Of Masquerading and Weaving Tales of Empowerment: Gender, Composite Consciousness, and Culture-Specificity in the Early Novels of Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami

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Marlene De La Cruz-Guzmán
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This dissertation titled

Of Masquerading and Weaving Tales of Empowerment:
Gender, Composite Consciousness, and Culture-Specificity
in the Early Novels of Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami

by

MARLENE DE LA CRUZ-GUZMÁN

has been approved for
the English Department of Ohio University
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Joseph McLaughlin
Associate Professor of English

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

DE LA CRUZ-GUZMÁN, MARLENE, Ph.D., December 2014, English

Of Masquerading and Weaving Tales of Empowerment: Gender, Composite Consciousness, and Culture-Specificity in the Early Novels of Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami

Director of Dissertation: Joseph McLaughlin

This dissertation explores the development of a risky but empowering culture-specific women's consciousness by the protagonists of Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami’s early novels. My insertion of Jameson’s “primacy of the national situation” in the development of a woman’s composite consciousness allows the reader to gain an understanding of women’s marginalization and subsequent empowerment in a specific setting such as Casablanca, Morocco or Lagos, Nigeria. The composite factor is essential to understand the lived experiences of people in specific cultures within the postcolonial nation, for it acknowledges the importance of traditional resources but also the modern liberation tools available to the women. This study places Atta and Lalami’s characters squarely in their cultural milieu so that they are read in their social, economic, political, racial, ethnic, and religious contexts. Just as Abouzeid argued that progress in studying women must be centered on women’s social and political milieu because it is there that women’s agency and oppression can be localized and contextualized, this study argues that women’s empowerment is, in fact, grounded on what it means to be a woman in her particular society with its cultural expressions and norms. This approach focuses on a very practical and empowering experience for women as it ties them even more closely to their communities, even as they advocate for more options than were previously available to
them. This culture-specificity empowers these characters to function even more efficiently as women who continually change and improve their communities in Nigeria and Morocco. Atta and Lalami’s use of the concept of the composite consciousness in the frame of the local tradition serves as a unifying metaphor for each novel. This composite consciousness approach has the potential to answer Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s call for a paradigm that is culture-specific yet creates solidarity across subjectivities and across the globe without erasing difference.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to the inspiring women no longer waiting to tell their stories

Gladys Leticia Guzmán Bobadilla
Consuelo Rowland de Bascuas
Concha Aguilar Corzo de de la Cruz

to those they have inspired
Cristina Maria Bascuas Rowland
Juana Ines de la Cruz Giles
Karla Verena Guzmán Vielman
Reyna Elizabeth Guzmán Ibarra

and to those who have yet to share theirs
Audrey, the joy in every day and every book
Sophie, my star of wisdom and hope
Olivia, the daughter of my heart
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CHAPTER ONE: FRAMING WOMEN’S COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS: CULTURE-SPECIFIC EMPOWERMENT IN ATTA AND LALAMI’S NOVELS

This project analyzes the development of a composite consciousness by the female protagonists in Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami’s first two novels. It also contextualizes their emancipation and activism within their post-colonial national setting and their distinct cultural frameworks. This study privileges the culture-specific expression of emancipation in the novels, the feminist scholarly methodology associated with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s Solidarity model, and close readings of the novels’ social, cultural, and historical contexts. Finally, by utilizing the traditional masquerade and domestic storytelling as conceptual frameworks for the novels, I argue that Atta and Lalami write their protagonists into the privileged positions of lead dancer and storyteller, respectively. Thus, these alternative models of womanhood guide the women on their journeys toward self-determination, modified relationships between men and women, and reform in their own societies.

The Internationalism of the National Situation

Culture-specificity is the cornerstone of this analysis, for it provides “a way of respecting the primacy of the national situation and also making it possible for an international network of intellectuals and cultures” to thrive and support one another (Jameson 94). The starting point of understanding is this national context, and it allows the reader to gain an understanding of women’s marginalization and subsequent empowerment in concrete settings such as Casablanca, Morocco or Lagos, Nigeria while
also making connections with the experiences of others across the globe in what Jameson names the “internationalism of the national situations.” It converts “the binary and invidious slogan of difference into the rather different call for situation-specificity, for a positioning that always remains concrete and reflexive” (xi). I ultimately argue that the national situation in Atta and Lalami’s novels is the key to understanding the broader trends of women’s experience of oppression at the national and international level.

Sefi Atta’s Swallow (2008) illustrates that “our intellectual and cultural relations to each other pass through the primacy of the national situation understood in the larger sense, through the concrete regional situation,” and we “understand each other through those situations” (Jameson 94). In the novel, a Yoruba adire dyer who has arrived from the east of Nigeria to trade in the Makoku marketplace articulates the resonance of women’s experience across Nigeria. First, she focuses on women’s lack of solidarity and support for each other when other local dyers begin to harass Arike about her high productivity. She consoles Arike:

Don’t pay them any mind, Sister Arike. Let me tell you, I’ve traversed this country and it’s the same all over. We women, we sabotage each other instead of working together” and “We don’t come together…. We should. We can’t and then, when the time comes, we wonder why we’re lagging behind the men” (190). She highlights the exploitation of women and their lack of solidarity across the nation. The regional situation of women, she says, is the Nigerian situation, and it must change. Women, she argues, are co-opted into the male dominated society. They become enforcers of patriarchal limits, so they compete with fellow women instead of making
meaningful cooperative progress together. She acknowledges, however, that there is hope for change as some women are finding ways to be independent, to progress, and to do so within their social and cultural contexts.

She praises Arike for her self-reliance and her ability to create a different paradigm for a Nigerian Yoruba woman. Arike has, after all, created a successful women’s cooperative of adire dyers, secured financial independence for herself and her daughter, and remained a concerned community member. The adire dyer notes, “I have yes, ears and a mouth to talk, God willing. I’ve seen you, Sister Arike. You’re doing well. You are taking the right steps. One should not rely on a man for anything, to provide or to pamper, not even to procreate. Is that not true?” (191). Later, Arike admits that “her analysis that day in the marketplace was close to the truth, too close for comfort,” for she risked public censure for her independent ways (191).

The acknowledgement of women’s roles in holding fellow women back for the sake of patriarchal stability at the national level was insightful, and it would resonate at the international level as well, as Jameson suggests. At the national level, however, the adire dyer will, without doubt, share with other women in her travels the story of Arike who was not only financially independent but also procreatively so. Meanwhile, Arike is privately quite happy with her progress, and very proud of her accomplishments, so she shares these gains with her daughter and her young protégés just as her aunt did with her. Such transgenerational mentorship must replace the sabotage that the adire dyer noted. In Atta’s novels, it is this female mentorship that promotes the empowerment of women across the nation and provides an opportunity for women’s solidarity and activism.
Feminism and African Scholarship: The Dialogue

Atta and Lalami’s female protagonists develop a consciousness of their oppression by both indigenous and European patriarchal forces as well as a corresponding strategy to fight for their emancipation that resonates with the movement for women’s rights and equality across the world, especially the post-colony. This argument also intervenes in an ongoing scholarly discussion about the role of feminism in Africa. I situate the work of Atta and Lalami in relation to various feminisms, such as African, postcolonial, and transnational feminisms. I then strive to problematize their application, instead advocating for Mohanty’s Solidarity model based on various social locations by applying the aforementioned concept of the “internationalism of the national situation.” Furthermore, the gender-centric narratives challenge and sometimes replace normative patriarchal national historicism. In this process, the performance of womanhood can be read as a re-writing and re-memory of women’s experiences and national histories. This theoretical contextualization also helps the reader situate women’s composite consciousness among theories of gender and feminism.

Oyewumi’s Critique of Eurocentric Feminism

In *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood,* Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that western feminism is a form of cultural imperialism that is being foisted upon women worldwide regardless of whether it is applicable or not because “Feminism forms a part of Europology—an elaboration of
what is a distinctly European phenomenon into a human universal – which is then imposed on all cultures” (3). As an example, she notes that there are no words for gender-specific kinship in Yoruba but only the moniker “my mother’s children” (8). The mother holds the central position and the offspring are related to each other by their matriarchal bond. Without gender, this sibling relationship is still reflective of “common interests because of shared experience and social location and whose love and loyalty are supposed to be unconditional” (9) Oyewumi also writes that it is the mother that unites and takes precedence in her society. This very normative concept for the Yoruba is a concept alien to many western feminists, she argues, for they tend to shudder at the connection of woman to the biological womb because they are focused, instead, on the individual and on a sisterhood metaphor that fails to speak to Africans like her.

This sisterhood, she argues, is actually sisterarchy, an oppression of women by fellow women who call themselves sisters yet act as oppressors. In this sisterly paradigm, she says, western feminists oppressively deem themselves more knowledgeable about African women’s lives, needs, and desires than the African women for whom they speak. Sisterarchy is similarly addressed in Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu’s poem “Sisterhood” in which “white sister told me/ all women are one/ united in de face/ of chau’vism” while the same

new found sister
had ordered me to be
on knees
to scrub the floor clean
for the pittance she paid me:

on knees

to scrub the floor clean

for sisterarchy.

In her essay “’O Africa: Gender Imperialism in Academia,” she continues this uncovering of the oppression hidden by the term sisterhood. Collins O. Airhihenbuwa’s book *Healing Our Differences: The Crisis of Global Health and the Politics of Identity* also criticizes the term as he posits that “Indeed, sisterhood is often transmuted into a form of race and gender hierarchy to produce a ‘sisterarchy’ that privileges White women” (92). Thus, Oyewumi’s claims that her argument “raises the question of the relevance and value of Western feminism” to scholarship by and about Africans (2).

This charge of cultural imperialism against feminist scholarship as well as her reclamation that African Studies consists primarily of European and U.S. scholars and that their “inflections in the corpus reflect not African interests and realities, but the identity, concerns, and predilections of the ‘safari’ scholars” (20) must be addressed in this study. Oyewumi is a prominent Yoruba scholar writing about Africa, Yoruba culture, and women’s issues therein. Her work is grounded in her experience of her particular culture and the intricate details of lived experience by the *insider* among the Yoruba. This insider’s perspective must be considered in my study of women writers from Nigeria and Morocco.
Culture-Specific Feminism and Mohanty’s Solidarity Model

In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty delineates a traumatization of women of color by Western women or westernized women of color who adopt western values in contrast to indigenous ones. These scholars, Mohanty argues, foist upon the women of color “a relation of structural domination and suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (18). Like Oyewumi, she says these scholars do not allow women across the world to represent themselves or to speak. When European and U.S. feminists project “the construction of ‘Third World Women’ as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victim of a particular socioeconomic system,” these marginalized women of color lose agency (23). Mohanty, as a scholar, focuses on the need to identify social location—including race, class, religion, orientation, and age—and its importance for understanding the many, and sometimes oppositional, social positions that women and feminists can occupy. Thus, Mohanty argues for a clearer understanding of women of color’s complex social locations because, “It is only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women’s location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised” (33). She ultimately proposes that writings like hers give agency and control back to women of color by exposing the trauma, taking control of feminist discourse, and outlining a new representative course of action against patriarchy and sabotaging women.

Mohanty proposes a Solidarity paradigm that eliminates cultural relativism and displaces a Euro- and U.S.-centric point of reference for feminism. Mohanty also creates
two flawed models of feminism to demonstrate the problems with feminisms that have come before it. The Solidarity model specifically displaces the trauma-inducing Tourist model, which glosses over third world women’s experiences and focuses on them as static and monolithic confirmations of the enlightened paradigm of western feminism. Mohanty’s Solidarity model also displaces the flawed Explorer model, which emphasizes a separate approach to the study of the Other woman who is object and subject of inquiry so that “the larger intellectual project is entirely about countries other than the United States,” thus “Non-Euro American” (240). An inordinate emphasis on difference and separation is the key problem of the Explorer model. It can yield deeper analysis of a defined area or region but is always weighed down by cultural relativism, which fails to yield a common basis for evaluation and commonality of experience among women. As Mohanty notes, “If the dominant discourse is the discourse of cultural relativism, questions of power, agency, justice, and common criteria for critique and evaluation are silenced” (240). Thus, women’s discourse is suppressed precisely because it questions the allocation of power, and it is silenced in favor of the normative patriarchal discourse. Therefore, the connections and comparisons as well as the focus on women’s agency, power relations, and social location are the essential components of the Solidarity model.

This Solidarity model unites women in activism across geographical and cultural regions, thereby echoing Jameson’s “internationalism of the national situation.” This comparative approach allows for a meaningful evaluation across groups of women. It places feminist scholarship squarely in the comparative studies realm so that “relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist
solidarity” are explored without the pitfalls of relativism to inhibit women’s connections (240). Mohanty’s work yields the closest theoretical connection to this study as the works of Atta and Lalami are connected and compared for their commonalities and the comparable models of women’s activism, exercise of agency, and changing power paradigms. Atta and Lalami’s novels reflect the detraumatization that Mohanty and Judith Harris posit is achieved in part by signifying the pain of feminist oppression through theoretical scholarship and conceiving of and modeling a feminist solidarity, namely activism, as a healing response to the multiple assaults on the body of the woman of color. Their narratives then provide the vehicle for both the acknowledgement of traumatic assaults and the venue in which healing or detraumatization can be performed in the African novel (Mohanty 230).

Feminist Scholars in Solidarity

Despite Oyewumi’s scathing critiques of western feminism, Mohanty, Sandoval, and other feminist scholars of color do make visible the privilege behind patronizing forms of Western feminism. However, they also make space for the voices of careful, culture specific feminist scholars who can build solidarity across categories of oppression. They stand in solidarity, listen, challenge, and empower women of color around the world to address their self-identified needs and to combat oppression, regardless of its source. Their scholarship also avoids essentialist tendencies while still exposing the problems with orientalist approaches. For example, Elaine Showalter echoes Oyewumi’s concern that many feminist scholars impose their views of what is oppressive
without giving voice to the women who can actually educate them and provide a realistic and thorough understanding of a woman’s experience in her cultural setting. In her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” she insists that “the wild zone, or ‘female space,’ must be the address of a genuinely women-centered criticism, theory, and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak” (201). Like Showalter, Oyewumi proposes that African “women are not just women; [they are] factors of race, class, regional origins, age, and kinship ties are central to the understanding of intergender and intra-gender relations, locally and globally” (40). Thus, attention must be paid to the whole person embodying the complexity of intertwining and sometimes competing and oppositional women’s subjectivities, as Oyewumi, Showalter, and Mohanty all argue.

Leila Abouzeid’s also advocates an empowering paradigm that takes into account that women are multi-faceted beings. The well-known Moroccan writer and feminist argues that progress in studying women must be centered on women’s social and political milieu (xxvi). It is there that women’s agency and oppression can be localized and contextualized, she argues, because this progress is grounded on what it means to be a woman in her particular post-independent society with its cultural expressions and norms. This approach does not privilege outside notions of subjugation, emancipation, or subversion. By culturally situating women, gender progress does not put these women at odds with their society, Abouzeid says; instead, it empowers them to carry on and to function better and even more efficiently within their social circles (67). Just as Abouzeid learned, so Atta and Lalami depict that there are “no easy solutions” to the troubles of
women. These authors endorse culture-specific empowering paradigms that can allow women to function as women in their societies and to exercise agency within their respective cultural milieus while also resonating with international women’s movements.

Another African feminist scholar to address the topic is Nawal El Saadawi. In the context of Egyptian society, El Saadawi openly discusses female genital cutting, the oppression and sexual exploitation of women by unscrupulous men, the role of women as collaborators in this oppression, incest, the agency that women do retain even in the most difficult situations, and the role of class as a factor in women’s marginalization. The cognitive understanding of these oppressive patriarchal practices is not enough, however, in *Woman at Point Zero*. A conscious reflection upon this understanding is necessary for the women to gain a consciousness of patriarchal oppression, both traditional and modern, that will lead them to freedom of choice and action. Firdaus says, “I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions…. I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous” (129). She enunciates the verdict after reflecting on the injustice in her life, including the abuse at male hands and the punishment of women for defending themselves. Her verdict is the result of a conscious reflection of a consciousness of her oppression, as Freire’s definition of *conscientização* clearly correlates with Firdaus’s understanding of the injustice as well as her reflection

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1 According to Paolo Freire, consciousness, *conscientização* in the original Portuguese language, entails a process of individuals becoming aware of their own awareness thereby achieving “their ‘real consciousness’ of the world (Freire 96). Consciousness is tinged by Freire with an emancipatory element that results from understanding one’s own position and then analyzing that understanding so that there is a consciousness of a
upon it. She has reached a consciousness of the consciousness of her oppression by males, and she is now engaging in action by speaking about her experience, helping a young doctor--namely the author El Saadawi--to inform the world, and thereby engaging in the activism and solidarity building that she can from isolated imprisonment in an Egyptian death row.

Firdaus understands the power dynamics in Egyptian society that formally charge women as criminals when they are merely defending themselves, trying to survive, or actually thriving. She gains this insight because each of her experiences with the men she lists has been oppressive, abusive, and dehumanizing to the point that she understands both her abusers and her own previous inability to exercise agency or demand human dignity. She processes the experience and the result is an awareness of the awareness of being oppressed as a woman. Thus, she can now exercise agency and posits that in her society, “No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man” (129). While this clear identification with the plight of the historical figure of this woman led El Saadawi to write this novel, the author herself testifies to this woman’s empowerment when she says in her Preface, “This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all of those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom” (viii). Firdhaus reflects, I argue, women’s composite consciousness, and through El Saadawi’s words, an African woman’s example is heeded, noted, and

previous consciousness. In this project, Freire’s consciousness--double cognizance or this twice analyzed state of knowledge, understanding, and perception--is the key to the women’s emancipation, for it necessitates critical thinking, discernment, and exercise of power and agency, as exemplified, for instance, by Rachida’s storytelling in the novel.
emulated. Firdaus’ legacy in this novel is that African women are full human beings who can speak and advocate for themselves, exercise agency, and inspire others to carry on the fight against the “criminals” who dehumanize them, both within their nationalist borders and abroad. Thus, let us listen to the voices of the El Saadawis, Attas, Adichies, Dangarembgas, Veras, Kyomuhendos, Wicombs, Molopes, Bas, and Lalamis, among others, learn from them, and support them in the production of African writings and theories that reflect women’s concerns in their particular communities, as well as those that are relevant across cultures to stand in solidarity with others.

This is the multiplicity of women’s feminist movements in solidarity that will reflect the linguistic, social, economic, political context of culture-specific gendered beings who function inside national societies. This paradigm provides women different avenues for exercising agency and relating different forms of oppression that may not be recognizable to outsiders. Furthermore, because the ethnic and culture-specificity is so important within artificially created nation states inherited from colonial European rule, the multiple lived experiences of women must be acknowledged as such. The nation remains the first point of reference for this study of women’s lives, for although it is not an organic cohesive state, it is the first and main political and geographical container for these women’s lives. The concept of the nation also yields a starting point from which women can build solidarity across the nation and the world with their own culture-specific consciousness that is framed by their national identity. However artificial the nation may have been at its inception, women frame their lives as citizens of a nation, and they do so with specific reference to their own culture within that nation.
From these specific points of reference, solidarity with other culture-specific women’s movements can be built in a transnational context. In this way, women across the world can work together to bring to light, according to their own subjectivities, the oppression they experience. As Chela Sandoval notes, oppressed women have to seek a movement that allows them as women of color to acknowledge their bodies as multiple sites of oppression which necessitate coalition politics to strive to counter the intersection of multiple systems of oppression an individual or group (44). Thus, these subjectivities can be fluid, constantly shifting to accommodate the need to fight oppression in various forms and across categories such as racism, ecological exploitation, sexism, ageism, classism, sexual orientation, and spirituality. This model is inclusive and not limited to the one isolated subjectivity of gender but also builds solidarity across other categories such as labor, civil rights, nationalist, and queer movements.

Women’s Composite Consciousness

Building on the Mohanty’s model of Feminist Solidarity and the activism that can emerge from global connections, Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that we “can no longer treat the oppression of women by indigenous patriarchy and by colonialism as two separate issues” (122). Instead, they must be acknowledged as two constitutive parts of women’s experiences in Africa. I have envisioned composite consciousness as the development of a woman’s consciousness of her oppression by both indigenous and European patriarchal forces, as illustrated above by Firdhaus in Woman at Point Zero. Therefore, developing women’s composite consciousness entails responding to this combined oppression by
using both indigenous and European resources to combat oppressive norms and strive for culturally centered empowerment for women within their societies. Like the composite building materials, the strength and beauty of the new product surpasses both the beauty and strength of the constitutive elements thereby rendering it more usable, durable, and strong in constructing a new structure, as outlined by Christensen in “Mechanics of Composite Materials” and Hull and Clyne in *An Introduction to Composite Materials*. In the case of women a composite consciousness, as I have conceived of it, integrates indigenous and European resources for women’s empowerment and must be anchored in women’s agency, activism, and voice in a post-nationalist society.

By creating this concept of women’s composite consciousness, I strive to answer Yeğenoğlu’s call for a more comprehensive analysis of women’s oppression instead of a series of discrete studies of the same in solely indigenous or colonial contexts, for as Said pointed out in *Orientalism* and Yeğenoğlu restates, “Orientalist discourse has reproduced itself in the Orient via nationalist projects whose fundamental principle was based upon the imperial divide between the Western and the native” (122). Scholars are now understanding the composite nature of the post-colonial individual more fully so it becomes more evident that the binary of ‘traditional vs. modern’ imposed by colonialism was also imperialist and that the immediately-post-liberation nationalist narrative that continued such a dichotomy was equally flawed as it also espoused the divide between women and men. Meanwhile, the post-colonial nation is a more open venue for understanding an individual woman’s experience even as it appears to be a hopeless and dangerous pursuit. In effect, the composite consciousness, by acknowledging intersecting
truth paradigms, can build a practical and more useful plan for women’s emancipation and a post-colonial liberation from oppressive binaries. The post-colonial period can yield an egalitarian perspective of womanhood that must be voiced and performed by writers who narrate its performance as a reflection of reality in a specific culture. In other words, as Jane Bryce noted, these women writers of the third wave “may be read ambivalently, as simultaneously performing new identities and revisioning old ones” as they incorporate and intermingle traditional and modern tools of empowerment into their struggles for emancipation within their national borders and cultures.

Driving Theoretical Concepts

The personal is political. Fiction and facts are inseparable. Personal stories resist vague and generalized abstractions. They maintain the urgency, the intensity, the richness and vividness of the concrete (“Foreword” El Saadawi x).

The overarching theoretical framework of this project is the use of culture-specific composite consciousness as a means for gynocentric empowerment by women on the African continent. In the case of Atta and Lalami’s female protagonists, emancipation can occur only once they shed the blinders that Nigerian and Moroccan societies have foisted upon them. Once they refuse to believe in men as kind deities, these women become aware of the deprivation, harassment, and discrimination they face daily thanks to traditional and modern patriarchal norms firmly in place in their societies. Simultaneously, they become conscious of men’s privilege, societal enforcement of gendered norms, and their active role in shaping the precarious condition of women in
their communities and in the nation. Furthermore, because of the “internationalism of the
national situation,” their local, culture-specific struggle for emancipation resonates with
and supports that of others across the continent and the world.

Significantly for their development of coping systems, they also become aware
that the social enforcement of gendered norms is performed by the community, both
individually and collectively. However, this patriarchal subjugation and its enforcement
can be made invisible because everyone in the community polices women’s bodies yet no
one in particular polices the validity of these norms. The community is not monolithic,
but that is its representation when it performs disciplinary action regarding gendered
trespasses. Thus, the rejection of patriarchal blinders allows women to see not only men’s
culpability and actions but also women’s complicity regarding the enforcement of
patriarchal oppression. As Lalami has noted herself, “this patriarchy that I talked about
earlier is not only passed down by men. It is also passed down by women. Men and
women are both maintaining a system that is making a victim of both” (De La Cruz-
Guzmán, Personal Interview). The full view of patriarchy is essential for the female
protagonists in Atta and Lalami’s novels to gain a composite consciousness and to seek
change.

The second theoretical concept that drives this study is one that I created to
understand women’s emerging consciousness or awareness of oppression, namely the
composite consciousness. This awareness and understanding of their position as women
in their specific cultures and societies who are subject to traditional and modern
patriarchal forces also allows the characters to see their potential for personal
development if they make use of both traditional and modern resources at their disposal.

The latter proves liberating for women who embrace their own cultural traditions but also use advantages gained in their experiences with European infrastructures in their homelands. The characters in Atta and Lalami’s novels use both to realize their potential to be self-sufficient in their society and create a new paradigm for women. Atta and Lalami write from a transnational space, namely living in the United States while also spending time in their homelands in Nigeria and Morocco. They are deeply influenced by their experiences in the diaspora. They readily incorporate the influence of European ideas and concepts into tools for use by their protagonists so that, for instance, in Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2004), Enitan uses her British legal training and, in Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Halima uses the motto from her literacy class as springboards for self-empowering action. They also remain tied to the rich traditions of their homelands, as evidenced by the frame references to the Nigerian masquerade and Moroccan storytelling in the novels. The novelists do not engage in an essentialist disregard for all things European or a rejection of their own national traditions in favor of European practices; instead, they create characters that remain anchored in their national contexts while also fully utilizing all tools for advancement, including European resources.

I make three main arguments in this study. First, I argue that national cultural practices frame these novels in such a way that these ground the texts and protagonists in the reality of life in Lagos, Nigeria and Casablanca, Morocco. The authorial choices to reference masquerades and storytelling in their novels allows the reader an insight into
key cultural practices and sets up the novels as culture-specific products that reflect Nigerian and Moroccan history. This culture specificity also depicts the protagonists as cultural insiders who are able to query the status quo, challenge patriarchal normativity, and propose alternative paradigms that make use of empowering traditional and modern resources.

Secondly, I argue that despite an initial deference to patriarchy, female protagonists reject what is considered normative in their society and become keen observers of their own gendered social environment. With this observation as a basis for understanding their social location, the women in the novels find emancipation through a move toward women-centered existences and a clear identification and consciousness of their oppression as both traditional and modern. The ensuing strategies for empowerment, namely the manifestations of composite consciousness, also entail the use of all tools at their disposal.

Finally, the authors’ choice of frames and women-centered communities is itself subversive because it represents an act of raising consciousness about women’s issues in postcolonial Nigeria and Morocco. As insiders, albeit sometimes transnational ones, the characters are able to raise issues that might be taboo to outsiders. In addition, Atta and Lalami escape the criticism for doing so that scholars such as Oyeronke Oyewumi would heap upon them if they were not themselves born and raised in Nigeria and Morocco, culturally grounded in national practices, and formally vested in the well-being of women in their home countries. Therefore, Atta and Lalami contribute to raising consciousness
about women’s living conditions, exercising agency, and problematizing paradigms of
gender relations.

The novels of contemporary writers Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami explore a
development of a woman’s composite consciousness and emancipation from patriarchal
restrictions, regardless of whether they are traditional or modern. These restrictions are
present in their protagonists’ customary traditional practices and beliefs and modern
European cultural contexts. These principal characters experience the restrictions while
they function as women of agency in their communities. The writings of these women
writers, moreover, demonstrate a determined commitment to social development and
emancipation for their female protagonists in Nigeria and Morocco. While the trauma of
the European colonial assault is always in the background, the focus of these narratives is
on the repercussions and effects of new nationalist assaults on the women during the
nationalist and post-colonial periods, in which the colonial experience is repeated but
internally expressed by fellow indigenous leaders turned exploiters.

This study analyzes the strategies that Sefi Atta and Laila Lalami use to illustrate
the female protagonists empowering journey toward culture-specific women’s composite
consciousness. That is why, for example, Atta’s protagonist in Everything Good Will
Come (2004), Enitan Taiwo, is able to conceive of her emancipation as a Yoruba woman
grounded in her role as a mother, daughter, and friend. However, she is able to carry out
the emancipatory steps, such as the emotional divorce from her father, the separation
from her emotionally abusive husband, and her advocacy for her wrongfully imprisoned
father, based on her English law degree, its entailing prestige, and her European sense of
human and civil rights and its corresponding conceptions of state normativity. Thus, Enitan creates a woman-centered community of advocates and activists who nourish motherhood, womanhood, and nationhood but also openly wield the concepts of human and civil rights against the corrupt government of Nigeria and the patriarchal supporters of the state. She is able to design and implement plans for change that take advantage of her traditional upbringing and modern training.

Once she recognizes and analyzes her own oppression, Tolani, the protagonist of Atta’s *Swallow* (2008), is able to use her cultural grounding in the town of Makoku, her mother’s traditional training as a weaver, dyer, and woman’s cooperative leader and her own European education to create a plan for emancipation. She creates a micro-enterprise based on her mother’s woven fabrics crafted into modern articles of clothing and accessories that are desirable in an urban market. Therefore, it is this woman’s resourcefulness and ability to integrate all the resources at hand that gives her the opportunity, at the end of the novel, to reject the oppressive and harassing advances of her lascivious employer, the loving yet equally problematic advances of Sanwo who would be her husband, and the probability of unemployment due to corrupt nepotism.

Similarly, in Lalami’s first novel, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Halima is influenced by the fusion of her literacy class, the role model of her emancipated female employer, and her experience with European-like state institutions to strive to liberate herself from her morally bankrupt, abusive, and alcoholic husband. She remains culturally centered as a mother and a daughter. However, she knows that in a corrupt state she must do as her literacy class motto indicates, “Work for your Future--
Today” (74). She builds her business on traditional, culturally-centered and religiously important *Eid-al-Fitr* biscuits that nourish the physical body after a month-long fast. It is this composite consciousness that leads Halima to overcome direct patriarchal oppression and create a woman-centered paradigm for herself and her children.

Furthermore, in Lalami’s *Secret Son* (2010), Rachida Ouchad is able to use the education she received at a French orphanage, including perfect French, to become self-sufficient and independent. However, she also holds secretly dear in her heart the traditions of her Amazigh home community in Sefrou, including storytelling. She was able to escape the fate of a fallen woman in Morocco because she was able to actively create her own future by using her traditional knowledge of storytelling to recreate her past into a believable life and using her European education to achieve financial independence.

These empowered characters cannot stay in the same patriarchal setting of their oppression. They must create their own women-centered communities in which they honor culture-specificity yet change their cultural status quo. By doing so, they risk their reputations, their social standing, and their ability to be seen as good women. However, the culture-specific shift also affords them opportunities such as western education, social mobility, and an understanding of the possibilities for women’s empowerment in their society. The culture-specific composite consciousness is not stagnant and petrified. It is not a monolith or a dogmatic adherence to the ancient. Instead, it is a dynamic reflection of the people’s lived experiences in their homelands and the expression of their cosmologies, and these are deeply affected by the European civil infrastructure. It is
essential to understand that these women are also able to turn that which was forced upon
them, their European training, into a tool to create a more egalitarian paradigm for their
own local cultural realities so that they are stronger, more resilient, and able to weather
adversity as well as to agitate for justice in their homeland.

The rejection of patriarchal norms, such as blinders to injustice and to male
privilege, render women better able to address the injustice they face every day. They are
then able to combat it at multiple levels--including the personal, professional, religious,
social, and economic-- in multiple contexts such as the rural, urban, and suburban, as well
as home, market, and office. Mohanty, Showalter, and Sandoval’s call for a culture-
centered scholarship can be addressed, at least in part, by a turn to the idea of culture-
specific woman’s consciousness in African nations, and this project strives to explore its
manifestations in the texts of Atta and Lalami. In particular, the gender-centered narrative
strategies that these two writers highlight in their work provide a mechanism for
understanding their portrayal of women’s empowerment.

Atta and Lalami’s Gendered Narrative Strategies

Narrative strategies are calculated authorial choices that create a unified storyline.
The key authorial choice made by Atta and Lalami is the loose narrative frame that
provides a culture-specific overarching structure for each authors’ accounts of imagined
events. The authors’ intentional references back to the framework center the works in a
cultural milieu as well as a social and economic context that enhance the sequence of
events, character development, and thematic foci. Sefi Atta’s two novels, *Everything*
Good Will Come (2004) and Swallow (2008), can be read as two narratives conceptually framed by the traditional Nigerian masquerade. Laila Lalami’s novels, on the other hand, can be analyzed as two narratives framed by traditional domestic storytelling.

In Atta’s first novels, Everything Good Will Come and Swallow, for instance, the lead woman character transforms herself from passive believer in men to activist. Each woman rejects her childhood belief in the divine rights of males, and she takes the position of lead dancer and mediator with the gods. Both novels’ protagonists reject the role of passive attendee and believer and become, instead, conveners of these communal masquerading events. The masquerade framework elucidates the character development of a composite consciousness in Atta’s two protagonists, and it adds depth and insight into this analysis of gender that is set in a culture-specific Nigerian setting.

Meanwhile, in Laila Lalami’s two novels, Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits and Secret Son, the conceptual structure is provided by the traditional Moroccan family storytelling by women. The characters find emancipation in the midst of their own communities by engaging in storytelling, and it is here that they are able to forge a new, hopeful future for their children and their own communities. The regeneration brought by these female protagonists benefits all Morocco’s citizens. The women create a new storyline for their lives that is more empowering and liberated than the one their communities might have told publicly. In the end, things may turn around or they may fall apart, but the nobility of the protagonists is unquestionable. Their efforts to persevere and to empower themselves are heroic. The challenge of these novels is not simply to the colonial grand narrative and the oppressive nationalist one that arose in the former’s
absence but rather also an affirmative project in which women with complex culture-specific experiences vie for acknowledgement, existence, voice, and self-representation through storytelling. They use their composite consciousness to reflect upon patriarchal oppression, both traditional and modern, and to forge new paths of empowerment based on the traditional and modern resources available to them.

The plot of these novels echoes the stages of masquerade or storytelling in their development. Atta and Lalami take advantage of these culturally current references as building blocks to add depth to their characters and to provide further insight into why the female characters make particular choices. While the protagonists initially comply with the patriarchal paradigm and submit to society’s gendered expectations, they grow to reject this oppressive paradigm and understand their oppression. They then anchor their choices in a turn to women-centered communities by using both traditional and modern strategies for advancement. For them, creating a more just environment for women in the nation leads to a more egalitarian society and to a rejection of the greed and corruption that has led to such disregard for human beings, especially women.

Furthermore, the commonalities of this narrative experience also include a turn to Yoruba and Amazigh consciousness inflected by the West. There is also a refusal to engage in corruption for self-advancement, as well as a turn to activism and self-sufficiency as creative outlets for the women’s talents. The differences between the masquerades and weaving stories will be teased out in the conclusion of this study by closely working with all four texts to show the culturally based differences in the women’s characters that render these novels by a West African novelist and a North
African writer in contrast with each other. The female characters I analyze have been able to find the possibility of redemption, healing, and emancipation by insisting on agency, survival, and witnessing for change in their own culture-specific environment. These manifestations are necessarily different for Nigeria and Morocco, but they also resonate as very similar avenues for a movement toward social liberation by developing a composite consciousness and utilizing both traditional and modern strategies for empowerment. The resonance can potentially create international solidarity, as previously noted by Mohanty, precisely because there is an “internationalism of the national situation” as Jameson remarked.

This is Atta and Lalami’s contribution: the narrativizing of potential avenues for women’s emancipation and even detraumatization and their turn to a culture-specific woman’s composite consciousness as a basis for enabling healing for the individual characters depicted in their novels. After all, as both authors have stated repeatedly, they are, first and foremost, novelists and want to write the best story they can.

It is a collective national psyche that Atta and Lalami are trying to render as healthy as possible in their novels so that “literature can have an important and profound positive effect as well, functioning as a kind of bountiful, nourishing matrix for a healthy developing psyche” (Achebe 116). Of course, both writers do so by privileging their female characters’ development, and opening spaces for their emancipation to be the potential emancipation of the nation. The signification of women’s patriarchal oppression in these situated narratives is a post-colonial endeavor, but it includes the acknowledgement that both traditional and modern patriarchal forces are at work in their
lives. These lines of scholarly thought resonate so strongly with the post-colonial novel because post-colonial social theorization of gender oppression and potential emancipation is translated into and then appears as social fact in the novels of Atta and Lalami. As Soyinka argues about African writers, because they focus on art as “a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths” and “a communal evolution of the dramatic mode of expression” (38), they gain from it psychic wholeness. Thus, literature, art, and political revolution are varying modes of expression of the “same crucial struggle for a re-statement of self and society” (109). In this study, Atta and Lalami’s novels are also a reaffirmation of the women’s empowerment in society, namely the women’s composite consciousness that would lead women to use both traditional and modern tools for empowerment and psychic wholeness.

Limitations of this Study

The limitations of this study are concretely present, for few extended analyses of these four novels have been published. In fact, only one doctoral dissertation analyzed one of these four novels, and Kadidia Sy’s 2008 dissertation focused on Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* as one of four novels by three authors she examines. Thus, the treatment of Atta’s work is comparatively small in Sy’s study². No dissertation has focused on Lalami’s novels. As a consequence, I will rely on scholarship about other

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² In her dissertation entitled *Women’s Relationships: Female Friendship in Toni Morrison’s Sula and Love, Mariam Ba’s So Long a Letter and Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come*, Sy focuses on female friendship in the four novels and explores the power of this friendship to support “women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building.”
contemporary African women writers in order to situate Atta and Lalami’s work within a scholarly dialogue. Although Owomoyela refused to include North Africa in his discussion of African writing, I argue that they are writers of what he would have categorized as the third wave of African writing, for they are concerned with “the remnants of colonialism evident in the neocolonialist attitudes held by many of those in the chambers and corridors of power. ...the new wave of writing seeks not only to entertain but to edify and instruct, as well as to forge a common cause with ordinary people” (37). Atta and Lalami follow Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, and Leila Abouzeid in a third wave of literature that openly criticizes the corrupt and patriarchal status quo while still remaining culture-specific and lending women’s struggles an international resonance as well as an opportunity for activism as an expression of international solidarity among women.

In addition, as emerging African novelists writing in the diaspora, Atta and Lalami are only just beginning to be taught and analyzed. Therefore, this critical analysis will provide an important foundation for their study, but it will suffer the shortcomings of the first scholarship to address a topic, namely the lack of dialogue as mentioned above but also the vast choice of theoretical approaches to use which means I must engage in careful control to focus on my area of analysis and not spread myself too thinly or claim too much. However, I will situate these writers’ oeuvre within the context of their national literatures and the waves of women writing across the African continent.

A second limitation of this study stems from the fact that neither writer necessarily sees herself as an outright feminist. Furthermore, each one finds herself
conflicted about the use of the term finding at once reductionist and westernized but also accurate because in their novels they clearly advocate for women’s empowerment and emancipation in a culturally appropriate manner. Lalami has noted that “I am very much a feminist for the simple reason that I think men and women are equal period, with no qualification whatsoever” (De La Cruz-Guzmán, Personal Interview). However, she also notes in the same interview that definitions of feminism can be very restrictive and that “my interest is about writing about human beings. Of course, I am interested in women. I just don’t necessarily accept the definition that others have of me being a sort of feminist writer.” Therefore, this study strives to illuminate the gynocentric work of the writers who clearly believe men and women are equal but may not be completely comfortable with the label of feminist writer and would prefer the more accurate moniker of writer. I strive to analyze their novels without projecting onto them a western paradigm of emancipation and the term feminist that they themselves may not embrace, but I also emphasize their women-centered focus in the works and integrate their known views on the topic of feminism from their many interviews.

As a Guatemalan scholar in the U.S. who works on women’s issues and feminist scholarship regarding Africa within the parameters of an English department, I realized that although it is tricky, I must avoid the superimposition of my own ideas onto Atta and Lalami. In essence, I must heed Oyewumi’s warning that people in my profession can engage in the practice of colonizing the body of text or woman for their own enrichment as scholars and try to avoid doing so. As Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton noted in their introduction to the special issue on the third generation of Nigerian writers in Research in
African Literatures, there is a “generalized perception” that the African novel of the third wave “has been hijacked by Western mechanisms of legitimation and validation, with the attendant consequence of a new canon being formed and consolidated by Euro-America around the works of writers such as Habila, Adichie, Abani, Atta, and Iweala” (ix). Therefore, I attempt to stay true to the characters, their direct comments on feminism, and the authors’ own expressed views on the subject matter. The limitation in the study then arises because I am not theorizing what kind of feminism Atta and Lalami engage or reject. Instead, I strive to walk the line of contextualizing the work of Atta and Lalami in relation to women’s composite consciousness and emancipation across the world with a focus on Jameson and Retamar’s concept of ”the internationalism of the national situation” (xi).

A final limitation of this study is that not all of each author’s published work is addressed. I limited myself to each authors’ first two novels, and I focus this study solely on this genre. Therefore, there is a need for the study of Atta’s third novel A Bit of Difference (2012), short stories, and drama, for instance, as well as Lalami’s third novel The Moor’s Account (2014), blogging text, short stories, and newspaper articles. Each author has a wealth to offer for future scholarship, but my study is limited to each author’s first two novels which also became available to readers at roughly the same time. Thus, the choice of the genre is a limitation but a necessary and useful one for this study.
Writers’ Background and Chapter Outline

Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria and was educated in Nigeria, England, and the United States. She currently lives and writes in Mississippi and has published numerous short stories and plays as well as three novels *Everything Good Will Come* (2004), *Swallow* (2009), and *A Bit of Difference* (2013), numerous plays, and the collection of short stories *Lawless* which is also published in the U.S. and England as *News from Home*. Atta reads Nigeria as a postcolonial African country that has betrayed its citizens through undisguised corruption, nationalist propaganda, and the marginalization of women. It does so even as it proclaims a myth of inclusion and empowerment that attempts to erase women’s activism, professionalization, and social consciousness. Despite the experience of the initial colonization by the British, the Nigerian men in the novel stand united as “musketeers” even as the women around them are victimized, objectified, and stigmatized.

In *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* Atta makes visible the post-independence betrayal of the people by the nationalist patriarchy which renders the women crazy if they voice dissent and threatens their social status as wives, mothers, and wage-earners if they fail to live in the constrained roles authorized by the male arbiters of culture in Nigerian society. The women’s creative response to this ontological assault is carefully explored in these novels, and the women’s empowering responses to male oppression at the individual and national levels is emancipation through action and activism. I pursue this inquiry further in the second and third chapters as I outline Enitan and Tolani’s rejection of patriarchal norms and their turn to self-empowerment and
communal woman-centered support. While these two characters begin their journeys as mere spectators in a masquerade where they must suspend disbelief in order to participate in a cultural ritual that involves the rejection of reality for the belief in simple village men embodying deities, they end the novels with an understanding that the oppressive patriarchal forces are both traditional and modern, a new understanding of the flawed men in their lives, and a refreshing understanding that it is the women who must work together for their own progress, justice, and equality in their homelands by utilizing all resources available to them. The women are also able to discern that their empowerment, happiness, and security can only come from themselves and their own actions.

Laila Lalami was born and raised in Morocco, studied in Britain and the U.S., and now teaches at the University of California, Riverside. She earned her B.A. in English from Université Mohammed V in Rabat, her M.A. from University College, London, and her Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Southern California. She is very well known for her many creative, scholarly, and political publications and for her very popular blog <moorishgirl.com> which is now renamed <lailalalami.com>. In 2005, she released her first book titled Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, and her second book Secret Son was published in April 2009. Her third novel, The Moor’s Account, was released in September of 2014.

Lalami reads and writes Morocco from the perspective of the subaltern. The disenfranchised such as the unemployed poor, the women, and the migrant workers that go to Spain provide the reader with the voice of the subaltern. Thus, Lalami makes clear that the marginalized do speak loudly in Dariya (Moroccan Arabic), Arabic, French,
Tamazight, and in local action. Lalami’s work also stands in opposition to the Odalisque-oriented writing of foreigners who exoticize Morocco in their western-focused literature, such as Paul Bowles, who Lalami openly targets in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, and Bowles’ admirers Allen Ginsburg, and William S. Burroughs. Lalami’s oeuvre makes visible the postcolonial disenfranchisement and economic deprivation for a majority of the population and the continued marginalization of women in the society’s legal, cultural, and social practices. In the novels, women develop a composite consciousness and reject a commitment to patriarchal institutions and paradigms, especially the patriarchal narrative of women’s submissiveness. They turn to their own creativity, other women, and their traditional and modern resources to anchor their emancipatory actions.

In the concluding chapter of this study, I posit the points of connection as well as points of disconnect between the four texts, and I speculate about the significance of this study. I begin by highlighting the similarities in Atta and Lalami’s use of the concept of the composite consciousness in the frame of the local tradition that serves as a unifying metaphor for each novel. I also illustrate other similarities among the four texts, the authors’ use of national history, and the very strong contrasts between the four texts and the two authors. The latter is particularly complex because the extent to which the authors propose gender reforms for the systems their characters inhabit is markedly different. This successfully problematizes women’s struggles on the African continent and demonstrates that there is no ready made answer and that local women themselves will
posit and implement the answers to their own problems based on their own experiences and resources, as well as their social, religious, and cultural contexts.

As cultural narrative frames, the Nigerian masquerade in Atta’s novels and the Moroccan storytelling in Lalami’s novels serve as a vehicle for the performance of a conventional act, a culturally situated traditional ritual, but these writers subvert the act and by doing so create an unconventional act of women’s protest leading to emancipation. They “use language to bring about a new state of affairs in the world” (Hallion), namely a new inclusive masquerade and a new storytelling paradigm. Atta and Lalami’s narratives are both reflections of the nations that engendered them and a call for these societies to change and to embrace women’s rights to equality without calling for an abrupt break with the past. Without these cultural frameworks within Atta and Lalami’s novels, the utterances and performance of womanhood that reflect the activism of women as well as the need for societal change might go unnoticed. Without public disclosure, the norms might remain unchallenged in their societies and unsupported globally. The opportunity for solidarity, group activism, and international attention are powerful tools for performing womanhood as an expression of women’s composite consciousness, and Atta and Lalami’s novels boldly write this culture-specific composite consciousness into the canon of African literature and reflect the “internationalism of the national situation.”
CHAPTER TWO: MASQUERADING MEN AND DISBELIEVING WOMEN: 
DEVELOPING A COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS IN ATTA’S EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME

Sefi Atta’s novels Everything Good Will Come (2004) and Swallow (2008) depict a gynocentric empowerment that is based on the strong tradition of women passing on knowledge and strength to their daughters combined with an eventual rejection of male normativity. Therefore, when the protagonists of Atta’s novels, Enitan and Tolani, develop a composite consciousness and conceive of solutions for the future, they envision them as closely connected to their mothers’ work, a matricentric paradigm. They plan to use their mothers’ gains as a foundation for their own development and build upon previous generations’ work to create a woman-centered reality. Given their focus on making space for women, other women also benefit from their arrangements, so they empower women in their respective communities. Both characters combine their matrilineal women’s experiences and modern European professional training to succeed while empowering themselves and other women by using the skills they have gained from both Nigerian Yoruba customs and their modern education.

This analysis of Atta’s novels uses the Nigerian tradition of the masquerade as a conceptual metaphor to understand Enitan and Tolani’s growth into self-empowered women. While the Nigerian masquerade is a central cultural concept for the two protagonists, they are initially unable to see its patriarchal foundation as well as its modern manifestations in patriarchal figures who masquerade as women’s allies. However, with time, they develop a composite consciousness and begin to understand
how their experience was influenced by oppressive traditional and modern patriarchal
norms, and they recognize their own initial willingness to be subjugated. They are then
able to reject the masquerade with its male-embodied gods in favor of a new celebration
“where the spiritual, moral and cultural education of the existing community is redefined”
(Griffiths 6). The new gynocentric paradigm allows women to thrive, to recognize their
own oppression, and to make choices for themselves. As Tolani noted when she fully
comprehends the folly of having believed in men as omniscient, omnipotent gods, “How
terrifying and how sublimate to behave like a god with the power to revive myself. This
was the option I chose” (332). The suspension of disbelief is not possible in this new
model of composite consciousness. For women unmask the oppressive males in their
lives and expose them for what they are, namely “a mini Idi-Amin sitting right there in
my home” (250). They are then able to use the traditional and modern tools at their
disposal to empower themselves.

Atta’s protagonists have the choice “to behave like a god with the power to
revive” themselves with agency so that women are the center of power and decision-
making for themselves (333). It is their new choices that allow them to thrive, and it is
their decisions that determine their own futures, including the use of their economic
resources and their bodies. After much soul-searching and observation of her society, the
new deity Enitan and Tolani embrace is themselves. Their composite paradigms enable
them to conceive of an egalitarian society in which they can thrive instead of a simple
male-centered masquerade promoting self-serving patriarchal messages. This is the hope
embodied by both Enitan’s dancing the palongo “because my heart was bubbling,” a
liberating religious dance, and creating her women-centered activism (334) and Tolani believing in herself and her community-empowering business plan.

Not surprisingly, the women’s responses, both proactive and reactive, are also a composite of their lived experiences in Nigeria and the atmosphere of European professional training that they have accumulated. They learn to use these effectively, to exercise agency, and to forge a different future for themselves, their sisters, daughters, and granddaughters. This is not merely a hybridization of Nigerian and European influences with some characteristics taking prominence, as Homi Bhabha may have articulated hybridization. Rather, it entails the creation of a composite, a synthesis of the two in which the entire elements taken from one or the other elements remain intact. The combination of two sets of experiences with distinct ties and manifestations in the indigenous Nigerian and the European, makes these women better able to address and combat injustice in their society. This must occur at multiple levels-- personal, professional, religious, social, economic, etc.—and in multiple contexts such as the rural, urban, and suburban, as well as the home, the market, and the office. Mohanty, Showalter, and Sandoval’s call for a more culture-centered scholarship are being addressed in these chapters, at least in part, by an analysis of Enitan and Tolani’s ability to use a successful integration, or composite, of contrasting cultural imprints to seek empowerment.
Unmasking Masquerading Lawyers, Fathers, and Husbands

Sefi Atta’s two novels can be read as narratives conceptually framed by the traditional Nigerian masquerade that explore the protagonists’ development of a woman’s composite consciousness that leads to their seeking self-determination in their own communities. Atta’s first novel *Everything Good Will Come* focuses on the life of Enitan Taiwo who begins the novel with the words, “From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even” (7). She is reared by her father to have a blind faith in men just as she has been conditioned to see the costumed men as deities during the masquerade. Therefore, the comparison of the effect of the masquerader on a community member at a local masquerade is useful, for it illuminates Enitan’s role as a woman required by Nigerian culture to suspend disbelief regarding patriarchy and its direct embodiment in the form of men in her life. This disbelief is a direct reflection of the one certainly required of a community member and spectator in relation to a deity, such as *Egungun*, embodied in a local man at a masquerade. Therefore, her body is inscribed by patriarchal masqueraders’ societally informed and enforced norms and expectations for women.

Enitan, as a child, is eager to please the two disciplinarians in her life. Her father, however, holds more sway over her. She complies with his wishes, ideals of comportment, and general worldview, and when ready to go to boarding school, she declares, “He was the one I would miss. The one I would write to” (40). She does so just as a community member would have to believe in the cosmology associated with the deity at a particular masquerade and be willing to ignore the obvious humanity of the
masquerader in deference to the deity. This willingness to comply is technically voluntary yet culturally dictated. Enitan’s journey from believing child to questioning adult and, finally, to rebelling woman activist develops directly in contrast to the given role of belief-driven, subservient spectator in the cultural event in Nigeria.

By using the masquerade as a cultural metaphor, I read the initial trajectory of Enitan Taiwo as that of a community member exposed to an advancing masquerader. She is reared to defer judgment just as a citizen would do before the incarnation of the deity at a masquerade. More specifically, she is trained by her father to believe that men are dedicated gynophiles who seek to empower her because “he is for the liberation of women” (21). According to Sunny, men strive to help her transcend the fate of the “kitchen martyr,” the oppressed woman of the previous generation who spends her life sacrificed to cooking and caring for a household and a husband (39). Her belief in her father as her benefactor eradicates the doubts raised by women’s voices, such as that of her own mother who counters his grand statements with the simple retort “All women except your wife” (21). She is indoctrinated into the mindset that women spend their lives lived in dedication to the quotidian patriarchal deities of father, husband, and son.

Furthermore, she is expected to believe not only that patriarchy is a thing of the past but also that the men are on her side, namely a form of enlightened sexism as defined by Susan Douglas. For instance, in the following exchange which takes place in the kitchen while his wife and daughter make a meal for him, her father skillfully transfers the appearance of patriarchal enforcement to her mother while exculpating himself. He then portrays himself as a messiah figure for her regarding gender.
‘I see your mother is making you understudy her again.’

“It won’t harm her to be in here,” she said.

“You should tell her young girls don’t do this anymore, “ he said.

“Who said?” my mother asked.

“And if she asks where you learned such nonsense, tell her from your father and he’s for the liberation of women.”

He stood at attention and saluted. My father was not a serious man, I thought.

“All women except your wife,” my mother said. (21)

The privileged embodiment of patriarchy, Sunny succeeds in promoting adoration for him in his daughter and in vilifying her mother, the realist who denounces him and his misogynist practices, thereby making the mother seem imbalanced, almost crazy.

Skillfully planned and executed by her father who works it out backwards just as he has taught her to do with the game of ayo, Enitan’s father’s worldview colors her own. When she is going to boarding school, for instance, he coaches her in the following manner.

“And join the debating society, not the girl guides. Girl guides are nothing but kitchen martyrs in the making.”

“What is that?”

“What you don’t want to be. You want to be a lawyer?” (39).

In this passage, he dictates to her without explaining the reasons behind his advice. If he did provide an explanation of the kitchen martyr, he would have to reveal who these women cook for, and why it is so socially expected that they do so. Ironically, Enitan
says that in a Nigerian woman’s life there are three major hallmarks: childbearing, wedding day, and graduation day, in that order. This means that her destiny automatically included kitchen duty to feed husband and child, but he focuses her on the latter, the graduation into his profession. This is the very belief that her father asks of her. He wants her to believe that the patriarchal order does not apply to her because equality is a reality for her.

However, the reality of a Nigerian woman’s lived experience is that “the sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do” (Bartky 77). In this case, cooking and bearing children are seminal, but the professional degree is also included as an emancipatory factor that distracts from the fact that women are still required to do the former even while now also exercising careers. They are called to do too much. They now carry the burdens of traditional expectations of work at home as well as the modern ones of professional endeavors in the world beyond the home, and both are to the benefit of the men they marry. As Enitan later states, “It was an overload of duties, I thought, sometimes self-imposed. And the expectation of subordination bothered me most. How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I’d seen? touched? Obey him without choking on my humility, like a fish bone down my throat” (187).

However, her mother-in-law insists, "You, yourself, you must learn that a woman makes sacrifices in her life. It shouldn't take anything out of you to indulge your husband for the sake of peace in your house" (302). Therefore, the men demand the submission, but other women also continue to enforce it. They provide the invisible patriarchal discipline of the
“everyone” in society that enforces women’s subjugation and compliance with male norms.

Once she earns her own professional credentials, Enitan would challenge this notion of enlightened sexism her father, boyfriend, and husband promote. However, her father would repeatedly call her spoiled, ignore her protests, and threaten to take away his material support if she did not tread carefully. He refuses to acknowledge the patriarchal order in which he thrives. He will not acknowledge that he is also an oppressor in this system, as evidenced by his ex-wife’s experience as well as that of his daughter and employees. Furthermore, he has the social and economic power to enforce the silence of his wife and daughter. Meanwhile, he is fully enjoying the support of his male friends and colleagues who take the normative oppression of women as a given and support each other in the upholding of the status quo.

Framing the Nigerian Novels in the Nigerian Masquerade

I selected the masquerade as a metaphor for the subjugation of women in Nigeria in Sefi Atta’s two novels because these social celebrations, often referred to as *Egungun*, were once a recurring and constant part of Nigerian life and relegated women to the role of believers and spectators without agency. These masquerades were cultural and religious celebrations practiced locally across the country with a myriad of variations across ethnic, geographical, social, and linguistic boundaries, but the represented deities were always embodied by men. These masquerades were essential to community life because “the masquerades of Nigeria display a highly animated ritualistic form of masked
dancing, where the masks personify ghosts from the past, where evil is exorcised, where purification is invoked, where the spiritual, moral and cultural education of the existing community is redefined” (Griffiths 6). Therefore, the metaphor of the masquerade is particularly very useful across national ethnicities, languages, places, and social practices in a nation with a great diversity of ethnic and language groups. Despite the deep divisions within Nigeria, for example the case of the Biafran War, the masquerade metaphor can be used to analyze fiction produced across ethnic and linguistic groups, and it can yield a more culturally grounded analysis.

These masquerades generally followed a similar pattern. They took place before a feast or special occasion demanding the presence of the gods and their mediums, “with male spiritual prerogatives where men act as priests to lineage ancestors and spirits” while women are relegated to the role of believers (Reed). As David Griffiths noted, “the masqueraders learn the theatrical skills as a means of taking on the correct and ritualistic form of their ancestral religion. They and their masqueraders are fundamental to the spiritual well-being of their community” (Griffiths 2). The day would begin normally and then be transformed by the masquerade. In most instances, a lead male dancer would begin the masquerade procession to the central gathering place or arena, and “he precedes the masquerade pouring a libation and invoking the ancestors to provide a safe and nimble performance” (Erekosima). The quotidian is disrupted by the masqueraders, men wearing elaborate costumes and masks representing a particular deity, who call people to a central gathering place to witness and welcome the gods’ intervention into community life and begin the conveyance of messages. In Atta’s texts, the home of the patriarch is
the central gathering place of Enitan and Tolani’s home communities, and their fathers represent the very masqueraders for whom they must suspend disbelief in order to believe in their goodness and power unquestioningly.

The masquerade gods are always male-embodied, thereby preserving what Bess Reed referred to in *African Arts* as an “upholding [of] the traditional organization of gender” in society through the masquerade. In fact, the men must train to become masqueraders. As David Griffiths notes in *The Masquerades of Nigeria and Touch*, “masqueraders are regarded as special people in their communities forging a crucial and fundamental link between past and present generations. Their methods of displaying and presenting their ancestry, is handed down with ritualistic care and thoroughness from generation to generation” (Griffiths 2). Victor Emenuga, a member of the Umuchu cultural troupe of Nigeria argues that "masquerade is exclusively for men. It's a macho thing” (Egondu Uzo). Therefore, Enitan and Tolani are allowed to participate only as children—the girl child is not rejected because she is required to align with the male perspective presented by her father in order to gain access. She is initially allowed into the circle of the masquerader but only to build up his image. They must only participate by singing, believing, and listening to what the deity or ancestor wishes to convey.

For both girl-children in Atta’s novels, it is their father, the masquerader, who can provide a reprieve from the less desired female-centered activities of the household, such as cooking. However, this relief form women’s work is only possible if each is willing to believe in the father figure’s goodness, progressive gender notions, and egalitarian mindset unquestioningly. Therefore, given the father’s patronage, his is the gaze that the
girls fear, the one they live up to, and the one they believe to be all-seeing. He is the motivation for their gendered restrictions and their internalized oppression. He is the very embodiment of patriarchal expectation and normativity, the panopticon, but patriarchy remains unseen by Enitan and Tolani because they believe in the goodness of their fathers. Furthermore, these girls experience normative patriarchal expectations which they strive to meet because “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment (Bartky 72). Both girls live with this gaze initially, and it is only later that they are able to identify it as a double consciousness and then to progress into a rebellion against patriarchal normativity and worship.

Enitan and Tolani initially suspend disbelief and doubts about their father’s credibility and dismiss all other important figures in their lives, such as the mother and influential uncles and aunts, in favor of the father and his privileged patriarchal worldview. Their lovers and employers would also share this privileged patriarchal worldview with the father, and they would enforce its norms and regulations in their relationships with them. The father’s detrimental influence on the girl child is then replicated later in her life by male characters who suffocate beginning attempts at empowerment and activism. For instance, both Enitan and Tolani’s experience their fathers’ exploitation of their mothers’ labor even while the men claim to be the women’s benefactors and to support them financially (25, 158 respectively). Similarly, once Enitan and Tolani join the workforce as adults, employers expect the protagonists to work without complaint for less than a living wage because it is expected that they are
dependent on a man financially supporting them regardless of their wedded status. They are also expected to be grateful to their paternalistic employers and to treat them with deference although these men capitalize on their labor and use their power to enrich themselves or sexually harass the women that work for them. When the grown child, now a woman, is unwilling to comply to the male demands for full faith in their good intentions and their knowing what is best for her, the woman is treated as a child, dismissed from their intimate circle, and deemed a nuisance, immature, guilty of thinking too hard, and a bad woman. Sunny tells Enitan that she is a spoiled child when she demands a living wage and Tolani is dismissed from her father’s inner circle when she is old enough to understand her father’s shortcomings. As adults, both characters are threatened with the infamous Nigerian tag of “bad woman” when they refuse to comply with privileged patriarchal expectations of submission and deference.

In Atta’s novels, the two girls develop in a similar pattern from children who fully believe in their father’s embodiment of an empowering metaphorical deity to grown women who finally refuse to suspend disbelief, question openly, and reject patriarchal norms and imperatives in favor of independent, woman-centered lives in which “everything good will come” (335). This is a life that is more connected to the reality of the Nigerian woman’s life and her plight in a corrupt misogynist society. In this context, the women are able to see the misguidance of the male, whether it be a father, boyfriend, or husband, who actually believed themselves omniscient deities regarding women’s lives and send clear messages that “nothing good will come” to women who disobey them (335). Moreover, these two women understand the potential for rejecting these
entitled masqueraders. They embrace the more grounded possibilities of believing, instead, in the real women before them, such as their mothers, great aunts, and grandmothers who fight for their prosperity. These role models have shown a dedication to justice, equality, and power for women. These ancestor women, including grandmothers, mothers, and great aunts, ask Enitan and Tolani to question, to agitate, to take risks, and to identify, name, and denounce the corrupt patriarchy that underscores Nigerian society and culture, thereby providing their own ancestors’ input, just like that to be expected at a phallocentric masquerade. In other words, their female ancestors teach them that they must recognize the wrongdoing of the men in their lives, name it, denounce it, and turn their attention to work that undermines the patriarchy that oppresses women in Nigerian society.

In a masquerade, however, there is a basic requirement for the community: it must believe. The people have to believe in the masked individuals who are embodying or channeling deities and to believe that the deities actually obscure the personality of the male body being used. This is the base requirement for participation, and this negates a male’s own character in favor of the god-figure he may be channeling. In the masquerade, the tradition begins with a parade as the gods dance their way into the central gathering. In the novels, the male characters parade their way into the narrative embodying various typical social and political figures, and the women, the protagonists in these novels, are like the spectators called to celebrate them, venerate them, and to believe in them based on sheer will.
Therefore, in Atta’s novels, the characters enter the narrative separately. The reader is introduced to Enitan, who is willing to believe in the masqueraders that are the men in her life, Sunny, Mike, and Niyi and to venerate them as exceptions to the societal norms, positive anomalies, and faithful women lovers, just as Tolani does with her father, Sanwo, and Godwin. However, this faith is based on sheer will alone on the women’s part because, like the attendees at the masquerades, they can see, if they would look closely, that the men standing before them are not unique but actually just men with feet. They are flawed and human, and they are more or less misogynists according to their own upbringing and their own means. Thus, the men in Enitan and Tolani’s life are initially idealized, idolized, and ultimately submitted to because these characters chose to partake in the masquerade and in its basic requirement of a willing suspension of disbelief.

These women finally acquire a healthy sense of disbelief in their lives based on their lived experiences and then begin to see the patriarchal infrastructure of neo-colonial Nigeria. They then perform a different dance. A dance of independence. A dance of liberation. A dance of disbelief. In Enitan’s case, she performs her revised proverb, narrative, and blessing: “everything good will come.” In taking the role of the dancer, she ushers in a new parade, paradigm, and ideal: justice. Enitan with her wriggling dance and song and Tolani with her new belief in herself as her own deity, her business plans, and her newly-found voice establish that a new way is possible for women in their communities. However, it is also a reality that women’s empowerment won’t be welcomed by men who do not wish to lose the advantages of being near-deities. Therefore, women must keep dancing, defying, and disbelieving men if they are to be
free and to usher in a new age in which “everything good will come” and “no story should remain untold” (Swallow 265).

Masquerades as Composite Cultural Celebrations

The masquerade framework elucidates the character development of Atta’s two protagonists, and it adds depth and insight into this analysis that is grounded in a culture-specific composite women’s consciousness. I must note here that while some ethnic groups had maintained regular masquerade practices, it was in the Nigerian post-civil war periods of the 1970s and 1980s that with new governmental focus and, more importantly, state funds designated under the “Unity in Diversity” slogan, masquerades were re-invigorated across the country. However, “some of this renewed interest in masking was a continuation of earlier patterns, while much of it could be classified under ‘invented tradition,’ as new elements were constantly introduced to the iconography and manner of performance” (Bentor 32). Therefore, what is considered a traditional masquerade is often a composite marked by modernity and its efforts to recapture the indigenous as a building block of a unified post-Biafran Nigerian identity.

In 2008, Eli Bentor wrote, “This revival is now a thing of the past. Masked performances have largely disappeared from public view,” but Atta provides a narrative framework that is a homage to this cultural institution. At the same time, Atta’s novels also implicitly acknowledge that “the language of cultural revival, popular in the 1970s and ‘80s, is employed here as a pretext for politicking” (Bentor 40). The very men who would be masked gods in a traditional masquerade are also now taking advantage of these
cultural traditions’ effects on the historical national psyche to promote their own agendas of gendered and corrupt Nigerian politics. In other words, they have fallen victims to the pitfalls of national consciousness as outlined by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* because “the native bourgeoisie which comes to power uses its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners” (155) instead of using its power to align with the needs of the masses.

The narrative structure of *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* seems to mirror the political reality outlined by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. However, the female protagonists create an anti-masquerade that involves, instead of a gendered corrupt politics, an activist’s empowerment and agitation for a just nation. Furthermore, the use of the *palongo*, a long-respected and powerful dance of protest and spiritual liberation, as the counter-masquerade is no coincidence in Atta’s first novel. After all, it is a woman-centered narrative that problematizes male dominated myths of spiritual embodiment.

In fact, through the *palongo*, the anti-masquerade in this reading, Atta illustrates the point that “women weave their path into, and out of, the nationalist script, as they take up, and then subvert, the positions into which they have been subjected” (Samuelson 236). Furthermore, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, “Post-coloniality is after all this; and its post, like postmodernism’s, is also a post that challenges earlier legitimating narratives. And it challenges them in the name of the suffering victims of ‘more than thirty republics’” in Africa (123). Therefore, the unity, plurality, and coherence are simultaneous and the challenge is not simply to the colonial grand narrative and the
oppressive nationalist ones that arose in the former’s absence but rather also an affirmation project in which indigenous women with composite experiences of the traditional and the modern vie for acknowledgement, existence and voice, and self-representation.

Citing the Nigerian Masquerade in Atta’s Novels

Before continuing the analysis of *Everything Good Will Come* as conceptually grounded and framed in the metaphor of the masquerade, I must note that Atta makes several overt references to the masquerade as a quintessential cultural register and landmark in these two novels. These references reflect the narrative frame, and they remind the reader that the concept of the masquerade is firmly grounded in every Nigerian’s cultural consciousness. In Atta’s first novel, for instance, the first reference to a masquerader is in Enitan’s description of Sheri’s strength. Enitan says, “sometimes masqueraders came out for Christmas or for some other festival, dancing in their raffia gowns and ghoulish masks. Sheri knew them all: the ones who stood on stilts, the ones who looked like stretched out accordions and flattened to pancakes. It was juju, she said, but she was not scared. Not even of the eyo who dressed in white sheets like spirits of the day and whipped women who didn’t cover their heads” (34). Enitan expresses admiration for her friend who fully understands the fear that these masqueraders induce in people, acknowledges their relevance to traditional religion, and then dismisses them.

Sheri is not awed by them because she refuses to suspend disbelief. She says she knows them all because she is referring to the men who embody the deities and spirits.
She is not awed because she focuses on the men as human beings she knows from the neighborhood. She sees them for what they are flawed human beings attempting to embody gods. However, she does not see another way for women to get along without them. Therefore, she knows and understands that they are men under the costumed deities, and she refuses to be awed, to believe, and to obey blindly. When she does give in to them it is either by force (rape) or by design to get something she wants. She does not participate in the masquerade in the traditional way expected of a woman because she does not believe in the deity and she refuses to ignore the flesh and bone men before her. Ultimately, Enitan is in awe of Sheri because she, herself, suspends disbelief and fears the specter of the masquerader. Unlike Sheri, she does believe in the deity, and she is willing to believe that men can channel a deity. Therefore, she is initially more vulnerable to men’s oppression and she sometimes willingly accepts it.

The second reference to the masquerader in the text of Atta’s first novel is very telling of Enitan’s character, her reaction to men, and her full willingness to suspend disbelief. As a child, when her brother is ill, she says, "Whenever he was in hospital, I preferred to hide under my bed than to visit him, and after he died, I worried that he would visit me like an ugly masquerader" (174). Enitan fears the spirits behind the masquerading men, and she fears the men, too. Therefore, she fears that anything she does wrong will bring the wrath of the “ugly masquerader” in the same way that she fears the wrath of the live men in her life. This is particularly apt because the ugly masqueraders in her life are her father, past boyfriend, and husband.
In an effort not to evoke the anger of the males in her life, Enitan actually suspends disbelief about their patriarchal privilege and desires, works with them to oppress other women, such as her mother, and obeys without questioning for the majority of her life. When she does begin to question, she realizes that her fear of a masquerader was unfounded. These are simply men with an extensive patriarchal infrastructure that allows them to demand submission and to make their privilege invisible. Therefore, it is the men in her life that begin to scare her, and this causes her to rebel and to begin to agitate for a different Nigeria. Finally, she ousts Niyi, her “own mini Idi Amin,” from her life and takes charge so that she can create a woman-centered existence for her daughter (250).

Therefore, the two direct references to masquerade in her work provide great insight into Enitan’s character. At the end of the novel, she is like Sheri. She knows the masqueraders, who they are, what they do, and how to combat them. Therefore, she takes on the role of the dancer, and she dances a new order into existence with a very culturally grounded choice, the *palongo*. This spiritual dance of protest grounds Enitan in a community of activism, a pursuit of equality and justice, and a focus on human and civil rights. The change is dramatic, and the masquerade is a key metaphor to explore in her development from a mere spectator suspending disbelief to an active participant dictating the course and focus of a social and cultural movement.

In the use of this metaphorical tool in the analysis of Enitan Taiwo’s character, the purpose of her father’s masquerade is to entertain her by focusing her attention on her privilege and her difference as the modern and privileged daughter of a Cambridge-
trained lawyer in post-independence Nigeria. However, the assumed social and practical “purpose of masquerade can be to entertain, to commend achievers, to chastise evil-doers, to bring messages of hope, peace, or impending disaster, to mourn the dead or to receive a special newborn, or to grace a ceremonial occasion like a festival” (Egondu Uzo). Sunny’s masquerade distracts her from the reality of a highly structured and deeply embedded patriarchal infrastructure in Nigerian customs which is already present with indigenous law, also called native law throughout the text, but then also codified by modern legislation. As a privileged oppressor, her father expects her to be blind to this legal system’s patriarchal tendencies and to the realities of living in Nigeria as a woman. He encourages this blindness by providing her with the protective mantle of money and class privilege. Ironically, after working for him in his legal firm, she begins to see his own privilege of class, as well as its detrimental effects on his employees and her mother, Arine. It is then that Enitan begins to question somewhat hesitantly the mask of innocence he wears (94).

Furthermore, using this metaphor of the masquerade as a tool for analysis of *Everything Good Will Come* entails identifying the figure of the masquerader in the novel as her father, Bandele Sunday (Sunny) Taiwo, her former boyfriend, Mike Obi, and her husband, Niyi Franco. In the course of the novel, these men all require that she is blind to their motives, actions, and privilege in the society. They also require her to believe that she is empowered, equal, and liberated. She must follow them into the center of Lagos society as the daughter, girlfriend, and wife who believes in their lies, their entitlement, and their professional, moral, and ethical superiority to her.
Sunny Taiwo is the masquerader who sets up, like many other fathers, the paradigm of patriarchal domination. He is the first generation of educated indigenous Nigerians who go to England to receive professional degrees and return to rule the post-colonial nation in various positions as heads of government, commerce, and the oil industry. He and his friends and colleagues see themselves as special crusaders, “three musketeers in the heart of darkness, they called themselves there” (9). Upon their return, however, they take full advantage of the indigenous and colonial practices that mark their bodies as privileged, and they perpetuate gender and class oppression.

In this way, independence changes little for the average citizen and for the average woman in Nigeria since the political instability and corruption of the oil industry continue the average citizen’s oppression. In particular, these men expect their wives to behave in traditional ways that include serving them, cooking for them and all visitors in the household, and bearing and raising their children. The formal degrees the women acquired are just “dusty certificates” that add prestige but no freedom to a woman’s life because Sunny’s generation would rather “generously” give with strings attached but would not pay a woman a fair wage or empower her to succeed independently. Her mother complains, “The man gave me nothing. Nothing, for all his education, he’s as typical as they come” (94). Since Enitan fails to heed her warnings about the reality of women’s condition in Nigeria, her mother comments, “If he’s no good to me, he’s no good to you. The day you realize it, I’ll be here waiting for you. The damage has been done already. You’re still too blind to know” (93). In other words, he has been successful in getting his daughter to believe in his goodness and her mother’s passivity.
The patriarchal indoctrination is into a blind faith in men in which women are already equal unless they choose consciously to opt for the kitchen martyr status. In other words, it is an enlightened sexism. According to Susan Douglas,

Enlightened sexism insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism -- indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved -- so now it's OK, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women. After all, these images can't undermine women at this late date, right? More to the point, enlightened sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power, power that is fun, and power that men not only will not resent, but also will embrace. (9)

Sunny’s version incorporates the additional myth that men like him have made this liberation possible. In other words, he has nurtured an incorrect assessment of the condition of women in Nigeria. He has also encouraged her exceptional career while downplaying that it is a token and that he held the power to promote or squash her success at will.

Thus, when Enitan discovers the real problem behind her mother’s dependence on her father, she reflects on her own position as his employee. Despite having earned high degrees, she earns low wages. He reaps the benefits of his thriving law firm without a thought for his employees. As a result, he creates an inherent dependence on him and enforces gendered expectations of a “good” woman. Therefore, as her eyes are opened, she muses,
I had always believed my mother chose to depend on my father. The evidence was there in her dusty certificates. Now I felt no different from her, driving the car he had bought. My father would give a car, but he would not pay me enough to buy myself one. If I were taking the car with me, I deserved it. If my mother took a house, two houses even, she deserved them. The power had always been in my father's hand. (152)

She realizes that her labor would have purchased her the car if he had paid fair wages, and she also realizes that her father appropriated the monetary benefits of her mother’s labor as well. She then approaches her mother for a more thorough understanding of how her own family’s history reflects the patriarchal order that she has just understood. In fact, she has just begun to see her own life as a reflection of her mother’s.

There, within her own family, she discovers the indigenous patriarchal order that subjugated her grandmothers, scarred both her parents psychologically, and is now replicated in a modern fashion by so called enlightened professional men. According to Douglas, “Enlightened sexism insists that women have made plenty of progress” so it justifies the resurrection of sexist stereotypes, patriarchal expectations, and paternalistic beneficence (9). In the same manner, Sunny resurrects the stereotypes to oppress the very women he should have actually empowered, as illustrated by his designation of kitchen martyr to his wife and spoiled and entitled to his daughter. Therefore, he proves his wife right, for she says, “The man gave me nothing” (94). Instead, he masquerades as a deity of human rights and a man of conscience who espouses women’s rights, and he is, as a masquerader, initially successful in converting his daughter for the majority of her life.
However, once she is an adult, he more forcibly encourages her to comply with societal expectations. For instance, when questioned about pregnancy by him, she says I asked why they harassed women this way. We were greater than our wombs, greater than the sum of our body parts.

'For God's sake,' my father said solemnly. 'I'm not playing here'

...

I shrunk to the size of my womb (188).

In Nigerian society, Atta implies, women are not greater than their wombs, as childbearing is the number one priority in a woman’s life with marriage a close second.

In this passage, Enitan’s father is making the expectation explicit to his daughter.

He then continues to point out her expected roles in society throughout the novel. However, she can now identify them for what they are, unjust patriarchal norms. For instance, in a later exchange, he says,

'He is afraid like a woman.'

He noticed my expression and pulled a face to imitate mine.

'What? How come your husband let you out of the house anyway?'

I laughed. 'I'm not a pet.'

'You modern wives.' (195)

In this instance, her father gives her a clear indication of his own stereotypes. He also illustrates his expectations that she submit to her husband’s will since the latter is attempting to keep her at home during the pregnancy. In addition, the term “modern wives” is a derogatory one that connotes a bad woman in her society. Therefore, Enitan
realizes that while he could technically be generous with his own gendered expectations, he expects her to submit to her husband.

Meanwhile, Niyi Franco, Enitan’s husband, follows closely in his father-in-law’s practices because he has been trained in the exercise of male privilege by his own father, just as masqueraders were carefully taught their practices, according to David Griffiths (4). It is a family legacy, he would say, like becoming lawyers or masqueraders. He comes from a Brazilian family of three generations of lawyers. Therefore, all the male heirs are expected to follow in the profession. Meanwhile, the women are required to become stay-at-home mothers upon the birth of the first child, regardless of their own professional accomplishments. He believes himself enlightened and claims amongst friends partying in his home that “I can't stop her. She's the boss in this house” (199). However, he demands that Enitan cook for his family and guests, that she do as he says, and that she comply to his limitations of her movement. Meanwhile, she publicly pretends that she is free of domesticity and gendered divisions of labor, thereby contributing to his image as an enlightened, progressive man, just like her father.

This key incident in which her husband claims that Enitan rules their lives and sets the standards in their home although he expects her to provide all the labor for the party is reminiscent of a similar incident between her parents at a social gathering in which her father does the same. Her mother was late to appear at the dinner party in her own home because she was in the kitchen taking care of the cooking. When she does appear, exhausted from the preparations but well dressed and beautiful, “My father accepted congratulations for spoiling his wife. ‘My money goes to her,’ he said” (25).
However, she had provided the labor for the party, but it was completely ignored. It was a credit to her husband that her mother was beautiful, and she is charged with being spoiled even as she has just spent an entire day laboring around the house and cooking for her many guests without any monetary recompense. Her labor is invisible as a product of her effort. Therefore, she is alienated from the product of her labor since her husband gets to take full credit for anything she creates and produces in his home. Thus, the two women are akin to the Nigerian artists called to the masquerading deity’s house to create beautiful art for which they cannot take credit since it is an honor to be chosen to labor for the gods. Furthermore, not only does Enitan’s father take full credit for the product just as the gods are entitled to do, but he also does so for her own physical body, and its ornamentation, as a commodity. It is traded for prestige in this society, and he takes full advantage.

According to Enitan’s evaluation of women in Nigeria, at least those she has seen, there are three types of acceptable women in society: strong and silent, chatterbox but cheerful, and weak and kindhearted and "all the rest were known as horrible women" (200). However, once Enitan develops a composite consciousness of her patriarchal oppression, she posits through her actions and words a fourth viable option for women: strong, cheerful, vocal, and combative. While the society would deem it automatically a part of the horrible women category, she posits this category as the psychologically healthy alternative for the woman who resists patriarchy. Of course, it is a marginalized position, but it successfully resists patriarchal normativity and proposes new roles for women through gynocentric activism. It is here, she posits, that the subaltern can speak,
and she makes room so that her voice and that of other activists may be heard over the
deafering din of patriarchal demands and expectations in Nigeria.

In the meantime, Enitan processes the problems with the other three options
currently available to her. For instance, her mother in law is a perfect example of what is
wrong with these patriarchal expectations. She says, "Toro Franco. She was one of those
women who swallowed her voice from the day she married" (182). Enitan’s mother-in-
law refuses to acknowledge that the kitchen is lonely and not nice (183). She will not
tolerate a woman’s resistance to her husband, and she refuses to see that these sexist
practices are detrimental to the health of both husband and wife. For instance, while "her
husband was a man who liked his stews prepared the traditional way” he uses this
preference to induce her to spend all her time in the kitchen cooking for him and the boys
because he liked it done in a specific manner that he associates with her, including “meat
fried, in thence groundnut oil” (183). Furthermore, he refuses to eat food at home that is
not made directly by her because “he loved his wife so much he wouldn't eat stews
prepared by anyone but her” (183). While this might seem like a compliment, a
dedication to the marriage and his partner, the reality is that it is an apparatus of power to
control his wife, her movement, her labor, and her mind. As a consequence, “forty-five
years later, he had bad arteries and her hands were as dry and shriveled as the meat she
fried" (183). In this example, Enitan carefully outlines not only how harmful these
patriarchal expectations can be for women but also how detrimental they can be for the
men, their health, and their sense of justice.
Niyi’s father’s values are clearly passed down from one generation to the next just as masqueraders’ “methods of displaying and presenting their ancestry” were passed down the male lineage (Griffiths 2). Therefore, Niyi is trained in the patriarchal norm and fears his parents’ judgment regarding Enitan’s work and her attempts to remain independent within the marriage and free of the shackles in the kitchen. When she expresses these concerns regarding her expected submission, especially about being expected to cook for Niyi’s brothers, he impatiently retorts,

'Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me woman wrapper.'

Wrapper was the cloth women tied around their waists. Woman wrapper was a weak man, controlled by his woman. I though he was paranoid. I said it was too bad. He was the very person who had encouraged me to be strong at work. He was asking me to fly within specified perimeters. (185)

However, for Niyi the work assertiveness is fully acceptable because it is a matter of honor for him to have a successful wife. However, within the parameters of the home, he wants submission. In the home, there is no room for the very assertiveness he encourages at her place of employment. In the home, she must defer to him. As a male, he is expected to control his wife. Enitan then realizes that if one reverses the above statement, “Woman wrapper was a weak man, controlled by his wife,” one gets “Woman is a weak person, controlled by her husband.” The latter is an accepted normative rule in Nigeria while the former statement implies an abnormality needing correction because the male is normally strong and in control in her society. She finds this appalling, so she complains
vociferously. However, she does nothing about it because she is only at the beginning stages of developing a composite consciousness and understanding, rebelling, and agitating so that she can set her own norms.

As she develops a consciousness of the combined traditional and modern patriarchal forces in her life, the blinders do eventually fall away from Enitan’s eyes. When they do, she fastens her gaze on the proof of her father’s patriarchal privilege and his active traditional and modern oppression of his wife and daughter as well as his support of the patriarchal order in general. The same happens with her husband who is not innocently dependent on her but expects her subjugation as a matter of course, especially once she has a child. Her reaction is not submissiveness. Unlike Niyi’s mother, Toro Franco, who swallowed her voice (182) and came to believe so strongly in the masqueraders of patriarchy that she is completely coopted and enforces the norms of women’s oppression, Enitan does not comply. Therefore, Enitan’s reaction, absolute resistance, use of her traditional and modern tools for empowerment, and separation from him, is all the more surprising to Niyi who had a similar experience with his first wife. However, he never processed his first wife’s rejection of his patriarchal family system. He refused to see his own part in her disillusionment and her decision to leave. Therefore, he never understood that it was the patriarchal mode, assumed to be the norm by him, that alienated her and caused her to leave him with her son in arms just as his second wife now leaves him with their daughter in arms.

Enitan gives this rejection to the patriarchal Franco norm, deemed feminist by men, a proper description when she states, "Sometimes it felt like I was fighting
annihilation. But surely it was in the interest of self-preservation to fight what felt like annihilation? If a person swiped at a fly and the fly flew higher, would the fly become a flyist? " (200). Therefore, she becomes what her society would derogatorily consider a dreaded insult word—feminist—simply because she embraces the emancipation of women from the kitchen and the expectation of marriage and childbearing.

Enitan embraces her composite consciousness and its emancipatory drive and openly comes to recognize that,

No man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their heads, with necks as high as church spires and foreheads crushed. (187).

She does not want to be one of the women forced to comply with oppressive societal practices, and she cannot envision becoming as subservient as her mother-in-law, which is the only option for her in her husband’s eyes. Ironically, she is living up to her father’s idealist lies when she decides to rely on herself as a trained professional, refuses the kitchen martyr role, and leaves her oppressive home environment. After all, she posits,

Too many women, I thought, ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion: shift-shift, prod-prod and then nothing. As far back as my grandmother's generation we'd been getting degrees and holding careers. My mother's generation were the pioneer professionals. We, their daughters, were expected to continue. We had no choice in the present recession. But there was a
saying, and I'd only ever heard it said by other women, that books were not edible.

It was an overload of duties, I thought, sometimes self-imposed. And the expectation of subordination bothered me most. (187).

After all, she is a London University-trained lawyer who has actually practiced law, works as a company secretary for a major corporation, and is very young and full of potential compared to her older locally trained husband. Once she is conscious of her oppression by men, she is able to access the transgenerational women’s empowerment that had opened the doors for her to gain a solid traditional upbringing and a modern education that facilitated her economic self-sufficiency.

Despite his shortcomings as a husband, father, and professional, he attempts to control Enitan’s movements, relegate her to the kitchen, and undermine her. Therefore, she rejects his control by openly saying, “I mean how can I decide what to do about my father from a kitchen? Come to think of it, how can I decide anything with a mini Idi Amin sitting right there in my home?” (250). Once she recognizes his gendered dictatorial tendencies, she rebels openly. This rejection of his control also implies, by definition, an ousting of the dictator if emancipation is to be the goal. Reforms are not possible, and she opts slowly for the overthrow of his oppressive paradigm of marriage. For the second time in his life, the separation leaves him a dictator without someone to control.

The dictator comparison seems apt in her domestic environment, and once she names the oppression, she realizes that there is an opportunity to be free. However, it
entails rejecting normative social values in Nigeria. Furthermore, her composite consciousness and its ensuing movement toward emancipation entails facing a life alone without the auspices of a man in a phallocentric society. More importantly, it means that her daughter will grow up the child of divorced parents, and she will not have a father living with her. The latter is no small consideration for her because Enitan’s own father was the major formative figure in her childhood. It is only in adulthood that she remembers her mother and her gifts. She recovers what her father had erased. Thus, she chooses to share this with her daughter so that she may be strong and grounded in women’s reality in Nigeria, not the masquerader’s cosmology and privilege as Enitan once was.

With her choice to abandon the marital home and shift to her mother’s house, Enitan chooses to give her daughter a composite consciousness and to teach her baby girl that there is no need to believe in masqueraders. They are simply men. They are simply men, both traditional and modern, pretending to be gods, and they gain power from every woman who chooses to believe them. Enitan can spare her daughter the disappointment and teach her to believe in herself instead of men, to question, and to defy when necessary. She can teach her to use all the traditional and modern tools at her disposal to resist oppression. A proactive approach colors Enitan’s choices when she decides to leave her husband. She plans carefully, avoids emotions, and does not deprive her child of access to her father. Instead, with her traditions and her modern education, she builds a gynocentric community to nourish the child’s spirit, and she rejoices in her performance of the palongo, the anti-masquerading dance of liberation in *Everything Good Will Come*. 
CHAPTER THREE: AFFIRMING TRANS-GENERATIONAL PROGRESS:
STOPPING THE BEATING DRUMS OF PATRIARCHAL TRANCE IN ATTA’S
SWALLOW

Building on the empowerment of Enitan Taiwo in my analysis of Everything Good Will Come, in this chapter I utilize Swallow (2008) to illustrate how Sefi Atta goes one step further in the depiction of women’s transgenerational empowerment through the development of a composite consciousness. Instead of the masquerade, Atta depicts the creation of a woman-centered alternative celebration of community and the refusal of the two most oppressive societal requirements in a woman’s life: marriage and motherhood. In Swallow, Atta builds on Enitan’s matricentric empowerment and writes the protagonist Tolani’s character so that she more quickly outgrows her belief in her father as a messenger of the gods and as her benefactor. She grows, instead, to see her mother and her Great Aunt Iya Alaro’s transgenerational support of her as the key to empowerment. Tolani then rejects the society’s patriarchal norms, and she dispenses with both the social requirements for a woman to marry and to have a child. Thus, this novel’s main character is more decisive in her refusal to comply with patriarchal norms than Enitan, and she forges her own liberating options through a composite consciousness and a paradigm of transgenerational women’s support.

Tolani Ajao, the protagonist in Sefi Atta’s second novel, Swallow, develops a woman’s composite consciousness and, building on her mother’s empowerment, becomes part of a trans-generational movement to achieve a greater sense of self-determination within her Nigerian community. The initial position of Tolani is that of a
community member, a subservient spectator, exposed to an advancing masquerader. As the daughter of a distinguished traditional drummer, she is reared to defer judgment about men just as a citizen would do before the incarnation of the deity at a masquerade, so she is expected to be blind to men’s normative privilege. She is taught that her father’s calling as a drummer is a calling to deliver the messages of deities. Furthermore, she is trained by her father to believe that men are important, gifted, and supportive of women.

Given the masquerade’s popularity in Nigeria, the powerful social assertion that men’s power is akin to that of the gods they embody eradicates the doubts raised by women’s quiet voices of protest. Thus, Tolani’s father initially holds more sway over her during childhood than her mother, and the girl complies to his ideals of comportment and his general worldview although she is vaguely aware that her mother behaves and believes differently. Tolani believes in her father just as a community member would have to believe in the cosmology associated with the deity at a particular masquerade. Like the community member, she has to be willing to ignore the obvious humanity of the masquerader, namely her father, in deference to the deity represented. This willingness to comply is technically voluntary yet culturally dictated and enforced. Tolani’s journey from believing child to questioning adult and, finally, to an empowered self-sufficient, independent woman develops directly in contrast to the given role of belief-driven, subservient spectator in the traditional Yoruba cultural event in Nigeria. In fact, her development of a composite consciousness questions all forms of patriarchal oppression, regardless of whether they are traditional or modern patriarchal paradigms, and uses her
traditional knowledge and European educational training to resist her subordination and dedication to the quotidian patriarchal god: the husband.

Atta’s second novel, *Swallow*, contains two direct references to the masquerade. The first occurs when Tolani comes across an exhausted, overworked, single parent of three boys, Mrs. Durojaiye. She is on a union strike, working several jobs, and greatly disillusioned with the government’s treatment of her union. Tolani says, "She was one stair above me and the dim light made her face appear like an egungun mask. She'd lost a lot of weight and her cheeks were hollow" (121). Tolani is initially struck by her neighbor’s resemblance to a ceremonial masquerader’s mask, but she quickly realizes that this woman is so rundown by her circumstances.

Mrs. Durojaiye is a single parent abandoned by a cheating spouse raising three boys in a two-bedroom apartment in one of the slums of Lagos. She works overtime to keep the boys fed and clothed instead of physically being with them herself. Being a good woman, namely a married professional having birthed a son and other children, does not bring any rewards. Instead, she comes to be so overwhelmed by the demands on her that she looks like a masquerader’s mask: thin, ragged, pale, and unhappy. This egungun or masquerader reference serves to ground Tolani in the reality that she must fear this precise thing: a good woman who is mistreated by the corrupt patriarchy in place in Nigeria. It is what Mrs. Durojaiye represents that she must fear, and the men in her life are responsible for that misogynist oppression. Therefore, when Tolani ceases to comply and questions those in power, she comes to understand that her father did indeed have a message from the gods for her. It was a message of patriarchal privilege, subjugation of
women, and a clear agenda to make this power invisible. The *egungun* that she must fear is ultimately the corrupt and entitled indigenous male.

The second reference to a masquerader in *Swallow* is linked to Enitan’s childhood reaction to a European man’s visit to her parents’ compound. The white man before her, the *oyinbo* in Yoruba, represents colonial powers, oppression, and difference. Therefore, her instinct to be afraid of him is merited given her homeland’s history. However, her family attempts to convince her that this danger is not real. As her mother notes,

Your father came home with you and you started crying once you set eyes on Alex. 'Egungun! Masquerader!'" "It's just an oyinbo," I said, but you wouldn't stop. You thought it was a mask that Alex was wearing. …You were still crying.

"Egungun, it's scary, it's scary. (151)

This reference is important in the text because Tolani fears the white man; however, it is no longer the European man alone that she must fear—his damage has been wrought in the colonial period and its enduring legacy. Instead, it is the men in her life that should also give her pause, and she must recognize that it is they who wear the mask of a patriarchal deity and oppress her. The new masqueraders are not readily visible, as Alex is with his white skin. These new oppressors share the same skin color, come from different parts of the country, and speak indigenous languages. They stepped into the system left by the colonizers and combined indigenous patriarchy with colonial patriarchy, and they created a new combined patriarchy that oppresses women in more systematic ways. Furthermore, because the new masqueraders are not readily identifiable, Tolani, like other women in Nigeria, must look more closely and scrutinize the men in
her life. She must also use her voice to protest and make injustices obvious just as she cries out against Alex in this passage.

In an effort to resist patriarchy, to agitate against it, and to promote activism for equal civil and human rights, the women respond to this combined patriarchy in Nigeria by using their own composite consciousness. It is based on their experiences of cultural contexts and signs gained while functioning as women of agency in their own communities as well as in their professional training. This consciousness empowers Nigerian women to use the skills learned throughout their lives to create a more effective approach, a composite one, to combat the misogyny they constantly face. The women then seek empowerment by using effective indigenous coping mechanisms and accumulated women’s knowledge and variations of the European education they have pursued, as well as new more versatile approaches created by combining and recombining them. These provide an effective tool to create a supportive and empowering woman-centered environment. Therefore, the development of a composite consciousness informs the emancipatory approach Tolani takes in the novel, and it allows her to gain control of her life, help other women, and create new empowering possibilities for herself while embracing both Nigerian traditions and European educational training.

Tolani’s mother, Arike, is the strongest female role model in Tolani’s life. As an adult, Tolani deems her “almost a man” and very powerful in their home village of Makoku because she is an elder. As such, her value no longer stems from her childbearing capacities but from her wisdom as a community mediator. Arike’s situation and her life story is a source of great inspiration to her daughter. At the end of the novel,
it will provide a model for transgenerational progress, and it will inspire her daughter’s full development of a liberating composite consciousness that will open space for women’s empowerment across the generations. Therefore, this analysis begins with a critical analysis of Arike’s life in Makoku.

A Mother’s Gift of Transgenerational Empowerment

As a child, Arike learns to dye cloth sitting at her aunt’s feet in Makoku, her traditional village. Unlike her own mother who just wants Arike to help her with the cooking because she is overwhelmed, Arike’s widowed aunt Iya Alaro provides her with a skilled trade and a model of women’s solidarity in her dye cooperative. She teaches the young Arike that while you must rely on yourself for survival, you must also ally with others to fight the bigger problems in your society. These problems include child abuse or neglect, domestic violence, and royal corruption, among others. In a group, Iya Alaro proves, women are strong and can enforce more communitarian values that empower women and demand their treatment as equal human beings. Together, they can also supersede male power but only while functioning within the parameters set out by their society. The individual woman’s power comes from the ability to be self-sufficient and to organize those around her to join in the fight against injustice. Therefore, a woman’s power is always presupposed on a community’s approval of her actions, and it is implicitly based on a coalition of women, as illustrated by Tolani’s great aunt and her mother. Thus, Iya Alaro’s cooperative enforces the reasonable treatment of women and children, and it does so with impunity because the community approves.
Unfortunately, the strict adherence, even in Arike’s life, to the premise that every woman must have a child automatically means that her destiny included kitchen duty to feed husband and child. For her, measuring up to community standards meant having a child. Furthermore, the house is always the male home, unless there is an older widow that can claim the role of “almost male.” Thus, the women cook and host for the glory of the male head of household. For these women, like Arike, who believe in childbirth as a requirement, “the sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do” (Bartky 77). In this case, cooking and bearing children are seminal, and they are always classified as service to a male if the woman marries or has a lover.

By listening to the women in the cooperative talk as they work, the young Arike surmises that marriage is undesirable for a girl. Thus, when Tolani’s father told her he would marry her, Arike is furious, and states, "I never forgave your father for that and I beat him up that day because I thought the worst thing for a woman was to be married" (42). She notes that she knew all girls were married off for the dowry that the family wanted and that “You moved into his home, had children and took care of them” (42). However, Arike also knows that just because it is the norm for all around her does not make it any more desirable. As she notes, “I'd hear my own mother complaining, how she had seven mouths to feed; how if I hadn't been born a girl to save her, she would have lived a terrible life cooking on her own” (42). The boys would not have been expected to help, so Arike is expected, as a girl child, to step in and do the undesirable womanly
work. Her own mother is eager to exploit her labor, so Arike is clearly aware of the detriment in marriage.

Arike knows that her brothers would have provided her mother no respite and that a girl-child was desirable as a source of labor, a cooking machine in this case. In a marriage, a woman would then be useful for her labor and for childrearing, and the cycle would repeat itself. Therefore, when the drummer boy shouts to her “I’ll marry you” and “Yes, I will. And you will cook for me all day long,” (44) Arike is immediately transported into a world in which she must labor like her mother without any credit, support, or respite. Furthermore, the boy continued, “I’ll marry you whether or not you like…and at night I’ll lie on top of you and do what men do to women…” (44). The second set of remarks adds the childbearing to the negative equation that already contains unwilling marriage and labor. Arike is blind with fury and hits him on the head until he runs away. She realizes even at that young age that a woman’s role in her society is brutalizing. She is willing to fight against it, even if at that age all she can do is beat a boy for speaking about it.

As Arike grows into a young woman of marrying age, she discovers the indigenous patriarchal order that subjugated her grandmothers, scarred her mother psychologically, and is now replicated in a modern fashion by so called enlightened professional men in Lagos. Arike’s father was concerned with enforcing the social expectation of marriage for Arike, despite her repeated request not to be married. He expected a dowry, and he expected her to leave his home. However, she refused his first selection of a husband for her, and with her aunt’s help, she is able to refuse openly and
to put off marriage for a bit longer. Her father’s reaction to the Oba’s unjust request that he send his daughter to the palace immediately without her having a say in the matter of her marriage captures the patriarchal expectation that she will obey. Her duty to the community is to obey, marry, and bear children:

…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. Taboo, you hear me? I’ve been telling you for a long time, don’t cause me any embarrassment; otherwise you will see what I will do to you. You refused to marry the man I chose for you and now you refuse 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 or graceful.”

They all agreed I was too proud and not that beautiful or graceful. (85)

Her crime was a failure to comply with her father’s will and that of the local Nigerian king, the Oba. In other words, her failure to meet the patriarchal expectations is deemed taboo, and she is pressured even more to comply. However, no one questions the Oba’s injustice or Arike’s father’s greed because these are part of the patriarchal norm.

The qualities in a woman that Arike’s society values, namely beauty, fullness of figure, and grace, are not hers, so she is demeaned as a woman by the entire compound when they declare her unattractive and undesirable because she is not married.

Meanwhile, her greatest talent, her dying of cloth into innovative and traditional designs so beautiful she immediately gains a privileged position in the cooperative, is altogether unappreciated by her father who would rather have her dowry than her regular income
(85). Her economic contribution to her father’s household is ignored. In addition, the
Oba’s unjust request for brides is also ignored. Instead, she is made to feel as the culprit
of a societal injustice because she does not immediately obey her father, marry his choice
of a dowry-providing man, and begin to bear children.

Iya Alaro, Arike’s aunt, creates a feasible exit strategy for her by mobilizing first
the women and then the whole community in protest against the injustice of the Oba’s
forced marriages. Without her aunt, Arike’s community would not have provided her an
outlet for a more liberated choice regarding her future. Her aunt Iya Alaro represents her
best hope: to be an independent woman one had to be widowed at a young age and
remain childless. However, unwed independence, Arike’s ideal, is not a feasible option
with the pressure from her father. After all, even her more liberal aunt reinforces the
normative requirement to marry as she notes, “‘This is the way of our people,’ she said.
‘A woman your age can no longer be in her father’s house. She must move on to her
husband’s house’” (86). She then provides another solution to Arike’s problem, as she
posits, “You’re getting old is what I’m telling you, and I see no reason why you can’t
marry that young drummer you keep running around with. Have some children at least,
before it’s too late” (86). Even her most liberated aunt, Iya Alaro, the one who has
transcended social obligation enforces the societal norm of marriage and inscribes its
patriarchal commandment on her niece when she commands her to “have some children
at least.” Therefore, she marries Tolani’s father whom she deems a free-thinker capable
of allowing her as much freedom as possible while still married and fulfilling that social
requirement. While Arike is able to select her own marriage partner, childbirth is a
requirement that cannot be forsaken. Her childhood could be sheltered by her aunt’s work and the cooperative. However, once Arike is old enough to marry, her father and the community more forcibly demand that she comply with societal expectations. They are the disciplinarians who enforce the regime of femininity according to Bartky and Foucault’s conception of societal enforcement of social norms and punishment for transgressing the same.

Arike has a positive role model, however, that gives her hope for an alternative existence as a woman, so she notes, “I'd seen my aunt, Iya Alaro, as everyone called her. She was a master dye dyer” (42). In her aunt she finds a widow with no children, full freedom, and social and economic power! Therefore, she aspires to be like her aunt although she realizes that her fate will be dictated by her family even as she resists her father’s suitors and arranged marriages at every turn. However, as Rose, Tolani’s friend and roommate in Lagos, later notes so eloquently, there is a cultural imperative to marry because “Aunts, uncles, cousins, everybody involved. By the time you've finished, you've married a whole village”(13). Integrating every girl-child into the norms of the community is more easily accomplished by symbolically marrying the whole village because the panoptical eye is present in every community member. The disciplining principle is embedded here because everyone enforces patriarchal rules and ensures women stay in their subordinate places. After all, the stability of each marriage in its conventional submission to the norms of the community makes the patriarchal infrastructure sound and impermeable to attack.
The transgenerational modifications of the expectations for women’s bodies in *Swallow* clearly show the trend toward a liberating women’s composite consciousness. The indigenous patriarchal expectation is that posited by Arike’s father who argues that the girl-child must marry whoever the patriarch designates. The arranged marriage is a contract between families and villages, and it has great financial benefits for the family of the bride who receive a dowry in exchange for their daughter. As Rose so bluntly notes in the novel, “And why do we follow such a foolish tradition? It’s unfair to women. You might as well sell somebody like a cow” (12). In other words, as Rose notes, there is no room for a woman’s say and her body seems to be traded as a commodity instead of valued and owned by the woman herself. This dowry-centered, patriarch-mandated pattern gives way to the more progressive indigenous conception of dowry, marriage, and childbirth as necessary but women have the freedom to choose their husbands. This is Arike’s experience in her own marriage since she had to marry someone, but not necessarily the person her own father selected. She also had to bear a child even if not by her husband. The dowry, marriage, and expectation of children are burdens she must carry.

Despite her early protests against marriage, Arike is forced to marry, and as she expected, she does experience the exploitation of her labor and her childbearing body. Her husband exploits her hard work and income, her domestic duties, and her physical body for the sake of fulfilling social expectations and covering up his own inadequacies. For instance, since he is infertile, he agrees to have his own brother father his child in what Rose appropriately calls “traditional African sperm donation” (185). To save her
husband’s reputation, Tolani’s mother gives up her own ability to marry someone else, have more than one child, and throw off the shame that people cast upon her and not her husband because she has not birthed a child, especially a son (138-40). Arike makes these compromises because the senior male in the family has demanded that she conform to social custom and engage in the traditional solution to men’s infertility: insemination by a brother-in-law. This compromise is one Arike greatly resents, but she is pressured by the family. She is not keen to give up the freedoms she has gained in this marriage and to put up with another husband.

At home, Arike is akin to the artist in the Nigerian deity’s house. Traditionally, artists were called to the deity’s house to produce art for the gods without any credit to the artist, and it was considered an honor to be the artist called to serve the deity. Arike, like the artist, must labor in the market, in the kitchen, and in childbirth and rearing, but all of the credit is given to her husband. She provided the labor and the money for his ongoing parties, but it was completely ignored just as her economic contribution had been in her father’s home. Instead, it was a credit to her husband that his household could entertain so many, give so many gifts, and generally patronize the town community.

Meanwhile, Arike is charged with being spoiled even as she spends entire days laboring in the compound and cooking for her many guests as well as dyeing cloth and selling it in the market to sponsor the celebrations.

Her labor is invisible as a product of her effort. She is alienated from the product of her labor since her husband gets to take full credit for anything she creates and produces in his home. Not only does he take full credit for the product, but he also does
so for her own physical body and its movement, as a commodity. Her labor is effectively traded for prestige in this society, and he takes full advantage. Therefore, the wife, Arike in this case, is like the artist creating anonymous art at the Nigerian deity’s call because she must generate children and food and money without any sense of ownership, and she cannot refuse. Furthermore, she is called to create for extended periods of time, and even when she is exhausted. As a Nigerian woman, she is vulnerable because she has no independent economic or social standing on her own in her community unless she is a married woman with a child.

Arike’s husband’s adultery is also an affront to her dignity. I focus here not on the traditional multi-wife arrangement but on the actual adultery he commits in hopes of siring a child. Arike, while hurt, takes it in stride because she is culturally conditioned to accept, if not welcome, multiple wives in the household. In fact, she says,

There was nothing I could do to stop him from womanizing, but couldn't he at least marry one of them to help me around the house? If a woman had enough energy to sleep with another woman's husband, then she ought to have enough energy to contribute to the chores in his household. It was only fair. (138)

Although unhappy about the betrayal, which her husband has orchestrated in conjunction with his family in the search for offspring, Arike would have accepted polygamy because she is very practical. She would have valued the extra help in the upkeep of the compound, including the additional money that would be earned by the second wife.

However, she is very aware of all the hard work that she must do to maintain her household and the pretense of her husband providing for the family. She assumes that this
burden would be easier with a junior wife to assist her with the kitchen duties. The compound must be kept clean, meals must be cooked for all the family members as well as any guests that may arrive. The wife or wives must also earn money to support the compound and to give the impression that their husband provides well for the family. Unfortunately, Arike must face the humiliation of her husband’s womanizing without bearing any of the benefits of a helper junior wife.

Disappointed, she said, “I’d had such high expectations of him only to discover that he was just like any other man. He had enough money to chase women, but did not have enough to fully support every woman he wanted” (139). Arike holds him accountable for the basic reference point in her culture: men may womanize, but they should provide for the women they see, and they must bring them into the household to provide assistance to the other wife or wives and to create a prosperous home that is a credit to the male. However, he is not only weak in that he cannot inseminate her, he is also cheating, using her money to chase women, and protecting his own reputation at all times. In other words, it is not out of love or concern for Arike that he does not take other wives to assist her in the compound. Instead, he chooses monogamy for purely selfish reasons because if he cannot inseminate more than one wife, then he cannot blame the women. With multiple wives, his infertility very obviously becomes his problem and not that of his cohorts. He would then become a public embarrassment to him and all his male relatives. So long as he keeps only one wife, she can bear the blame for infertility while he is seen as kind and loving yet impractical for not marrying a second wife. In the
meantime, under the guise of being permissive, he can enjoy as many women as he wishes with his own family’s support and encouragement.

Because Arike has had to conform to society’s norms by marrying, it is not surprising to learn that when Arike decides to ride the Vespa she is very frightened of the community in her transgression into the realm of men’s effective transportation. She notes,

The people, the slope. I didn't know what scared me most. If I didn't fall off the Vespa, the people might waylay me, drag me off and beat me up for daring to ride. Not even my aunt Iya Alaro would come to my rescue this time. She believed there was women's business and men's business, and she was prepared to protect any woman so long as she kept to women's business. She didn't approve of women crossing over to the men's arena and causing confusion (117).

Her fear is justified because the community would protect its gender regulations and enforce its patriarchal rules. Even if a current standard is useless and detrimental to the wellbeing of individuals and the community, tradition and a history of gendered protocols inhibits new standards and propositions. Therefore, while Arike dares to ride for the good of her women’s group, she does not dare to take the next logical step. Instead, she notes,

I did fall once or twice, but that was because of my wrapper. I would have preferred to wear a man's trousers while I rode that Vespa. I never did. That would have been too much for the townspeople to tolerate. All I wanted was to continue riding and carrying on my businesses. Really. I wasn't a troublemaker. That was not in my nature. I was simply being practical (120)
Arike’s practical nature leads her to challenge some societal norms, but she is not able to fully move beyond patriarchal expectations. She has developed a composite consciousness, and she understands that the modern trousers would facilitate her movement on the Vespa. However, she is too aware of the patriarchal norms to challenge the system. Instead, she self-polices these urges and concludes that the changes would be too progressive for this community. She would rather fall off than challenge the system so directly. Thus, she conforms. She is able to bring change, for women can now ride a Vespa in a small village. However, she cannot change the status quo altogether because she cannot wear the “male” clothing that would facilitate her riding. She, therefore, works within her society’s restrictions so that she may continue to function as a woman in her community.

Of course, Arike’s progress in bringing such changes to her community are admirable, but she is also disheartened when she considers she was not able to fully realize her potential as a woman. Instead, she has to continually make compromises and sacrifices to the patriarchal deity, namely her husband and the system he represented. Additionally, she is always at the mercy of the male head of household who eventually simply orders her to stop riding. She complies without a choice to do otherwise. She knows that the community will not support her despite her business gains, professional success, and full economic support of the household. The community will unite against her just as it did when her father demanded that she marry. Thus, she knows that she must compromise, negotiate, and regroup instead of standing her ground and demanding to ride the Vespa and to do so in trousers.
In teaching and telling stories to her daughter, Arike also notes that given the society that they live in, women end up internalizing their oppression. In Arike’s case, even with independence, she self-polices: "I started my cloth dyeing business. I did my best to behave” (88). She attempts to conform to social norms because she knows everyone is an enforcer but she has also begun to self-police once she has internalized the order and the behavior that is expected from her. Foucault’s panopticon paradigm again applies here as Arike muses, “I knew the townspeople were watching me and waiting for me to take a wrong step. People are funny that way. Someone in power does something wrong to you and everyone treats you as if you are at fault. You yourself begin to feel you’re at fault” (88). In fact, she is the person in the cell, she knows that she can be seen at all times, and she complies to the expected behavior even when she knows that something is wrong with the social order that expects it. She must compromise because she still wants to live as a woman in her society, and she fears the repercussions of seeking too much change: the bad woman label.

Thus, although Arike is the head of household in terms of money, she is not given any credit for this contribution. In fact, her husband goes to great lengths to claim to be the provider and to misuse her funds for his own self-aggrandizement. In the village, there is no pretense of an enlightened man. Instead, the expectations are straightforward and known. The men constitute the decision-making heads of household who cannot be publicly challenged by the wife or wives in the compound. They also hold the support of the community that will empower them to subjugate women. Furthermore, they wield this patriarchal privilege as a weapon against women, thereby justifying Rose’s comment that
“No woman can afford to be nice in this place. It’s a war between men and us. A war, you hear me?” (10). Arike eventually wins the war when she outlives her husband and becomes an influential village elder with the power to teach young women and to help them open spaces for their expressions of womanhood without regard for the patriarchal expectations of marriage and womanhood. Widows have the greatest power among women, but they must persevere through marriage and childbearing and outlive their husbands to reach this powerful status.

Once she is no longer of childbearing age, Arike’s talents are recognized. Thus, Tolani reports that “She was almost a man, now that she was past her childbearing years. People in the compound valued her knowledge and experience and they respected what came out of her mouth. She settled arguments between neighbors, heard disputes over property and rent” (246). Even in her own community, once Arike is widowed, her wisdom is acknowledged as valuable and necessary for the well-being of those around her. Therefore, the Makoku townspeople have appointed Arike a disciplinarian. She is “almost a man” and viewed as an exception to the male norm once she has produced children, is widowed, and becomes the financially independent provider for her compound (246). Arike can then exercise independence, help young women, and follow her aunt’s footsteps in improving women’s status in the village. As a village elder, she can support those, like her own daughter Tolani and Peju’s mother, who usher in a different order for women. Thus, the transgenerational empowerment of women is prominently illustrated in this novel, as Iya Alaro assists Arike. Then, Arike assists Tolani in making the most progressive choice with her life.
When it comes to Tolani’s future, Arike teaches her the more liberatory choices she was able to make with her aunt’s help, namely selecting her own husband. However, in her new position, she also pushes forward women’s liberation within society by stating that “It’s up to each woman to decide if she wants to be on her own or not. Marriage is optional for a woman; motherhood is not,” so she gives in to patriarchy to fulfill this expectation (243). Arike uses her own power as a village elder to make this option a reality for the next generation of women, namely Peju’s mother and Tolani. Although definitely disempowering for the woman who must give up her own body for male impregnation, this is also a great achievement, for it is a modification of the Nigerian focus on marriage and childbearing. This option is more liberating and empowering for women because a male is unnecessary as a companion and needed solely for insemination. However, Arike’s model is still oppressive because childbearing remains a requirement in the community. For Arike, childbearing is still not a choice a woman can make. It is a societal expectation, and this expectation still weighs heavily on women such as Arike who are able to bring about change without destroying their social system.

Thus, the next step in the transgenerational progression of emancipation is what Arike, as an elder, proposes: marriage is optional but not childbearing. This is already a more modern conception of women’s rights over their bodies since the patriarch loses power of command in matrimony. Instead of a male parental dictate, a woman chooses for herself whether or not to marry, as illustrated by Peju’s mother (243). This is an essential step because this modern and more liberating paradigm eliminates the direct
subjugation to a father and a husband, and the community accepts this development so long as there are offspring to raise.

Arike is a model for women helping other women to gain more rights. Just as her aunt helped her, so she helps her daughter and other women of the next generation. A well-travelled trader in the market once commented to Arike,

I’ve traversed this country and it’s the same all over. We women, we sabotage each other: mothers against daughters, sisters against sisters, friends against friends. If there is no unity between us, how can there ever be progress? It’s a spiral that will never end, and I don’t need the gift of prophecy to say this. I have eyes, ears and a mouth to talk. God willing. I’ve seen you, Sister Arike. You’re doing well. You are taking the right steps. One should not rely on a man for anything, to provide or to pamper, not even to procreate. Is that not true? (191)

What she alludes to is the fact that women unfortunately do collaborate with patriarchy. As Arike is also painfully aware from personal experience women can ally with the oppressor to block the way for other women, especially if they are deemed too progressive. However, she chooses to be a voice of empowerment for women in the areas that she can while still working within the confines of her community.

The trader’s words are important in relation to the masquerade metaphor because while women engage in willing suspension of disbelief about the men who masquerade, they are hypercritical of other women. They empower these mere men to exploit. They enforce male expectations and consolidate their power into a panopticon that projects the male gaze to every woman and enforces the policing of their bodies. They support it.
They enforce its rules. They conspire to make women submit just as they have been forced to do in their own lives. In doing so, they impede progress and brave women’s emancipatory efforts.

As Tolani’s mother notes, however, there is room for women’s empowerment within that indigenous paradigm, but it is admittedly limited. Therefore, it is up to each generation to teach the next and to help the next group of women make more progressive changes. In the case of Tolani, Arike teaches her how to change her expectations of the society and how to value herself, as illustrated by the following exchange between Arike and Tolani:

“A mother makes more than her fair share of compromises. How fair is that?”

“That is the way of the world,” I said.

“What way?”

“For a woman to compromise. Her worth, for one.”

“Did I not raise you to value your self?”

“O I am not accusing you of anything?”

“Then how come you’ve come to that sorry conclusion already?” (264)

In this exchange, the mother clarifies to her daughter that self-worth is what anchors a woman. Therefore, while compromises must be made for the sake of living in society, a woman must be conscious that these are compromises and remain strong and value herself if she is to give her child a chance to thrive and to push for equality. Tolani had obviously failed to see her mother’s strength because she saw Arike’s compromises as failure. After a discussion with her mother, she is able to see the sacrifices that her great
aunt and her mother made so that she has the choice to marry or not to marry. It is now up to her to value herself and to decide whether she wants to have children and to propose that as normative as a woman in her society.

This exchange also reminds Tolani that while her masquerading father is a farce, her mother is genuinely courageous and strong, the sole provider, and her benefactor. In fact, it is her mother’s strength that allowed Tolani to go to school with her savings, and it is her mother’s strength that encouraged her to go to the capital to work and gain independence from the village restrictions. Of course, as a woman from the countryside, she was not able to coach her daughter through the city’s pitfalls. To compensate, however, she tried to teach her strength of character to prepare her for Lagos’ well-known corruption. Ultimately, it is the example of her mother and great aunt that really anchor Tolani and motivate her to fight injustice and denounce sexism and harassment. Furthermore, it is this learned strength of character that they teach her that fuels her refusal to make her body a mule for drugs and a toy for a corrupt bank bureaucrat. She ultimately stands up repeatedly for the right thing because this is her mother’s legacy. She comes from a strong line of women, and this is the formative part of her upbringing and her development of character that leads to her empowerment at the end of Swallow.

Tolani’s Father Plays the Drums of Patriarchal Power

Tolani’s father, however, embodies male privilege, so before analyzing Tolani’s move to the city as an independent professional, it is essential to explore her childhood spent admiring him. Her father, her closest embodiment of patriarchy, succeeds in
promoting a sense of worship and devotion in his daughter. He is a legend, himself, as he was selected to be the new Oba’s drummer, but refused the post to become a member of Tunde Twinkle’s famous band. He comes from a long line of traditional drummers, and he makes the leap to modern musical recording for his own glory. His own god-like aura is always an influence on Tolani who knows people came from as far as Belgium and the United States to talk to her father about his drumming because, as one of these visitors stated it, “He is such a genius with the talking drum” (152). Furthermore, Tolani herself is awed by her father’s success, fame, and indigenous grounding and modern success, and she boasts, “‘My father is the best drummer,’ or ‘My father is on a music record.’” (149). She believes in her father’s talent and his connection to the gods, and this blinds her to his mistreatment of her mother, his failure to provide for the family, and his patriarchal privilege.

Tolani’s father’s worldview colors her own during childhood. When she is growing up, she believes that it is her father who provides for her, her education, and her status in their community. She believes that her progressive father empowered her mother to be a single wife, ride a Vespa, build a strong business, and have only one child. With this belief system firmly in place, she is blind to his womanizing, his spendthrift habits, his lack of assertiveness, his selfish interests in promoting adulation and feasting, his theft of her mother’s hard earned money, and his inability to care for the family financially or emotionally. Therefore, although he says openly to her that she is not special, she assumes the best, namely that he is trying to teach her a lesson. However, she is always troubled by his remark because “my father did not speak as though he was
angry with me that day. He spoke as if he was stating a fact. I was not special. Perhaps that was why his words stayed with me, or perhaps it was his way of living, the way he accepted all people” (148-9). Yet those words signal a rejection of her specifically, and it troubles her significantly through adulthood although she continues to believe in his god-like talents and community status.

Furthermore, even as a child, Tolani is vaguely aware that her father is not interested in her except as she is of use to him. In other words, this god-like figure needs her to serve his purposes so he pays attention to her for that reason only. The messenger of the gods has no real regard for her, but Tolani chooses to see it as a dedicated father’s attention; however, this signals that she is firmly suspending disbelief about the drummer and masquerader. For instance, he takes her around the village with him, allows her entry into places a child would not be allowed, and into circumstances a girl would not be allowed to witness. However, he doesn’t do so to encourage her independence and to empower her. Instead, he brings her along because it detracts attention from him when he doesn’t want it. Tolani distinctly recollects,

I’d also spent time with my father. We’d walk around town. He’d always walk by my side and keep his hand on my shoulder so I wouldn’t stray. I ended up in places where children rarely went, palm wine parlours, where men laughed so loud I had to block my ears. ‘Where’s your shadow?’ his friends joked whenever they saw him. Some scolded him for taking me around: ‘You want to spoil this child?’
They embarrassed me. As I grew older, I knew my father did not like the attention people gave him, and once I was around, he knew they would focus on me. Now, I could only imagine they must have known about him. Every man wanted a son. If his wife couldn’t provide one, some other woman would. (248)

Tolani serves as a distraction from his disgrace, his inability to procreate, to bear a son, and to control his wife. In his mind, she is proof that he could have a child, although everyone in the community knew that she was not his child.

In addition, while he is a most talented drummer, he is not a strong individual. His infertility combined with his dedication to the talking drum render him insecure and unable to relate and communicate with people unless they are in the midst of a drum-induced trance, they are paying him compliments, or they are able to speak about music. This insecurity leads him to assert, “I have spiritual powers. When I beat messages people must take heed” (Atta 155). In other words, he is only comfortable in the midst of a masquerade when he is a god’s conduit, sending divine messages to the people around him. Therefore, his daughter is a crutch for his social ineptitude, but he makes it appear as if he is in control.

As a god-like figure, he can control Tolani’s movement in a very simple manner, namely keep her by his side with a firm shoulder grip. However, by virtue of being a male in a patriarchal society, he is able to do the same to her mother in a very real manner when, in conjunction with his brother, he prohibits the use of the Vespa. Tolani’s presence grants him a respite from the community’s attention, especially the negative attention that he imagines he would get because of his infertility, the strength of his wife,
and his lack of a consistent income. Furthermore, he can appear very liberal by introducing a young girl into places no child, and especially no girl child, would be allowed. Therefore, he uses Tolani to get along, to cope, and to relate to others.

Despite being an exploitative patriarch, however, he would also protect her as a young child, as illustrated by the palace incident. The Oba was participating in a parade with his court and wives at the palace grounds, and her father takes her to the spectacle. She is awed so that

My father prostrated on the ground to greet him like everyone else: ‘Kabeyasi oba wa!’ Your highness. I was about Peju’s age, watching the colorful entourage, when a hand in the crowd grabbed my shoulders. ‘Get down lower,’ a voice whispered in my ear. I almost wet myself. The hands seemed to have come from nowhere. ‘She’s just a child,’ my father said. (249)

In this instance, he claims her childhood, her innocence, as an excuse for her not following the very clear expectations of social behavior, especially before an Oba. The Oba, with his entourage of wives and the strong tradition of misogyny in the arrangement, is a clear representation of indigenous patriarchal values. In fact, this is the very Oba who just years earlier demanded Arike become another wife in his entourage. The community wants Tolani to prostrate herself and to “get down lower.” Her initial unawareness of the indigenous patriarchal demand and her lack of compliance mimic her own trajectory as she develops a composite consciousness.

By utilizing this metaphor of the masquerade as a tool in the analysis of Tolani Ajao’s character, this study posits that the purpose of her father’s masquerade is to
distract her from his own weakness by focusing her attention on her privilege and her
difference as the daughter of a member of Twinkle Tunde’s band. It also distracts her
from the reality of a highly structured and deeply embedded patriarchal infrastructure in
Nigerian indigenous and postcolonial customs. Only after his death is Tolani able to see
beyond the image of the grand drummer, the messenger of the deities, and the grand
provider. She then sees a weak man who could not stand up to his society when he could
not bear a child (138). Instead, he blamed the infertility on his wife and demanded the
insemination of his wife by his own brother (140). He then proceeded to use his wife and
to live a lie as a father and provider so that he could enjoy society’s privileges without
standing up for the fair treatment of women or infertile men.

Using the metaphor of the masquerade as a tool for analysis of *Swallow* entails
identifying the figures of the masquerader in the novel. Tolani’s comes to recognize her
father, her lover Sanwo, and her boss as masqueraders. In the course of the novel, these
men demand that she not scrutinize their motives, actions, and privilege in the society;
instead, they require her to believe in them as empowering allies because like her father,
they all believe that “I have spiritual powers. When I beat messages people must take
heed” (Atta 155). She must follow them into the center of Lagos society as the daughter,
girlfriend, and potential wife who believes in their lies, their entitlement, and their moral
and ethical superiority to her. At the same time, they take full advantage of the
indigenous and colonial practices that mark their bodies as privileged, and they
perpetuate gender and class oppression because they believe that “my future has been
decided for me by my forefathers” and women will be forced to comply (41). Thus,
independence changes little for the average citizen and even less for the average woman in Nigeria because political instability and ongoing corruption perpetuate the average citizen’s oppression. In particular, these men would expect their wives to behave in traditional ways that include serving them, cooking for them and all visitors in the household, and bearing and raising their children(42). The degrees or accolades that the women in their lives acquire are just adornments. They add prestige to the male but no freedom to a woman’s life. The focus is always on the pretense of a man’s provision for a woman and his family, and society demands that it be sustained.

Rejecting Masqueraders and Developing a Composite Consciousness

When Tolani discovers the real problem behind her mother’s dependence on her father, she reflects on her own position. Like her mother, she is a hard worker, she has special skills, and she is a competent employee. However, her society dictates that as a woman, her body is a commodity at the disposal of the men who employ her and the businessmen who use the bank. These men, such as the retired Colonel Daodu, Mr. Salako, and Godwin, read her body as a commodity to be acquired, with or without her own consent, for their own sexual use, as illustrated by Sanwo’s praise of Tolani: “Her body belongs to me alone!” (79). Therefore, she is rendered powerless before the patriarchal infrastructure that combines sexual harassment with low wages that do not constitute a livelihood and the inherent dependence on lascivious male supervisors and customers for verification of her professional worth. Any male in her circle can destroy her career, and the various men, including traditional elders, are willing to uphold the
infrastructure of male domination. The women face a predicament as a result of meager wages, national economic conditions, and governmental instability, not to mention gendered expectations of sexual submission. Tolani slowly becomes aware of her dependence on the men in her workplace because “Mr. Salako might come out with a termination notice for me” (210). She is also aware that she made herself vulnerable by giving all her savings to Sanwo. She put herself in a precarious position so that he might marry her, and upon realizing her mistake, she says, “Like a fool, I had given my money away” (146).

This development of a composite consciousness allows Tolani to become aware of her awareness of her own oppression when she faces her own employer’s aggressive and inappropriate behavior, files a sexual harassment complaint that is dismissed before it is filed, and faces unemployment because she refuses to engage in sexual relations with her supervisor (78). Her very material existence is threatened when she refuses to comply with a patriarchal expectation. Tolani understands that she must go to her mother for a more thorough understanding of how her own family’s history reflects the patriarchal order which she has just realized exists at every level of Nigerian life. It is thus that she begins to see in her own life the same patriarchal oppression as that in her mother’s life.

As a consequence, Tolani’s choice to return to a matri-centric environment of her mother’s compound in Makoku is essential for her own growth as a woman. Here, she can analyze her life choices, examine her mother’s choices, and experience her mother’s exercise of agency within a patriarchal setting. This experience assists Tolani in developing a sense of self as sophisticated as her mother’s but with the composite
approach which will allow both of them to grow into stronger independent women. In the case of her own life, this time at her mother’s house allows her to conceive of a future without Sanwo (243). She recognizes it as potentially very liberating, and she plans for it in conjunction with her mother when she says, “we will do something together” (253). It is intergenerational collaboration that takes women’s empowerment a step further. In this case, it frees Tolani from the expectation of marriage and childbearing, and in doing so, it gives her agency and frees her from patriarchal expectations, such as those of Sanwo and Mr. Salako. It also allows her to integrate tools from her modern education into her plan for emancipation.

In the novel, this progress culminates with Tolani’s kind refusal to marry Sanwo when she states, “marriage will not save us” and refuses to let him speak to her mother (255). He is a potentially progressive husband, and at the beginning of the novel, Tolani starts out courting and almost paying for “this wedding of ours” (28). However, over the course of the novel, she is able to see that what appears to be a progressive partner can still be an oppressive partner unless she is independent and strong on her own. Therefore, she comes to equate Sanwo with her father who seemed equally progressive and free-thinking to her mother (92). However, Tolani has now registered the danger of believing in a man’s potential because her own mother’s experience has taught her that women are regularly abused by a societally-condoned patriarchal infrastructure that would have them submit to their husbands. Examples in her mother’s life are vivid for Tolani who learns of various requirements, including childbearing—even if it means insemination from a totalitarian brother-in-law—cooking and hosting, having her money stolen, depleting her
resources for his own aggrandizement, and limiting her physical movement at will. Furthermore, even the liberated Nigerian wife, as embodied by Sanwo’s aunt, reveals the use of a woman’s body for the male’s profit, in this case by her husband, even as he pretends to be progressive. Also, Sanwo’s own reaction to his aunt actually reveals his own assumptions about the role of a wife and his position on women’s empowerment. He blames her and holds his wealthy uncle innocent for prostituting his wife for contracts and promoting corruption (97). He maligns her but praises his uncle and the riches he has garnered with his wife’s hard work.

Tolani begins to understand that Sanwo has been trained in the exercise of male privilege by his own community. Therefore, his expectations of men and women’s roles and adherence to them is also shaped by his own experience. Despite the fact that he periodically supports his mother and sisters, he is insistent that he must be the breadwinner in the family, even when it is impossible because he engages in unsound business investments in an effort to get rich fast, as illustrated by the dog breeding scheme (100, 144). When he actually makes money, it is only because Tolani has given him her life’s savings, and she has been the one regularly earning income as a secretary in a downtown Lagos business. Furthermore, he expects her to clean for him and leaves a mess for her to clean whenever he visits her although she works full time and he only does so sporadically. She finds, for instance, a fork under her mattress, dirty dishes, food remnants, etc. which he expects her to clean for him. He also criticizes her flat and her daily living circumstances although she pays for them herself from her hard earned money. Meanwhile, he has worse accommodations, one room in the servants’ quarters,
which are handed to him for free by his uncle. There is no appreciation of her hard work, her steady job, and her accomplishments while she is of childbearing age. However, once a Nigerian woman is no longer a viable bearer of children, her role can change. Seniority enables a woman to enjoy respect, power, and prestige, but this is only possible once her usefulness as a baby-maker is past. However, Tolani realizes that she is in the midst of her childbearing years, so she must fight patriarchal values and learn to honor and respect herself. Obviously, even a poorly employed man who cannot afford rent is able to criticize her because he is male and his privilege blinds him to his own shortcomings.

Like her mother, Tolani also becomes a keen observer of the order of things in her community although she does so at a much older age. According to Tolani’s evaluation of women in Nigeria, there are hardworking women who are fortunate enough not to have husbands because they are widowed or refused to marry a man after having a child. There are the women who marry because they are sold as cattle, as Rose noted, in an arranged dowry marriage or because they are economically unable to care for themselves. There are women who choose a partner of their own. There are also women who are unmarried. However, throughout the novel she changes drastically in her perspective on the status of unmarried women. Initially, she becomes desperate to marry Sanwo, even going as far as offering him the money to pay her dowry, then she questions the value of marriage, and at the end of the novel, she rejects marriage in a kind, quiet way that allows Sanwo to keep his dignity even as she eschews the expectations of matrimonial submission (255). Therefore, by the end of the novel, Tolani understands that no marriage will bring her the opportunity to be a trader, have a business, be self-sufficient, use her
professional skills, and live as she pleases. She is, in fact, taking the step her mother was unable to take: to remain unmarried and independent. She can live the dream her mother had as a young child. Her mother was forced to marry, although she was fortunate in that she was able to choose her jailer. Tolani has the privilege of actual freedom, and she is poised to engage in this journey precisely because her great aunt Iya Alaro and her mother Arike paved the way, just as her mother paved the way for women to ride Vespas across the country without community censure.

Tolani’s life begins to differ greatly from Arike’s once she is able to gain access to formal higher education. She completes her education, earns her certificate, and moves to Lagos to seek social and financial independence that she believes is not available to her in Makoku. In the city, she refuses to believe in masquerading men at work, and she rightfully challenges this notion of patriarchal deity in the workplace once she earns her own professional credentials. However, the patriarchal infrastructure is reinforced in the master’s house in which corrupt bureaucrats took over from exploitative colonialists and began to mimic the colonial master. Thus, she is subject to a combined indigenous and colonial legacy of patriarchal oppression. Women who have been educated, act and live independently, and are professionally competent are kept in their submissive positions.

Tolani comes to the realization that to live as a professional in the capital city she has internalized patriarchal norms and been forced to “compromise her worth” (264). This comes into focus when she faces sexual harassment from her employer, and she notes, "I began to tread softly, and it was exactly the same with my mother" (112). Both women were made aware of the norms and told to conform so that they come to police
themself(107). Tolani faces not only the humiliation of Mr. Salako’s inappropriate behavior but also Franka’s gossip that she is Salako's girlfriend and has been caught in fragrante delicto (212), which creates a hostile working environment. In other words, because the patriarchal infrastructure is in place, there is no blame put on Salako as the perpetrator of the crime because “Mr. Salako is a married man” (107). Only Tolani is disciplined, and she is watched all the more closely so that she says, “I had to admit that my new job at Federal Community Bank was harder that I’d expected, so stressful” (88). She is so traumatized by the incident that she can't even fight back because she is immobilized. Although she has always claimed she would not stand for it, she is shamed, belittled, and further assaulted by her society which says it is her fault for being herself, wearing high heels, looking nice, being efficient, not confronting outright, and bringing it upon herself (80). She has failed to tread softly and to continue the myth of patriarchal goodness. The collective eye is accusatory and disciplines her failure to comply with the normative sexual harassment.

When she does speak up, she fears she will once again face the "How could you let that happen to you?" remark she got at 13 when a boy pulled up her skirt and then pretended to be innocent and not understand his crime. The teacher punished him but then turned to her and asked her in what manner she was walking because she had obviously brought this upon herself. Of course, the fact that as a schoolgirl she saw some justice come to the perpetrator even as she, too, was blamed is sharply contrasted with the fact that as an adult not only is she still blamed for male behavior that is inappropriate and abusive, but she also receives no justice. Salako is not held accountable, and he is
praised as a family man by Ignatius, the elder who refuses to file her sexual harassment claim. Meanwhile she is labeled a loose woman who is hurting a family and told, “Your allegations are…rather shocking” (107). Salako is free to do it again, just as he had done previously to Rose, and he is able to continue in his position. She, on the other hand, is stigmatized, taught a lesson by an elder, suspended by the perpetrator, and eventually fired.

Tolani tries to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, namely the bureaucratic sexual harassment accusation against her boss. She is ineffective because several males stand together against her. Mr. Salako, secure in his patriarchal privilege, accuses her of insubordination. His word is gospel because the institution does not allow her to protest or to register a complaint. In fact, the human resources employee in charge of grievances warns her that her boss is a married man and this would disturb his family life instead of actually hearing her complaint (107). The rest of the office immediately assumes that she must be his jilted lover and ostracizes her accordingly (106). This is an instance of what Bartky would describe as the “everyone and no one” enforcing femininity, namely weakness, subservience, and submission of the female body. As Bartky notes, “The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (74). However, as Bartky notes, based on Foucault’s Discipline and Punish everyone in society upholds these norms, including institutions, but there is also “no one” because it is oneself that internalizes these norms and then self-policing. This self-policing can ironically lead to the real possibility that “women punish themselves too for the failure to
conform” (Bartky 76) because they have “internalized patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability” (77). Therefore, in the case of this Nigerian novel, even when a woman, such as Tolani, manages to confront the patriarchal order, she must still fight herself in order not to conform and to continue to resist subjugation. Her roommate Rose lost the fight and became a drug mule, but Tolani perseveres and resists the temptation.

For anyone other than Tolani, the sexual harassment, professional embarrassment, and social stigmatization would have meant the end of an independent spirit that resists injustice, as illustrated by Rose’s choice to become a drug mule out of necessity. It would have entailed pressure to comply with the patriarchal order and the silencing of her voice. In other words, for another individual, this experience would have motivated a renewed suspension of disbelief and utter compliance with the masquerader at hand. The concept of further challenging the deity would have been inconceivable, as illustrated by Tolani’s experience with the other bus riders who are brutalized by the military man. However, Tolani, after a brief depressive reaction, responds with a will to empower herself, to speak against injustice, to question those in power, and to plan for a self-sufficient independent female-centered life. In this case, patriarchal attacks, “the founding trauma may be a way for an oppressed group or an abused person to reclaim a history and to transform it into a more or less enabling bases of life in the present” (LaCapra 57), as Tolani does. While the society would deem it automatically a behavior of the “horrible women” category, she posits this category as the psychologically healthy alternative for the woman who resists patriarchy. Of course, it is a marginalized position. However, it successfully resists patriarchal normativity and proposes new roles for women through
gynocentric activism, self-sufficiency, and empowerment. In other words, it creates a space where the subaltern can speak and exercise agency and women can heal and seek empowerment.

In the process of experiencing this crushing realization about patriarchy in her society, Tolani recognizes that she must go to her own woman centered home to process her choices in life and make a decision to stay there (260). Her mother is the anchor she needs. This instinct to consult her mother is important because in her own home community, her mother’s wisdom was acknowledged as valuable and necessary for the well-being of those around her (246). However, a woman’s change from a productive producer of children to a community leader can only happen once she is well-established despite patriarchal repression, her husband is dead, and she is able to support and run her own compound. Even then, the community keeps its collective panoptical eye on her, and she is part of the structure, even if an outlying part. Ironically, this also grants Arike independence, and the ability to change things for young women, just as her aunt once did for her. Tolani’s mother is an advocate for women, and she can support her daughter when she usher in a different order for women by resisting oppression and demanding a different paradigm in their society.

Gynocentric empowerment comes to Tolani from the strong tradition of women in her family and the rejection of male normativity. Therefore, when she conceives of a business solution for her future, she envisions one that is closely connected to her mother’s work, a matricentric paradigm. She plans to use her mother’s textiles to create accessories for sale in modern city boutiques (253). Therefore, women in Makoku benefit
as weavers, dyers, and seamstresses, her mother’s beautiful art has an audience, and all of
the women involved in the women-centered business plan, including Tolani, can earn a
proper livelihood. Tolani combines indigenous cloth making and dyeing, modern sewing
and patterns, and a composite woman’s consciousness, including extensive European
business training, to succeed while empowering herself and other women by using the
skills she has gained from both her village upbringing and her modern education.

Thus, Tolani rejects the masquerade with its male-embodied deities in favor of a
new celebration “where evil is exorcised, where purification is invoked, where the
spiritual, moral and cultural education of the existing community is redefined” (Griffiths
6). However, the new paradigm is matricentric, so when she fully comprehends the folly
of having believed in men as omniscient, omnipotent gods, Tolani describes her deity as
“She. And She looks exactly like me. That’s the God I’m trying to believe in now” (237).
The male gaze has no power in this new model of women’s composite consciousness
because women believe in themselves, reject subordination, and empower themselves.
They strive to be self-sufficient and to make space for themselves and for other women to
live their lives more freely within their society. In doing so and creating women-centered
spaces, they continually change the societal norms and open space for women’s
emancipation.

Trans-generational Empowerment

The progress of women in achieving more self-determination in their society is
evident in each generation portrayed in Atta’s Swallow. Tolani’s great aunt Iya Alaro
faced the imperative to marry her father’s choice of a husband and to have children in the marriage. However, her husband’s early demise released her from the requirement because widowhood is a venerated status in her society. Thus, as an independent woman, she builds her resources, organizes the women in her community, and advocates and acts for the fair treatment of women so that “she protected women and children in the town with the help of the women of her co-op” (44). In addition, she mentors younger women such as her niece Arike who says, “I saw that as a girl and thought I would be exactly the sort of woman my aunt was when I grew up” (44). She teaches the younger generation a trade, thereby giving these girls a profitable skill, organizing skills, and economic training in the cooperative. As Arike notes, “My aunt, Iya Alaro, was my mentor. She trained me to be a cloth dyer” and she did the same for many girls in the village (43).

Thanks to her aunt’s training, Arike is strong enough to reject the suitors her father orders her to marry. She rejects his choice of husband because she has no choice in the matter because “Your family arranged that. They received your dowry: cloth, yams, palm oil, goats or whatever your husband’s family could afford, to show his appreciation of your upbringing. It was a token, nothing more. You moved into his home, had children and took care of them” (42). She is able to select her own husband with her aunt’s help because she, too, faces the patriarchal imperative to marry and have children. Her ability to pick her own husband is progress, but Arike resents not being able to remain unmarried so that she is in control of her own life, including economic independence. Thus, Arike teaches her daughter, Tolani, that she does not have to marry and gives her daughter the life she wanted. Once Arike becomes an elder she is able to assert a
woman’s right not to marry. She communicates this directly to Tolani when she says, “It’s up to each woman to decide if she wants to be on her own or not. Marriage is optional for a woman; marriage is not” (243). Arike still reflects society’s demand that women must be child bearers, and this expectation reflects the relative progress that has been made in Makoku. However, Tolani has lived outside of Makoku and survived life in the capital city, as she notes, “I had to look after myself in the city. I had no one. No one. Ruin around me. Living in fear, trying to escape one problem or the other. It caught up with everyone” (262). Thus, based on the hardships she has endured, she is able to conceive of an even more liberating paradigm for herself.

Tolani realizes that while her mother’s stance is already an empowering one, she agrees with her best friend’s assessment that societally mandated childbirth is oppressive and even more so for a modern professional (185). Thus, Tolani strives to reject childbirth as a social imperative and to be a woman who is free to choose her own future, including marriage, motherhood, and self-sufficiency. This generational progression of choice is key in Swallow, for it allows the main characters to gain progressively more power over their bodies even as they endure the male gaze of the masquerader. Their rejection of the societal panopticon is sometimes disastrous, but it can be empowering as other women rally around them to support the next step in women’s empowerment instead of keeping their eyes on the masqueraders.

The social environment in Swallow’s Nigeria is brutal to these women because patriarchy is so strongly in place, and women’s subservience to the masquerading deity, the male patriarch, is a strong tradition, as evidenced by life in Makoku. The misogynist
infrastructure in Nigeria is strongly reinforced by legal procedures and policies, as clearly illustrated by the bank’s grievance procedures and the Oba’s previous ability to kidnap and marry any woman without her consent (44). However, in Swallow, women are forging new possibilities slowly, steadily, and with diminishing regard to the male expectations around them, as evidenced by Peju’s mother and Tolani’s own choices. In other words, the women are questioning, deciding differently, and garnering support for their ability to do so even if they are called witches or troublemakers (44). Furthermore, women are realizing that female solidarity is empowering whether it is in cooperatives, families, or companies, as illustrated by the cooperatives set up by Iya Alaro, Arike, and Tolani.

The empowerment of women in each prior generation is prominently displayed in this novel, as aunt Iya Alaro assists Arike (43). Then Arike assists Tolani in making the most progressive choice with her own life (243). This choice not to marry or have children is possible because of the composite woman’s consciousness that arises from the experience of women’s coping mechanisms, accumulated cultural knowledge and a European education, as well as the realization that together these can empower women to forge change. Finally, this composite consciousness that arises in Tolani allows her to combine what she has learned from her indigenous cosmology and her modern professional training. She then crafts this composite consciousness into a viable alternative to the existing restrictive notions of acceptable womanhood. Therefore, Tolani benefits from the progress her great aunt and mother have made, and she proposes for herself even more control over her body and a normative exercise of agency.
In Atta’s novels, women have the choice to revive themselves with agency so that they are the center of empowerment for themselves. It is their choices that allow them to thrive, and it is their decisions that determine their futures, including the use of their economic resources and their bodies. After much soul-searching and observation of her society, the new deity Tolani embraces is herself (237). This shift toward both self- and woman’s empowerment brings her society closer to Frantz Fanon’s vision in *The Wretched of the Earth* that “the living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women” (204) and not a simple male-centered masquerade promoting self-serving patriarchal messages. This is the hope embodied by creating her women-centered activism and Tolani believing in herself and her community-empowering business scheme.

The metaphor of the masquerade allows Atta’s readers to gain greater insight into the protagonists journeys from naïve girls who believe their fathers are gods to strong combative women who seek empowerment and self-sufficiency by unmasking the patriarchs in their lives and seeking a woman-centered paradigm, instead. Furthermore, Enitan and Tolani’s journeys toward self-assertion and activism are possible precisely because they are able to utilize lessons gained from their indigenous cosmology and successfully combine them with European training so that they can create a more empowering space for themselves and the women around them. They forge a different future than the one planned for the spectators in a masquerade, and they reject patriarchal belief as a norm because they choose to take the position of lead dancer and to undertake
their own dance of liberation. In this manner, Mohanty’s Solidarity model is integrated into the study of women’s literature through the culture-specific study of the Nigerian protagonists in Atta’s novels, for this analysis relies heavily on a turn toward woman’s composite consciousness that is shaped both by the characters’ cultural upbringing in Nigeria and their exposure to European professional training.

The character of Tolani Ajao develops a Nigerian woman’s composite consciousness and becomes part of a trans-generational movement to achieve a greater sense of self-determination within her community. The women in her family steadily build the precedent for her to have greater freedom than they experienced. Each generation of women moves forward, for the women before them have provided them access to more tools for empowerment. For example, Iya Alaro has the freedom as a widow to create her powerful women’s cooperative. She teaches Arike to become the best dyer so Arike is economically independent and a leader among the women in her community. Arike then uses her economic success as a local businesswoman to pay for her daughter to leave the village, get a western education, and land a job in a prominent bank.

Tolani is able to make this progress because each generation of women has made her own strides and has taken great risks to bring change to the home community and to open doors for the next generation. Tolani’s western education gives her the business acumen to create the new business paradigm that will take her mother’s cloth outside of the village and into tourist shops in Lagos (259). This is a huge stride because before that, the women had made space for a more emancipated existence for the next generation of
women, but they were ultimately confined by the village’s restraints. Given her experience living in Lagos and her education, Tolani’s new enterprise transforms her mother’s cooperative’s fabrics into coveted items by turning them into tourist items for sale to a metropolitan market. The pricing will not only reflect the women’s talent but also the world market’s prices for such items, thereby giving the women a fair wage for their labor, an especially welcomed relief for them since “business is not that good” (259).

Tolani will also be able to remain outside the confines of the village’s social restraints as she will operate at the national level. In fact, this choice to build on her composite consciousness allows Tolani to honor her mother and great aunt as well as their very traditional crafts while using her modern training to market them to European tourists and to get fair and profitable prices for them. The development of her composite consciousness allows her to grow from a mere follower in Lagos, a secretary taking orders from lecherous men, to an independent business leader in her community. She expands on the freedoms she had previously gained and becomes an agent of change. She is the active creator of economic prosperity for the women before her and those who will come after her. She is also able to act independently from any man and to envision a life not subservient to destructive patriarchal forces. In fact, she will also serve as a role model for Peju just as Iya Alaro was for Arike.

When *Swallow* begins, Tolani is subordinate to and complicit with patriarchy. She wants desperately to marry and have children as that is what is expected of her. Despite her degree, she does not see herself as a professional first; instead, she sees herself as a
mother- and wife-in-waiting. She has internalized the social imperative, and she openly states “I don’t want to be one of those jilted ones” when her boyfriend won’t propose after two years of dating (30). She becomes so desperate to fulfill this requirement that she is even willing to give her boyfriend all her savings. Thus, she pleads, “Please, let me help. At least I can add my savings to what you have” (73). However, as she experiences indigenous patriarchal oppression at work, including blatant sexual harassment, she begins to understand that throughout her life she has been limited by patriarchy and its expectations of women. She revisits her childhood memories and begins to understand her father’s use of her as a cultural shield, his abuse of her mother’s generosity and prosperity, his disregard for her mother’s sacrifices and for her feelings. Furthermore, she realizes that he never did anything to help her mother get ahead in life although he took credit for her achievements. It was only her mother who worked hard to pay the fees for her to go to school, encouraged her to leave the village, and now tells her to stand on her own two feet instead of looking to a man for support (243).

The development of composite consciousness begins while she works in Lagos, and it is triggered by two very specific transformative events. The first is the realization that she is not willing to become a drug mule because she wants to be a productive citizen (208). The death of her roommate Rose confirms for Tolani the fact that Nigerian society uses women and considers them dispensable (228). Patriarchal restrictions limit their freedom and force them into compromising themselves (187). Rose’s only reason for becoming a drug mule was her lack of money after her dismissal from the bank for having physically fought off Mr. Salako’s sexual advances and made public his
inappropriate behavior (16). With Franka’s help, he argued that they were lovers, so Rose was discredited. Once discredited as a jilted lover, her physical attack was deemed unwarranted, and this merited her dismissal because she “had insulted him in front of everyone downstairs, including the customers on the banking floor and security guards. She’d called him a bloody bastard and slapped him” (18). Her excellent professional record was marred by his actions, and the likelihood of her getting another job without a favorable reference was close to none. Thus, her courage to stand against sexual harassment is punished by the patriarchs at the bank who black list her, and the desperation that ensues results in her premature death.

The second pivotal event is Mr. Salako’s sexual harassment of Tolani, and her experience going through all of the denial, anger, and helplessness when she officially lodges a complaint against her supervisor. She is ridiculed by the bank staff, accused of being sexually promiscuous, and generally harassed for even daring to document the incident. She is then put on leave so that she will realize her economic dependence on the position and retract her complaint. However, it is at that moment when she does realize that she is completely at the mercy of the patriarchal oppressors that she decides to return to her mother, the strongest, most independent person she knows, to seek answers to her questions about patriarchy in her society and about women’s responses to the oppression.

Thus, she returns to the village to stay in her mother’s compound and look for the answers she seeks. Her mother’s compound, she knows, will provide a safe haven. Rose did not have a strong line of women to empower her, so she was on her own in Lagos depending on her innate talent. As Rose said to Tolani, “You have people” and “I have no
Thus, when Salako ruins Rose’s career she is left with no way to recover her professional standing or her livelihood, and she does not have a loving, caring mother to assist her. However, Tolani is fortunate to have Arike, for Arike is a source of support and encouragement to break free from patriarchy’s crushing effects.

Once she finds shelter in her mother’s compound, she is able to fully develop a composite consciousness. She takes the time to discern the impact of patriarchy on her own life and that of her mother and great aunt. Once she sees their strategies for empowerment, she is able to create her own strategy and to reject her juvenile obsession with marriage and childbearing as the only avenues to fulfillment. Instead, she now very kindly rejects the suitor she would have previously paid to marry her, and she ushers into her family history a more recent development: women choose for themselves whether or not to mother. She realizes that she doesn’t have to marry and doesn’t have to bear children either. She can make herself a strong community woman without having children, and this is a new choice, a new freedom. It is not reflecting a new trend toward childlessness necessarily but rather a trend toward choosing for oneself and making space for this countercultural choice of single and childless as a viable option for Nigerian women. Instead of investing her energy into husband and children, she pursues the emancipatory business enterprise that connects her to the craft of her mother and her great aunt and will bring her and the community weavers and dyers economic independence.

In Sefi Atta’s *Swallow*, Tolani, Arike, and Iya Alaro learn to see the oppressive patriarchal forces at work in their lives, to dissect them, and to seek a liberating release
by utilizing traditional and modern emancipatory tools at their disposal. Thus, each generation of women in her family makes greater strides toward opening women’s spaces and fighting patriarchal oppression. However, since these women want to continue to live as women in their communities, they do not attempt to destroy the system in their communities but rather to reform the system so that change comes slowly but steadily with every generation. Also, because this empowerment through the development of a composite consciousness is an interweaving of the traditional and the modern knowledge that Tolani has gained, she also realizes that her strategies for empowerment must address both indigenous and colonial patriarchal repression. The compromise inherent in the development of a composite consciousness is the unwillingness to break with the past, to favor either the modern or the traditional, and to overthrow the current system. Instead, Tolani seeks to gain from both the modern and the traditional the tools for empowerment, and she endorses a transgenerational movement toward women’s emancipation so that each generation of women may still be able to live in the community and bring continuous change to it. In other words, Tolani uses modernity and indigenous matriarchal pressures against indigenous and colonial patriarchal supremacy to achieve a greater sense of self-determination, thereby expressing her composite consciousness within her Nigerian society.
CHAPTER FOUR: EMBRACING LALAMI’S *HOPE AND OTHER DANGEROUS PURSUITS*: (RE)WEAVING JENARA’S TALE INTO A COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS

In Chapters 2 and 3, I demonstrated the development of characters who take different progressive paths toward Nigerian women’s empowerment. Both characters still relied on a development of composite consciousness and a culture-specific approach to rejecting patriarchal normativity and to defying oppressive expectations of marriage and motherhood in Nigerian society. In this chapter, I will argue that Laila Lalami’s portrayal of the female characters in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* shows a development of the composite consciousness in a very different cultural context that opens some space for women’s empowerment within Morocco, although with more subtle and less definitive gains against patriarchal oppression than those portrayed in Atta’s novels. I will analyze the characters’ empowerment and explore the potential for widespread women’s local activism that leads to women’s solidarity and relative progressive.

Lalami’s storytelling in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) weaves four female characters’ narratives through the novel after the initial chapter entitled “The Trip” which shows their interconnectedness. Halima, Faten, Lamya, and Zohra are at the center of this analysis of the novel because these women illustrate the liberating potential of a woman’s composite consciousness shaped by their use of traditional and the modern experiences to achieve a greater sense of self-determination within their Moroccan communities. These characters’ gradual emancipation is based on an indigenous feminism, clearly outlined by Lalami through Jenara’s tale in the novel, buttressed by a
modernity that enables them to envision a stronger role for themselves as women in their communities.

The other two male protagonists, Aziz Ammor and Murad Idrissi are integrally connected to the women in their lives and ultimately alienated from them by the economic hardships of their class and gender—both men are unable to find steady employment, for instance. Lalami uses these male characters to narrate women’s emancipation under the guise of a male tale. Just as Murad purportedly tells the young Americans “another story his father had told, about a young rug weaver and the revenge he took on the man who’d stolen his beloved” (187) but tells, instead, the story of a woman’s emancipation, so Lalami uses the same narrative technique. She weaves a tale about Murad, “The Storyteller,” and the “Homecoming” of Aziz Ammor but actually narrates the independence and composite consciousness of Murad’s sister, Lamya, in the first instance, and Zohra in the latter. The women’s liberation represents a culturally appropriate solution that allows the women to remain strong participants in their home communities yet still open spaces for their independence. Thus, these four women characters exhibit a composite consciousness that is situated in Moroccan culture, as illustrated by Jenara’s tale.

Jenara’s Tale of Empowerment

The denouement of Laila Lalami’s novel encapsulates the essence of Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits, for the novel’s four storylines are an artful reweaving of Jenara’s image into a Maghrebiyya composite consciousness. This novel is the meta-text
for the stories that Murad would tell and write once he realizes, at the end of the novel, that it is his own culture and traditional past that he must honor. Thus, he must take into account the cultural history of the Arab and Amazigh peoples who inhabit Morocco, their migration to and from this geographical area, including the Arab influx from Spain after the Reconquista in the fifteenth century, the historical agency of women within Islam, and the rich folklore of these peoples, including European influences. The tale he shares with the American women at the end of the novel is significant because he recalls the traditional tale of Jenara, the stolen betrothed who gained revenge and ousted a sultan, and the empowerment of a culturally centered woman. The tale depicts her growth as a woman against the cultural production of a “traditional Berber” rug. The rug is modern and transgressive in its representation of an angry, unveiled woman with a knife in hand, instead of the traditional animals and geometric patterns that the West normally consumes.

The woman’s transgression, in the form of the murder of a demented Sultan, is then authenticated as liberating and positive not only for Jenara, who was wrongfully taken from her fiancée and her family, but also for the people under the Sultan’s rule. Her emancipation is not dependent on a male lover’s acceptance, but solely on her plan to end the injustice to which she has been subjected. She liberated herself for her own purposes, and she took action against injustice, as is the Moroccan and Islamic tradition of women’s vociferous activism against injustice as illustrated by Al-Hassan Golley (527). The spirit of a composite consciousness in Morocco, or *Maghrebiyya* composite
consciousness\(^3\), is the key to the four tales we read in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. It is also Lalami’s aesthetic response to a scholarly call for models of change in women’s lives (Al-Hassan Golley 522).

Lalami weaves four narratives that reflect women’s emancipation akin to Jenara’s yet in very different economic circumstances and modern contexts that lead to a variety of settings for the empowerment of women in Morocco and a unified narrative whole. It is important to note that folktales are dynamic and constantly developing and adapting to change, so the critical elements of Murad’s version of Jenara’s folktale must be outlined so the reader can recognize the storytelling threads that Lalami weaves throughout the novel. Jenara is the culturally centered “daughter of the muezzin,” wears the hijab, is promised in marriage to Ghomari, and is a well-respected participant in her community. Ghomari is a rug weaver by profession. Jenara is in a state of waiting for her marriage to Ghomari. She spends her evenings in his shop, asking how many more rugs he has to weave before they can marry. “‘I have to sell 10 more carpets,’ he’d say, or, ‘Only seven more, my love’” (189). The lack of capital forces him to sell the product of his labor before he can enjoy marriage and family life.

Jenara is suddenly subjected to unjust actions initiated by the lust and jealousy of both Arbo and the Sultan when Arbo happens upon her while she is unveiled. She, like her fiance, is temporarily left without recourse when she is forced to marry the Sultan and enter his household’s harem. Her fiancé is unable to stop the marriage, for “he knew that

\(^3\) “Al-Mmlaka al-Maghribiya, the official name of Morocco, translates as The Kingdom of the West” (2) in Gray, Doris. *Muslim Women on the Move*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. Therefore, I have chosen to use the feminine form of the word “Moroccan” in Moroccan Arabic or Darija: Maghrebiyya.
there was no use fighting the Sultan” (191). Instead, he pours his sorrow into the weaving of a masterpiece depicting Jenara’s anger, as a vehicle to vent his own. The rug is the physical embodiment of his psychic reaction to the injustice.

Jenara does not, however, forsake the idea of liberating herself. Instead, she uses her space in the harem, to prepare herself for possible escape. She does not expect the men in the story to save her, so “Jenara didn’t show any sadness over the death of her betrothed” (191). Ultimately, however, his rug provides her with the opportunity for revenge and helps her gain her freedom. She decides to trick the evil servant of the Sultan, Arbo, and she discredits the Sultan by making him appear mad to his court. First, she threatens his life, and then blends into the modern tapestry when the court members enter the Sultan’s chamber. His cries for help are seen as madness. “He’s lost his mind,’ said the Grand Vizir, and he left to go share the news with the Sultan’s younger brother…. who would soon replace the demented on the throne” (193). Jenara then kills the discredited Sultan, and the Grand Vizir ushers in a new governor for the people but still within the same cultural and governmental infrastructure.

The power of one woman to reject her oppressors and exercise agency is the key theme of this tale. However, she does not attempt to overthrow the cultural order that subjugates women, and she remains an empowered member of her society precisely because she makes this compromise. She is the very embodiment of composite *Maghrebiyya* consciousness. She is set to thrive in her cultural environment after the injustice has been corrected. However, she cannot make the structural changes that would
altogether eradicate this oppression of women precisely because she makes this compromise.

Lalami masterfully allegorizes and reweaves this tale of feminine empowerment yet limited reform through the stories of the four economically disenfranchised characters who attempt to cross the Strait of Gibraltar on their way to a different life in Spain. Lalami weaves all four of the women’s stories into tales of composite consciousness and empowerment who, like Jenara, bring about their own independence from oppressive men and a new sense of agency within the welcomed confines of their Moroccan culture and community.

**Developing a Composite Consciousness**

One must consider the development of a composite consciousness in order to understand Laila Lalami’s female characters in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and *Secret Son*. These characters reflect the heritage of the resilient Amazigh culture, their resistance to oppression and conquest, the multi-colonial, cultural, and lingual experiences of Morocco, and the legacy of the Arab Al Mmlaka al Maghrebiyya as well as the modernity embedded in their society by multiple colonial experiences. This rich tapestry of the women’s interweaving of the traditional and the modern into a composite consciousness is an essential backdrop for the unifying metaphor of the storyteller in Lalami’s novels, and it creates a useful cultural context in which to frame these novels and the tales of their female protagonists’ movement towards empowerment in their societies.
An analysis of these novels must take into account Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s argument that we “can no longer treat the oppression of women by indigenous patriarchy and by colonialism as two separate issues” (122). These two issues have been studied as exclusive opposites in the context of theories of history that see radical breaks with the past and consider them binaries. Thus, instead of an approach that requires the study of one or the other exclusively, I argue for a feminist form of theory that acknowledges that both indigenous patriarchy and colonial patriarchy must be acknowledged as two detrimental yet constitutive parts of women’s experiences in the post-colony.

A composite image of women allows the scholar to see distinctly the traditional and modern aspects in a woman’s life. It also allows women who learn from their traditional and modern European training to develop a composite consciousness that allows them to become strong agents of change within their community. As their composite consciousness develops, it builds on all their experiences and empowers the women characters in Lalami’s novels to change their lives and to create a space in which to live their own lives as women in their society. This consciousness is forged from these women’s legacy of resistance to traditional patriarchy as well as colonial oppression simultaneously. It is also derived from the lessons and strength that they have gained from their traditional upbringing and their exposure to modern lifestyles and education.

Like composite building materials, the strength and beauty of the new product surpasses both the beauty and strength of the constitutive elements, thereby rendering it more usable, durable, and strong in constructing a new structure. In the case of the Moroccan women, the new paradigm must be informed by Amazigh and Arab traditions
as well as European models of education and progress. It must also be anchored in the
development of women’s agency, activism, and voice in Moroccan society, for these
women still live as women in their society. Thus, a compromise is also made for the sake
of the society. This acknowledgement of a compromise and a negotiation by the
characters is seen as a failure by many feminist and post-colonial theorists who advocate
a “winner-take-all” paradigm, namely solely indigenous or exclusively European models
of women’s emancipation. However, women’s lives in Morocco are shaped by both
traditional and modern factors, and the women are agents of effective change precisely
because they look to both for the development of strategies of emancipation.

This analysis of Lalami’s novels creates space for understanding the composite
nature of the post-colonial individual more fully, so it is clear that the women that
populate Lalami’s novels are shaped by both traditional and modern factors and build
upon these their own spaces of empowerment within their society’s constraints. Thus,
they challenge “the imperial divide between the Western and the native” and challenge
essentialist constraints placed on the post-colonial individual by nationalist agendas
(Yeğenoğlu 122). The theory of a composite consciousness acknowledges the
intersecting paradigms and builds a practical and useful model for women’s emancipation
and a post-nationalist liberation from oppressive indigenous and colonial patriarchal
legacies. Instead of a constraining binary of traditional vs. modern, it allows the reader to
understand the source of strength and determination for these women as well as the
choice of effective paths toward emancipation within their societies. Finally, because
these women develop their own composite consciousness, they are able to choose for
themselves key practices, such as veiling. They affirm them as their own choices instead of choices that should be made by men in their society. The women are then able to move beyond manipulated signifiers that others use to discuss them. They focus, instead, on the daily changes that they must make to live more freely as women in their society.

With a practical focus gained from the development of Maghrebiyya composite consciousness, the women characters in Lalami’s novels make choices that fulfill them as women in Moroccan society. They are not concerned with theoretical debates about African or Arab women, for their reality requires daily choices to live as they wish and a daily push for a more women-centered society. Still, they do not wish to destroy their society, so they work within the parameters of their communities when they effect change and open space for varying definitions of Moroccan womanhood. They are agents of change who control their daily lives while also providing different models for living as a woman in Morocco. The composite consciousness ultimately calls for a dialectical understanding of history and cultural encounter and focuses on a realistic balance of continuity and change, as exemplified by Lalami’s characters. As working women in Morocco, they are not interested in theoretical feminist or postcolonial debates because they are too busy changing their everyday lives. This is why, for example, Zohra defends her sister’s right to wear a hijab as well as her own not to wear it. The choice belongs to each woman, she argues, and she will not tolerate men, even her husband, questioning it or assigning judgment based on a woman’s choice (169).

Her assertion of the freedom of women to veil or not to veil in Morocco is important precisely because this issue is one greatly debated by scholars across the world,
especially feminist and postcolonial scholars. As Yeğenoğlu accurately points out, these scholars are not necessarily interested in women’s daily lives or practices but in the greater scholarly dialogue, so “The visible cultural effects one can induce by veiling or unveiling woman makes it a convenient signifier for the contending parties to fight out their differences through manipulating this highly charged symbol” (126). Lalami’s own published writings on the subject and her inclusion of the issue in her first novel, however, illustrate the need to think of veiling as a decision each woman in Morocco makes for herself and to treat the subject discretely and in the context of each woman’s own personal, cultural, and national context. Thus, the development of composite consciousness entails a development of a “both-and” mindset for the characters, and this paradigm embraces negotiation and compromise as a viable way to enact women’s empowerment. The strides towards women’s emancipation represent progress in Morocco although they would not satisfy a “winner-take-all” or “either-or” mindset that can only conceive of emancipation as a radical break with past, society, and culture.

Weaving a Woman’s Tale of Morocco in the Public Eye

This progress for women in Morocco is evident through storytelling in Lalami’s novels. Moroccan women storytellers are represented in several seminal Moroccan texts, including Leila Abouzeid’s *Year of the Elephant*, Hassan Zrizi’s *Jomana*, and Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. In Lalami’s work, the principal women’s characters are traditional *rawiya* storytellers. They significantly out-perform men and increasingly take their more public place in the market square. These narratives
consistently confront women’s issues of dispossession, injustice, and fortitude, and reflect a vigorous Maghrebiyya consciousness. As Hejaiej notes in *Behind Closed Doors*, “the tale itself is a silent space where the poetry of women’s experiences is performed” (ix). Storytelling becomes a performative space that allows women to speak the unspoken, the taboo, and the truth in the guise of entertainment. As Hejaiej further notes, the protagonists are most often women through whom the tale-teller can speak things usually left unspoken—pain and desire, revolt and resignation. Here, too, is a space where narrators may become subjects in their own right as they break the thread of the narrative, splicing in their own judgments about the heroism or hypocrisy of men, the foolishness or wisdom of women, and the grace of God, before fading again into the background of the weave. The tale is an inhabited, dynamic space where characters interact with one another, the story-teller interacts with the tale, the performer with her audience. (Hejeiaj x)

It is in this tale that each woman is able to weave together her own personal experience with her judgment about the society in which she lives. She also creates a reality for herself that extends to her tale. The ideal is laid out and each character strives for independence and action even if the storyteller’s life is circumscribed by patriarchal limitations.

El Koudia points out in *Moroccan Fairytales* that this narrative opportunity serves as an outlet for women because,
this cultural heritage expressed the daily preoccupations of ordinary people from all kinds of social classes. It also reflects literary and artistic aspects of their society in general.

At home mothers and grandmothers were highly reputed as bearers of such treasure. In the absence of television, families used to gather around in the evenings to listen to such tales, their sole entertainment. (viii)

Therefore, women’s reality has an outlet in the storytelling traditions of Morocco. The women can exercise agency, change their lives, infuse their voices into the national narrative, and make conscious choices about how to educate the next generation.

Ironically, however, as Daisey Hilsey Dwyer has noted in *Images and Self-Images: Male and Female in Morocco*, this role of storyteller-cum-educator can be coopted by patriarchal forces because

    Moroccan folk moral tales implicitly and explicitly educate their listeners in the belief and control systems that help maintain male dominance and female subordination in Morocco. Adults who wish to underscore certain points about male and female for children or guests are apt to glide into folktales at strategic times in the course of conversation. (x)

Nonetheless, women have also learned how to maneuver their composite consciousness into the moral tale, albeit more marginally as the expression of their daily experiences. They do not necessarily strive to change the system but rather change their existence and that of their progeny, and they provide a model for emancipation even if it is limited by cultural realities.
The development of a composite consciousness debunks the binary of an indigenous versus a Western ideology. Instead, the composite paradigm articulates the conflagration of the indigenous and European experiences for the woman living in a post-colonial society. This is particularly relevant because the society is oppressive in ways that conflagrate traditional as well as modern patriarchal tendencies. Not surprisingly, the women’s responses, both proactive and reactive, are also a composite of their indigenous and colonial knowledge and experiences. These are used effectively by women to exercise agency and to forge a future for themselves that is different from the one dictated by their society. This is not merely hybridization, per Bhabha, with some characteristics of traditional and some of European descent taking prominence. Rather, it entails the creation of a composite which entails a co-existence, a syncretic mixing of the traditional and the modern that also allows them to remain whole as they strengthen a Moroccan woman’s ability to exercise agency in a patriarchal nation and to articulate her own story.

Another way to frame this composite consciousness is to place it squarely within historical antecedents and societal processes that give this composite model its indigenous grounding. Morocco was not a part of the Ottoman empire, an Islamic empire that lasted from 1299 to 1922 as an imperial monarchy and in 1923 became a state. This is very important because while its North African neighbors such as Algeria and Tunisia were subdued, Morocco was not subject to outside rule (Hart), and the inhabitants of Morocco constantly repelled invaders, including Romans who viewed “the indigenous
Berbers as an intractable people who gave their legions constant trouble” (Njoku 11). In fact, according to Elizabeth Fernea,

Morocco’s unique history is stressed by social scientists both Western and Eastern, who point out that until very recently, Morocco consisted of an area of independent but related units. In the cities, a loose form of central government (read loyalty to the Sultan) obtained (bled el-makhzen): but in the country, the tribes made their own laws and were termed bled el-siba or areas of dissidence. The tribes usually declared an annual allegiance (bayaa) to the sultan of the ruling dynasty, a symbolic act which helped reduce inter-tribal conflict, but generally they operated more or less independently (xiii).

There is a parallel function of culturally centered Moroccan women within this bayaa/el-siba model. Women, like the more rural groups in this paradigm, can be considered dissidents when they act or speak against the cultural norms, so they are bled el-siba; however, with bayaa, this insurgence is tolerated. Although some scholars may only see the bayaa and fail to understand the bled el-siba, the indigenous or culturally centered model of resistance and exercise of agency is strongly in place. The complacency and allegiance to patriarchy that western scholars sometimes deduce to be the only Moroccan women’s reaction to unjust practices is actually more than submission. It is a token.

Instead, the reality is the dissidence, the agency, and the ability of women to function as strong women in their communities even as they nominally acknowledge the patriarchal power structure while, as pointed out by Fernea, “generally they operated more or less independently” (xiii). Of course, since there is an unwillingness on the women’s part to
overthrow the whole system, a yielding, however slight or pronounced, to patriarchy can be read into the texts as well. A third model that might be of assistance in anchoring this composite consciousness to Morocco is that of the women’s weaving in Imazighen communities in Morocco. These weaving practices have been passed down by women across generations, so they have actively continued to be practiced to this day. Often used as a metaphor of identity in Western academic and theoretical circles, this practice of weaving is an intrinsically grounded cultural phenomenon of the everyday in a rural Moroccan household.

Moroccans have a deep respect for the weavers as they are considered creators, so they are often designated as “blessed” because of their cultural production. There is a birthing metaphor for the power to create cultural meaning through the tapestries because women exercise their agency when it comes to selecting colors, symbols, and designs. It is an artistic symbol of identity that they create, and they are the sole arbiters of culture precisely because men do not interfere in this process, and their cultural heritage is passed on through these tapestries. In “Empowering Women Weavers?” Susan Schaefer Davis argues that the weavings are not only exquisite art but rather also intrinsic to the everyday life of the Moroccan woman. In fact, the weaving of the ordinary into tapestries is what gives the weavings such depth, cultural importance, and authenticity. An outsider’s reading may not be necessarily accurate or even welcomed in the weaving process because the weaving itself is a creative act in the process of living and being that is then passed onto others as a culture. These Moroccan women do not need or solicit outsider’s confirmation of their lived experiences or their freedom as women. They are
busy exercising their freedoms regardless of whether others might see it as freedom or not. The most important element is the ability of the women to function in their communities and to exercise agency, freedom, and creativity in their art.

These three models --North African women’s use of storytelling, the historical antecedents of *bled el-siba*, *bled-el makhzen*, and *bayaa*, and the women’s independent weaving tradition of the Imazighen--should provide a structure that can illuminate this composite consciousness theory. The idea of a composite consciousness is crucial because postcolonial women are no longer focused on the resistance to colonialism and the nationalist enterprise as a liberation route for them, as the previous generations of women clearly were. In Morocco, the year 1956 brought emancipation from direct French rule, the Arabicization of the educational system, and the placement of the monarchy firmly in power. That era of nationalist focus is a bygone era for women, who must now seek to make the quotidian just and to overthrow indigenous and colonial patriarchal mechanisms of control, as third wave African writers are doing across the continent. As Leila Abouzeid pointed out, there is a recognition that “in the beginning of the Resistance, we believed the struggle would wash clean all spite and malice. Just as we thought that Independence would relieve our cares and heal our sores like miracle cures sold in the market. In fact, we loaded Independence down with a burden it could not bear” (Abouzeid 67). As Abouzeid notes, there is no suspension of disbelief regarding the corrupt politicians and the limits of royal power. It is, moreover, accurate to note both for Abouzeid and Lalami that “No patriotic rhetoric is found here, no self-justification, although there is no doubt that the author takes great pride in the achievements of her
country. A certain sense of realism is present, a recognition that there are no easy solutions to the troubles of nations—and peoples” (xxvi). And, as these authors have made it clear in their own work, women are now focused on the work of the post-nationalist anti-patriarchal struggle. Therefore, this chapter explores Lalami’s novels and her female protagonists’ weaving for themselves a tale of liberation through the development of a composite consciousness.

Halima’s Empowerment

Halima is initially presented as a patient, gentle, and mild tempered wife and mother. Like Jenara, Halima finds herself in an unjust situation that precludes her own fulfillment. She is married to Maati who cannot find productive and consistent employment. They live in the slums in utter poverty. She is the victim of domestic abuse. His frustrations about economic and social problems are transferred to her via brutal beatings. Despite repeated attempts, she cannot garner the support of her mother, Fatiha, to divorce him.

Nevertheless, Halima soon realizes that she must get a legal divorce if she and her children are to escape Maati’s mistreatment. However, the *al-Moudawana* or Code of Personal Status impedes her progress, for unlike Moroccan civil law which considers women equal to men, this family law gave men increased rights. As Gray notes, “women could not normally request a divorce and had limited rights concerning property and inheritance” and “Men were free to marry multiple wives, issue unilateral divorces in accordance with the Islamic tradition of repudiation (talaq), and make decisions regarding
their wives” (81). However, like Jenara, Halima exercised her agency and planned for her own liberation. Since he won’t give her a divorce, she plans to bribe a judge to rule in her favor for both the divorce and custody of the children.

Once, Halima arrives at the judge’s house, she realizes that he is one of these new oppressors that stepped into the system left by the colonizers and combined indigenous patriarchy with colonial patriarchy, and they created a new combined patriarchy that oppresses women in more systematic ways. Thus, she is still feeding this corrupt patriarchal system if she simply bribes the judge or her husband to gain custody of her children. Her husband, Maati, “told everyone that if all Halima wanted was a divorce, then why didn’t she just pay him, like he’d asked her? He’d have divorced her” (118). However, she wanted a different paradigm for herself and her children. Like Jenara, she comes to understand that she must rely on herself and not on the men around her, for her own well-being and prosperity. Therefore, she rejects the opportunity to bribe the corrupt judge.

Instead, she follows the lesson she learned from her literacy class slogan: “Work for your Future--Today” (74). She decides to take her children with her to Spain by braving the Strait of Gibraltar. The decision is a desperate one, but she is unwilling to feed into the institutional corruption that plagues her homeland and gives unjust men so much power. The journey is harrowing, as we read in “The Trip,” but it embodies the journey toward hope based on utter despair.

The attempt is doomed because Halima does not confront the misogyny of her husband within the context of a supportive community. Moreover, the escape does not
resolve any of her problems, encourage personal development, or provide healing from trauma. The crossing fails, of course, when the tiny zodiac boat capsizes just offshore from Spain. Fortunately, the whole family gets to Tarifa alive and then is deported back to Morocco. Others die, so it is in this failed escape that Halima’s empowerment becomes possible upon her return to Casablanca.

Halima rents an apartment in Sidi-Moumen, an urban slum, choosing independence instead of her mother’s unsupportive household or her old apartment with Maati. Thus, like Jenara, she takes matters into her own hands to bring about change. Maati willingly divorces her because he is shamed by her choice to risk death over life with him. Ironically, he then tries to marry another woman, but the woman’s family refuses him because of Halima’s story. The community reinforces the need for fair treatment of women, and the marriage refusal indicates support for Halima, her children, and her divorce request.

Confronted by community pressure, Maati gives her a divorce and custody papers. This plot development, that Halima deems a miracle, opens spaces for the possibility of reform of corrupt and unjust structures. The community pressure that Maati feels is akin to that felt by the government in 1990 when a women’s rights group (UAF) “collected a million signatures on a petition urging a reform of the al-moudawana” (Gray 81). The reform was not immediate. However, fourteen years later, in 2004, the reformed code acknowledged that a family unit has two equal partners before the law, the husband and wife. Significantly, this “miracle” comes only once Halima returns voluntarily to her cultural roots for nourishment and decides to trust in the Moroccan judicial system for her
divorce and custody request. She returns to her community firmly committed to exercise self-determination and to open a space for herself and her choices.

Like Jenara, Halima opts for bringing about personal change within a Moroccan cultural context. Halima understands that, despite the economic deprivation, with community support such as that offered by her neighbors, she can successfully raise her children on her own, even if she still thinks that “only a miracle could make that man give her back her freedom” (124). Halima, the blessing, is thus blessed, and she seeks financial independence and a community-centered existence. Like Jenara, she does not disturb the community but strives to make it better through change that allows her to live in her community.

To work against the lack of a material base, Halima becomes a successful self-employee, who is not alienated from the product of her labor. She begins selling beghrir bread from her Eid recipe—the importance of the religious festivity bringing economic and family renewal is not lost on the reader. The informal market provides a venue for her to trade her labor and resources and to earn a livelihood, and her immediate community provides her with the support she needs, including friendship and a religious fellowship. The change, namely the defeat of the abusive husband, is the rejection of the unjust practices of the “demented man” just as it was with Jenara. Instead of the paradigm of injustice, Halima is able to move to one of personal nourishment as well as economic maintenance. The woman-centered environment that Halima creates for herself is like Jenara’s harem, or women’s quarter, a safe place to find her own ideas and her own agency.
It is within her woman-centered community that Halima finds freedom, fulfillment, and hope. She is able to teach her children self-sufficiency and a refusal to live under oppressive forces, including those represented by Fatiha or Maati. Like Jenara, she reinforces the culture’s overall values, but she is active in the pursuit of change and hope for a more just and equitable Moroccan society. She is an ideal proponent of *Maghrebiyya* composite consciousness because she uses the modern judicial system to trump the *al-moudawana*, and she combines the informal business training in her literacy class and work to set up a successful traditional beghrir business in the market. Halima’s progress in making space for herself and her lifestyle in her community is premised, of course, on “the extent to which ideological shifts are reflective of indigenous social change” (Al-Hassan Golley 529). In other words, changes made by women in the quotidian create shifts in cultural ideology and eventually bring forth change in the society. Therefore, the culture develops according to the needs of the individuals in the group, as illustrated in the narrative of Halima’s tale. However, it must be noted that while Halima is able to carve emancipation and empowerment in her own life, she does not challenge the structural misogyny in the government or religion. However, like Jenara, she enacts change that is progressive and serves as a model for other women to unite in solidarity and seek a broader social change, such as the reform of the *al-moudawana*.

**Faten’s Freedom**

Lalami’s characterization of Faten also demonstrates an empowering choice that seems flawed because it does not challenge the patriarchal norms, but it provides freedom
to the character and makes space for a women’s space. Faten’s journey from a dedicated Muslim activist in “The Fanatic” to unencumbered sex worker in “The Odalisque” is also a journey from an economically difficult situation as a pious Muslim university student to one of financial and religious independence abroad. Faten’s mother raised her alone, sent her to Agadir because she could not afford to keep her in Rabat, and then brought her back to Douar Lhajja once Faten “turned fourteen and her breasts grew into a D cup” (134). During the next six years, Faten enters university without much ambition and becomes a hijab-wearing Islamic activist who embraces reform in her homeland without feeling the need to sacrifice herself for the cause, as illustrated by her unwillingness to join Noura as a country schoolteacher. However, in the last stages of her studies, she is expelled for cheating, and, in her anger, she makes an indelicate comment about the king that quickly motivates her to leave the country or face arrest.

While Faten’s name means enchanting or charming, Noura’s parents see her as a fanatic. They disapprove of Faten’s hijab, her dedication to Islam, and her influence on luring their daughter away from bourgeois complacency and entitlement to a rebellious religiosity. In “The Odalisque” Faten is portrayed, in line with the 19th century Orientalist art movement, as an alluring exotic “other” who fulfills the requirements of her name. It is only in finding her own definition of self, as a culturally centered self-assured Moroccan woman, that she is able to escape those identities superimposed upon her by the male gazes of Larbi and Martin, her Spanish client. While Faten was able to work toward accessing an educational advantage that would translate into economic prosperity, Noura’s wealthy and well-connected father, the epitome of the corrupt Moroccan
bureaucrat in this novel, pushes for her removal from university. Thus, she loses all prospects of prosperity in her homeland because education was the only viable outlet for her, as predicted by moderate nineteenth century reformers in Morocco (Al-Hassan Golley 531).

Her subsequent voyage to Spain, advised by her imam, is born of desperation and fear of political reprisal. The crossing ordeal is told in “The Trip,” and her state of mind is symbolized by her inability to swim or to hold onto Murad without drowning them both. She is at a crucial point in her journey in which she does not know whether to go forward by swimming toward Spain or to allow herself to drown in utter despair for the loss of opportunity she has suffered. She is caught, in a sense, at the intersection of modernity and tradition but is, at that moment, unable to choose for herself. The narrator says, “Her eyes open wider but her hands do not move” (11), and the reader is shocked to see her change from one who apparently acts decisively to one who is immobilized and can only look on helplessly.

In Spain, she becomes aware of the reality of her past inability to take care of herself and to act independently. She decides to actively determine her future instead of the usual, “she had not argued… she had done as she was told” (135). Thus, when she is arrested in Spain, she makes her own interpretations of the imam’s words and chooses to exchange sex for freedom and money because “extreme times sometimes demanded extreme measures” (147). As an exotic foreign sex worker on the streets of Madrid, she is able to sell her sexual labor and accumulate capital without difficulty in this production
of odalisque dreams for Spanish men. With the economic empowerment, she is also able to control her leisure time, namely the majority of the daylight hours.

Martin, the young, affluent, Spanish university student, who exoticizes Arab women, offers her a semblance of a normal life, with legal immigrant status, an apartment, and a new life (138). She rejects it immediately because she realizes that “normalcy” has a price tag, and this gaze and its inherent DuBoisian “double consciousness” or Fanonian “racial inferiority complex” is far too high a price to pay for the luxury of not looking over her shoulder for the police (30). Therefore, she rejects Martin’s offer and sees it for what it is, an Odalisque dream in which she is “a semi-nude woman stretched out invitingly on similar carpets and sofas and beckoned to sexually repressed spectators” (Parker 179). She then charges Martin for the fantasy chit-chat because it is also a form of exploitative intercourse (149). The decision to charge the teenager for his odalisque daydreams signals a turning point for Faten. She finally expresses her desire to gain independence from men and their cultural “respectability” in male-dominated Spanish society by rejecting exoticism and European Orientalism. It is also a personal rejection of that gaze, for she is not willing to buy into the mindset of the Odalisque.

Faten turns to her cultural identity to sustain her and to help her make choices for herself and her body (147). Thus, she is careful to set up a Moroccan harem, women’s quarter, in her apartment, thereby honoring the traditional. Her roommate, Betoul, is a fellow illegal Moroccan immigrant: “one of those immigrants with the installment program—she sent regular checks in the mail to help her brothers and sisters,” and she
returned to Morocco laden with gifts every August and came back to Spain with worry lines (142). It is in conjunction with this other woman that Faten decides to return to cultural celebrations, such as Eid, to find cultural fulfillment. She decides to play the role her mother played for her by using her modern earnings and her freedom to take the day off, cook an appropriate meal, and provide her with an opportunity to break the fast in community and to celebrate Eid. For Faten, the ability to create a female community, with her Moroccan roommate, allows her to enjoy her life, her profits, and her own identity because Betoul is honest and forthright, and “Faten smiled, feeling grateful for the truth” (151). Betoul can see that she is not a fanatic nor an odalisque, and it is only within this Moroccan cultural context and lack of double consciousness that Faten can live happily, as an independent woman shaped by tradition and modernity. Thus, her Maghrebiyya composite consciousness seems to reform Muslim beliefs so that she can sell her sexual labor and gain capital that allows her to be an independent Moroccan woman within her own self-created harem in a foreign land. She is not challenging Islam, but she adapts its practice so that she can use the modern and traditional experiences as a basis upon which to forge a life.

Lamya’s Practical Empowerment

Lamya is another of Lalami’s characters who, unlike her brother Murad, skillfully uses her modern and traditional resources to forge a life of self-determination that is independently sustainable. Murad is the main character in the novel most tied to western ideology and culture. While Lamya, his little sister, immediately turned to practical
money-making work as a receptionist for an import-export company downtown, Murad pursued a university degree in English Language and Literature. The labor market in Morocco, however, had no use for his degree, so after graduation, he is forced to work in the informal sector as a tourist guide. He is economically dependent on his mother and his sister for all his needs, including spending money, and “without a job his turn [at being engaged] wasn’t going to be anytime soon” (107). Unemployment in the slums of Tangier threatens Murad’s ability to function as a man. Unlike Ghomari who is making progress toward the accumulation of capital needed for marriage, Murad is unable to sell his labor for six years or to produce anything of value, so he cannot even aspire to a regular man’s life, including marriage.

Lamya, however, is able to sell her labor and support the entire family. She is also able to conceive of marriage and to fulfill all the male requirements. Her fiancée is employed at an import-export business, so they are linked in their pursuit of meaningful employment. Her independence, premised on her status as provider for the family, is disturbing to her brother, who demands to know, “shouldn’t she be home already?” (107). However, she creates a harem with her mother and little brother while her older brother, emasculated by his unemployment, is forced by economic circumstances to share the female quarters. Thus, his sister’s modern economic independence and her connection to her culture and religious community authenticate her role as a woman who has developed a composite consciousness in Tangier. Their mother tells Murad, “there will be a proper engagement ceremony and you’ll be there” (106). Lamya’s embodiment of composite
consciousness is deeply rooted in her Moroccan society and her modern approach to economic prosperity, marriage, and security for her family.

Zohra’s Fulfillment

Zohra is the last Lalami character in this analysis who uses both traditional and modern resources to secure a life of self-determination in her community even when her husband, Aziz, leaves for Spain. Aziz’s name means the mighty or powerful one, but his wife Zohra is the empowered character in Lalami’s narrative. Like Murad’s tale about the weaver, the story of the mighty Aziz is actually about his wife, Zohra. Her name means brightness, and she outshines him by remaining firmly entrenched in her community and finding economic empowerment and personal fulfillment in her role as a woman displaying a composite consciousness while he is away in Spain. Zohra is always gainfully employed in the narrative, for she works at the soda factory. Meanwhile, Aziz is unable to find a position despite his special degree in automation. With a relatively high unemployment rate declining from 23% in 1999 to 11% in 2006\(^4\), it is not surprising that he cannot find a job and that he can sit at café surrounded by other unemployed men.

Zohra initially opposes his dangerous journey to Spain, but eventually agrees because “at least he’ll make a living”(80). His employment and ensuing economic prosperity would mean economic progress as a family with their own home, children, and

\(^4\) “Morroco Economy: Overview.” Downloaded Feb 12, 2007

<http://www.indexmundi.com/morocco/economy_overview.html>
material goods. She is secure in her community and has strong family support, especially with her sister. Zohra knows that she will live in a woman-centered household, so she is willing to let her husband go abroad. Thus, practical and Marxist concerns inform her decision to give up the opposition to his journey. She knows that she is technically “being left behind,” but her community life will not change substantially with her husband’s departure. Zohra, like Jenara, lets go of her social dependence on a man in favor of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment, for “she had always been the practical one,” the narrator tells us (90). The reader gets an immediate sense of her modern ability to take care of herself with the product of her labor, to exercise her will independently, and to live happily within her community.

Upon Aziz’s return to his parents’ apartment in Casablanca in “Homecoming,” he expects to be the heroic figure bringing marks of progress and economic security, but he is shocked by his wife’s lack of admiration for his accomplishments over the past two years. Just as Jenara had found her fiancée unable to contribute to her freedom, so Zohra finds Aziz’s contributions, both the gifts and his opinions, to be unnecessary. For instance, he brings his mother and wife dresses, fabrics, creams and perfumes, but his pièce de résistance was a portable sewing machine. “Zohra looked at it with surprise. ‘I bought one last year,’ she said. She pointed to the old Singer that lay in a corner of the room” (161). His idealized conception of himself as the modern man who knows what she needs and takes care of her is mistaken, for she is self-sufficient and happy about her life just the way it is.
Like Jenara in the folktale, she has found her freedom within the very community that she lives. She has brought a new order to the household, as Jenara did with the kingdom. Aziz soon finds out that this self-sufficiency extends to Zohra’s relationship with her semi-daughter figure, Meriem, with whom she shares such a special bond that her need for mothering seems fulfilled, thereby rendering him unnecessary for procreative purposes (166-7). In addition, she refuses to leave his mother, will not subscribe to cable, and refuses to go to Spain with the simple words, “I don’t know if that’s the life for me” (170). With the practical dimension of her character, she rejects his foreign ideas about her journey to Spain, her need for an electric sewing machine, and his judgment about her sister Samira’s hijab.

Like Jenara, she is making her own future with her own resources, indifferent to the male gaze. Zohra defends her sister’s choice to wear the hijab scarf as much as she defends her own right not to do so, or to paraphrase Lalami paraphrasing a French philosopher in “Behind the Veil: “I do not approve of the headscarf, but I will defend to the death the right of women to wear it” (3). Zohra is so centered in her community that she understands the various reasons why the hijab is worn by women: protection against aggressive men, making a political statements about women’s faith, fashion, and the disregard of European and bourgeois norms, and embracing Islam. She also implicitly rejects Aziz’s culturally disconnected condemnation of that choice, and his other ideas, such as her travel to Spain and abandoning his mother.

Zohra’s character can be read as a Jenara-type for she begins her journey as a sedate, loving wife who agrees to his departure because he has to sell the proverbial “ten
more carpets” before he can be a real husband (189). However, Aziz finds life in Morocco hopeless, so he chooses to leave her behind. He would later physically abandon her and his mother for a second time. Much like Ghomari, he thinks it is a hopeless pursuit to remain and to fight for economic survival and his manhood, within the community and his own homeland (191). Zohra is not powerless when faced with his decision because she is the modern head of household who takes care of herself, her mother-in-law, and her extended family by building strong community relationships that both nourish and empower her. She develops a stronger sense of *Maghrebiyya* composite consciousness during his absence because she uses her modern job and earnings to become the head of household who makes all the decisions, but she honors the community in which she resides and brings a different model of womanhood.

Meanwhile, as Aziz gains a material base abroad, he also loses his Moroccan self in Madrid. He wishes her to join him, but he eventually decides that it would be inconvenient and that he does not actually desire that reunification because he knows that she will not fit in socially and sexually. She not only refuses in polite ways, she also demonstrates to him how she has ushered in a new order to her life and how it is, in fact, better than the one he brought to the household. Thus, like the Sultan, he is shown to be gravely misguided in his actions and in his desire to have her join him in Spain. Zohra ushers in a new order with a new household leader who understands the need to restore her culturally centered existence in Morocco upon his departure. Thus, Zohra’s tears at the conclusion of “Homecoming” (175) are not tears of sadness but of relief at her freedom in staying behind combined with an understanding that her relationship with
Aziz as a husband, and not the entire family and community, is finally over. Unlike the royal protagonist of the tale of the Female Camel, Zohra does not find herself lost and crushed by her lover’s loss (Lebbady 226). Her emancipation is the source of tears, for she knows that he will not come back to everyday life in Morocco. She, however, will get to enjoy her community and her freedom to be a self-determined Moroccan woman.

Lalami’s Story of Jenara

Lalami’s work can be read as feminist although the term is laden with problematic western hegemonic overtones that many argue should not be applied to Africa. Oyeronke Oyewumi, for example, presents “several challenges to the unwarranted universalisms of feminist gender discourses” because she argues that “analysis and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa. Meanings and Interpretation should derive from social organization and social relations paying close attention to specific cultural and local contexts” (5). At the same time, this reading gives proper attention to the various Moroccan cultural realities that are at the heart of the people’s struggles with economic deprivation, lack of access to education, emigration, and governmental corruption, among others. In addition, this analysis of Maghrebiyya composite consciousness does, of course, have a particular focus on the women in the novel, but it does not write off men’s equally problematic concerns. It simply focuses on the empowerment of women and the hope that can be found in cultural centeredness and the use of European tools for exercising agency within the community. In essence, this chapter argues that Lalami’s
work is a narrative answer to Al-Hassan Golley’s call for “a more realistic and practical way not just of representing women but also of changing their lives” (522).

The culturally grounded narrative of Jenara, a storyteller’s tale usually told by a woman in the domestic realm, is the meta-narrative model upon which the four characters’ tales are told and the unifying factor for *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. Lalami’s characters’ stories mirror Murad’s childhood tale and empower women in a manner that allows them to thrive and to remain culturally centered and free *Maghrebiyya*, for, as cited earlier, according to Hasna Lebbady, Moroccan women’s storytelling was a venue to voice issues of importance to them, traumatic experiences, and grievances, so it was not merely entertainment (217). Therefore, within this narrative framework of tales retold, all the female protagonists in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* return to their own cultural traditions strengthened by their composite use of indigenous and European skills. They find fulfillment and empowerment in this Moroccan context of North Africa.

The architecture of Lalami’s first novel mimics the public square or *halqa* model for storytelling, as outlined by Richard Hamilton for a BBC broadcast. This *in medias res* narrative begins with the action that is a dramatic life turning point for the four women, “The Trip.” Lamya’s brother and Zohra’s husband sit alongside Halima and Faten as they set out on their precarious journey to seek a better life in Spain aboard the overloaded zodiac. This is the point of connection for the disparate characters whose lives we come to understand in *analepsis* or flashbacks that give the reader the background for the decisions to take the journey, as well as *prolepsis* or flashforwards that show the reader
how these four Moroccan women have made great emancipatory strides after that central event.

“The Trip” functions as a teaser, a dramatic pivoting moment in the lives of the main characters analyzed in this chapter, and it piques the attention of the reader, just as a storyteller would have done to a listener in the public square or al-halqa. This initial short narration builds spin off narratives that hold the reader’s attention just as they would have held the interest and attention of the listener in the public square. Thus, the narrative frame of the novel is true to a Moroccan storyteller’s experience in a public square, and it is centered upon retellings of Jenara’s tale which is woven throughout Lalami’s novel. Additionally, per the requisite moral instruction that such public storytelling would traditionally contain, the novel’s message is centered on women’s development of an emancipatory Maghrebiyya consciousness that takes advantage of both traditional strengths and modern opportunities to seek freedom from repression. Thus, while the message may promote emancipation, it does so within the confines of Moroccan societal norms so that the community changes but is not destroyed.

As a consequence of their developing a composite consciousness, these Moroccan characters do not dismantle the master’s house in their respective tales within the novels. As Dwyer insists, they are conservative in their storytelling. They do however, restore their own agency within the parameters of their home and cultural environment through subversive behavior transmitted and coded in the Jenara tale. Lalami finds a creative solution to the objections of critics such as Kumari Jaywardena, who are resistant to the hegemonic western influence they claim are inherent in feminism, and those of critics
like Al-Hassan Golley, who believe in a more indigenous Arab feminism. Lalami addresses their concerns by creating a model of culture-specific womanhood in which women continue to be and function as women in their respective cultures and communities. However, they also incorporate the European skills they have gained. By doing so, they empower themselves. Lalami depicts the development of a composite consciousness that allows each of the main Moroccan female characters to find culture-centric solutions to their oppression and to enjoy a female liberation within the existing system without dismantling it. It must be noted here that this position can be critiqued as a limited emancipation, a concession to patriarchy, and a compromised sustaining of the status quo as argued by Dwyer above. However, the counter-point is that this composite is realistic and reflective of the emancipation that is possible for these women in Morocco, and it is only the beginning of their empowerment.
CHAPTER FIVE: SILENCING THE OVER VOICE OF PATRIARCHY IN SECRET SON: COUPLING A RAWIYA’S VOICE AND COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated the development of a composite consciousness in four of Lalami’s female characters and its subsequent manifestation in a culture-specific approach to the women’s empowerment within Morocco. The strides that these women make bring reform into the community, and they open space for alternative life paradigms for women. In Secret Son (2009), Lalami builds upon her initial exploration of women’s models of emancipation in Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits giving her protagonist the ability to create a new reality for herself through storytelling. Rachida’s story permits her to live freely as a self-sufficient woman in her society. Ultimately, the very need for the fictional tale belies a woman’s compromised position in Moroccan society, but Rachida’s approach illustrates women’s resourcefulness and their ability to take small steps forward even under difficult circumstances.

The key feature of the storytelling in Lalami’s Secret Son is the role of Rachida as the domestic storyteller who frames her life and that of her son in a tale of empowerment for his success. Her story is one of awakening, of gaining a consciousness of her role and value as an Amazigh woman trained for modern health care employment in her society. It is the story of the emergence of a consciousness of the consciousness of her oppression by men and their circumscription of her freedom. According to Paolo Freire, this consciousness or conscientização is a step of becoming aware of one’s own awareness and thereby “make explicit their ‘real consciousness’ of the world. As they do this, they begin to see how they themselves acted while actually experiencing the situation they are
now analyzing, and thus reach a ‘perception of their previous perception.’ By achieving this awareness, they come to perceive reality differently” (Freire 96). Consciousness is tinged by Freire with an emancipatory element that results from understanding one’s own position and then analyzing that understanding so that there is a consciousness of a previous consciousness. This double cognizance or this twice analyzed state of knowledge, understanding, and perception is the key element of Rachida’s emancipation, for it necessitates critical thinking, discernment, and exercise of power and agency, as exemplified by her storytelling in the novel.

Rachida’s conscientização develops in her as she changes from a naïve country girl who is orphaned to an independent woman who creates her own past, present and future. She begins as a child who subscribes to the patriarchal social expectations of her as a girl child. Therefore, after her mother’s death in the village and her abandonment by her father at the French orphanage, she still believes that her father does what is best for her and that he is a good man. She believes that he is good and mourns their separation. Thus, she idealizes her father and aims to return to the village of her birth so that she may be reunited with her father. Even her profession is chosen with the intent to return to the village, care for her father, marry, bear children, and follow her community’s rules and regulations. She believes midwifery will be useful to her home community, and it is a proper role for her as a woman in her community.

However, upon falling in love and consummating that love, Rachida becomes disillusioned with the idealist visions of her patriarchal society. She discovers that the propaganda about women’s sanctity, men’s uprightness, and the strict adherence to Islam
are not reality. Instead, she finds that men use women at will for their pleasure and needs, and she discovers that women contribute to this maltreatment by enforcing misogynist rules. She rejects the patriarchal rules that would bind her and declare her an outcast and an undesirable given her unwed pregnancy. Instead, upon understanding this consciousness of consciousness, she takes control of her life through story.

Rachida uses a traditional practice of storytelling to stage her liberation from the constraints of her life story. Instead of resigning herself to the role of woman of ill repute, poor orphan, and immoral prostitute, she becomes a rawiya or storyteller and weaves a new tale for her life and for her son’s life without regard to actual facts. When caught in lies, namely mistakes in weaving a story, however, she only unravels a little at a time attempting to mend the tapestry of her invented life. She always selects what to include and discard and how best to frame and connect the various narrative threads. In doing so, she steers the future of her son as well as her own life. However, after her deceptions are more clearly and systematically revealed by Youssef’s short-lived relationship with his father, she is no longer able to hold her woven story together. Instead, she is forced to tell the tale as it unfolds and to live it as a participating side character instead of the lead storyteller. She is debunked from her revered seat as a rawiya, the prime storyteller in the Moroccan home, and anchored instead in the role of mother, daughter, and subject.

Storytelling is the unifying metaphor for Laila Lalami’s second novel, Secret Son. It is not the square’s halqa story told in public and heard by many in the open; instead, it is the story told quietly in the home by a mother to her only son. The very title of the novel, Secret Son suggests a hidden story, a parallel narrative that is kept hidden. There is
always a subtext even as the reader learns about Youssef El Mekki’s simple life in Hay An Najat, an urban slum in Casablanca. There are various stories interwoven, and Youssef, himself, is only to privy to what he is told by his mother, and he does not initially question her tales. Meanwhile, the reader catches glimpses of inconsistencies, and immediately looks for the origin of the novel’s title in the tale told by Rachida Ouchak, the lonely perfect French speaking medical assistant with the turquoise-eyed fatherless son.

An outline of the basic facts of Rachida Ouchak’s life is necessary to understand this storyteller’s skill and her creative inventive powers to shape her life and exercise agency once she acquires a composite consciousness based on her traditional upbringing and her modern education. In the story of her life, various stages of awakening and realization signal her gaining levels of consciousness regarding her situation in life. As outlined by Freire, a conscientizaçaõ is only the beginning of developmental change. Steve Biko’s conception of Black Consciousness builds on Freire’s notions of consciousness because it grounds the definitions of consciousness in awareness-raising. It also goes beyond that theoretical paradigm to emphasize action, and performance, as well as a rejection of the privileged oppressors’ messianic complex. In the essay “We Blacks” Biko proposes “to take a look at those who participate in opposition to the system—not from a detached point of view but from the point of view of a black man, conscious of the urgent need for an understanding of what is involved in the new approach—‘black consciousness’.” (27). He posits consciousness to be a multi-pronged approach, including a re-vision and re-writing of the past history to include indigenous history, heroes,
religions, and languages (29-32). Situated within Freire and Biko’s work, I will develop the concept of a composite consciousness that incorporates the key aspects of these thinkers’ ideas about consciousness. It then develops these into an expanded theory about women’s ability to gain this consciousness, perform womanhood, and challenge patriarchal structures in their societies. My first step will be the expansion of the definition of consciousness from the aforementioned so that womanhood is also integral. This step involves the inclusion of women, the re-memory, re-envisioning, and re-writing of womanhood back into Africa.

The seminal postcolonial writers such as Freire and Biko were often inclusive in gender, but not explicit about it, its conscription for the sake of indigenous nationalism, and its limits in their practical solutions to the problems of colonial oppression. Women willingly risked as much or more than their male counterparts in the struggles for independence because they believed, as Leila Abouzeid so markedly points out, “In the beginning of the Resistance, we believed the struggle wash clean all spite and malice. Just as we thought that Independence would relieve our cares and heal our sores like miracle cures sold in the market” (67). Women sought liberation from colonial and patriarchal repression. Freedom and emancipation, as they conceived of the ideals, namely access to a decent livelihood, the attainment of personhood, and the overthrow of the oppressive patriarchal colonial system, were necessarily applicable to women’s status as well as to the colonized. The move from Black Women’s Consciousness to a more open concept of African Women’s Consciousness requires an inclusion of the experiences of a variety of local cultural groups as well as the variety of social, political,
religious, and economic experiences of women across the African continent. The new terms addresses the disjunction between black consciousness and women’s place therein, as well as the euro- and androcentric context of postcolonial rule in Africa, for Black Consciousness does not necessarily exclude a space for patriarchal indigenous erasure of women’s contributions and a potential avenue for misogyny in the postcolonial state. However, an African woman’s composite consciousness necessarily focuses on women’s experiences and counteracts and negates misogynist Euro-and androcentric historical paradigms of the postcolonial state.

Rachida, the embodiment of a Moroccan woman’s composite consciousness in Atta’s second novel, was born in Sefrou in a Tamazight-speaking community. The rural village’s standards of comportment ruled her life during her early childhood. She was immersed in her life as a child without opportunity for reflection or comparison of her life with others, as Freire noted of individuals who are submerged in their lived experience without the ability to critically analyze their lives (90). Rachida’s mother died when she was still a child, so her female role model vanished. Her father became the primary figure in her life, and she saw all good things as a product of his doing. In this early stage of her life, Rachida engages in a magical consciousness that views her father as the magical source of all that is good in her life. Since she has lost her mother, he is the one she must depend upon for the basics of life. He is also the only family that she has, so she idealizes him and his patriarchal norms and expectations.

Shortly after her mother’s death, her father sent her to the orphanage at Bab Ziiyat purportedly to “get an education, train in a profession, and then return home”
In reality, he did not know how to care for her. He gave her to the orphanage so the nuns would raise her. He does not calculate the devastation on the part of the motherless child who then practically becomes a full orphan without the presence of her father.

During her time at Bab Ziyyat, he failed to visit or communicate, thereby abandoning her when she needed his parental care the most. The distance and the separation were harsh for her as a child, so she idealized her father. She held on to the notion of him as the sole source of goodness in her life even after he left her at the orphanage. She grew up believing the social propaganda that fathers know what is best for their daughters, so patriarchs dictate the course of girls’ and women’s lives. She was so engulfed in daily life and coping in this foreign environment that she was not able to take the time to reflect on her father’s actions. She was busy learning a foreign tongue, French, that comes to replace Tamazight, her mother tongue. She became literate, learned new social conventions, and adopted all that she was offered in this new setting, for she had no access to her former life. In Freire’s words, she was submerged in this reality, and she could not emerge to reflect, understand, and intervene in reality. She lacked both the historical awareness and the conscientizacao of the situation because she was too busy simply negotiating the foreign reality that engulfs her (Freire 90).

Rachida was, in fact, overwhelmed by the whirlwind of her life circumstances as an orphan, so she is unable to critically assess her status, diagnose it, and prescribe a solution. Instead, she is a passive subject as a child forced to endure orphan status. In these circumstances, she cannot intervene in her own historical reality, fight the oppressive patriarchal norms of both Amazigh and foreign French culture, or change the status quo of her existence.
As she grows up in the orphanage and comes to see this orphan reality foisted upon her as the norm of her existence, she has to select a profession. Midwifery seems a proper profession for her village, as she dreams of returning to her father and the comfort of her childhood home. Clearly, these dreams reveal a denial of her father’s abandonment as well as strength of character and perseverance. She hopes that in her choice of profession she will find a means to make her dreams of returning to her home village a reality despite her father’s actions. In the midst of such a dream, while training in midwifery, she meets a Fassi activist who was wounded in a protest. The lawyer and activist, Nabil Amrani, seems like an ideal man.

This nobleman is particularly attractive for a young country girl sheltered from the realities of Moroccan life by the walls of a French orphanage. To expand her training, she was assigned to serve as midwife to Nabil’s very pregnant wife, for Mrs. Amrani had a difficult pregnancy and was confined to bed rest. During Rachida’s service, Nabil charmed her and took advantage of his status and wealth, as well as her naïve lack of experience with men. Rachida’s lack of experience with ruthless womanizers left her unprepared for this. The only relationship that she had seen in her rearing in the orphanage was that of her parents’ marriage which was cut short by her mother’s untimely death. Therefore, in this relationship with Nabil, she is also unable to reflect upon her experiences, what he is offering her, and what this entails for her. Instead, she is charmed by this man of magnificent means and manners.

Rachida idealizes Nabil just as she had done with her father. Instead of recognizing his advances as infidelity and a violation of Muslim codes in her society, she
is flattered and entranced by his attention to her and his valuation of her. He quickly categorizes her looks, her impeccable manners, and perfect French language and accent. He deems them excellent and bypasses his own rule not to engage with the servants so that he can conquer her sexually. Rachida is no match for this powerful man, and she succumbs to his advances still swept up by his persona and without any reflection or any potential to exercise any power.

As the man of the house, he holds all the power. If she had resisted, she would have been dismissed by the powerful family and given a bad recommendation, so the imbalance of power in their relationship already excluded a level playing field. The power of a male in her society and the system that supports such patriarchy precluded the possibility of Rachida’s refusal. As Freire further notes, “any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire Pedagogy of the Oppressed 66). In sum, Rachida is the object of Nabil’s desire, the sexual object of his desire. She also becomes discarded like an object when he has achieved the conquest. She is not allowed the privilege of financial security, self-esteem, or experience to judge the situation. Instead, she is assigned to the servant position by the training orphanage, and she succumbs to an unscrupulous man’s advances.

After a short-lived affair, Rachida became pregnant. Nabil rejects her. To protect his reputation as a community leader and socialite, Nabil’s mother asked her to get an abortion and to walk away from their lives. Mrs. Amrani did not hold him to community
and religious standards but rather views him as exempt from these while Rachida is held responsible for the entire affair. Meanwhile, Mrs. Amrani is focused on the protection of her son’s reputation and that of her family. She is engaged in enforcing patriarchal norms, subjugating women, and enabling men to mistreat women. She is, in other words, enforcing propagandistic notions about the virtues of men and the culpability of loose women instead of holding her son accountable for his deplorable behavior toward a vulnerable young woman. In this exchange, separated from the ideal vision of men in her life, Rachida first understands the patriarchal lie in her society. She also becomes aware that she “can no longer treat the oppression of women by indigenous patriarchy and by colonialism as two separate issues” (Yeğenoğlu 122); instead, they must be acknowledged as two constitutive parts of her experiences as a woman abandoned by her father and betrayed by her lover.

A Rawiya’s Story of Composite Consciousness

She then reflects upon her upbringing, her lover’s actions, and her own future in light of this relationship. This reflection leads to more reflection about what she wants for her unborn child and for herself. She knows that if she keeps the child she will be ostracized and deemed immoral by all, including those in the only two homes she has known, the nuns at the orphanage and the community in Sefrou. When she reflects upon the patriarchal norms, her entanglement, and her ability to affect her future, she comes into a consciousness of the previous consciousness. She emerges from these circumstances which she entered by following all the rules around her: those of Sefrou,
the orphanage, and her society’s enforced code of silence regarding male cowardice and oppression. In Freire’s words, she is able to “emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled” (Freire 90) when she can envision a solution to the problem she now recognizes as such.

This emergence with a composite consciousness as a Moroccan woman allows her to create a plan for her own future. Thus, she refuses the abortion, has the child, and moves to Casablanca. Because the unmarried pregnancy would bring shame to her father and the nuns and both would pass judgment, she never returns to the village or the orphanage. In addition, she stopped speaking Tamazight. The nuns at Bab Ziyyat had trained her in perfect French language and manners which she carefully uses to her advantage in the city and parlays into landing a professional well-paying job at the hospital in Casablanca.

Rachida empowers herself when she gains a composite consciousness and uses the tools at her disposal, such as traditional storytelling skills and her European-style education and the colonial language. She forges a new reality for herself that subverts the patriarchal expectations of women in Morocco. She intervenes in reality and begins to create an image of herself. She pretends that “she was simply an abandoned girl raised by nuns, and she could speak the languages of the city, not the idiom of her village” (239). She also pretends that she is a widowed mother who was so devastated by the loss of her husband, a kind and morally upright teacher, that she prefers not to talk about her past. She focuses all her energies on raising her son as one who does what is right and works hard (110). The women of Hay an Najat, a Casablanca slum, see her as aloof and
pretentious with her perfect French. However, she is focused solely on her son and his future, so she keeps to herself and works hard, getting promotions and raises at work. Despite extremely simple living in a one-bedroom house, she struggles to make her salary enough for herself and her son; however, as a practical woman, she saves for his university and dreams of his graduation day.

She is also keenly aware of the patriarchal and religious censures that she would face if she were discovered to have fornicated with an adulterous man. All the negative consequences are aimed at the woman, and it is a brutal condemnation she would have to face because she is not wealthy and does not have a powerful family to hide her mistake, stitch her up for marriage, and give up the money to maintain her position as a desirable bride in her society. In fact, as Nabil Amrani says of his own daughter, Amal, such mistakes are common for girls of her social status and liberal education. However, protocol required maintaining appearances so that “she would have prevented her father from finding out. Other girls, would have been more discreet about their relations, then gotten a doctor to sew them back up” (83). Nabil’s response illuminates the social trends in light of reality. In this case, his honor as a father is at stake if others learn of his daughter’s love affair. He is willing and financially able to save his daughter the fate of a fallen woman. No such provision was possible for Rachida. She had to save herself through storytelling.

In addition, as Amal Amrani’s situation illustrates, there is a class element to this sexual permissiveness so that the wealthy are offered the opportunity to commit and hide such behavior while the poor are not. As Marjane Satrapi says of Iranian women in her
book *Embroideries* and Nadine Labaki notes of her Lebanese characters in the film *Caramel*, women of a certain social level can afford premarital sex with a confidential system that upholds their social repute and hides their mistake so that the patriarchal norm remains unchallenged. The poor who do not have access to such modes of concealment, such as Rachida, are subject to harsh social constraints, and the women are without recourse if they fail to live up to those patriarchal requirements of premarital virginity. Meanwhile, the wealthy bypass censure for their actions and retain their social and moral privilege while also hypocritically upholding and supporting unjust and unrealistic patriarchal norms.

Hymenorraphy, also known as re-virgination or hymen restoration, is a procedure that entails sexually active women’s vaginas being sewed up so that they will bleed during their first marital experience of sexual intercourse. It is common among the wealthy in Morocco, as evidenced by extensive international coverage of the issue after a 2007 Reuters article about a 19 year-old Moroccan woman living in Paris who felt it was necessary to get the surgery to conform to societal imperatives at home. Even Youssef experiences this class-based reality during a sexual escapade with a classmate at university who enjoys casual sex precisely because she has access to revirgination. Therefore, Rachida’s shame comes from her grounding in the rural lower class. Her Amazigh heritage would not allow sexual trespasses for those in her village without bringing shame to her father’s household. Additionally, Rachida knows of the religious censure of the fallen woman. After all, Lalami carefully weaves into the *Secret Son’s* first chapter the plot of the classic film *Fatmah* and includes Hatim’s fundamentalist
patriarchal religious condemnation because a fallen woman’s “misery is her own fault. This is what happens when Muslim women engage in relations with dissolute men” (Lalami 20). There is no blame placed on the wealthy male who seduces the young woman or any mark on his honor. The woman is left to bear all the blame and social censure.

A Mother’s Tale of Empowered Widowhood

Therefore, after conscientização and developing a composite consciousness, Rachida creates a realistic culturally-centered approach to her situation. It leads her to skip Fatmah’s fight for her children under a then unjust Al-Moudawana family code and to create, instead, a strong self-sustaining family of two in a viable Moroccan context. As such, she and her son are fully independent of Nabil Amrani and the accompanying cultural prejudices, for her narrative has opened space for them to live and thrive independently. Upon emerging from this blind faith in patriarchal propaganda, she intervenes in her own story, takes control, exercises the power she has, and creates her own reality through the words. Rachida is a gifted tale-teller, for she is able to turn these grim facts-- an adulterous affair, an unwed pregnancy, poverty, and a rural childhood-- into a more empowering tale for herself. She reframes the story of her life in the cloak of widowhood, she legitimizes her son’s birth through a bribed official’s signature, and she painfully excises from her daily life her Amazigh heritage and her mother tongue.

In my words, she creates a tale that goes as follows: "When I was young, I was abandoned by my parents at Bab Ziyyat orphanage and then raised by French nuns. I
speak only French with excellent diction because that is what I learned growing up. I have no indigenous language. French is my mother tongue. I studied to be a midwife. I did not complete my studies because I married. My husband, Youssef El Mekki, was a young teacher with high morals and a very kind nature. He died when my son was in the womb. I began to work at the hospital to earn a salary to raise him. We have our one bedroom house in Hay an Najat. It is simple living, but we live according to our means, and we survive. I have saved only my deceased husband’s photograph. His family did not approve of our marriage. I have no other things of his to offer my son. However, every day I give my son his legacy of hard work, quiet patience, a love of books and study, and a dedication to self-betterment. I have no wish to remarry or to socialize because I am deeply hurt by my loss. My only desire in life is that my only child graduate from university and that he take full advantage of the possibilities open to him. I live only for my son although I am practical."

Two things about this narrative immediately strike the reader. The first is that Rachida empowers herself as she rewrites the tale of the common fallen woman. She bypasses the usual narrative that includes the innocence of the young girl who falls in love, the willful violation of the virgin, the naïve belief in a man’s word, the callousness of privileged men, the protection of a male’s honor and family name at the expense of the young woman’s reputation and sometimes even life, as well as the doomed future of the unaborted child who is a bastard without a family name. Instead of allowing the patriarchal society as well as religious norms to condemn her, she eliminates from her storyline the choice to have sexual relations outside of marriage, her adulterous lover, his
practical and unsympathetic mother and wife, and their demands that she have an abortion. In addition, she eliminates the disillusionment of a young woman, the extreme hardships that she must endure to keep and raise him, and her choice to swear off men.

In her journey toward emancipation through a composite consciousness, she locates the center of power in herself and her words, so she is able “to overcome the situations which limit” her progress through transgressive storytelling (Freire 80). Therefore, for Rachida developing a liberatory composite consciousness is also a crossing of borders, namely imposed thinking limits that have been socially inculcated in her. She makes her own liberation just as Biko encouraged in his “Frank Talk” persona when he said Blacks must “assert themselves and stake their rightful claim” instead of being passive victims (21). In fact, she asserts herself precisely by narrating herself out of victimhood. She does not await help from Nabil or from her father; instead, she partakes in the women’s “insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy” by subverting them via storytelling (Butler 147).

To overcome the looming obstacle of social censure because she has violated the patriarchal code of virginity, Rachida eliminates the thread of woman’s fragility from the story. Instead, she weaves a tale of empowerment and maternal virtue and bases it on various parts of her own experience. Through the use of storytelling, Rachida rejects and subverts the patriarchal system’s oppressive norms, such as premarital virginity, that would deem her a fallen woman, condemn her son as a bastard, and heap misfortune upon them both. Instead, she intervenes in history and presents the story of a successful mother and widow.
Biko’s conceptualization of Black Consciousness required the realization that the solutions must come from those oppressed, namely black Africans. To do so, however, requires a resistance to temptation to simply mimic the oppressors and bypass the benefits this mimesis might offer, as addressed by Fanon in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” the famous third chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth* (164). Instead, the consciousness must be that of the people, the oppressed, and the marginalized. It must be a liberatory consciousness attained by the oppressed individuals. The individual who claims a consciousness must also empower others to share in the cognizance of their situation in life and to exercise agency and intervene in the historical moment (Fanon 205). In addition, women’s condition in Africa, while encompassed in the Black Consciousness envisioned by Biko, is not fully considered without “a clear definition of their objectives and methods of struggle as well as of the rights for which women must fight” (El Saadawi 211). In other words, an African woman’s perspective is necessary because, for instance, a Moroccan woman such as Rachida, fights for more rights than a Moroccan man, such as Nabil. While the latter is a renowned activist, he is complacent when it is convenient, and he has the patriarchal privilege to use and abuse women and to support his abandonment of the fight for justice in his homeland. Nabil, under the guise of nobility, mimics the colonial oppressors and steps into their shoes (Fanon 164).

Rachida, on the other hand, has too few rights in a patriarchal country ruled by the old Family Code, and she is an advocate for herself and her child. As a woman, she must fend for herself and her offspring, so her concern is not just for political ideals. It is also for the concrete institutionalized discrimination against women, the poor, and the
Amazigh people who have been othered. In theoretical terms, Rachida’s growth begins by touching on the consciousness of consciousness of the female postcolonial subject. However, it must also address the initial state of ignorance she experienced as a child, the false consciousness regarding her father and the potential attachment to the oppressor’s paradigm that she initially embraces, as well as the awakening from this stupor of propaganda (Freire) and liberal paternalism (Biko). Her development must then go beyond this immersion in patriarchal propaganda and paternalism to the enactment of womanhood as an assertive way of living with choice and freedom. Rachida’s life narrative points to this performance of womanhood through storytelling and to an emancipation through words and modern employment so that the subaltern does speak and exercise agency. Rachida is the rawiya of her life. She develops a woman’s composite consciousness through the traditional Moroccan art of storytelling and the use of her European training as a health care provider.

Rachida’s weaving of such a tale is an act of empowerment by a woman conscious of her own oppression and aware of her ability to change her circumstances. Because she has the French orphanage training, she dictates her own future and that of her son. Her narrative is a result of her conscientizaçao, and it stems from her new understanding that she can intervene in history, for as Freire noted, it is essential to “emerge from their submersion and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled. Intervention in reality, or historical awareness itself, represents a step forward from emergence, and results from the conscientizaçao of the situation (90). She becomes a subject who has access to her own decision making and who refuses pacification (Freire
Instead, her narrative creates a new history and reality for herself and her unborn child. This narrative is buttressed by her modern training as a hospital midwife, as it provides economic independence. As Oyewumi noted in the case of the Yoruba mother, for Moroccans, “Symbolically, omoya emblematizes unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty” (13), and Rachida is the one who provides these noble qualities to those around her precisely because she is a mother. Her narrative is the history that attaches to them and gives them dignity as the widow and the orphan, and through this narrative, she gains the agency to control their fate. Her weaving of this tale is a manifestation of taking control and exercising agency over her own destiny and forging a better one for her son.

Through the realm of story, Rachida is no longer subject to patriarchal or religious limitations but rather uses them to empower herself and to intervene in her own future and history, thereby providing an example of the debunking of the myth of “‘Third World Women’ as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victim of a particular socioeconomic system” (Mohanty 23). In Rachida’s tale, she becomes an empowered widow, a much respected role in her society, and this quells any questioning about existing as a single parent. She also gains the sympathy of others through her withdrawn nature and her dedication to her son. In turn, she earns him a respectable status as a boy who lost his educated father, and she gives him motivation to strive to be a good student, to aspire to university, and to grow up as a moral and ethical young man in the midst of harsh poverty. In her story is the possibility of intervening in history and creating a new reality for her son. As a woman storyteller, traditionally the bearer of
culture, she takes on the role of arbiter of culture and creator of reality. Rachida’s transgressive story demonstrates that while the “home, and by extension woman, are regarded as the principal site for expressing the nation’s culture, controversies about women’s dress, manners, food, education, her role at home and outside” (125), the woman can also undermine the norms of culture and its patriarchal prescriptions to create a more open space for her development than that available for women in her society.

In this way, Rachida utilizes her new consciousness of consciousness to change her reality as a fallen Amazigh woman in Casablanca and to turn the tale of her youthful dalliance and its disastrous outcome into the tale of the professional, hardworking, and honest widow who gets ahead by living virtuously with her son. As long as her tale is convincing, she is able to lead a stable quiet life with great joy in her son’s accomplishments and a clear sense of purpose. He, on the other hand, lives in a state of longing for the father he never knew yet also striving always to be a morally upright man who values education. This is a narrative of self-empowerment, created solely by Rachida, and it is born of a realization of the understanding of her oppression and a rejection of patriarchal norms that only hurt women combined with her economic self-sufficiency. In other words, it is the product of her developing a composite consciousness and liberating herself from restrictive patriarchal norms by utilizing her own modern education and the tradition of storytelling.

Despite her success as a rawiya, Rachida is also painfully aware of her deception, for “when she looked into her heart, she found her own lies to her child taunting her” (240). She was raised to be truthful in her village, and she is ashamed of her own
trespasses. She knows that Nabil was wrong in his actions, but she acknowledges that she was also to blame. After all, her job at the time was to care of his pregnant wife, so she betrayed her employer and acted unprofessionally. She knows that her storyline is a lie, but she chooses to keep it alive so that her son will succeed and surpass her youthful mistake. However, knowing and acknowledging the truth, she waxes melancholic about her lost childhood and home. For this is the sacrifice that she had to make. This compromise, however understandable and strategic comes at the expense of the truth. This expendable truth is her own lost Amazigh culture and language as well as the truth about a prominent man defrauding his community.

It is the burden of this rawiya or storyteller to know the facts of her life as well as the creative narrative that she uses to empower herself. She must also bear the burden of a lie so powerful it could destroy both her and her child if fully revealed. Thus, her empowering tale is also a compromise of her own values, and it robs her son of his rich Amazigh heritage. Therefore, she is not always at peace with her tales although she remains consistently committed to her story for the sake of her child as well as her own reputation.

It is not only the storyteller who bears the burden, for Youssef instinctively feels he is an actor in her stories and that he has an assigned and very specific role to play. When he first meets his father, he says of his mother, “She wants me to be…like her dreams of me” (90). He is accurate in his assertion because Rachida has dreamt his life. In fact, she makes all things in her story conform to his successes in her dreams. He feels the burden and her disappointments when he does not live up to her preconceived notions
of what he should accomplish. However, he would later reject this burden because he questions the patriarchal status quo and the failed nationalism that lead to his hopeless material living conditions. He notes the disappointed hopelessness when he states,

Why should he and his mother be struggling so much? Perhaps that was why his mother had lied to him all these years: she had traded the anger of what should have been and given him instead the sadness of what could have been. She had tried to be patient, to be good, to be wise. But Youssef was not so willing to make the same bargain. (73)

Youssef is not able, as a man in his community, to make the same bargain of self-effacement for the sake of a peaceful if resigned existence. In fact, he is, at this point in his development, blind to his mother’s emancipation through the tale she weaves for his life. He focuses solely on the deprivation they face while she has always focused on the freedoms and the opportunities because as he notes later, “she has certain ambitions for me” (90). These ambitions are adequate for a mother. They are not enough, however, for a young man who aspires to upward social mobility and to more than his society will grant him as an orphaned slum dweller.

A Father’s Tale of Power and Denial

Moreover, it is not only Rachida that has a storyline. His father, Nabil Amrani also has his own story, and his life is also closely governed by it. It is the story of a Fassi, an Arab conqueror, a power player in national politics, and a privileged man. For instance, when he finds out where Youssef lives, he mutters,
Good Lord. In a slum. Nabil was revolted at the thought that his offspring, his flesh and blood, an Amrani whose ancestors had fought battles and won wars, conquered land and ruled clans, been part of the power structure of this country for as long as anyone could remember, lived in a place like Hay an Najat. It made his blood rise to his cheeks. (94)

The fact that he bears responsibility for his son’s misfortunes is not part of his tale, however, so he banishes any self-blame. He carefully limits himself to the confines of the story that he has created, a very public story like that for a halqa. Also, unlike his mother, Youssef’s father is unaware that he is weaving the story of his life even as he admits when he meets his son that he has edited his own life story. Therefore, “he reserved a moment of wonder for the work memory could do, and for the fact that it could preserve as well as erase details of the past” (86) so that just as he refused to remember his own extramarital affairs, he also purges the memory of the unwanted pregnancy of Rachida Ouchak. He can still see himself as a dedicated family man because he discards the memory of his many extra-marital affairs and of that potential child and focuses solely on Amal, his legitimate daughter. He also begins to weave a story about his son and Youssef’s integration into Nabil’s own story.

Nabil Amrani’s story is not one directed toward and inspired by Youssef’s well-being. Rather it is a selfish one in which his son is simply a “younger version of himself” (90) or as he also phrases it, “something of himself” and “someone he could have groomed, someone with whom he could have shared what only fathers and sons can share, someone he could have cherished alongside Amal” (86). Nabil’s focus is on
himself, this replica of himself, and the opportunities he has lost as the father to a much coveted male heir. Youssef, himself, is a surplus consideration, except as an extension to his father. Therefore, Nabil’s story is one of self-aggrandizement and self-comfort. Meanwhile, Rachida’s story stands all the more starkly in contrast to it because it is so clearly focused on Youssef and his success.

The Unravelling of Stories

Despite the focus on her son’s well-being, Rachida’s story unravels at various specific points, and she must mend the lose ends to prevent it from destroying them both. However, by the end of the novel she must face the fact that her tale is completely unraveled and that only the truth can save her son. Only her sheer love and determination to keep her son can guide him, as he drifts without a tale to anchor him, a role to play, or a community to support him. Rachida is, therefore, a skilled storyteller who tells the story of a decent, morally upright, educated young professional who dies tragically leaving his son the legacy of a moral and ethical upbringing and a drive for education that is fostered by his attending mother and her dedication to her only son. She weaves him a story that will end with university graduation, life outside of the slums, and a successful life. She weaves him the story that should have been hers, and she reinforces its fictionalized structure with her own calm, resigned work ethic, moral character, and undeterred will to see him succeed.

Like a rawiya, Rachida constantly varies the tale as needed by inventing new branching storylines or even resorting to the truth as a potential reinforcement for the
moral of the tale she tells: education will get you ahead. When he discovers inconsistencies in her story and questions her, she adjusts, changes, and improvises to keep him in a state of believing in himself. She keeps him attuned, for instance, with stories of his childhood, with stories of success, and with warnings about those around him. She also keeps her story protected by not befriending the women around her so that she is actually isolated from the slum’s community around her. She is dedicated to her son and her work, in that order. Of course, she is ultimately also committed to keeping the truth about her son’s life a secret. He is a secret son, and it is only as such that he can succeed.

Rachida and her goals are vulnerable when her tale is discovered as flawed by her son. She adjusts, but it soon becomes obvious that she must tell the truth. Even when forced to tell some of the truth, she continues to weave tales that are not necessarily all truth because she believes that all the truth would render them vulnerable to an unjust society. She fears that the propaganda of patriarchal structures would condemn her loudly, and his moral centering would be lost. Ironically, it is only once she tells the tale of her life in full sincerity that she is able to tell him who he is, to confirm his identity as the son of Amrani, from a long line of Arabs, and her son, from of long line of Amazigh horsemen on her part, that he understands himself, finds the will to do the right thing and to focus on hope.

Furthermore, he finds the will to stop a murder and to confront the fundamentalist Islamic hate machine called The Party. He can see how it brainwashes and takes hold of his poverty-stricken neighborhood. He rejects the religiously fundamentalist narrative of
The Party, the patriarchal nationalist narrative of his own father, and the untrue yet empowering narrative of his mother. Instead, he embraces personal agency as he understands that it is not mektub or fate that determines his future. Rather, it is his own ability to choose his path and his courage to do the right thing that determines his future. Therefore, although the end of the novel signals a rejection of the various narratives consecutively imposed upon him by those who claim to know what is better for him, his community, and his homeland, it is from his mother’s real life tale that he gains the fortitude to do what is morally and ethically right in a world driven by politics, patriarchy, and corruption.

**New Modes of Storytelling: Youseff and Amal**

Once truth and fact come to the forefront, Rachida loses her power over her only son as he begins to make his own choices and to reject the preset path she had laid out for him. He rejects the concept of mektub and embraces his own subaltern agency. Therefore, Rachida becomes a mere side character, a foil to Youssef once she is not the tale-teller, the arbiter of culture, the narrator of his life, or the rawiya in the home. He is still grounded in the reality of her lessons and her upbringing. When troubled, he opts for the most ethical course of action. He attempts to stop the murder of an innocent individual by the fundamentalist leadership of The Party because he is able to see the truth of conditions in his community, the political and religious corruption, and the way in which the subaltern is silenced and used by those in power. He no longer strives to play a role laid out for him by the different stakeholders around him. Instead, he opts for the freedom
of thought, the respect for life, and the commitment to justice and to activism. This is his own version of Freire’s conscientização that results in positive action and agency. This is a new and very liberating path for Youssef, so the reader finds him thinking at the end of the novel,

He was an Ouchak from Sefrou on his mother’s side, and an Amrani from Fès on his father’s side. He was half-Berber and half-Arab; he was a man of the mountains, and a man of the city; a man of the people and an aristocrat; a full-blooded Moroccan, with the culture and the history of a thousand years—a rich identity, of which he could be proud. (282).

Therefore, although at the end of the novel he is sitting handcuffed in police custody waiting questioning by the Comissaire, he is actually most clear about his own social position in life, his understanding of the politics of his homeland, and his own ethical belief system.

He is the hero of the movie that has played in his head because he was able to see the nature of his own existence and his oppression and to make an ethical choice for freedom and idealism. His conscientização enabled him to create his own solution, to intervene in history, and to take action. Therefore, there is hope in this narrative that he writes for himself after he discovers the truth of his own life and his own community. He understands that the state has used him as a pawn. He knows that Hatim is a corrupt politician like the rest and that in his hypocrisy he is the worst kind of leader. Through these experiences, he knows that such an oppressive version of Islam does not yield him or anyone in his society any emancipation. When he reaches this point, the strength of his
choosing his own path in life is that he does exactly what Rachida would have wanted. He chooses the ethical moral path although he ultimately fails to save Farid Benaboud’s life, and he becomes the embodiment of the average Moroccan. He is an ethical individual of mixed Amazigh and Arab heritage with both a wealthy city-dwelling family and rural family. He is a college dropout who cannot find employment to support himself, and he has lost hope in the economic advancement that once seemed possible if he went to university and did everything correctly as laid out by his mother. However, most of all, he is an individual who is keenly aware of the realities of his homeland. This knowledge itself is empowering.

In Laila Lalami’s *Secret Son*, weaving stories with full understanding, namely a Moroccan composite consciousness, is the most empowering endeavor. It erases mektub for the main characters, and it places the tale-teller squarely in the place of power. The storyteller speaks, however subaltern they may be in their society. The marginalized storyteller creates reality, determines outcomes, controls others’ reactions and steers them in their desired direction. Therefore, just as women are empowered when weaving rugs at home and receiving money for their labor, so the main tale-teller in *Secret Son* is empowered and can exercise agency as long as she is in control of the narrative. Therefore, it is in storytelling that women are empowered both in the private sphere and acting as arbiters of Amazigh culture when weaving rugs and in the public sphere when weaving tales about their private lives. They intervene in history and exercise power to lead the lives they want. For Rachida Ouchak, she must pay a high price for storytelling. The outward severing from her Amazigh roots affords her the ability to dictate her own
future in a cultural context that would have destroyed her if she had revealed her indiscretion and been subject to the hypocritical religious and patriarchal condemnation that Hatim so clearly illustrates. Therefore, Rachida is a storyteller who wrenches power from patriarchy and uses it to support her own and her son’s existence. She is the empowered tale-teller. It is only once she loses control of the various threads and loses hold of the loom that she becomes sidelined by reality unfolding.

The other female storytellers in the novel, the Amrani women, are not as adept at the ancient art, and they take prescribed paths for themselves because they are of the upper class and seek empowerment through material advantages. They are keenly aware of the real options for women if they were to confront patriarchy, and it is a perilous situation because “Although North Africa considers itself advanced, the position of women remains bound by traditional Muslim dynamics” (Handal 31). Therefore, the elder and younger Mrs. Amrani do not tell the tales they know. They choose silence in an oppressive patriarchal environment. They hide Nabil Amrani’s indiscretions, safeguard his reputation, and eliminate any threats for him. They empower him because it is through him that they have money, power, and prestige. They are the beneficiaries that enjoy the privileges his class and money bring. He is the provider, the main heir. They are ultimately bound to him and his mistakes, which they take on and solve for him. By deleting from memory his many faults, trespasses, and selfish actions, they uphold the status quo and patriarchy. They also benefit immensely from this arrangement although it is questionable whether they would participate in this arrangement if their own position in society were not so precariously linked to a man.
Amal, on the other hand, seems to be the new Amrani woman who will not conform. She is the one who disobeys honestly and openly, confronts patriarchal and nationalist values, and is willing to live without the material comforts her family provides. However, she returns home for a short time to satisfy her familial demands, to take care of her parents’ stressed marriage, and to play the role of a privileged daughter for which they have groomed her so carefully. At the end of the novel, Amal, like her illegitimate brother, realizes the truth about her parents’ stories. She understands the state of women in her homeland, and she rejects the privilege she has enjoyed. She also denounces the patriarchal oppression of all women, including herself. Therefore, she rejects first her parents’ narcissistic tales and focuses, instead, on her own agency. She chooses to forge a new story with her boyfriend, little privilege, and an opportunity for an honest relationship with someone outside her culture and religion. There is hope in Amal’s emancipation, and at the moment of choosing her own storyline, her father notes, “She looked so young, so innocent, so full of a kind of hope he had long forgotten, and he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her and never let her go” (269). When she chooses agency and voice, thereby rejecting her parents’ values and their restrictions, she is most alive and vibrant. She is poised to begin telling her own story, to use her voice, and to choose agency, but she is only able to do so outside Morocco.

The Amrani women’s stories stand in contrast to Rachida Ouchak’s own story. In the case of the elder Mrs. Amranis, they join their son and husband in oppressing women by enforcing patriarchal norms and privileging male family members. The two women tangibly benefit because Amrani foresakes his emancipatory values and focuses on
financial gain. However, as collaborators, they also discard their own voices, censor their responses, and choose silence to accommodate Nabil. Amal, on the other hand, is like Rachida. She is willing to subvert patriarchal norms, to reject any privilege that would have been hers in her station in life, and she chooses emancipation in exile over subjection at home because she has an American education to keep her economically and professionally fulfilled. Furthermore, Amal has already practiced using her voice, refusing to tell lies, and confronting her father. As Handal notes, there is a long history of Maghrebiyyat doing the same, for “North African women throughout their history have been heroes and legends, martyrs and resistance fighters, nationalists, feminists, and writers, participating in all aspects of their civilization historically, culturally, politically, socially, artistically” (30). Therefore, she is able to choose to walk away from the Amrani dynasty, just as Rachida did more than twenty years before. She exiles herself so that she can live the life she wants instead of the life prescribed to a woman according to Moroccan social norms. She is able to take advantage of the privileged upbringing, including a foreign education, to realize her dreams in a way that was not possible for Rachida over two decades earlier. Therefore, she helps to create alternatives of hope for emancipation of Moroccan women in the same way that Rachida’s storytelling enabled her to avoid censure and create her own reality.

Like an avid listener at the Jemaa al-Fna, the reader of Secret Son leans closer awaiting Amal’s story. However, the central stories told by the characters in both of Laila Lalami’s novels are actually reverberations of the ancient art of storytelling. Storytelling enables women to exercise agency over cultural production, the passing on of values, and
their own futures. The storytelling tradition anchors the women in hope and opportunity. It is also creative, captivating and enthralling for the listener and reader.

Nabil Amrani’s children both come to a strong sense of self and a turn to exercising agency when they acknowledge the composite elements of their existence and utilize them to seek empowerment, control over their lives, and opportunities for emancipation. For instance, Youssef only comes to understand himself as a young Moroccan man when he fully realizes his composite background, upbringing, and his own potential for emancipation if he uses both his own Amazigh and Arab ancestry as a resource and his European-style education as a key to empowerment instead of turning to fundamentalism and corruption when in despair about his material conditions. In the case of Youssef, the outcome is less favorable because he is still involved in the Farid Benaboud murder case. However, it is very important that he loses the anxiety that had plagued him throughout the novel. He no longer has to be anxious and inadequate about playing a role that he doesn’t fully grasp. He no longer filters his image of himself through the eyes of others, nor does he find himself inadequate and insecure. He understands who he is, where he comes from, and what strengths he has. He also comes to understand that he is best suited to determine his future even if his material living conditions are challenging.

Likewise, Amal, his sister, realizes that she is Moroccan, she is privileged, she is European-trained, and she is a product of all her Arab, Moroccan, and American training. As a consequence, she is no longer willing to submit to patriarchal chauvinist notions of women’s place in Moroccan society. She is most successful in emancipating from her
parents, keeping her own cultural grounding, and utilizing her European-style education as well as her U.S. degree to leave the family home, the country, and the religious and social constraints. She reassures her mother that she will still be her daughter and Moroccan, but she also strives to live for herself, to build upon her own skills and training to follow her own ideals. Therefore, Lalami’s storytelling enables a composite consciousness to lead Amal to emancipation from patriarchal norms and restraints, and to open new possibilities for the educated Moroccan woman, whether it is an upper class woman like Amal or a working class woman like Rachida.

As argued earlier in this chapter, the key feature of the storytelling in Lalami’s Secret Son is the role of Rachida as the domestic storyteller who frames her life and that of her son to lead him to success in a brutal environment of economic deprivation and hopelessness. The rawiya weaves her tale quietly in the home. Therefore, the whole story of the hidden son’s life is a story by a mother told to her only son in the domestic quiet of a one room shack. As the dramatic revelations of discrepancies in her storytelling come despite her careful mending of tears in her tale, she is forced to improvise, to deceive, and, in the end, to reveal herself as the tale-teller that she is. In fact, her story is a tale of empowerment for his success.

Youssef also sees her storytelling as both an asset and as a lie that deprived him of an indigenous heritage and an identity. In a patrilineal society in which she herself is designated, as a child, “Rachida bent Hammou ben Abdeslam ben Abdelkader Ouchak” (280) thereby incorporating three generations of male ancestors in her very name, she is unwilling to give him the patrilineal identity anchor. Instead, he is Youssef El Mekki
even as she shrinks to Rachida Ouchak and eliminates her and Youssef’s position in the patrilineal lineage lines. Therefore, her story is one of empowerment for herself and her son, but it is also one of great consequence for Youssef’s psyche as a Moroccan man. It is only once she tells him the truth of his own Amazigh and Arab heritage that he comes to fully understand himself, the importance of his role in his mother’s life as well as his relative unimportance in his father’s life, and his potential venues for success and for rejecting fundamentalist nationalist corruption and oppression.

Rachida, the weaver of tales, is herself a foil character, but as the weaver she has garnered power for herself. Rachida must ultimately acknowledge her son’s independence from her and her expectations, as framed in her stories. She is also confident that she has empowered him, served him well as a mother, and gained for the two of them a better life than they would have had if she had succumbed to the fallen woman syndrome rampant in her society. Her storytelling allows her to exercise agency over her life and that of her unborn son in a society that would have given her son to his father and condemned her as immoral. Rachida Ouchak is both a central and a foil character, and she is the director of her son’s life as well as her own. In the end, she is also truthful, able to articulate what she lost in exchange for this power, and able to articulate why her tales still hold valuable and worthwhile goals and ideals for her son. Therefore, it is the story of the fallen woman that reverberates throughout the text of Secret Son in references to classic Arab films such as the Egyptian Fatmah. However, Rachida turns this story upside down, uses her voice to articulate a different future, and exercises agency by utilizing her indigenous and European skills to raise a moral and
ethical son by teaching him through her stories. The hidden tales do eventually emerge, so the secret son is no longer hidden. However, even then, she manages, in the perfect French accent that she appropriates as her own, to anchor her son in egalitarian values of justice, fairness, and thoughtfulness which she learned from her own Tamazight speaking family.

The tale of Jenara and the tale of Rachida dominate Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and *Secret Son* respectively. They are tales of empowerment for women willing to come to a Maghrebiyyat composite consciousness, and the tales allow them key opportunities to embrace their indigenous heritage as well as to utilize western skills they have learned. In the process, the women become stronger in their composite consciousness so that they are able to forge a new future for themselves. The women in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* can be seen as unconventional as they find new avenues of empowerment so that they can exercise agency within their communities, remain grounded in their indigenous traditions, and still thrive in their societies. Their lives do not necessarily entail an outright rejection of the societal and religious norms but they are still able to carve for themselves a space to live their lives as empowered women. Meanwhile, Rachida and Amal in *Secret Son* actually escape the staid tale of the fallen woman and forge for themselves a new future that they create through their stories. In creating new options for women, they also subvert patriarchal standards and empower themselves to exercise agency over their futures. Rachida is not able to escape poverty in Morocco. However, she retains her dignity, her son, and her independence.
Meanwhile, Amal, as the upper class Moroccan with a U.S. education, is able to forge whatever future she aspires once she rejects her father’s patriarchal double standards and decides to lead her own life according to her conception of womanhood and emancipation. It is also important to note here that Amal decides to leave Morocco so that she is not bound by the religio-cultural constraints that would remain in effect if she were to remain in the country. Therefore, the women in Lalami’s novels display the Maghrebiyyat composite consciousness that allows them to thrive utilizing all resources available to them and to become the agents of change and empowerment in their lives. The art of women’s storytelling is precisely what allows this emancipation to become viable. In fact, Lalami’s work, like other key North African writers, “often interrogate the tension between tradition and modernism, and almost always investigate the deep struggles of women’s freedom, equality, and position in society” (Handal 30-1). As discussed above, this interrogation in Lalami’s work leads to the creation of what I have termed woman’s composite consciousness through the storytelling, and in this case, it is specifically Maghrebiyyat composite consciousness which allows for magnified freedom in her Moroccan society.

The Moroccan composite consciousness that these women develop allows for a dialectical understanding of history and cultural encounter and focuses on a realistic balance of continuity and change for Rachida as she weaves her tale and eventually tells the real story of her life. It also emphasizes negotiation and compromise rather than theories of history that see radical breaks with the traditional, so women’s emancipation is contextualized within the cultural setting. Thus, Rachida’s composite consciousness is
a movement to achieve a greater sense of self-determination within her community, and it also stands in stark contrast to Amal’s choice to abandon her homeland and its women’s struggles for her own individual freedom from Moroccan patriarchal norms.
For Atta and Lalami’s female protagonists, the development of a composite consciousness is the beginning of a journey toward self-determination in their communities. It is fraught with controversy as the women focus on continuity and change in their societies, so they make compromises instead of attempting to tear down the patriarchal society that oppresses them. However, these women make space for alternative models of womanhood in their societies, and they encourage change and activism. They do not advocate a break with the society because they want to remain in their culture-specific environment. In fact, they want their society to change but understand that continuous change is essential to the modification of their society and to a growing self-determination for women. Thus, they do not aim to destroy their society but to continuously effect change that leads to women’s empowerment and to different paradigms for male-female relationships. Culture-specificity is “a way of respecting the primacy of the national situation” and contextualizing the empowerment of women with in their respective communities so that they can function as women in their own cultural setting (Jameson 94). Of course, according to Jameson, this culture-specificity also makes it “possible for an international network of intellectuals and cultures” to thrive and support one another (94). The struggle of Atta and Lalami’s characters in their novels, set in Nigeria and Morocco, resonates with the novels of other women writers around the African continent, including Nawal El Saadawi, Goretti Kyomuhendo, Yvonne Vera,
Bessie Head, and others. Thus, the concept of the development of a composite consciousness as a feminist theory that is focused on “the primacy of the national situation” and its culture specificity has the potential for application in women’s literature around the globe precisely because it is not afraid to argue that European tools and resources are used along with indigenous ones by postcolonial women resisting patriarchal oppression and seeking a more liberated existence within their social community.

Atta and Lalami illustrate the female protagonists’ undertaking of a risky but empowering turn toward a culture-specific women’s composite consciousness. This is a difficult concept to situate initially, for it entails the acceptance that women embrace not only their indigenous traditions but also European tools of empowerment, such as education, to help themselves. The development of a composite consciousness allows the women characters to create a viable solution for their lives’ problems. The composite factor is essential to understand the lived experiences of people in specific cultures within the postcolonial nation, for it acknowledges the importance of traditional resources but also the modern liberation tools available to the women, even if these are vestiges of European colonialism.

This composite consciousness approach has the potential to answer Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s call for a paradigm that is culture-specific yet creates solidarity across subjectivities and across the globe without erasing difference. In this study, for example, I explore the similar ways in which Nigerian and Moroccan characters develop a composite consciousness that allows them to utilize all the resources at their disposal to
open space for a woman-centered existence within their communities. However, this study could also include the writings of women across the globe who explore the postcolonial condition of women. It could also create the links of solidarity across postcolonial communities around the world while respecting “the primacy of national situations” and regional differences.

Atta’s Novels

The protagonists in Atta’s novels develop a composite consciousness that allows them to see themselves as part of a trans-generational movement to achieve a greater sense of self-determination within their community. The women in their families steadily build the precedent for Enitan and Tolani to have greater freedom than they had themselves experienced. Each generation of women moves forward, for the women before them have provided them access to more tools for empowerment, and it is their duty to make great strides so that they, too, may open spaces for women’s empowerment in their communities.

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan’s grandmothers were the first generation to receive a European-style education in Nigeria along with an indigenous upbringing; however, still constrained by traditional models of marriage, once married they had to forego their elevated status as locally educated women and defer to their husbands even when these men were oppressive and abusive. Still, Enitan’s grandmothers saved and directed their children to get educations in Europe so that they would be well-suited to modern life in Nigeria. Thus, Enitan’s parents study in England and return home with
their European professional certificates and credentials. Once they are back in Nigeria, however, the same pattern emerges as Enitan’s mother is expected to stay at home, cook for her husband, entertain for his professional aggrandizement, and generally forget her own training and professional status. Later, Enitan would wonder about her mother’s “dusty certificates” and finally discern the detrimental effect of patriarchal norms on her mother’s life.

When Enitan returns from England trained as a lawyer, she finds that she is encumbered by national patriarchal forces. The corrupt governmental structure and the patriarchal expectations in Lagos leave her vulnerable to the men in her personal and professional life. Both her father and husband expect her to cook, entertain, and earn an income. They encourage her professionally, but in the home, they both also demand submission. Thus, Enitan finds that although she has better professional training than her husband, he still expects her to serve his family and to bow to the men in his family while he holds court. Furthermore, he believes he has the right to limit her movement, to dictate her friendships, and to command her labor in the kitchen and the home. Enitan then realizes that the oppressive patriarchy in her homeland has not changed although there are three generations of progressively more educated Nigerian women in the society, and she also understands through her professional work that women are doubly hurt by traditional and modern forms of patriarchal oppression. She becomes conscious of a composite oppression.

Once this is clear to Enitan, she is able to develop a composite consciousness and to utilize both traditional and modern tools for her empowerment. She leaves her husband
once their daughter’s traditional naming ceremony is complete. She sets up a matricentric household in her mother’s home and finances her life with her income. She builds on her mother’s strength, for she knows that it was not easy for her to leave her father, the famous Sunny Taiwo. Enitan knows that thanks to her mother’s lessons and her professional degree, she can thrive. Furthermore, Enitan’s daughter can learn a new paradigm of womanhood from her example as she continues to be a political activist, a women’s empowerment advocate, and a voice against corruption within her community in Lagos.

For Tolani, the main character in Atta’s *Swallow*, the journey is more circuitous as she is the first in her family to receive an official European-style education outside the village. Her great aunt Iya Alaro receives the traditional training in women’s weaving and dyeing of fabric. She educates herself and sets up a women’s cooperative that endorses the empowerment of women in the village so long as they stick to the business of women. With this mission, the cooperative enforces the fair treatment of wives and daughters with force, including outright physical punishment of men. However, she does not advocate the advancement of women into what she perceives to be the men’s arena.

Iya Alaro educates Arike in the traditional weaving and dyeing, and she mentors her in the cooperative so that Arike thrives and becomes a leader early in her life. Arike learns that there is a potential for women’s empowerment from her aunt, but she also learns from her own mother that marriage and motherhood erase that potential. Her mother’s life, in stark contrast to her aunt’s, illustrates the society’s patriarchal norms and oppression of talented women. Thus, Arike learns from her mother and aunt that marriage
and childbearing in her community is a hindrance instead of help in the search for self-determination. However, her father demands that she marry and that he be paid a dowry for her. Since it is not possible for her to refuse the societal imperative to marry, her great aunt Iya Alaro advises Arike to conform to the societal pressure to marry but to choose for herself since she has already successfully scorned two suitors, including the Oba himself. Iya Alaro mentors Arike in achieving self-determination within her community despite her community’s imperative that she marry the man her father demands. Because Iya Alaro has taught her the skills to be economically independent and to be a leader in her community, Arike is better able to navigate the marriage process and its subsequent restrictions. She also learns that she can open space for women’s self-determination even if she is ultimately circumscribed by patriarchal power.

Arike, in turn, supports Tolani’s education and her professional advancement. She is economically responsible for all of Tolani’s school fees, and she encourages her to leave the village to gain a European-style education, train at a business college, and go to Lagos to practice her profession. Arike envisions a life of self-determination and empowerment for her daughter, and she works twice as hard in the market to sell her cloth to provide Tolani the opportunity for freedom from the village’s patriarchal restrictions. Tolani realizes her mother’s sacrifice only once her father is dead, and she can see clearly that it was her mother’s leadership and entrepreneurship that made it possible for her to escape the bonds of local marriage and subservience. Tolani benefitted greatly from her mother’s ingenious ways to exercise agency and find self-fulfillment despite tight patriarchal controls. Arike transmits to her daughter the need for her to do
the same and to achieve a little bit more so that the society may change and women may have access to more opportunities for self-determination.

Once Tolani uncovers her mother’s strength and her emancipatory drive, she is able to forge her own path as an entrepreneur who can control her own life and movement and open opportunities for self-empowerment to the women in Makoku. Like her great aunt and her mother, Tolani has the opportunity to practice self-determination but also to help the women in her community to gain greater freedom and to resist patriarchal oppression without overthrowing the community’s structure.

Tolani’s new choice, to believe in herself, is the key to her personal empowerment just as it was for her mother and for her great aunt. She no longer believes in masqueraders or drummers transmitting messages for the gods. Instead, she recognizes the women before her and their great accomplishments. Each one has helped Makoku to become a better community with more progressive acceptance of women’s emancipation and the potential to become a just, egalitarian community in the future. This continuity for the traditional community tinged by modern elements of education and business is essential, for the change is compounded over three generations and the outcome is evident. The community retains its identity, however, while revising its patriarchal norms and progressively moving toward a more egalitarian model of community standards for men and women. In other words, the development of a composite consciousness allows the protagonists to open spaces for women’s emancipation while retaining their community and changing it continually to create a more egalitarian one.
Lalami’s Novels

The female protagonists in Laila Lalami’s first two novels similarly develop a composite consciousness that allows them to seek emancipation within their Moroccan communities. The women seek relief from the social, political, and religious patriarchal norms that conscript them, but these women are, like Jenara, unwilling to completely destroy the existing order. Instead, they favor the modification of that order so that it is closer to a just and egalitarian model, and the continual change they advocate and participate in makes their society progressively better able to meet women’s needs and to accommodate women’s experiences and their choices. Each woman in Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits seeks freedom in a different manner, and each is always conscious of the integrity of her community. Each woman seeks self-determination within a society that has not allowed her to exercise agency. Therefore, she seeks to open a space for her emancipation while still functioning as a woman of agency in her community. For instance, Zohra becomes the head of a multigenerational household and continues to be economically independent while her husband is abroad. The compromise the women must make is not an easy one, for they do not reject their community or its traditions. Instead, they embrace the traditions along with the modern means of making an independent livelihood for themselves. For instance, Faten continues to celebrate Eid in her self-created harem while a financially independent sex worker in Madrid, and Halima sells her Eid bread, beghrir, while living independently with her children as a divorced woman in the slums of Casablanca. Meanwhile, Lamya embraces the role of head of household, especially financially, and she chooses her own marriage partner and the
continuation of the harem of her birth family while working at a multinational corporation. Her composite consciousness allows her to function as a faithful well-rewarded employee who is also the head of her traditional home, and within this paradigm, she finds self-determination and relief from patriarchal restrictions that her brother, Murad, would readily impose upon her. Thus, Lalami’s characters find self-determination in their communities, but they sacrifice a full emancipation for the sake of the social and indigenous traditions within their society. These characters strive to be emancipated women within their society, so they seek to change it gradually and respectfu...
within her community as a woman of dignity. Her development of a composite consciousness allows her to use both her traditional storytelling skills and her modern education as a medical assistant fluent in French to open a path of independence for herself and change her community but not challenge its very structure. Her story is one of empowerment. It allows her to remain in her community without censure, but it is a definite compromise that must be noted because Rachida wants to remain a woman of good standing in her society. She wishes to change it but not to destroy it.

Atta and Lalami’s Points of Comparison

Atta and Lalami’s traditional narrative frames are very different as they stem from culture-specific traditions. In Atta’s case, the novels reference the masquerade and its focus on male embodiment of gods through masqueraders, dancers, and drummers. They also reference women’s expected belief and submission to these gods and their emissaries. Given this patriarchal focus on masquerades, the development of a woman’s composite consciousness leads to overt change as these women reinvent themselves as the lead dancers in the masquerade who set the direction of the ceremony. Thus, Enitan and Tolani’s activism, their turn toward a woman-centered environment is more pronounced. They become either the lead dancer, as Enitan dances the palongo in the streets of Lagos, or the deity itself, as Tolani believes in herself instead of the men around her. In contrast, Lalami’s narrative use of traditional storytelling allows the reader to see the women tell and change their own stories. The characters change from the private storytelling, common among women in their households as they pass on cultural norms to
their children, to public storytellers who reinvent their lives into tales of empowerment within their society. Thus, while the traditional narrative frames used by Atta and Lalami are culture-specific and differ greatly, they are equally empowering to the female characters.

Atta and Lalami’s use of the concept of the composite consciousness in the frame of the local tradition that serves as a unifying metaphor for each novel is also expressed very differently. For instance, in Atta’s work, Nigerian women’s emancipation is more openly expressed by Enitan and Tolani who reject the men’s paradigms openly and refuse to comply to their father’s, husband’s, or boyfriend’s will. They are able to relocate to their mother’s homes. They build on their mother’s trans-generational progress and education as full professionals and are able to move freely across the country. In emancipating themselves, they also strive to create a framework for long-term women’s empowerment in their communities.

For Lalami’s characters, however, their self-determination within their own communities takes a subtler turn given political and religious restrictions that circumscribe their behavior. Thus, while most of the women create a safe woman-centered space, like a harem with only women and children, they are only able to establish that publicly to a very limited extent. A single word against the king can mean death or imprisonment in Morocco, so the ability to protest openly is limited for these women. Additionally, unlike their Nigerian counterparts in Atta’s novels, Lalami’s characters have more little, if any, professional training and do not come from families in which women have been educated, so they are restricted by economic considerations.
However, their woman-centered households are centers of power for these women, and they are able to exercise agency as women in their homes and communities. They are also able to dispense openly with the need for men to protect or provide for them. They are the heads of household. They provide fulfillment for themselves and those they love. They move freely according their will, and they can plan for their own futures. These are points of empowerment for independent Moroccan women who bring change within their respective restrictive communities.

Atta and Lalami’s novels also set aside the orientalist interest in the outsider’s story and set forth, instead, the insider’s story. Their novels preclude the Tourist or Explorer models of scholarship because these authors openly criticize Westerners embodying these paradigms. Atta and Lalami know and experience Nigeria and Morocco, respectively, as indigenous citizens, learned about the culture and women’s struggles while growing up in the capital of their homeland, and understand all too well the economic and political repression that ails their nations. In this study, I strive to avoid the scholarly pitfalls outlined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders*, as the traumatization of women of color by westernized women of color who adopt western values in contrast to indigenous ones. By exploring the model of the composite consciousness, I have sought to represent Atta and Lalami’s characters as the complex heterogeneous individuals they are instead of doing what Mohanty denounced as the Tourist or Explorer scholars who foist upon women of color “a relation of structural domination and suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (18). To combat what she calls the projection of “the construction
of ‘Third World Women’ as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victim of a particular socioeconomic system,” this study shows how Atta and Lalami’s characters seek self-determination and function as women of agency within their communities (23). In fact, their very compromises, the price they must pay for inclusion in their communities, point toward a model of feminism that prioritizes culture-specificity (Mohanty 240).

This analysis also strives to answer Oyewumi’s call to produce scholarship in which woman cannot be reduced to gender alone or to a victim status but must be located, instead, within her various social, economic, political, racial, and religious spheres. This study places Atta and Lalami’s characters squarely in their cultural milieu so that they are read in their social, economic, political, racial, ethnic, and religious contexts. Just as Abouzeid argued that progress in studying women must be centered on women’s social and political milieu because it is there that women’s agency and oppression can be localized and contextualized, this study argues that women’s empowerment is, in fact, grounded on what it means to be a woman in her particular society with its cultural expressions and norms. This approach does not privilege outside notions of subjugation, emancipation, or subversion. Instead, it focuses on a very practical and empowering experience for women as it ties them even more closely to their communities, even as they advocate for more options than were previously available to them. This culture-specificity empowers these characters to function even more efficiently as women who continually change and improve their communities.
The extent to which the Atta and Lalami propose gender reforms for the communities their characters inhabit is markedly different. This successfully problematizes women’s struggles on the African continent. It demonstrates that there is no ready-made answer and that women themselves will posit answers and implement solutions to their problems based on their experiences and the resources available to them, as well as their particular religious and cultural contexts. Atta and Lalami’s characters share the search for self-determination within culture-specific communities. They value their communities, so they are also unwilling to dismantle the master’s house. Instead, they develop a composite consciousness that allows them to use traditional and modern resources to open spaces for themselves to function as women of agency within their communities. Clearly, these women bring change but also make compromises that are appropriate for them to remain within their communities. These characters are shaped by their national situation and culture, so their comparison must acknowledge the differences as well as the similarities of these women’s struggles and accomplishments, and it must acknowledge the need to take into account culture-specificity when discussing women’s liberation. Also, this analysis makes space for the possibility of further studies of the development of a composite consciousness by characters in women’s novels across the post-colonial world.

The composite consciousness allows each individual to gain greater freedom within her society by utilizing all the resources available to her. Each one realizes the compounded indigenous and European patriarchal repression that she experiences. Each also uses the tools at her disposal to create a space for her life choices in her society. The
composite consciousness allows each woman to transform her community into a more women empowering setting and to set this change as the new norm for a continually more egalitarian community. Thus, the compromise the women make is real although it is not publicly and directly challenging their society’s patriarchal oppression. This compromise is justified for them as they still gain the ability to live as they please and remain part of their community while bringing change that they hope will continually lead to a more egalitarian society.

The “primacy of the national situation” in the development of a composite consciousness allows the reader to gain an understanding of women’s marginalization and subsequent empowerment in a specific setting such as Casablanca, Morocco or Lagos, Nigeria. The starting point of understanding is this national context. As Jameson notes, this is the starting point of contact, for it is here, in their proper cultural context, that these experiences find a way to resonate with the experiences of others across the globe (94). When they do, there is a solidarity that can be felt across international borders. In this project, I explore the resonance between the very different experiences of women’s oppression in Nigeria and Morocco, and I ultimately argue that the national situation is the key to understanding the broader trends of women’s experience of oppression at the national and international level.

Therefore, the sense of the international is only secured through the national experience, for as Jameson noted, “our intellectual and cultural relations to each other pass through the primacy of the national situation understood in the larger sense, through the concrete regional situation” and we “understand each other through those situations”
(Jameson 94). Thus, this study opens the opportunity to explore the postcolonial experience of women across the globe through the ‘primacy of the national situation.’ It also provides a cornerstone to analyze women’s search for self-determination across various national contexts that may shed light on the compromises that women make across the world to remain within their communities as agents of change. This positioning can also be used to find others in “the more marginal cultural areas” that may provide useful partnerships and analogies to those of post-colonial women and thereby create solidarity across subjectivities and across the globe without erasing difference. This more specific solidarity places the paradigm of composite consciousness firmly in a post-colonial context that allows for women to find resonance for their experience, engage in solidarity, and partake in activism with others who share their experiences and strive for justice. Enrique Dussel labels this process “incorporative solidarity,” and his vision reinforces the culture-specificity of the composite consciousness that is explored in this study. After all, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues in Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,

Black, white, and other third world women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century Euro-American hegemony: the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration, plantation and indentured labor, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide (10).

The variety of characters and communities that these experiences yield in post-colonial women’s literature opens space for the use composite consciousness as a theoretical tool to study literatures across the world and to find solidarity through points of intersection
and convergence as well as traditionally oppositional standpoints. As a literary critic, I learn from these writers and their characters, and I support their production of writings and theories that reflect women’s concerns in their particular communities, as well as those that are relevant across cultures. Literature, art, and activism are varying modes of expression of the “same crucial struggle for a re-statement of self and society” (Soyinka 109). Thus, Atta and Lalami’s novels are a reaffirmation of culture-specific women’s composite consciousness that would lead women to use both traditional and modern tools for empowerment.
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