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# Identity and the absent mother in *Atta's Everything Good will Come*

## Identity and the absent mother in *Atta's Everything Good will Come*

*Everything Good will Come* presents the trope of the absent mother which scholars have identified as a significant feature of third generation Nigerian women prose fiction writings. Besides the trope of the absent mother, religion and identity also feature prominently in *Atta's Everything Good will Come*. This article harmonises these three dominant motifs in the narrative towards an examination of the complexity of identity formation in *Everything Good will Come*. The article focuses on Mike's sculptures as an artistic depiction of the dynamics that ultimately influence Enitan's identity formation. Due to the plurality of religious ideologies in the postcolonial Nigeria depicted in the narrative, the motifs of Christianity and traditional religion present in the narrative are explored towards illumination of key elements of the text. Christian motifs provide deeper comprehension of the dynamics that influence the relationship of Enitan and Sheri against the backdrop of the trope of the absent mother. Victoria and Enitan's characters and experiences find parallels in the being and characteristics of Ala, the Earth Goddess and Obatala. **Keywords:** absence; Ala; Sefi Atta; *Everything Good will Come*; identity; Obatala.

### Introduction

Identity, religion and the trope of the absent mother are three dominant motifs in *Everything Good will Come* (2005) by Sefi Atta. The three complement each other and understanding the intricate interwoven nature of the three will enhance the comprehension of the narrative. In recent Nigerian women prose writings, the trope of the absent mother is dominant. The absence of the mother may manifest physically, emotionally and/or psychologically. As Nadaswaran (26) explains, while these mothers "may not necessarily be physically absent, they are emotionally absent in their spiritual connectivity with their daughters". Adichie's novels, from *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) to *Americanah* (2013), *Atta's Everything Good will Come* (2005) and *A Bit of Difference* (2012) and Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2012) are only a handful of recent Nigerian female writings which present the trope of the absent mother.

A reading pervaded by consciousness of the trope of the absent mother opens the door to multiplicity of meaning. While Washington acknowledges the fact that absences and negative facts have "causal efficacy", he explains, "there is no way to define, or strictly classify, absences" (46). In the field of theatre studies, Morrow submits that absence, like presence, could be a "proximate cause" (10). Morrow bemoans

the lack of robust inquiry into the effects and nature of absent characters in plays: "What the audience might not realize and what critics have thus far failed to discuss, though is the fact that these absent characters are the causes—in fact, the proximate causes for the onstage action" (11). Morrow maintains that absent characters can be as important as present characters: "occasionally, these characters' absence serves as the basis for the onstage action of a play. In many instances, the whole premise of the play would collapse if the absent characters were to appear" (24).

To acknowledge that meaning might lie in absence is to undertake a deconstructive reading. Barry observes that deconstructive reading aims to uncover "the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text, all the things which its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognize" (54). Therefore, a deconstructive reading that focuses on absence in a text is posed to reveal new layers of meaning in an imaginative work, as buttressed by Dobie's (155) assertion that deconstruction yields "plurality of meaning." This scrutiny of *Everything Good will Come* will emphasize the interplay of action and inaction, of words and silence, with special emphasis on the undercurrents stirred by the absent mother and Nigerian mythology against the backdrop of identity formation in the narrative.

### **Navigating Obatala and Ala**

Religion plays a major role in the narrative. At different points, as will be subsequently illustrated, religion provides the motivation and the impetus for identity formation and characters' development. Postcolonial Nigeria, as depicted in the narrative, contains different religious ideologies. For instance, Enitan's mother, Victoria, is a very religious character. Her immersion in charismatic Christianity borders on psychosis. Enitan explains her mother's strange fixation with religion: "Had she turned to wine or beer, people would have called her a drunkard. Had she sought other men, they would have called a slut. But to turn to God? Who would quarrel with her? 'Leave her alone,' they would say. 'She is religious'" (178).

Enitan's father, on the other hand, is indifferent towards religion. The stance of Enitan's parents on the question of religion is one of the causes of conflict in the Taiwo family. While being confronted with religious indifference on one hand and fanaticism against the backdrop of the Christian faith, Enitan also gets to see Sheri, her childhood best friend, and an indifferent Muslim (75). Atta also provides a glimpse into traditional belief in the art of Mike (112–3), Enitan's one time boyfriend. The interplay of the motifs in these cohabiting religions may contribute to the comprehension of Enitan's journey towards self against the backdrop of the absence of connectivity with her mother, Victoria Taiwo.

At the beginning of the narrative, Enitan is still well under the control of her mother. In a paradisiacal manner, Enitan has only her mother to listen to and obey. Enitan declares, "From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright

lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations" (11). The opening words, put in this context, hark back to Genesis 1: "In the beginning ...". Then, the tempter, like the serpent, arrives on the scene to disrupt paradise and therefore, become an alternate deity to Enitan. This tempter is Sheri: "She was like an imp who had come to tempt me. I couldn't get rid of her" (43). What is more, the first encounter of the two happen in the garden, which may be taken as an allusion to the Garden of Eden. Sheri, in this context, is the serpent urging Enitan on to forbidden knowledge.

Sheri Bakare, the imp, may be read both as a character and as an extension of Enitan. Sheri, daughter of (Alhaji) (Chief) Engineer Bakare and an English woman, grows up motherless. She lives with her grandmother, Alhaja and is worldly wise beyond her years. She is everything the reserved Enitan is not allowed to be, thus, she is the shadow to Enitan's light. Sheri is the embodiment of Enitan's unvoiced yearning, that is, the desire to be a girl unencumbered by her mother. Sheri is Enitan's inclinations made flesh, in reference to Enitan's confession before Sheri shows up as she ruminates on her mother's influence on her life: "... I had my own inclinations" (11). Where Enitan's mother walks, Sheri cannot, because they become as light and dark whose paths cannot cross. Thus, in the narrative, not once do the paths of Sheri and Enitan's mother cross. Sheri represents everything that is absent in Enitan. Where Sheri is very strong, Enitan is weak; Enitan will later attest to this in adulthood: "She was stronger than any other strong person I knew [...] I had always been motivated by fear, of lowliness, of pessimism, of failure. I was not strong" (300). Earlier on, Enitan says of Sheri, "She had had the best misadventures [...] she was a bold face, unlike me" (55). Sheri therefore, in addition to arriving as a tempter, arrives as an alter ego to point Enitan in an alternate direction. She is the incarnation of the character traits Enitan's mother had subdued in her up until their meeting. Where Enitan is bashful, Sheri encourages her to put a phone call through to Demola, her schoolgirl crush, and speaks with the recipient of the call when Enitan is struck by fright (59). Once, Enitan remembers her mother and protests in the middle of a belly-twisting laughter: "You have to go home, Sheri [...] My mother hates you" (59).

The dynamics of absence also manifests itself between Sheri and Enitan's mother. In this regard, Sheri and Enitan's relationship thrives on absence. It is significant that Sheri does not ever come in through the main door and that the first time Enitan comes across Sheri, a fence divides them. The fence is erected by Enitan's mother following a prophecy in her church that her house would be burgled by fishermen: "The very next day, three workmen replaced our jetty with a barbed wire fence and my mother kept watch over them ..." (11).

When Enitan defies the fence and seeks Sheri out, it is the beginning of a new chapter of her life, for Sheri takes her across the boundary of maternal consent. Following their first encounter, Sheri seeks Enitan out on other occasions. When Sheri

seeks Enitan out, it is through the window: "Sheri was not afraid of my mother. If she sneaked to my window, who would find out? she asked" (57). Having determined that no one would find out, Sheri would regularly appear at Enitan's window. One time she shows up at the window, Enitan ponders, "Wasn't she afraid? It was as dark as indigo outside" (43). As the summer vacation begins, Sheri appears at Enitan's window two other times, surreptitiously. Enitan recounts the last time Sheri shows up at her window: "I leaned over to shut my window and Sheri's head popped up: "Aburo!" (60). Enitan is startled: "What is wrong with you? Can't you use the door?" (60). Sheri's appearance on this occasion coincides with when Enitan's mother is away at a church vigil while her father works late. Sheri arrives as temptation and tells Enitan of a picnic in Ikoyi Park (60). Once Enitan finds out Damola will be at the picnic, she allows herself to be led away by Sheri.

However, events at the picnic lead to Enitan's disillusionment with Sheri. At the picnic, Enitan is ignored but Sheri attracts multiple boys. In rapidly unfolding events, Sheri is raped by the boys. Subsequently, Enitan becomes disenchanted with Sheri. In a patriarchal society where rape is viewed as punishment, Enitan swiftly becomes disapproving: "Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys, following them around, thinking she was one of them. Now, I could smell their semen on her, and it was making me sick. It was her fault" (68). Thus, Enitan recants and extricates herself from the mishap that befalls the pair.

At that instance, Enitan feels disenchanted with her raped and disoriented friend. She washes and washes Sheri. Sheri never becomes clean: "The water dribbling down the drain, I wanted it to be clear. Once it was clear, we would have survived. Instead, it remained pink and grainy, with hair strands and soapsuds. The sand grains settled and the scum stayed" (67). After the rape, Enitan has a nightmare in which Sheri drowns because Enitan is unwilling to hold on to her (71). Enitan's disillusionment with Sheri leaves her feeling vulnerable and raw. When the memory of Sheri first comes back to Enitan, all she remembers is the story of power that once was, and then was lost, "All I knew was that she was once powerful and then, she was no longer powerful" (153).

In the absence of Sheri in her life, Enitan represses all wantonness. Enitan, following punishment by her parents, sticks to the straight part and sacrifices her rebellion before parental restrictions. Years later, it would not help that Robin tells her that "Nothing a woman does justifies rape" (78). The memories of her assumed complicity in Sheri's rape would haunt her and she would wonder, when her parents separate, "... if the trouble I'd caused hadn't divided them further" (79). She would find herself heavily censored by unexplainable internal inhibitions that manifest themselves in sexual frigidity and result in the inability to have a healthy sexual relationship. Nothing eliminates her self-accusation. It does not help that, shortly after the occurrence,

she is taken to her mother's church for cleansing. She is unable to have a functional romantic relationship until Mike comes into her life.

Mike is an artist whose main work is the artistic representation of selected Nigerian gods in sculpture. Enitan is confronted with the traditional Yoruba and Igbo deities that Mike had sculpted. Thus, she is forced to examine her religious beliefs. Enitan reflects on the result of growing up in a background where fanaticism and indifference compete:

Between my mother's worship and my father's disinterest, I, too, had found my own belief, in a soul that looked like a tree [...] God was the light toward which my tree grew. But the God of my childhood, the one who stood like a white man, eight foot tall with liver spots and wearing a toga, kind as he was, he was still a God I feared, beyond reason. (115)

When Mike washes her after sexual intercourse, it comes with intimations of religious rites:

He wrapped his arms around me so tight I thought my fear might drip out. He took the bucket from me, filled it with water and brought it to the shower. He lowered me and began to wash me. I shut my eyes expecting some pain, some probing. The last person who washed me was Bisi, our house girl [...] 'Spread your lecks,' she would say, and I would spread them hating her sawing motions. But Mike washed me with the gentlest motions, like a mother washing her baby [...] I was certain I would never be ashamed again [...] (135)

Thus, having presided at Enitan's re-incarnation, Mike also gives Enitan a new deity. After years of being an acolyte with neither priest nor deity, Enitan moves through Mike's pantheon and re-lives her journey thus far. In Mike's pantheon of Nigerian gods, Enitan encounters Oshun, who Mike equates with Aphrodite, whose human incarnation might have been taken to be Sheri. Enitan's exploration of the pantheon of deities which Mike artistically creates is symbolic and becomes a metaphor for Enitan's search for identity. Thus, having put Sheri in her past, Mike's Oshun or Aphrodite does not hold much allure for Enitan. Enitan takes a cursory look at Ala, Earth mother.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, *Ala* (earth or land), the goddess of the earth, is the divine feminine earth force and the embodiment of the workings of the world; Ala is the head of the Igbo pantheon, the Goddess (Isichei; Orji). Enitan's subtle dismissal of Ala mirrors the passive aggressive way she relegates her mother to the background of her life. In Yoruba cosmogony, Obatala is the god of creation. Soyinka (152) explores the nature of Obatala and considers him the equivalent of the Greek god, Prometheus. While Obatala is traditionally depicted as male in Yoruba mythology, Mike depicts Obatala as "a naked woman with muscular shoulders, in black and white beading" (113):

And this Obatala?  
 'The creator of the human form.'  
 'Yet you've made him a woman.'  
 'Some cultures, I think the Brazilian descendants of Yoruba, worship him as female.'  
 'Why is she in black and white?'  
 'They say all things white belong to him: milk, bones.'  
 'I like her ...' (115)

Obatala, as depicted by Mike, occupies the position where gender poles are fused. Therefore, (s)he becomes a linchpin for interrogating gender dynamics within the text. Enitan finds respite in Mike's Obatala; a respite that comes from knowing that place where gender is deconstructed, a place where Mike can be his mother's child and Enitan can be her father's child. Obatala, as depicted by Mike, is a mix of male and female. In Obatala, the two genders meet without the necessity to demarcate roles. Mike's Obatala is what Fashina (71) refers to as "it", which stands for "co-sexual and joint gender heroism." The first time Enitan sets her eyes on Mike's Obatala, in addition to being curious about this genderless place, that is, the place of it and not of her or him, Enitan identifies with Obatala who is neither male nor female. She asks whether Obatala is a hermaphrodite, and adds, "I once thought I was a hermaphrodite ..." (113).

The woman Enitan turns out to be is like Mike's Obatala because she problematizes gender and signifies the blurred intermingling of the sexes because of the intermingling of nature and nurture. Enitan, therefore, finds it easy to approve of Mike's Obatala, despite her questions about the rightness of experimenting with deities in the name of art: "I like her... although, I'm a little scared" (114). She loves Obatala so much that she declares, when Aunt Valerie requests to look at Mike's art portfolio, "Show it to her, but save Obatala for me" (126). The allure of Obatala for Enitan is that Obatala is the "it" of sexuality and race; the perfect embodiment of Enitan's being. Obatala's blackness and whiteness may stand for Enitan's bi-national consciousness that arises from Enitan's existence as a postcolonial subject who has had the privilege of getting an English education. In finding herself in the God(dess) Obatala, Enitan finds herself in a place where she is unencumbered by worries about gender inequality (115).

The beauty of the relationship of Enitan and Mike is that in Mike, Enitan finds a mother. In Mike, she also finds atonement for her "sin" in being a witness to the rape of Sheri. She has peace in her relationship with Mike until she walks in on Mike in the middle of an affair. Significantly, in her anger, she does not attack Mike or his lover; Obatala bears the brunt of her fury: "I ran up the stairs. I headed straight for Obatala, grabbed her seemingly, by the ear and dragged her out [...] I raised Obatala above my head, smashed Obatala over the banister, heard her beads pitter-patter

down the stairs" (155). Years later when she finds it difficult to conceive, she fears her brazenness in demolishing the god(dess) might have returned to haunt her: "Soon I convinced myself that it was a punishment; something that I had done, said. I remembered the story of Obatala who once caused women on earth to be barren. I made apologies to her" (187). Like her absent mother, the absence of Obatala in her life spells sterility. Following the death of her mother and the birth of her daughter, Enitan re-evaluates her life and opts to return to her mother's house (315). Back at her mother's house, she finds Obatala and Ala, as will be subsequently explored.

### **Absence and becoming**

As has been established in the foregoing, Mike's sculptures are a linchpin for the analysis of Enitan's quest for personhood. The sterility of Enitan's life and the difficulty that characterises her marriage with Niyi comes from her existence in a place without Ala or Obatala. Victoria is Ala. Mike's Ala, as has been earlier pointed out, scorned and ignored by Enitan is her mother. Enitan's return to her mother is the triumph of Ala, earth mother. It is the ultimate victory for a mother who has been rejected constantly by her daughter.

Initially, Enitan and her mother have a strained relationship. Silence prevails between them. The potency of silence is felt in the narrative as it hovers around so tersely that it becomes a motif. There are many silences in *Everything Good will Come*. In the first place, it is set in the era of silence. The military era that thrives on its enforcement of the culture of silence drives the people to mindless laughter, having fashioned out the decree against "speculation": "The government had warned the newspaper editors not to speculate about the coup. People began to joke in that senseless way that a beaten people might: "You're speculating? Why are you speculating? You've been warned not to speculate. I'm not speculating with you" (285–6). Thus, the pseudo-middle class, as represented by the residents of Sunrise estate live a subdued life governed mainly by silences in order to avoid confrontation with the government.

Among the Francos, Niyi's family, silence thrives. The Francos always speak "hush, hush" (300). When Niyi and Enitan disagree, he punishes her with absolute silence until she yields. During a typical face-off when Niyi becomes silent for weeks, Enitan describes a "silence that had become noisy" (239). Sheri also embraces silence and when Enitan laments Niyi's silence, Sheri declares of it: "It is my friend" (245). Sheri's mother is also absent and shrouded in silence until Alhaja breaks the silence before her death. After years of battling infertility, Enitan embraces silence too: "That was how my thirties found me, in a silent state. I felt as though I had been running in mid-air for years. The realisation had me laughing at myself. 'Satisfied?' I asked myself aloud one morning. When I could hear no answer, I said, 'Good'" (187).

However, the silence in which Victoria Arinola Taiwo lives is the ultimate silence.

Victoria becomes the protagonist of this narrative with bounteous meanings to yield if she is re-located and centralised. First, she must be rehabilitated and redeemed from the mire of religious fanatic, dictatorial mother, irrational, bitter divorced Hera-figure woman whose fury is let loose when her faithless husband wrongs her. Like Hera as she is described by Bolen, Victoria's rich identity is eroded by a husband who does not keep faith with her. Consequently, Enitan is alienated from Victoria, preferring her indulgent father. Between father-worshipping Athena and the king of Olympus, Hera does not really stand a chance. She lives in obscurity for the major part of the narrative.

Victoria comes to embrace aloofness first when her mother dies heart-broken after her father steals the money she has saved for her children's education, in order to marry another wife. Following her humiliation, she turns to "snobbishness" (151). In adulthood, her husband, Sunny Taiwo, orchestrates her silence, as explained by Enitan: "My mother needed quiet, my father would say. 'I know,' I would say" (28). Thus, Victoria buries herself in religion while Sunny focuses on his legal career. The result of this is a palpable silence in the house that would lead Enitan to liken the house to a "graveyard" (58).

Because of the loss of her son and her disappointment in her marriage, Victoria appears so absent and empty of herself, that the young Enitan describes her mother as "hollow," after concluding that, "There was nothing in her" (73). This hollowness suggests nothingness, absolute absence. The moment Enitan decides her mother is hollow, their relationship is irreparably damaged: "I would not say another word to her, only when I had to, and even then I would speak without feeling: "Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Good night" (73). Afterwards, Enitan would reflect on her relationship with her mother and find that it would be erroneous to describe the relationship as bad, it is not bad but absent—she describes it as "a lack of relationship" (92).

After Enitan's parents get a divorce, Victoria moves out of the family house "into a duplex in another suburb of Lagos" (79). Here, Victoria is further silenced and her absence becomes more pronounced since, according to Enitan, "There were no phone lines in the area, so I couldn't call her. I was to stay with him" (79). The absence of telephone in her house may be taken as a fitting representation of her solitude and the silence to which she has been banished. The absence of a telephone with which she could communicate with her only daughter represents the ultimate erosion of the possibility of a relationship with her daughter through the latter's growing years. The absence of a telephone also denotes the severance of communication with the world. Even after Enitan grows up, she still cannot call her mother because of the absence of telephone in the latter's house.

It takes years for Enitan to come to see her father as he truly is. This moment of awareness comes when she discovers the existence of Demola, the son her father

has out of wedlock. This opens Enitan's eyes to a large extent and following this, she comes to see her mother's hurt, which has left her mother, a woman "with broken crystals in her stomach, the pain of which is reflected in her eyes" (177). Enitan comes to understand that her mother latches on to religion because she does not live in a country where therapy might have been an option for her (178).

Enitan circumvents the absence of a telephone in her mother's house after uncovering the lies of her father and Mike. Together, the two defy enforced silence that has decreed the absence of a relationship between them. Significantly, Enitan's relationship with her mother is at its peak when her father is in prison. At this point, the two can relate without the patriarchal shadow hanging over their heads. In this light, the simultaneity of his incarceration and the blossoming of a relationship between Enitan and Victoria is no mere coincidence. Enitan comes to know her mother very well. Enitan discovers that Victoria can be humorous and sarcastic. Enitan also discovers that Victoria is not hollow and that the facade of hollowness has been a protective shell. Shortly after it appears that a relationship is blossoming between the two, Victoria dies alone and is not discovered until days after. Victoria's death appears to be the price she pays for defying the forces that keep her apart from her daughter.

Enitan discovers that her mother is not drunk on religion after all. Far from being a pawn in the hands of religion peddlers, Victoria's escape into religion is a subterfuge, as Enitan uncovers: "I had watched my mother worship, and seen the way she waved her hand and exaggerated her smile. Whenever she said amen, I thought she might have well been saying nyah-nyah. She had tricked us all. Her fixation with religion was nothing but a life-long rebellion" (179).

Victoria's death—her absolute absence—becomes the singular most important impetus to Enitan's *becoming*. Victoria's death is the re-birth of Enitan:

But I was lucky to have survived when I believed I wouldn't, the smell of my mother's death. I couldn't remain as I was before, otherwise my memory of her would have been in vain, and my survival would certainly have been pointless. Anyone who experienced such a trauma would understand. The aftermath could be a re-incarnation. One life was gone and I could either mourn it or begin the next. How terrifying and sublime to behave like a *god* with the power to revive myself. This was the option I chose. (323, our italics)

Thus, the death of Enitan's mother liberates Enitan to become a self-reviving god. Enitan comes alive after her mother's death, concluding that she has stayed in the womb for too long. The stark reality of being without a mother and the horror of seeing her mother's body in death and decay fills her with a sense of urgency that drives her to full blown activism: "I could not wait. There were babies who stayed in their mother's wombs too long. By the time they were born, they were already dead. There were people who learned to talk on their deathbeds. When they opened their

mouths to speak, they drew their last breaths" (319). Therefore, Enitan arrives where she needs to have been all the while, which is the arrival at self. In this way, she finds herself to have the likeness of deities. She, at this point, has become Obatala—a self-contained deity who is both male and female. She has no use for Niyi. Therefore, she moves to her mother's house, after Niyi protests and would hold her back from meeting with the other women together with whom she forms the agitation group. In response, she declares, "we can meet at my mother's house" (316). She moves to her mother's house as a mother who is also self-sufficient. Ultimately, she has become both Ala and Obatala in her mother's house.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on Atta's *Everything Good will Come* as a story of identity formation with especial attention paid to the significance of absence and religion, particularly the interplay of Christianity and Nigerian mythology. Mike's artistic re-creation of the Yoruba and Igbo pantheon has been analysed as a metaphor for exploring Enitan's journey to self-hood.

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