

## **Lagos Landscapes And The Shifting Discourses Of Aesthetics In Sefi Attah's Swallow**

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### **Abstract**

*Lagos city, the first capital of Nigeria from the 1914 Amalgamation to 1991, has been a favourite setting for most Nigeria's cultural productions, especially fiction, poetry and the movie. Although the "culture novel" model motivated by the publication of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart in 1958 had depicted African fiction as predominantly set in the rural environment, Lagos city had had its early portraiture in Cyprian Ekwensi's People of The City (194) even before Achebe's 1958's debut. Since then most fictional stories set in Lagos have described a dynamic cosmopolitan environment marked with ever increasing modernity, over population, traffic congestion, rapid economic and infrastructural development as well as improved transportation by road, air and sea. Lagos is therefore viewed as quintessential object of social and cultural shift from the primordial through the modern to the postmodern, hence the consequential creative-destructive process inflicted on the city evokes images of an urban jungle brimming with life; a mass of humanity bereft of human compassion; an environment of pollution, dirt and crime provoking fun and resilience; the elites of power and wealth, eliciting the emergence of areaboyism; and the culture of oppressive patriarchy instigating assertive womanhood, and so on. This paper is an ecocritical examination of Sefi Attah's Swallow to demonstrate how the cosmopolitan environment has gradually given Nigeria its postmodern twist in literature arising from earlier discourses of realism and modernism. But, above all, to prove that realism still remains the pivot for creative writing as there is not clear distinctions between Realism with either Modernism or postmodernism.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The fiction tradition in Africa, unlike those of poetry and drama, is generally believed to have arrived late, and possibly copied from the European literary tradition. Leading scholars of the European novel like Ian Watt, George Lukacs, Walter Benjamin and J.P. Oflinn associate the rise of the European novel to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution and the subsequent wave of urbanization, especially the growth of cities like London, Paris, Berlin, Rome and so on. Subsequent or parallel revolutions like the French Revolution in 1789 and the American Revolution in 1776 gave impetus to the modern sense of liberty and individualism that had generated in the West since the break-up of the medieval feudal system and the emergence of capitalism. The novel therefore became an art form that described human relationship of individuals in the capitalist society.

City living has, since the cradle of civilization been associated with education, freedom and progress. The Greeks were the early precursors of city life and city-State democracies in which adult males participated in decision making. Although cities had already started developing in Europe at the time of the Renaissance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was indeed the industrial revolution that gave a boost to the surge of cities and altered profoundly the natural environment of the Europeans. There were mass exoduses of people from the countryside to manufacturing sites as workers migrated to other major settlements linked by the then newly constructed railway lines. Cities became the melting pots for people from different ethnic and primordial backgrounds worked and lived together. This development naturally led to a change in values and tastes as aptly described by Ian Watt in the case of London in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

The combination of physical proximity and vast social distance is a typical feature of urbanization and one of its results is to give a particular emphasis to external and material values in the city dweller's attitude to life; the most conspicuous values – those which are common to the visual experience of everyone – are economic, in eighteenth century London, for example, it was coaches, five houses and expensive clothes which pervade the outlook of *Moll Flanders*.

The world of the novel is therefore essentially a world of the modern city; both present a picture of life in which the individual is engaged in private and personal relationship. The modern novel explores the plight of

individuals caught up in the vagaries of capitalist society, how they relate with other people and their societies and how they either survive or are consumed by forces beyond their capacities.

The ideal fiction tradition in Nigeria is described by Nnolim as existing on the protean nature of its variety, rather than on a strict adherence to a homogeneous procrustean straight-jacket tradition. He outlines elements of the tradition by their chronological appearances ranging from Tutuola's fictional world of the bush, spirits and the jungle in 1952 through Ekwensi's lacklustre depiction of city life in *People of the City* in 1954; to the Nigeria-Biafra war novel trajectory and the rise of the intellectual in the novels as Okara's *The Voice* and Soyinka's *The Interpreters*. But he concludes that it is Chinua Achebe, his cultural nationalist novels, and the clan of Achebe imitators like John Munonye, T.M. Aluko, Onuora Nzekwe, Eleche Amadi and Flora Nwapa that truly capture the essence of the Nigerian novel tradition. He says:

In sum, when all things are considered, we must all hark back to Achebe for what is great in the tradition of the Nigerian novel, that tradition which, in addition to embodying the best in the art of the story and the best of technique in the form of the novel, promotes our awareness of what is really great and dignified in our culture, salted with the lilt of our local proverbs, the charm of our folkways, the respect of our ancestors, the beauty in our tradition – in sum the rehabilitation of the dignity of the Blackman bruised and damaged by the colonial master. (75)

We must however understand that Nnolim is merely describing the norm and not aspiring to reach the ideal essence of the genre, which he admits Cyprian Ekwensi embodies. Ekwensi being the first Nigerian novelist to set his works in cosmopolitan centers, away from the village. In apparent reference to Ian Watt's *The Rise of The Novel* that traces the establishment of the realist novel with the emergence of individualism, secularization, rationality and urbanization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, following the industrial revolution, Nnolim, however, contradicts himself by creating an even more universally valid template for Nigerian fiction.

The major concerns of the novel, as literature of the bourgeois class, are with the problems of everyday living, the problems of human relationships, close attention to the realities of the bourgeois, the life of business and commercialism, the problem of life in modern cities, increasing class mobility, and the acquisition of money and material possession in a competitive world. (70)

There is now no doubt that the novel in Nigeria has finally found its natural habitat in the cosmopolitan centers of Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port-Harcourt and Enugu. Its themes are now mostly varied and drawn from the slums, suburbs and genteel residences of the city. The themes of the slums being the breeding ground for crime, lawlessness and anarchy are replete in the novel. The middle class and the super-rich are mostly portrayed as feeble and ineffective or even soulless and stingy. There is vulgarity, harsh religiosity, ugliness, insecurity, disorderliness and corruption on the sprawling streets of the city, of which the Nigerian novel in the 21st century seeks to capture.

Jonathan Raban as quoted by David Harvey describes the modern city of London in the 1970s, for instance, as too complicated a place to be disciplined. A labyrinth, an encyclopaedia, an emporium, a theatre, the city in somewhere where fact and imagination simply have to fuse (5). Most new Nigerian writers are engaged in writing about city life. They include Sefi Atta, Chimamanda, Ngozi Adichie, Toni Khan, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Festus Iyayi and Toni Kan, all of who have given the Nigerian novel its cosmopolitan outlook. Abiola Irele puts it as such:

With these writers, the novel has entered a new phase and assumed a new complexion in Africa. The raffia skirt and the kolanut have been left behind as indices of African life, along with the village environment; the focus has been shifted to the new social configuration of the urban milieu which provides the significant context of experience in the post-independence period (11)

As remarked by Eustace Palmer, every good novel is a reflection of life and of human experience, so the “novel must communicate to us that the words on the page add up to a representation of a realistic world peopled by realistic men and women engaged in realistic activity” (2). Realism as an aesthetic tradition which developed alongside with social changes in industrialization, urbanization and secularization, fosters both the ideas of mimesis and verisimilitude. The realist aesthetics are therefore central to the idea of the truthful depiction of city life, an idea which has however been questioned by both modernist and postmodern discourses. Pam Morris observes, for instance, that:

Modernist writers wrote out of a troubled sense that “reality”, whether material or psychological, was elusive, complex, multiple and unstable, but they still believed that the aim of their art was to convey knowledge by some new aesthetic means, of intangibility. In this sense, their quarrel with realism was predominantly an aesthetic and epistemological one. (17)

If modernist art, as indicated by Morris above, questions the idea of objective reality and attempts to encapsulate reality in the writer's subjective manner, the postmodern aesthetics were even more pluralistic in approach thereby shifting away from the modernist model seeking absolute truths and standardization of ideas in society. David Harvey quote Terry Eagleton as explaining postmodernism as a process of:

(Privileging) heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse. Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or totalizing discourses (to use the favoured phrase) are the hallmark of postmodernist thought. (9)

This paper sets itself the task of examining the environmental setting and the point of view in Sefi Atta's novel *Swallow* as it treats Lagos as potpourri of postmodernist living. While in search for reality in the Lagos environment, the novel's realist discourse metamorphoses sequentially to both the modernist and postmodernist modules along with the rhythm of the city, without really losing its initial essence as a realist novel.

## **II. The Jungle City And The Swallowing Monster**

The misconception that the idea of realism simply means the capture of reality in fiction is certainly one of the factors that have given rise to the emergence of both modernism and postmodernism as alternative modes of expression. Unlike photography which is a straightforward art, it is impossible for a work of fiction to render in precise details what is found in the physical world. Authors carefully select, organize and structure their representation of the world in a language that conveys subjective views and values. This position reinforces Aristotle's age-long idea that poetry is not merely the imitation of nature but the re-ordering of it using the creative skills of the poet. Pam Morris expresses the same view when he says:

Indeed, if we accept too quickly or unquestioningly the assumption that the realist texts copy reality we tend to overlook a long, impressive tradition of artistic development during which writers struggled and experimented with the artistic means to convey a verbal sense of what it is like to live an embodied existence in the world. (4)

It is even more difficult for a writer to faithfully capture the disparate manifestations of the mass culture of the metropolis in fiction, hence the inability of realism to come to terms with reality or the truth. The challenge of both modernism and postmodernisms to realism is therefore that of logical transformation from the ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the Enlightenment to the subjective, pluralistic and fragmented world-view of contemporary living. Irving Howe captures this tradition aptly as he outlines seven (7) characteristics that distinguish the realist from either the modernist or the postmodernist in the fiction tradition. A few of those characteristics spelt below are central to the argument in this essay to explain the ambivalence of Sefi Atta's preoccupation with both polluted Lagos environment and the depiction of the changing fortunes of her two narrative-characters-Tolani and Arike.

....(3) Nature ceased to be a central subject and setting for Western Literature. Also,

(4) In contradistinction to the classical western hero, a whole new sense of character structure and the role of the protagonist or hero appeared in the Western novel. And foremost among the literary attitudes and values which emerged triumphant from this are:

(5) Perversity – which is to say: surprise, excitement, shock, terror and affront.

(6) Primitivity – which is to say: a fascination with what in Western tradition has been considered primal, decadent or atavistic

(7) Nihilism – which is to say: a breakdown and accepted loss of belief in traditional values as guide to conduct, together with a feeling that human existence is meaningless.

Two striking images are easily noticeable in Sefi Atta's description of the Lagos environment in *Swallow*: Firstly, the city is depicted as an urban jungle, dirty, disorderly, smelly, vindictive, vulgar and lawless; but it is also sympathetic and empathetic to its stoic inhabitants. Secondly, the "Swallow" image, evoked from the title of the novel is ascribed both to the landscapes of the city and the greed of its inhabitants in quest for wealth. Atta's realism beams its spotlight at both the larger kaleidoscope of Lagos to the inner living rooms of its indigent characters to bring out the truth about the city. The novel is a story of the vast jungle city of Lagos brimming with overpopulation as much as it is a story of two struggling spinsters, Tolani and Rose, starting a career at a commercial bank as well as grappling with the chances of getting married and living a good life. In her first-person narration of the story, Tolani is made to describe the general environment of the city slums in the following words:

Lagos. The street on which we lived was named after a military governor. Our neighbourhood smelled of buried beans and rotten egusi leaves. Juju and apala music, disco and reggae music jumped from windows, and fluorescent blue cylinders lit up the entire place past midnight. Ground-floor rooms were rented to businesses like tailors, notary publics and palm wine bars; families took up rooms upstairs. There were no telephone lines and we had regular power cuts. At the bottom of our walls were gutters, heavy with slime. On our walls we had pee stains over *Post No Bills* signs. Our sidewalks were blocked with broken down cars, cement bricks and rubbish piles as tall as the trees. Street hawkers sat between them selling coca-cola, eggs, cigarettes and malaria pills by kerosene lanterns. (10)

This vivid description of anarchy and the disorderliness of Lagos is further accentuated by the description of the daily routine of Tolani and Rose, along the busy death-trap streets of Lagos and at their corrupt establishment where a vindictive boss, Mr. Salako, awaits their arrival and departure every working day:

In the evenings, our scramble began at the bus stop. WE elbowed and pushed people out of our way. We woke up early in the mornings to avoid the crowds. After work, the crowds were there, waiting for the same buses, heading in the same direction of the mainland. Quarrels, plenty. Chaos, unbelievable. Sometimes, the police showed up and horsewhipped people....They treated us like cattle. The bus terminal was like a market. If we managed to get on a bus in time, we watched the exodus in the evenings – people at bus stops, along the bridge, some with sacks on their shoulders and baskets on their heads, school children carrying books and chairs – everyone's eyes as red as the sun. (10)

There appears to be a corelationship between the “elbowing and pushing” of people at the bus stops and the “blocked sidewalks”, “rubbish piles” and “street Hawkers” that swarm Lagos. The general “redness of the eyes” of the inhabitants, likened to the redness of the sun, is a consequence of the unpleasant odours, soggy soil, wastes and broken sewage systems as well as the loud noise and atmospheric pollution of Lagos. It further demonstrates the fear and vulnerability of the people of the city to the persistent images of crevices or openings ready to swallow them, like the “black hole” (2 and 134), or septic tank (61-65) and gates looking like the “lion's mouth” (101). Lagos is therefore depicted as a blood-thirsty beast eager to swallow its inhabitants, who are in any case, smart enough to escape its murderous antics.

The “black hole” Rose keeps referring to is symbolic of premature death, a phenomenon she says is peculiar with the African continent (134). Ayo, Mrs. Durojaiye adolescent son, narrowly escapes being swallowed up by the gaping septic tank in the backyard:

“The septic tank”, she said, “He fell inside. It sucked him under. I am waiting for his mother, to tell her myself.”...The crowd in our backyard were other tenants. They were gathered around the septic tank, carrying kerosene and battery lanterns. When I saw them I became conscious of an awful stands, like a sewer. It was the waste in our tank. The cement surface had a huge hole. Mama Chidi's husband was dipping a long stick into it and seemed to be stirring the contents...Even their children were gaping at the hole (61-2)

Similarly, the relatively serene landscapes of Victoria Island with its “mansions, swimming pools and electric generators” is given the image of a devouring beast. While the inhabitants in the slum areas of Lagos are sympathetic towards one another as demonstrated by their show of concern by neighbours to rescue Ayo from the septic tank, the middle-class citizens like Sanwo's uncle and his wife Mr. and Mrs. Odunsi are depicted as soulless and stingy. Sanwo lives in a one-room apartment at the boys quarters of his uncle's mansions described symbolically as follows:

The gates of his uncle's house are made of bronze and had the face of a roaring lion. When the gates opened, cars drove straight into the lion's mouth. The watchman let me in through the side entrance used by servants...Mrs Odunsi was standing there with her back to me. Her posture was so stiff she made me nervous. She was carrying a green watering can. Sanwo had said she gardened for relaxation and was a member of the horticulture society, although, he claimed, any flower she touched ended up witting. (101)

While Sefi Atta creates various physical landscape markers that threaten to swallow the people of Lagos, she also does the same thing through abstract ideological markers. Godwin is swallowed up by the extreme religiosity of the tongues-speaking Pentecostal church; and Mr. Salako is consumed by the flaming lust for sexuality instigated by officiddom. Rose and Tolani are swallowed up by the idea of making easy money through illicit means by paradoxically, swallowing up sachets of cocaine and taking it out of the country. Like all processes of swallow, that of cocaine is tedious and unsafe. Their main agent, OC, explains to them about the lucrative nature of the trade, but it is only Rose who has the drive and determination to carry it out to the end. They rehearse the act by swallowing condoms filled with garri and lubricated by margarine, groundnut oil or palm oil as well as pills for controlling constipation. In the end, Rose succeeds in swallowing cocaine and making the trip to the United Kingdom, but the sachet bursts in her stomach and she dies at the airport in London. Tolani who is unable to swallow the condom decides to abandon the city of Lagos and go back to her village. Sanwo later brings her letter of termination of her appointment at the bank, while her marriage plans with Sanwo also suffers a setback, hence neither of the ladies succeeds in their sojourn to Lagos city.

### **III. Parallels Of Modernism And Postmodernism**

In Sefi Atta's novel, *Swallow* there is a parallel consciousness between the Lagos city experience and the Makoku village living. The two first-person female narrators live in either of the two worlds. While one experience is monstrous and disorderly, the other is more sympathetic and empathetic. While the city is depicted as a monstrous jungle from which Tolani and Rose are fleeing, the village is portrayed as a more stable environment at the threshold of modernity, from where the alternate narrative voice, Arike, seeks to maintain a more orderly and rational lifestyle. The disorder, despair and anarchy manifest in the lifestyles of characters in the city are eminently contrasted with the simplicity, orderliness and harmony emanating from the village where

Arike's narrative voice craves to establish a normative code for her society. The two characters live at the same time but belong to two different generations. Arike's world is being transformed into Tolani's; modernity is being metamorphosed into postmodernity; the moralistic and objective universe is being shifted to the infinite space of fragmented ideas and unfixed meanings.

With this binary structure of the modernist village life of Makoku and the postmodernist Lagos city life, notwithstanding, there is a state of general decay or lack of infrastructure in both the city and the village, which makes the study of the environment alone inadequate to fully appreciate the distinction between the two discourses. It is perhaps in this regard that, the points of view exhibited by the two narrative voices in the novel as representatives of the oscillating worlds of modernism and postmodernism is very important.

Firstly, Arike's world is romantically recreated in the novel from its idyllic pre-colonial innocence in which it metamorphoses from the primitive agrarian or fishing community to a more sophisticated society of modernity, industry and wealth. Makoku town is located in the serenity and ambience of nature, and it derives its food and therapeutic energy from the sauna and fauna around it:

Makoku as it was when my mother was a girl, with yam and cassava farms, streams where children bathed, and rocks over which women beat their wrappers clean. Men fished where the riverbed dipped, and all around were bushes and plants, most of which were unnamed, but people knew which leaf was bitter, which leaf looked like chicken feet, which leaf held poison, and which leaf, if brewed with peppery tree bark, could break a fever.

My grandmother cooked vegetable soups over firewood. The fire was their light at night; the smoke was the smell of the compound, a small clearing of six homes. Those who lived there belonged to the same family. (21-22)

Arike's present lifestyle represents the early stage of modernity. Her town is robbed of its primal essence as the forests are chopped down to make way for a corrupt mercantilist world. "The farming settlements my mother grew up in were shrinking. Loggers had chopped down the surrounding forests" (23). Her story now transforms from that of a subservient lady of nature and tradition, to that of a shrew businesswoman leveraging on both the natural endowments in the Makoku's textiles industry and business acumen of the modern society. She represents a generation that respects the Yoruba culture but also subtly rebuffs the oppression of patriarchy inherent in it. She is the first woman in the village to ride the motorcycle, which is somewhat like a taboo, and this action helps to explain a misconceived notion of her bareness. More significantly, her marital life history in which she resists a forceful marriage to the royalty of the village but opts for a more romantic marriage with a village musician, makes her an archetypal feminist of the modernist era.

The palace wanted me to report as a wife the next day. I told my father I will not go. He asked, "what? You disobey me twice? Taboo. Taboo you hear me...you refuse to marry the man I choose for you and now you refused the palace? What kind of daughter is this? This one wants to stay in our compound until she becomes old. Too proud, this one, yet she is not even that beautiful and graceful". (58)

Arike's kind of feminism, like that of her aunt Iya Alero is predicated on not just the idea of freedom but a desire for the woman to be responsibly married to a male spouse and live a profitable life. The women of this generation are presented as strong-willed, sacrificial God-fearing and moralistic as they promote a template of family values distinct from those in the city of Lagos. They do not necessarily need modern conveniences to be happy, but Arike works hard in her textile dyeing industry to earn a decent living for the family. Her husband music career also affords them a substantial fortune which is however wasted on unnecessary philanthropy. By receiving and entertaining visitors generously in their home, Arike and her husband have not fully adapted to the selfish world of postmodernity but are being overtly influenced by the liberal hospitality of communal living. Arike is uncomfortable with this lifestyle being unprofitable in the age of mercantilism and consumerism.

She questions this irrationality in the following words:

I was worried about his generosity. There were people who became friendly with us because they had heard how easily he parted with money. That was my main concern, my only concern, until I realized that I was cooking for these people and your father did not seem to care what was happening to me. In one day, I could cook for almost twenty people. He never asked how the food was prepared, where the food came from, or how much it cost. (1079)

If Arike's response to patriarchy is with a certain measure of equanimity, that of Rose and Tolani, living in the city of Lagos, however had no room for such niceties and decorum. Tolani says "Rose was so ruthless with men and did not discriminate" amongst them, as she has as many as eight boyfriends. She says that Rose cannot keep a steady relationship. Tolani's perception of Sanwo as a future husband is that of a failure because he lacks the ruthlessness required of a Lagos resident.

He wasn't ruthless enough to be a Lagos hustler and was too fair to cheat. He had the right qualities in a man, but he was definitely in the wrong line of work. (20)

The Tolani and Rose generation is not as moralistic as the generation of Arike and Iya Alero. The Lagos city girls are depicted as fiercely individualistic, materialistic, irreligious, intolerant, aggressive, irrational, contradictory and even confused. The women's quest for freedom and patriarchal disintegration is not as orderly and coordinated as that of the older generation. The action of Rose slapping her boss, Mr. Salako in the office aptly demonstrates this purposelessness inherent in postmodern city women:

She did not tell me why she had slapped Mr. Salako and she had not denied that she was his girlfriend either, but that Rose, five times a girl, no explanations or apologies. She was always having her way and didn't care about consequences. She took chances without thinking, never regretted the choices she made. In that respect, she was a fearless woman and tough, unlike me. (13)

There is a complete loss of family values in the city as most of the girls described in the novel pursue filthy lucre at the expense of their relationship with spouses or brothers and sisters. Violet who had worked as a prostitute in Rome and is now living in Lagos as a single mother to a baby born by an Italian father, perpetually fights her siblings. Her mother, Sisi, has had several children for different fathers who mock one another. Tolani, the sanctimonious co-narrator who acts like a moral compass for womanhood blames Rose for her irresponsible conduct towards Mr. Salako, but she herself ends up behaving more irresponsibly towards the same man, hence she also loses her job. That she is not caught in the act of swallowing and trafficking drugs like her friend, Rose, is not because she is a better girl. She simply was unable to swallow the condoms of drugs like Rose.

In Makoku, the practice of a man fathering a child for an infertile husband is treated with secrecy and awe. Tolani's mother even feels it is a taboo to talk about it. The lady whose paternity is questioned keeps pondering over the morality or otherwise of disclosing the truth. Tolani is caught brooding over the situation in which the man's image is protected in the event of childlessness:

I think my father's brother is my real father, Brother Tade. You know that if a woman is infertile she can't hide it. If a man is sterile, no one has to know. Understand? The wife finds someone else to father her child, and keeps the whole thing secret. (184)

On the contrary, polyandry thrives in the city instead polygamy and the man's image is unabashedly ridiculed since the woman is paradoxically in charge. Sisi is "married" to four husbands with whom he has had children with at different times. These children insult one another's fathers in their scuffles and make no effort in protecting the sanctity of the parentage. Infact, they seem to celebrate the multiplicity of fatherhood in the family instead of regarding as an aberration:

Violet's father had disappeared during the Civil Ward. He was also father to Lucky and Hope, the first and second sons in their family. After Violet came another daughter, Christie, whose father was a Scottish Sailor. Christie fled to England as soon as she was able. Rose was the third daughter. Her father was Mr. Adamson, a local headmaster who was married to some other woman. They called him "Daddy Adamso." Rose's mother they called "Sisi." Sisi's last child she nicknamed "Somebody." (33)

Just as family values have diminished and the image of the man as the supreme head of the family has transformed to that of a servile instrument of child production, the idea of religion has also shifted from a binary righteousness/evil structure to a more fluid Pentecostal paradigm of prosperity and commercialization.

Religion in Makoku has been demonstrated by the author in the marriage of Tolani's father a Shango worshipper and Arike, a convert of Reverend Thomas of the Christian Church. The two religions have reconciled their initial differences concerning drumming during worship, marriage of many wives and the entrenchment of fundamental human rights. Arike is able to sample and embrace the positive sides of each of the two faiths, hence she became bold enough to resist the marriage advances of the new King and got married to a man of her choice:

Families had been arranging marriages for generations, I said. That, too, was wrong. Christians did not believe in men taking more than one wife. Those who worshipped Shango were not hypocrites. Shango was like Jesu Cristi except he was the god of thunder and lightening, a lesser god to Olodumare, who was the same the world over but known by different names like "God" and "Jehovah" because not everyone in the world was intelligent enough to speak Yoruba. (57)

Arike's conceptualization of her religious faith may be seen as simplistic as her husband, a Shango worshipper alleges, but she encapsulates and indeed, demonstrates values of good conduct, hardwork, respect, honesty and generosity which should be attributes of good Christians and followers of all true religions. She has no confusion about who a good Christian or a good Shango worshipper is, hence her marriage to a Shango worshipper symbolizes the unity of forces of righteousness against those of evil. Religion in Makolu is therefore appositional activity meant to scare away evil behaviours.

In Lagos city, however, this delicate rubicon dividing religion and evil practices is blurred. The Lagos environment with its dirt, slums, crimes and crowds seem to destroy man's sense of harmony with the natural life and with his fellows, and as such created the feeling of individualism and personality which is existence in isolation with his privatist God. Religion in the city as exemplified by Tolani in the novel, seems to lack any

force of morality as it justifies the supremacy of material values instead of transcendental altruistic values. Here, for instance, is a passage in which the ideas of a stable modernist religious faith canvassed by Arike and those of the confused postmodernist model are being showcased:

“Why don't you believe in your Bible?”

I ask.

“Praying to an Oyinbo man? I don't believe, in that”

“Pretend He's black! What does it matter? Have you seen God to know His colour?”

I smiled. “She. And she looks exactly like me. That's the God I'm trying to believe in now.”

“She? That's terrible talk. You can't make up your own god.”

“Yes I can. Every religion was made up.”

My mother shook her head “That's a taboo.” (174)

While Tolani believes, to the consternation of her mother that all religions were made up by people, Godwin comes up with his Pentecostal born-again Christian faith known for their ten-percent, “My Gahd is not a poor Gahd” message.

The church was as big as a palace, with white pillars. There were so many cars outside in the car park. Volkswagens, Benzes and Peugeotts. It was like going to happy hour at Phaze Two. Inside the church, the floor was marble and wood; the pulpit was red velvet, the exact colour of my skirt suit. The pastor was wearing a black suit, well fitted. His bald head shone like his shoes. He walked up and down calling God, “Gahd” His accent was American and he was Nigerian. (146)

The above description of the pastor and his luxurious church as well as the various ideas of racism, commercialism and Americanism are characteristics of religiosity in the postmodernist era. The decline of orthodox religions values in the city does not only accentuate the reign of crime and immorality, but also the rise of religious bigotry of which Godwin with his naivety. represents in the novel. Mary Klages indeed reaffirms that such a situation as a manifestation of postmodernism: “One of the consequences of postmodernism seems to be the rise of religious fundamentalism, as a form of resistance to the questioning of the “grand-narratives” or religious truth.” (175)

It is significant that Atta's dual first-person narrative style has the tendency to confuse the reader since neither graphological nor textual workers are used to separate the two characters in the novel. However, their points of view imaginatively indicate the difference. One is a modernist while the other is a postmodernist. Both modernism and postmodernism are products of the same historical and philosophical events: the rise and cries of the Enlightenment and the interrogation of objective reality in scholarship. Both of them are therefore subversive of the *status quo*. But while modernism seeks to describe a way of living or experiencing life with changes in industrialization, urbanization and secularity in a manner that creates binary hierarchies between objective reality and their opposites, postmodernism favours a complete decentralization of these hierarchies.

As has been demonstrated in this section, Arike represents the modernist viewpoint in her articulation of the idea role of the women, her morality in cosmopolitan living and altruistic religiosity. She seeks to be an acceptable moral person even as she subverts the patriarchal order and re-adjusts the religious configuration of her society highlighting the parallels between righteousness and evil. Tolani and her acquaintances in the city are on the other hand, many things in religion – mercantilists, hypocrites, fanatics and pretenders.

#### IV. Conclusion

If there was any human activity in history that had so completely represented the postmodern culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of fragmentation, fluidity, anarchy and confusion, it is urbanization and the city life. There has been a tremendous rural-urban drift in virtually all countries, resulting to overpopulation, congestion, pollution intrusion and a surge of mass culture. Overpopulation and urbanization has also lightened the social gulf between the rich and the poor, whose lives correspond to the dictates of the high and popular cultures respectively.

In literature, the shift from the primal agricultural way of life in the rural areas to modern cosmopolitan lifestyle has also attracted a major shift from the orthodox neo-classical genres of poetry and drama into the realist fiction tradition. The flourishing of the novel side by side with the emergence of city living is therefore not a mere coincidence in history; there is an ideological or even a stylo-linguistic symbiosis between the two. The novel with its length, space and elasticity is perhaps best suited to describe the limitless vagaries of the city.

Chris Dunton argues in his essay “Entropy and Energy: Lagos as City of Words” that Nigerian novelists see Lagos as characterized not only as a site of disorder and decay but as an environment in which creative energies are nurtured that are held to constitute a corrective and liberatory forces.

What distinguishes the contemporary Lagos novel from its precursors, however, is the emphasis placed in the possibilities for cognition and action, and in particular the possibilities inherent in the act of writing or some form of expressive activity as a means to assert meaningful existence. While this emphasis on positive

energy - as distinct from high entropy, or disorder - not represented – it is now present to a remarkable degree. (250)

There is no doubt that Sefi Atta is one of the leading lights of Nigerian literature who have shifted to the “new social configuration of the urban milieu” in her fiction. Both her *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* have captured the Lagos environment and characters with great knowledge and sensitivity. Just while her description of the Lagos landscapes offers a close to real life perception of activities and atmosphere in the city, we also notice that she deploys the point of view of his dual-character narrators to distract the realism of the narrative. The main narrator, Tolani and her friend, Rose as well as her acquaintances in Lagos are representations of the postmodernist culture in which people live and celebrate in a confused world of no fixed essences, no fixed truths, ephemerality, immorality, irreligiosity, crime and insecurity. Her mother and co-narrator, Arike, along with her husband and acquaintances at Makolo represent the modernist world-view in which they try to set targets about morality, religion and order in response to the growing stability that modernization has introduced into the Nigerian society. The city and the village as well as the older and the younger generation of women are being compared and contrasted in the novel. This approach certainly does not suggest that Sefi Atta is valorizing popular culture or “literature of the flesh” as earlier critics seem to describe authors that have set their works in large cities.

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