

From Silence to Testimony: Narrative Voice and Female Development in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

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Abstract

This paper examines Sefi Atta's (2005) Everything Good Will Come as a female Bildungsroman in which Enitan Taiwo's development cannot be separated from her changing relation to speech. From a childhood retreat to jetty pressures of renewed military rule, silence appears in the novel as enforced obedience, protection, complicity, and tactical restraint. Enitan's relationships with Sheri Bakare, her mother, Grace Ameh, and other women show that speaking is shaped by class, bodily vulnerability, kinship, and political risk. Drawing on feminist narratology, work on the female Bildungsroman, Nigerian womanism, and nego-feminism, the article argues that first-person narration is both the formal evidence of Enitan's development and a mode of testimony under authoritarian rule. The ending does not promise uncomplicated emancipation. It presents a voice that can claim joy, interpret experience, and speak beyond the private self while remaining aware of the costs of public speech.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Narrative, Voice, Silence, Testimony, Womanism

Introduction

Everything Good Will Come opens with a child's memory of domestic instruction. Enitan recalls that she believed what she was told about "how best to behave," even when those instructions contradicted her own inclinations (Atta, 2005, p. 9). Her refuge is a jetty by the Lagos Lagoon, while her mother's call from the kitchen, "Enitan, come and help in here," summons her back into a gendered domestic order (p. 9). Enitan goes to the jetty because her parents' quarrels have taken over the rest of the house. Her mother later has it demolished after a religious warning and replaces it with a barbed-wire fence. The episode introduces a recurring problem in the novel: the spaces in which women and girls think, speak, and move are vulnerable to institutions that claim to protect them. The adult Enitan cannot undo the demolition, but she can recover the place through language, and in doing so she turns childhood obedience into an object of scrutiny.

For this reason, Atta's first-person form is more than a convenient vehicle for a coming-of-age plot. Enitan tells a life in which access to speech is unevenly distributed, and the act of telling gives her an authority the younger Enitan does not have. Existing criticism has examined the novel's critique of patriarchy, female friendship, the mother-daughter relationship, and the political conditions of military rule. Akung (2012) reads the novel as a

narrative of female growth in which assertive characters contest the spaces assigned to women. Odinye and Ebingha (2021) highlight women's vocality and self-actualisation, and Bailey (2025) revisits the continuum between womanism and feminism in Atta's portrayal of Nigerian womanhood. These studies show that voice is already a central critical concern.

This paper changes the question. Instead of asking whether women speak, it asks how the novel makes speech narratively consequential. If silence is treated only as a motif and speech as a sign of empowerment, an important formal question remains: what changes when Enitan becomes the narrator of the experiences that once constrained her? The paper argues that her first-person account does not only report the outcome of her development. It is one of the means by which that development becomes intelligible. The novel itself invites this reading. Grace Ameh, a journalist and playwright, tells Enitan that she has a voice and should use it to bring about change (Atta, 2005, p. 269), and she describes writing as activism in a state where words can be removed from constitutions and public records (p. 272). At the same time, the novel is not a story in which silent women become outspoken and therefore free. Its women speak from unequal positions, and some risk bodily or political harm when they refuse silence.

Theoretical Framework

The Female Bildungsroman

The Bildungsroman traditionally shows the formation of a protagonist through family, education, work, and intimate relationships. Abel et al. (1983) argue that women's narratives of development must attend to the gendered terms on which a self can enter public life. Domesticity, sexuality, marriage, and access to public authority shape what counts as maturity. Okuyade (2011) adds that the Nigerian female Bildungsroman negotiates growth within specific social and historical spaces and does not measure it against a fixed Western model of individual autonomy. Atta's dated sections, which run from Enitan and Sheri's childhood in 1971 to the political crises of the 1980s and 1990s, place individual growth within national history. Enitan does not mature outside politics. She learns that the authority she experiences at home has parallels in the state.

The novel also complicates the familiar Bildungsroman ending in social integration. Professional qualifications do not settle the problem of gendered authority, and marriage does not provide a stable endpoint. Enitan's growth lies less in accommodating existing institutions than in learning to evaluate them.

Narrative Voice and Authority

Lanser (1992) argues that narrative voice is not only a technical matter of point of view. Narrating can be a means of claiming social authority, especially for writers and characters whose speech has historically been constrained. Atta's narrator occupies a productive tension, since Enitan is both the person whose experiences are represented and the person who selects, orders, and interprets them. The narrating Enitan is not identical to the child who lives through each event. Her irony, compression, and retrospective judgments reveal a gap between past consciousness and present understanding, and her credibility comes from showing how her judgments have changed and not from claiming omniscience. Her account also moves between family experience and national history so that domestic conflict

and military power illuminate each other. This does not make her a spokesperson for every Nigerian woman. The novel builds a situated voice whose partiality is part of its force.

Womanism and Nego-Feminism

Ogunyemi (1985) developed womanism from attention to the historical and cultural pressures represented in Black women's writing, and her framework does not separate gender from race, community, and family. Kolawole (1997) connects womanism to African women's cultural consciousness and to forms of agency that cannot be reduced to an opposition between tradition and modernity. These approaches help us read Enitan's development as relational and not as a solitary escape from Nigerian society. Nnaemeka (2004) presents nego-feminism as a practice of negotiation, strategic engagement, and refusal of rigid oppositions. In this view, compromise is not automatically capitulation, since a woman may stay silent to protect herself, to build an alliance, or to wait for a better moment. Negotiation is not automatically liberating either, because the pressure to compromise can preserve male privilege and shift the burden of accommodation onto women. Bailey's (2025) emphasis on collectivism and non-confrontational strategies in the novel supports this reading, and this article adds a focus on narrative form.

Three terms are used in specific senses. Silence includes imposed muteness, the withholding of information under threat, socially prescribed discretion, and the silence through which a person resists or delays an answer. Voice means both spoken expression and the capacity to frame experience as meaningful, including the authority to interpret the past. Testimony is an account that bears witness to experience while making a claim on an audience's attention and judgment. It is not the same as confession, because it places experience in relation to a social world that may deny, distort, or erase it.

Silence at Home

Enitan learns gender through instructions that seem ordinary because they are repeated. Her mother's call from the kitchen does more than interrupt play, since it directs the girl toward service. Enitan describes her parents' quarrels as occupying the spaces around her, which leaves the jetty as a "protectorate" until it is removed (Atta, 2005, p. 9). The metaphor makes silence spatial. Enitan does not seek a chance to answer her parents. She seeks a place where she does not have to absorb their conflict.

Her mother's religious transformation after the death of Enitan's brother complicates any simple picture of maternal authority. Grief and conviction become entangled with surveillance and control, and the jetty is demolished in response to a priest's vision. Fear is converted into rules that regulate a daughter's body and movement, and Enitan learns that women may enforce the very restrictions from which they also suffer. Her father, Sunny Taiwo, appears more liberal and politically articulate, yet his domestic conduct exposes the limits of a progressive male identity. A man may defend public rights while expecting private obedience. These scenes prepare the novel's central analogy between household power and state power without treating the two as identical. They also show why childhood narration matters. The younger Enitan experiences instructions, quarrels, and exclusions before she has a language to analyse them, and the older narrator's ability to organise these memories into a pattern is itself evidence of development.

Silence and Military Rule

Enitan grows up in a Nigeria whose postcolonial institutions are repeatedly unsettled by military intervention. When a coup suspends the constitution, her father explains that constitutional authority depends on the respect people give it. Without that respect, it becomes "words on paper" (Atta, 2005, p. 78). The statement anticipates the novel's interest in the vulnerability of language. Words may record rights, but they do not enforce themselves, and political authority can silence speech by suspending institutions, threatening journalists, or detaining people without charge.

Enitan's political awareness develops unevenly. At first the struggle between politicians and soldiers can seem remote beside the pressures of family and education. She then recognises a shared logic: authority is exercised by deciding who may speak, which words count, and what follows from disobedience. The state's control of journalists and public records gives this logic an institutional form, and the household's demand for feminine quiet gives it an intimate one. Atta also refuses a romantic account of democratic politics. The novel depicts corruption and elite privilege alongside military coercion, and Enitan's father can criticise the regime partly because his position gives him resources that poorer citizens lack. Some people stay quiet because they are afraid, others because they are comfortable, and others because the available channels of speech offer little protection. Silence may be imposed on the vulnerable and chosen by the privileged, and the consequences are not equivalent.

Women and Their Strategies

Not all of the novel's silences are failures. A person may withhold speech to avoid humiliation, to protect someone else, or to keep a limited sphere of control. The problem is the unequal conditions under which silence is demanded and interpreted. A woman's quiet may be praised as patience when it serves family order, while the same quiet may conceal injury or anger. Enitan does not discover this alone. Other women show her different ways of handling the same pressures, and voice becomes a relational achievement and not a possession she finds within herself.

Sheri Bakare

Sheri first appears as a girl who can say and do what Enitan cannot. She is socially bold and skilled at managing adults, and her confidence challenges Enitan's assumption that obedience is the natural condition of girlhood. Yet Sheri's apparent freedom is not security. Her sexual vulnerability and the violence she experiences show that visibility can become a source of danger. The silence around sexual violence is not simply an individual's failure to speak. It is produced by a culture that risks shaming the victim and protecting the perpetrator. Sheri's story therefore prevents Enitan from treating vocality as uncomplicated agency. Her tactical accommodations, read through nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), are neither automatically admirable nor evidence of false consciousness. They are strategies formed under constraint.

Women Who Comply

Other female figures reveal the social rewards of compliance. The instruction Enitan later summarises as "Shut up and face your family" is a compact statement of a discipline that places domestic continuity above the disclosure of harm (Atta, 2005, p. 268). It frames speech as selfishness and silence as duty. The women who comply cannot be reduced to

passive characters. Their silence may be shaped by economic dependence, religious belief, fear of exclusion, concern for children, or the knowledge that speaking will not produce justice. If silence is treated only as weakness, the analysis repeats the moral pressure that tells women to endure quietly. Enitan's mother belongs here. She transmits restrictive rules, but she is also shaped by grief, marriage, and a domestic order in which her own desires have been set aside. The novel does not excuse the harm she causes. It places that harm within an intergenerational system that teaches women to police one another.

Grace Ameh

Grace offers a different model. As a journalist and playwright, she understands the political consequences of public speech, and her insistence that Enitan should use her voice makes voice an obligation as well as a right (Atta, 2005, p. 269). She does not pretend that courage removes danger. Her work is sustained by a practical awareness of risk. Her view that writing is activism where words can be expunged from public records (p. 272) gives Enitan a way to connect personal conviction with a wider community. The advice is not simply to speak louder. It is to recognise the conditions under which speech matters, to stand with others, and to understand that a privileged person's silence can help preserve the inequalities that leave other people voiceless.

One objection is that this emphasis on voice privileges a particular heroine who is educated, professionally connected, and able to move between elite spaces. The novel acknowledges the asymmetry when Grace asks why privileged Nigerians believe doing nothing is an option when others are born into poverty and without formal education (Atta, 2005, p. 269). Testimony can contest silence, but it does not automatically redistribute the material resources needed to speak safely or be heard. Enitan's growth is significant without being representative of every woman's possibilities.

Work, Marriage, and the Cost of Speaking

Enitan's legal career gives her forms of authority that were unavailable to her as a child, yet professional standing does not dissolve gender expectations. Institutions may recognise a woman's qualifications while continuing to measure her by domestic service and marital availability. Her reflections on human rights make the point sharply. She observes that rights become urgent when men's rights are threatened, while the constitution offers little remedy for "kindness at home" (Atta, 2005, p. 203). A legal education equips her to see this contradiction, but it cannot guarantee that her own marriage will be governed by justice. The novel therefore does not present a career as a straightforward route to emancipation.

Marriage becomes a decisive test because it brings the public ideal of equality into the private space where gendered expectations are often enforced most strongly. Enitan's relationship with Niyi exposes the gap between being respected as a professional and being accepted as an independent person whose priorities may differ from a husband's. Silence in this setting can operate as punishment, refusal, or a way of controlling the terms of a conflict. A man's withdrawal can force his partner to interpret the silence, repair the relationship, and carry the emotional burden, so that the person who speaks may appear excessive while the person who refuses to engage keeps power. Silence has different consequences depending on who can afford to withhold communication. Enitan's growing resistance revises the meaning of maturity. If the conventional adult milestone is marriage, the novel asks whether a woman has matured when she learns to accommodate a husband or when she gains the capacity to

judge the relationship's demands. Atta favours the latter, without suggesting that judgment is painless.

Enitan's development is also uneven, because insight does not immediately produce action. She may understand an injustice and still hesitate or negotiate while weighing the consequences. This is not a failure of character. Under unequal power, direct speech has costs that are not shared by the person who demands it. Nnaemeka's (2004) framework helps distinguish strategic compromise from submission by asking whose interests a compromise serves. Enitan's growing independence involves testing which accommodations are survivable and which require the surrender of self-respect. The result is a more discriminating sense of when to speak, when to wait, and when continued accommodation becomes untenable.

Narration as Testimony

The novel's main contribution becomes clearest when its first-person structure is treated as an act and not as a neutral channel. Enitan is the experiencing subject of the events and the narrating subject who orders them in retrospect. The child at the jetty cannot explain the domestic order around her, while the adult narrator can connect that scene to later experiences of marriage, work, and political repression. The implied audience is not a single confidant. Enitan addresses readers who must infer the relation between intimate scenes and public history, and the telling is neither a private diary nor a formal deposition. It is a literary testimony that asks readers to attend together to family quarrels, gender expectations, legal work, state repression, and women's friendships. Retrospection also introduces accountability. Enitan records her own blind spots, privileges, and delayed responses, and this self-implication gives her testimony authority through situated knowledge and not through a claim to be free of error. The first-person form is therefore aligned with the Bildungsroman trajectory. Narrator and protagonist cannot be separated, because the narrator's authority depends on the interpretive capacities that the protagonist acquires.

Lanser's (1992) account of voice as a claim to authority explains the political force of this form. Enitan's authority is not granted by the state, a husband, or a professional institution. It is produced by narrating, and it refuses to let those institutions be the only sources of interpretation. This is not a claim that first-person narration is automatically truthful. Enitan's perspective is partial, but partiality is not the opposite of testimony. Testimony begins from a situated position, and Atta's irony and retrospective qualification make the limits of Enitan's understanding visible and do not hide them. The narrator also refuses the expectation that women's accounts should be restrained or limited to the domestic sphere. Her narration is an act of reclassification, in which experiences dismissed as family matters become evidence of a broader distribution of power. Her class position remains part of the picture, since it gives her access to education, legal language, and social networks. Her testimony can expose privilege while still being made possible by it, and it should not be mistaken for a substitute for structural change.

The national setting makes this testimony more than a record of private development. Military rule threatens the public conditions under which accounts circulate, so Grace's remark that writing becomes activism when records can be erased (Atta, 2005, p. 272) also describes the novel's own function. Enitan's testimony is communal without claiming to speak for all women. Sheri's experience exposes the vulnerability beneath apparent boldness,

Enitan's mother shows how patriarchal norms pass between women, and Grace models the link between writing and collective action. These women do not form a harmonious chorus, and their differences matter because a community of testimony does not require a single voice. At the national level, the account counters the idea that public history belongs only to official institutions. The coup, the suspension of constitutional protections, and the pressure on journalists shape daily decisions, family loyalties, and professional ambitions, and the novel shows that authoritarianism also works through fear, self-censorship, and the calculation of what can safely be said. A story about silencing could reproduce silence if it represented women only as objects of harm. By giving Enitan control over the telling, Atta makes the narrative a site where experience is organised, judged, and passed on. The account cannot guarantee justice, but it can contest erasure and create a record open to collective interpretation.

Conclusion

Everything Good Will Come represents Enitan's growth as a passage from silence imposed by family, gender, and authoritarian politics toward a voice capable of testimony. The passage is neither straight nor complete. Silence may shelter, protect, punish, or conceal, and speech may challenge authority while exposing the speaker to risk. Through Sheri, Enitan's mother, Grace Ameh, and other women, the novel shows that voice is relational and must be understood within unequal material and social conditions.

This paper has placed narrative form at the centre of that account. Enitan's first-person narration is a record of her development and one of its clearest signs. Her retrospective authority turns private memory into an interpretation of public power, and Grace's reflections on writing clarify the political stakes of making an account. Read as testimony, the ending offers no simple promise of emancipation. It shows a speaker who refuses to let social disapproval set the limits of her future.

The paper has limits. It does not give a full account of the novel's treatment of class, sexuality, religion, or the body, and its focus on Enitan's narration risks giving her perspective more weight than the women whose experiences she recounts. Further work could examine how narrative authority distributes attention among women, and how the novel's representation of political history relates to archival and testimonial accounts outside fiction.

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