumerist culture as we find the children watching Harry Potter, Disney movies and completely absorbed with western entertainment. The parents' choices of the clothes for their children are heavily inspired by Hollywood and western media which apparently is the idea they have what success and being able to make it in America should look like. Their perceptions are direct impact of their neo-colonised environment back home where every object from the west is kept on pedestal and seen as better than the others. This assimilation of the characteristics of the American lifestyle that they wish to inculcate in their own lifestyle and try to project that through their children is just an example of how the adults in both the narratives keep their native clothes and dresses away from children, keeping their roots at bay, a denial of their hybrid existence which should be tackled in order to engage in discourse and understand each other within the family and outside better. They become exemplary of afropolitan individuals by presenting multiple versions of hybridization and represent their own 'hybridity' formed through various transnational experiences that lead to the creation of new social traditions and a culture centred on the individual self. On the surface level, they seem to have achieved the 'American Dream' with their high paying jobs and now the green card, the ultimate symbol of establishing yourself as a successful immigrant in the US. Their relief is clear when they cannot the protagonist's father breaks into a dance after receiving his green card and her mother says, “You have no idea. We waited so long.” to the lady who informs them about their green card

status the exasperation and relief is quite evident in her voice. It's a feat thousands of migrants are never able to achieve.

On the other hand, we see Mrs Darego, the employer of Eve, the protagonist of *News From Home*, still waiting for her green card despite living in the country for a substantial number of years. She even complains about the system being faulty and regrets her decision of applying for visa under her husband's name. The entire system of providing visa and green cards is extremely biased and sometimes even random. In *Behold The Dreamers*, a novel by Imbolo Mbue, the central character and his family are deported as their plea for asylum is rejected by the immigration centre. It cannot be denied that their plea is a ruse and lie but the lawyer that they have hired does explain to them blatantly the reality of the green card application system wherein being a good and model individual doesn't grant you access but economic status. Even Eve's own experience when she was traveling from Nigeria to New Jersey she was questioned several times, her ability to procure a visa was also doubted by officials from her very own country. The amount of disdain and doubt that the immigration officer have for her is solely based on the fact that people belonging to lower economic status don't have access to more opportunities to further their progress and development. She has a proper education and is qualified nurse by profession but the opportunities in the city where she lives are extremely limited owing to political upheaval and civil distress.

The condition of immigrants is clearly stated by Charity, the person Angelica asks Eve to contact for help, "Ah, well, you will soon learn how things work over here. We Africans, we only get attention when we need help, when we have no hope, and oh yes, most especially when we are naked." (280). Charity iterates the harsh reality that looms the lives of thousands of immigrants in USA who come to the country with big dreams but have to resort to menial and underpaid jobs to make ends meet. Even Eve is in a dilemma as to whether inform her employers of her future plans of applying to a medical school and acquiring legal status to work since she doesn't want to jeopardize her relation with Mrs Darego. Further, the uncertainty of the discussion dissuades her from informing them. It's an indictment of the system that dissuades thousands of immigrants from exercising their human rights and raise their voices towards apathy and exploitation and leads them working minimum wage and menial jobs. Moreover, the lack of opportunities in their homeland is one of the primary reasons why migrants choose not to go back even if they wish to. She clearly states her intention of never moving back which is further solidified by Angelica who tells her, "Eve, you can't come back. There is nothing here for you."(280) There's deep mistrust amongst individuals as to whether

their countries will ever be free from political strife or not, they talk about their home lands in nostalgic tones and grieve upon the culture and comfort that they have lost but the idea of returning isn't enjoyed by many. The oil company in the town where Eve comes from is the issue that both the women bond upon, their solidarity for the women taking steps to bring in change and regulations in the functioning of the company, a metaphorical representation of crushing patriarchal and sexist viewpoints is in direct contrast to the power structures at home. Both Dr and Mrs Darego are doctors, but Mrs Darego hasn't received her legal permit to work so she cannot practice as a doctor, even their children who are too young to pinpoint their father as a patriarch realise the power dynamics at home and end up making Eve feel sympathetic towards their mother "My mom really wants her papers, because my dad is controlling." The objectivity of Daniel's perspective represents what multiple authors fail to depict when trying to showcase male counterparts trying to establish the same rules and code of conduct that they were a part of when they were in their native land and the women are also conditioned to accept their fates and the behaviour of their spouse or parent figure. Dr Darego refuses to be an equal contributor in the division of the household work despite his wife's requests to understand that she's overworked trying to balance a career, their home and children. He has a defensive attitude regarding the situation and thinks that he has addressed her grievances by hiring a nanny which according to him should solve all the problems. He says

"You wanted help, I got you help. You have your nanny downstairs. Call the girl, tell her to get the kids ready, take the keys to the jeep. All of you, drive to wherever you feel like spending your July Fourth. I'm not going. Finish?" (243)

His quick response is quite dismissive of his responsibilities as an equitable partner in the marriage. The Darego's might have been successful in establishing a good life in 'America' on the surface level but the patriarchal structure still exists in the household where the man can just shrug off his responsibilities according to his own wishes. He even delegates his wife to fulfill the social obligations of meeting his friends and helping the children make friends with the other children. He seems to believe in the indigenous patriarchal structure wherein the man of the works only contributes financially and has no other responsibilities to fulfill. Mrs Darego despite her protests has unconsciously accepted her position and does try to fulfill the stereotypical role of being the wife and the mother. Her decision to hire Eve to stay longer with the family is based on the notion that when she moves to the residential school in order to finish her educational degree, her husband will not return the favour or even volunteer to do the same as she did when

he was studying. The same can be said for many female migrants who are quite successful professionally but cannot make their partners develop more respectful and equitable environment at home.

Adapting the language and the lifestyle just to satisfy the external need for validation from the host country cannot solve the internal patriarchal structures that still clutch multiple transnational women still struggling for equality at home. The idea of receiving a green card isn't the end to all problems, the social and political structures at home and the outside world need to be questioned in order to make it a better and equitable environment for females. Sensitization towards different cultures and discourse amongst individuals is required in order to remove the insecurities and dilemma that individuals specially children of migrant individuals face. Atta tries to express and explore the issues without being didactic and gives a glimpse into the world of these afropolitans who seemed to have achieved their American Dream.

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