

**Lexical playfulness and gender relations in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come***

**Uju C. Nwankwo and Amaka C. Ezeife**

Department of English  
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe  
Anambra State, Nigeria

**Abstract**

*Lexical playfulness is a significant lexical strategy employed by writers to define and re-define new Englishes in social practices. Nigerian writers use this means (otherwise lexical innovation) to portray a lot of social issues in their literary works. One of such issues is the textualisation of gender relations especially in depicting an apparent imbalance between men and women in social practices. Although many studies have been carried out on gender imbalance, there is little or no attempt on the study of lexical playfulness on gender relations in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*. This study fills this gap by examining how lexical playfulness is employed in the sampled novel to signify new Englishes, specifically in bending the language so as to achieve a desired communicative intent. It adopts the approaches of new Englishes and feminist linguistics in demonstrating exquisite display of lexically innovated gender items in the expression of indigenous thoughts. The study identifies two discourse strategies of lexical playfulness relating to gender: new Englishes projecting hybrid forms/varieties of English, and new Englishes and expansion. Therefore, the lexicalised expressions portray male supremacy, female powerlessness, and how females and their advocates struggle to disentangle themselves from the shackles of male dominance.*

*Key words: Gender relations, New Englishes, lexical playfulness, feminist linguistics*

**Introduction**

There is a connection between lexical playfulness, otherwise lexical innovation and gender relations. This is because gender relations are largely earmarked on the basis of sex differences using lexical items that mirror the assumed expectations of the society. In many social settings, important leadership roles are assigned to men, while less important ones are basically given to women, a situation that is quite evident in African traditional culture. It is pertinent to state that role assignment on a sex basis is being balanced in some parts of the world, yet the status quo has remained in some others. In Nigerian and African literature generally, the issue of gender has been recurrent. One of the reasons is because Africa generally is male oriented, and no matter how civilisation tries to change this fact, it keeps re-surfacing. At a time like this, people still believe that some practices which feminists view as discrimination against women are normal (e.g. a woman who proposes to a man is seen as wayward or sophisticated). It is against this background that this paper

examines how gender is represented in the language of a Nigerian novel, applying the concepts of new Englishes and feminist linguistics to ascertain the recurrence of this imbalance in gender relations via lexical playfulness. We propose the discourse strategy of lexical playfulness above its well known synonym-lexical innovation because of the exceeding use of the latter.

In broad terms, “gender refers to the sex-role identity used by humans to emphasize the distinctions between males and females” (Adegbite 2009: 12). It differs from sex in that while sex works with biological and physical features of humans, gender is social and relates to roles and behaviours performed by sexes (Lamidi 2009). According to Cameron (2005), sex and gender are cultural rather than neutral constructs. Butler (1990: 32) sees gender as a performative quality: “Gender is the stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a ‘natural’ kind of being”. This means that gender, in the post-modernist tradition, is considered as “...an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions” (Cameron, 2005: 486). However, we will show shortly how, in this post-modernist tradition, gender is still seen “[as] something you acquire once and for all at an early stage of life” (Cameron, 2005: 486). Evidently, research in gender-bound language has shown how language is drawn upon to construct and come to terms with the semantics and identities of personal, social and cultural dimensions (cf Yusuf 1988, 1993, 1997a; Adegbite 2009). In general, it has paid attention on the way gender comes into communication and how this has influenced the construction and functions of language. While some research has been carried out on gender in literary texts using Sefi Atta’s *Everything good will come* (henceforth *EGWC*), for example (Eze 2008, Orabueze 2010, Akung 2012, Ezeife 2014), studies are yet to attend seriously to how the construction of lexical playfulness define and redefine new Englishes, in demonstrating Atta’s linguistic word-smiting in gender relations in the novel.

Much of what has obtained hitherto have been studies with sociological and anthropological orientations. Another dimension has been the concern about the literary perspective in general with reference to the socio-economic and political landscape of Nigeria and how it affects the psychology of the woman without any specific attention paid to the lexical playfulness of gender relations in Atta’s novel in particular. These are gaps that should be filled as it is crucial to determine the linguistic (lexical) perspectives employed to signify new Englishes in Atta’s *EGWC*. This will heighten the fact that lexically innovated gender items can be used in the expression of indigenous (social) thoughts. Although gender issues have been presented in various discourse strategies, lexical playfulness is a novel term; it remains a significant lexical strategy for analysing the imbalanced gender relations between sexes.

Sefi Atta’s *EGWC* is one of the novels that has exceedingly reflected uneven gender relations in an African community. Her finely tuned linguistic presentation of the powerful men and obvious powerlessness of women provide clear insights on the

greatness/relevance and inconsequentiality/irrelevance associated to man and woman respectively in many African societies. *EGWC* offers useful insights into the link between societal norms and gender construction. Apparently, it depicts the inseparable link between gender practices and ideology, and how these trends are constructed in social practice, in corroboration with the axiom that language is an indispensable tool in the construction of gender. Atta's *EGWC* is set in Nigeria and it redefines the existing traditions of how men are promoted in the society even as they do evil and how women struggle and suffer under the weight of African patriarchal masculinity. It discusses the fate of two African girls; one who is prepared to manipulate the traditional system and one, who attempts to defy it. In the novel, Enitan tries to defy the traditional system by resisting the familial and political systems until she is confronted with the one desire too precious to forfeit in the name of personal freedom: her desire for a child. The societal attachment of a woman's fulfilment to motherhood weakens her struggle. On the other hand, Sherifat attempts to manipulate the traditional system. She remains a spinster after her ugly rape experience, pregnancy and abortion which took away her pride- her motherhood- the society's standard for becoming a fulfilled woman. Therefore, *EGWC* is selected because it depicts the struggles women face in a conservative society and remarkably, the need to speak out when all around is falling apart. Consequently, it stresses the meeting point between language and culture or language and society and reveals clearly, various discourse strategies of lexical playfulness in relation to New Englishes in the construction of gender.

### **Language and gender**

Language is seen as a system of choices from which individuals, writers or speakers make their choices in relation to the situation. It is used in relation to specific environment, in creating and expressing experiences. Language influences the way in which people perceive reality, and how they view themselves in respect to it. It is viewed as the "way fictional ordering of experiences is created" (Fowler, 1981:95). It gives expression to social events because "...language is a control feature of human activity..." (Gibson 2004: 1). Expatriating this social-functionalist language paradigm, Poynton (1989: 4) notes, "...language is the primary means by which we create the categories that subsequently come to organise our lives for us". Coleridge, cited in Orchardson-Mazrui (2005: 146-7), describes how "Our thoughts and attitudes are influenced by the language we use; we tend to slot into every language patterns dictated by current usage and prevalent attitudes" (1993: 99). In this way, Coleridge, as noted by Orchardson-Mazrui, makes it clear that language can be used to "devalue a person". Similarly, Orchardson-Mazrui avers that in Africa "language can advance or hinder gender issues, as can be elsewhere in the world. Some African societies are said to have more indistinct semantic systems in which there is flexibility in the words used to describe women and men and their roles in society". Therefore, language is one area where gender roles, concepts, ideas and expectations can be constructed and reproduced.

Studies such as Lakoff (1975), Litosseliti (2006), Lamidi (2009), among others have shown that language has functioned as a major means of women's domination by men. Given the fact that it is a term that refers to the relations between men and women, gender has been approached by many scholars from different fields of human endeavour, "yet it is hardly ever clearly defined in conceptual terms" (Haug 2005: 279). However, for Annan-Yoa, gender "designates behaviours, attitudes, roles, status... etc that societies assign to one or the other sex in a given socio-cultural setting and/or in a particular socio-economic and/or socio-political context to govern relationships among the sexes" (2000: 1). Considering the inherently dynamic and complex nature of gender relations, Haug writes, "In the widest sense, gender relations are relations of production, complex praxis relations. The analysis considers both the process of formation of actors and the production of the social world" (2005: 279). This conjecture carries the notion that gender relations, like identity, are socially constructed. Their analysis calls for pluralistic and socially situated rather than monolithic interpretation. Gender relations, then, describe the relationship between men and women, indicating how political, social, cultural and historical situations shape relationships between the sexes.

Since we have sustained from the foregoing conceptualization of gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, the implication is that gender relations "...vary not only from one community to another..., but that they also vary according to different social classes at stake in a given society" (Annan-Yao 2000: 1). Linguistic practices on gender are context-specific, and this indicates that the specific context of interaction is very important in determining linguistic behaviour. In patrilineal societies, according to Annan-Yao (2000), gender relations vary considerably from matrilineal communities. Most African communities are patrilineal, and so, women tend to be systematically under the weight of men's superiority. What obtains in most patrilineal societies (such as Nigeria) is a fatal suppression of women's freedom of speech in public, and the power to legislate on issues which concern them and society in general are near absent and totally non-existent in certain contexts.

The foregoing presupposes that language and gender are interconnected. Gender is an agent of culture, and language is used to communicate it. Also, gender is a socio-cultural construct which permeates all levels of society from the domestic to the global realm, and it is overtly expressed through language. So, language cannot be expunged from gender and vice versa. Based on the language we select and the opinions that are expressed on topics that are considered either essentially masculine or feminine, as a society, we twist notions of gender. Once people learn words for categories, those words in turn sustain the acquisition of further information and inductive inferences about their referents. Accordingly, an individual's knowledge of words for gender categories is an indicator of some conceptual knowledge of these categories and instigates the elaboration of gender representations. As word production follows word comprehension, an individual's choice

of words on gender issues particularly becomes good indicators of the expression of indigenous thoughts, in defining and redefining new Englishes.

### **The concept of lexical playfulness**

Lexical playfulness is a concept that is synonymous with lexical innovation. The term is preferred in this paper because of the recurrent use of its synonym (lexical innovation). It is a way in which a lexical item is used in an innovative way to explicate an experience or event vividly using good humour. It is coined by the researchers to serve as a way of presenting words that signify important social concepts or crucial issues in a text. Based on the dynamic nature of English language, the researchers deem it fit to participate in the expansion of English lexis as a way of upholding dynamism in language. Obviously, the vocabulary of any language is the domain subject to the most rapid changes. Lexical playfulness (innovation) is also a way in which the English lexis can be expanded for greater semantic effects in both the first and the second language situations. It may be occasioned by lack of adequate items that can effectively spell out current ideas or events in a society. Thus, one can talk about linguistic changes only after spreading or embracing some innovations, new linguistic facts. Coseriu (1997:1) talks about these facts in the following terms:

*Everything that, in one speaker's words, is getting far – in a linguistic manner – from the existent patterns in the language, in which conversation takes place, is called innovation. And the acceptance on the part of the listener of an innovation, as a pattern for the next expressions, can be called endorsement. [...] A linguistic change ('a change inside the language') represents the spreading or generalization of an innovation, namely it necessarily implies a series of successive endorsements. This means that, ultimately, every change is an endorsement at the outset.*

Therefore, vocabulary changes involve the representations of lexical playfulness (innovations) spread to accommodate and support new ideas. Lexical playfulness (innovation) can imply the use of a new lexical unit, the modification of the root or of the semantic structure of a word in a language. Sometimes, there are deficiencies in the existing words to explain certain issues. A writer, therefore, resorts to creating new words that will capture the peculiar experience he or she discusses. Considering the inherently dynamic and complex nature of language and gender relations, lexical playfulness is introduced to capture the friskiness relations of production; complex production of lexical expressions in the social world. Therefore, lexical playfulness is seen as one area where gender roles, concepts, ideas and expectations can be constructed and reproduced in literary texts. It can also reveal the interconnectivity and interdependence between language and the construction of new Englishes in the Nigerian literary context.

### **Feminist linguistics and new Englishes**

Feminist linguistics, “identifies, demystifies, and resists the various ways language reflects, creates, and sustains gender inequalities” (Lamidi 2009: 192). Feminists oppose, agitate, harass and demonstrate disapproval on the bias communal treatment meted on the female folk by the society. They (feminists) are of the opinion that society treats men better than [it does] women in relation to language use. In this sense, women and their advocates put up some actions to promote their cause, project male flaws and struggle to achieve equality with men or at least fair treatment from the society. Litosseliti (2006: 23), as cited in Lamidi (2009), argues that feminist linguistics “aims to theorise gender-related linguistic phenomena and language use, and to explicitly link these to gender inequality or discrimination, on the assumption that linguistic change is an important part of social change”. Many scholars who follow this approach to gender studies trail on the idea that the interpretation of linguistic practices is a central phenomenon of human relationships. Language, for these scholars does not simply mirror preexisting sexist world, but energetically constructs gender asymmetries within specific socio-cultural contexts (see Lakoff 1975, Poynton 1989). Therefore, feminist linguists pay attention on how people negotiate and construct their gender identities in social practice, either accepting or challenging societal beliefs or ideological constructs.

An existentialist relationship exists between New Englishes and feminist linguistics because they both mirror language construction within specific socio-cultural situation. While feminist linguists pay attention on how people negotiate and construct their gender identities in social practice, new Englishes inevitably creates a whole range of new expressions in order to fulfil the communicative needs of speakers in social practice. New Englishes, as coined by Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) refers to those varieties of English that have developed in former colonial territories of the United Kingdom or Britain. Therefore, New Englishes show hybrid forms as a result of a modern celebration of the English language – as a lingua franca with multiple identities. It is also known as new varieties of English (NVEs), non-native varieties of English, or non-native institutionalised varieties of English. The multi-lingual settings of some countries encouraged the growth of New Englishes, and this affects the construction of feminist linguistics as well. As English language begins to be appropriated by its non-European users and changes to reflect their experiences, marked by their variety-specific features, linguistic preferences and norms, the development of New Englishes is enhanced. Further, the lexical, phonological and grammatical properties of New Englishes reflect in the construction of resistance through language use to create and sustain gender inequalities in feminist linguistics.

New Englishes is a conceptual framework that evolved out of the Concentric Theory. Accordingly, Kachru (1992) emphasizes that the English language belongs to all who use it, and that the most vigorous expansions and developments of the language can be observed in Outer and Expanding Circle countries. It has certain formal properties (lexical, phonological, grammatical) that differ from those of British or American Standard English.

However, since our interest in this paper is on the lexical aspect, lexical innovation is very notable. There are many cultural domains likely to motivate new words, as Nigerian speakers and writers find themselves adapting the language to meet fresh communicative needs. Some innovated words do not conform to the grammatical rules of word formation, yet, they connote peculiar belief and culture. Equally, some lexical innovations (playfulness) display the peculiar feature of a new English of semantic shift/extension to cater for the cultural meanings of the users. Sometimes, there are deficiencies in the existing words to explain certain issues. A writer, therefore, resorts to creating new words (New Englishes) that will capture the peculiar experience he or she discusses. In the world-wide 'English Language Complex' (cf. McArthur 2003), these new Englishes represent unique and vibrant areas of recent, on-going and innovative change, given their typically multilingual contexts, their largely non-native speech communities and the wide-spread lack of codification. Therefore, lexical playfulness (innovation) is an aspect of New Englishes. It helps in expanding English lexis for greater semantic effects in both the first and the second language situations.

#### **Discussion of the lexical playfulness and gender relations in the novel**

A significant lexical strategy identified in the sampled novels is the use of lexical innovation to define and redefine new Englishes. Lexical innovations are found in the texts as discourse strategies that are deployed in two ways: to project hybrid forms/varieties of English, and to expand English language lexis. These innovations are humorously used even as they convey significant points. In the vocabulary of new English, there are completely new creations and words whose meanings have been modified to fit the new environment. The two discourse strategies and how they are explored in the lexical playfulness and gender relations in the sampled novel are discussed below.

#### **New Englishes projecting hybrid forms/varieties of English**

New Englishes are used in projecting hybrid forms/varieties of English in gender relations when there is a fusion of lexical items that may not be grammatically correct, to accommodate new or existing social realities. In projecting hybrid forms/varieties of English, writers rely on the modern celebration of the English language as a lingua franca with multiple identities. This is exemplified in:

*Living with Sheri, I saw how she survived as a sugary girl. She limited her involvement in the family business to please her brigadier(EGWC, 157).*

*Sugary girl* is a new English expression, a fusion of the lexical items (sugary and girl) that is used to display the hybrid form of a sex worker and the services she provides to her patronisers. Invariably, its usage accommodates existing social realities as regards to a girl whose sexual ideology centres on having affair with men who are old enough to be her father. In the above instance, the use of *sugary girl*, a compound word which may serve as

a noun phrase, may not be grammatically correct. Yet, it buttresses how and why Sheri feels at ease pleasing the brigadier sexually because of the financial and material benefits she derives from him, and how the sexual services Sheri provides for the Brigadier is gratifying to him. The word *sugary* means something sweet or sweetened while *girl* implies a young woman. Therefore, the use of this compounding goes a long way to express the syrupy activities of some female youngsters in taking advantage of older men financially by offering their bodies sexually, as well as the treacly feelings of some older men as they confine younger girls through their riches for sexual gratification. It is a two-way thing; give and take by the two parties involved. Thus, it connotes the amiable, genial, and welcoming attributes of Sheri towards the Brigadier, and vice versa. The writer uses the coinage to make provision for a variety of English that captures the over romantic and desperately enjoyable way in which female youngsters are presented in the hands of older men. It also implies the position of some lazy and money conscious girls at the exploit of wealthy men.

Another instance of lexical playfulness in projecting a hybrid form of new Englishes in gender relations is presented below.

*“He’s so nice,” she said. “He’s not charging us anything.”  
“Let’s hope he’s doing it out of kindness. My father never did pro bono work. He too came out of his room smiling. He never smiled in the office. If you do such a thing, I thought, chase my friend, you will never forget what I have to say to you and after that, I will have nothing to say to you. It wasn’t improbable, he is with a younger woman; Sheri with an older man. There are men in Lagos who chased their daughter’s friends. You called them uncle and curtseyed before them. There were women in Lagos who would chase their best friend’s father for money” (EGWC, 145).*

The writer in the bid of finding a right word to capture an act of wooing a woman or man uses Nigerian expressions (New Englishes), *chased* and *chase*. The lexical item, *chase* is the present tense of *chased*; they are all verbs that simply mean pursue or run after. Enitan expresses the probable act of an older man going after a younger woman, and vice versa in the city of Lagos. According to her, young girls engage in such an unpleasant yet possible act because of money, while older men involve themselves due to the sexual satisfaction they get in return. Therefore, Atta resorts to the Nigerian Englishes in forms of *chased* and *chase* to illustrate the very act of winning a girl or man for sexual gratification or financial benefits, as the case may be, in Nigerian context. Evidently, Enitan dislikes such act and fears that her father, Mr Taiwo is directly or indirectly putting up such steps towards her friend, Sheri and Sheri, towards him. Enitan’s ideology is formed by the unpleasant way the society views young girls who prostitute with married men and married men who prostitute with young girls. As a result, such young girls call the married/older men they sleep with, uncles and curtseyed before them in pretence, so as to confuse people and make them believe they (young girls) are not defaulting in any way. The concepts



*uncle* and *curtseyed*, as used in the above instance are new Englishes (Nigerian English). This is because the noun and verb, *uncle* and *curtseyed*, are used respectively in the above context to accommodate new realities in the society that have not been able to be represented in English language.

Closely related to the above example is Atta's description of a relationship between man and woman, the unusual powerful position of women: how they strive in controlling men thereby, making their place known in family setting:

*Niyi bullied his brothers the same way he bullied me, but he could easily become vexed in the middle of our playing. Then he would call me aside and warn, "Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me woman wrapper." I would have shouting fits about this and he would remain totally silent. He said he wasn't used to arguing that way (EGWC, 182).*

In the above excerpt, the writer projects a hybrid form/variety of English in gender relations between Enitan and Niyi, her husband through the use of a neologism, *woman wrapper*. This compound lexical item, which is also a Nigerian (English) innovation for a man who is controlled by a woman, is used to illustrate the powerful position of women: how they strive to control men and make their place known. Evidently, it is a noun phrase which describes Enitan's assertion of her position in the house which makes her husband nervous. Since the culture does not want to 'hear' her voice, she tactically silences her husband, places him in a doable position of a *woman wrapper*. This variety of English expression signifies the projection of a woman who through passionate argument asserts her womanhood. The concept metaphorically connotes that women like Enitan, through subtle ways, assert their individuality as members of the society. Additionally, Enitan's husband is scared of being addressed as a *woman wrapper*, probably because of the assertive nature of his wife, even jokingly. And her assertion, however, increases her husband's anxiety of losing his position as the head of the family. By implication, the weak nature of Niyi, Enitan's husband manifests as he always gets victimized by Enitan's yelling in the house while Enitan gain recognition as she manipulates Niyi; he *remains totally silent and perhaps prays that people do not hear when they argue, and consequently address him as a woman wrapper*. The lexical innovation metaphorically identifies the role of imagination in Atta's thought by positing relatively conventional knowledge structures for the identified concept.

When there are fusions of lexical items that may not be grammatically correct, to accommodate new or existing social realities in English language, a new identity of the lingua franca originates. An instance of lexical innovations that project such new identity is demonstrated in:

*...And another thing, these romance books you're reading, No chasing of boys when you get there."  
"I don't like boys."*

*“Good,” he said. “Because you’re not going there to study boy-ology (EGWC, 42).*

Atta uses two expressions of new English: *chasing* and *boy-ology* in the above extract. These words are hilariously used to project existing social realities in English language. The first, *chasing* portrays the act of wooing (a man by a woman or vice versa) in Nigerian English as expressed in the text. The lexical item, *chasing* is a verb that simply means pursuing or running after probably for sexual relationship. The second, *boy-ology*, is used to accommodate existing social reality which implies abstinence from any sexual relationship/act with a male (boy). Moreover, *boy-ology* is a lexical innovation (Nigerian English) which may conceptually be classified under the word class of noun. Equally, *boy-ology* rhymes with the context in which it is used; it implies the study of boy. Mr Taiwo uses it to advise Enitan, his daughter to pay more attention to her studies at school and avoid being distracted by boys. This ungrammatical noun, *boy-ology* implies the study of boys (males), probably to attain expertise so as to render effective services to them as a commodity, and get financial rewards in return. It ironically indicates the interactants’ consciousness of the manipulative nature of males which needs to be publicised, and perhaps avoided by females for a better/greater achievement in their life. In fact, the co-text depicts that gender is performative: boys can chase girls, and vice versa. However, the two words and their co-text suggest that the writer culturally forbids the act of girls wooing boys hence the hybrid and new expression; *chasing* and *boy-ology*, to accommodate the idea.

### **New Englishes and expansion**

New Englishes and expansion involves the process of increasing or intensifying the terminologies of English language or its vocabulary. In this strategy, Atta uses lexical playfulness in ‘bending’ a language (expanding the meaning of English lexis/words) to suit her world view. Evidently, in gender relations as expressed in *EGWC*, some grammatically correct words are used as new Englishes by making the original meaning of the lexical items to be multiplied so as to accommodate new or existing social realities. This is exemplified below:

*...Secondly, while I am there cooking for you, I won’t be thinking of dropping some poison in because you’ve gone to eat another woman’s stew”*

*“Because?”*

*“I’m getting what I want in return”, she said.*

*“Love?”*

*“Please, my sister”*

*“Sex? I beg, which one of them can do.”*

*“Money?” “One day your eyes will open” (EGWC, 107).*

The word, *stew* is a lexical item that represents new English as used in the above context. It belongs to the word class a noun, and is used to illustrate how word formation in a non-native English situation relates to a group of people's ideology on a woman's body. The item, *stew*, originally implies a kind of sauce that is used in eating rice or yam. In the above context, its meaning is ironically extended to contain a feminine sexual organ, and act of manipulating the organ. Probably, Atta uses the lexical item through one of her character, Sheri to illustrate how a woman's sexual organ is viewed in the society, and its association with something edible. The ideology behind the connection between a woman's sexual organ and food (*stew*) is that human beings crave for food (*stew*) exactly the way men crave for women's sexual body parts. The implication is that as they (men) eat women's *stew*, their bodies get nurtured just as people get nourished when they eat food. Therefore, the association of the verb, *eat* with a woman's sexual organ signifies another lexical expansion to suit the writer's concept in the context of usage. Equally, these items *stew* and *eat* contain vital information in sexual relations between man and woman, and indicate that the novelist is in tune with the social reality as they unfold. Since, man does the eating, and a woman's body part is the one that is eaten, men can be seen as the predator (the eater) while women are the prey (the eaten). The items also serve as examples of semantic shift.

Conventionally, the lexical expressions, *birth mother* and *motherhood* mean biological mother and an act of being a mother respectively. However, their meanings are expanded in the context below:

*“Her birth mother and motherhood were taken away from her ...and she wasn't thinking of tearing her clothes off and walking naked on the streets. She was stronger than any strong person I knew” (EGWC, 300).*

Equally, the lexical innovations, *birth mother* and *motherhood* illustrate a woman's virginity and womb. Normally, *motherhood* belongs to the word class of a noun; it means maternal parenthood while *birth mother*, a noun phrase simply refers to biological mother. These compound words are used to describe how Sheri lost her virginity, was impregnated through rape, and how she damaged her womb trying to commit an abortion. One can say that the novelist does not want to be straight by mentioning the words 'virginity' and 'womb.' That is why she invents (through one of her characters) existing words with indigenised meaning, extends their meanings to describe her ideas. The compound words illustrate Sheri's strength as a woman, how she lost it and still strives for survival despite the society's approval of a woman's fulfillment through motherhood. The ideological disposition is that after a rape scandal, which may short change some people's future, Sheri decides to live a normal life. She still works towards accomplishing her future goals and does not want the rape scandal to ruin her future or mar her life goals.

The expansion of English lexis is also demonstrated in:

*“Anyone who bullies you, beat them up,” my father said. “And join the debating society, not the girl guides. Girl guides are nothing but kitchen martyrs in the making (EGWC, 42).*

As noted above, the noun phrase, *kitchen martyrs* expresses a kind of ideology women form based on social cognition especially when they are united alone in one group. The meaning of martyr is extended to accommodate woman’s activities in the kitchen, implying sacrificial victim. This compound lexical item broadens the meaning of the concepts, *kitchen* and *martyrs* to accommodate the dealings of young women in girl guides; a Christian association in some churches. *Kitchen* is a place where cooking is carried out while *martyrs* mean sufferers or sacrificial victims. Traditionally, kitchen is a place meant for women, where they are expected to compulsorily enslave themselves for their husbands and children. The two items are combined to achieve a particular effect; the upshot of women; those who are in girls guides, how they become casualties to the advantage of the opposite sex (men). By implication, Mr Taiwo does not want Enitan, her daughter to join such group because of the negative notion he has about them. He believes that young girls in such group are willing victims who suffer for a cause, invariably equivalent to those who subjected themselves to providing cooking services for men. As such, the use of the expression encapsulates how Mr Taiwo abhors the group and extends the meaning of an already existing word to cater for his intention.

Another way in which references to new Englishes are deployed is in the expansion of English lexis for greater semantic effects in both the first and the second language situations. In *EGWC*, for example, when Arin discovers that her daughter’s friend, Sheri is pregnant, she becomes scared that her daughter, Enitan might be vulnerable too. She then decides to liberate Enitan from such captivity from male gender by using a semantic shift. Enitan submits:

*“She gave me holy water to drink, since my father would not allow me to stay for cleansing. He produced a bottle of it, green and slimy. I had to drink the water in the churchyard, and make myself sick afterwards.” (EGWC, 72)*

As portrayed above, the word *cleansing* is extended to accommodate the expression ‘deliverance’ in Nigerian context. Its usage in the above context goes a long way to project the stability of male gender and vulnerability of female gender in the hands of men. It is a noun mostly used in religious context; it means spiritual purification, to rescue or liberate one from captivity, hardship, or domination by evil. The word simply indicates the necessity of submitting every young girl for thorough ‘cleansing’ at a particular stage in her life to avoid damage to her personality, such as getting unwanted pregnancy. As a woman, Atta uses this participle noun to portray her belief in the efficacy of holy rituals. Apparently, it symbolises Arin’s weak protective measures as a woman. Sheri, her daughter’s friend was raped and impregnated. Arin believes that ‘deliverance’ should be carried out on her daughter, Enitan to stop her from associating with girls like Sheri, and

subsequently shield her from rapists; a feminine guarding approach which may be seen as feeble and fragile. As a man with strong and practical protective measures, Mr Taiwo, Enitan's father does not allow the cleansing. And so, Arin, her mother forces Enitan to drink the holy water in place of the purification. Therefore, the context formed the novelist's choice of word explicates Arin (the woman) as a weaker sex by just believing in the efficacy of 'deliverance' from saving her daughter from bad association, rape and unwanted pregnancy, and depicts Mr Taiwo, Enitan's father as a stronger sex, who believes in practical measures and disputes his wife's belief on the flimsy practice.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has proved that lexical playfulness is a significant lexical strategy employed by writers to define and re-define new Englishes in social practices. It adopts the approaches of new Englishes and feminist linguistics in demonstrating exquisite display of lexically innovated gender items in the expression of indigenous thoughts. Nigerian writers use this means (otherwise lexical innovation) to portray a lot of social issues such as the textualisation of gender relations especially in depicting an apparent imbalance between men and women in social practices in their literary works. Lexical playfulness is employed in the sampled novel to signify new Englishes, specifically in bending the language so as to achieve a desired communicative intent. The study identifies two discourse strategies of lexical playfulness relating to gender: new Englishes projecting hybrid forms/varieties of English, and new Englishes and expansion. By and large, the lexicalised expressions portray male supremacy and how women are illustrated as objects of men's sexual cravings, as lesser or second class citizen, and the obstructive ideology and practices that pull them down as they (women) struggle to disentangle themselves from the shackles of male dominance. In fact, lexical playfulness (innovations) in a Nigerian novel offers an outlet for creativity in language use (gender inclusive) and puts a new life into the imported language (English). Therefore, Nigerian writers should try to remould English language to new usages, just like Atta demonstrated in *EGWC* in defining and redefining new Englishes in other social practices aside gender relations.

### **References**

- Adegbite, W. (2009). Language, gender and politics: a general perspective. In A. Odebunmi, E. A. Arua and S. Arimi, (Eds.), *Language, gender and politics: Festschrift for Yisa Kehinde* (pp. 9-21). Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation.
- Akung, J. E. (2012). Feminist dimensions in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. *Studies in literature and language*. Retrieved March 6, 2012 from <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php>.
- Annan-Yao, E. (2000). *African gender research in the new millennium: Gender relations and perspectives, direction and challenges*. Retrieved April 12, 2014 from [ec.europa/justice\\_home/daphnetoolkit/files/projects/2003\\_028](http://ec.europa/justice_home/daphnetoolkit/files/projects/2003_028).

- Atta, S. (2005). *Everything good will come*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, D. (2005). Language, gender, and sexuality: current issues and new developments. *Applied Linguistics*. 26 (4), 482-502.
- Coleridge, P. (1993). *Disability, liberation and development*. Oxfam.
- Eze, C. (2008). African feminism: resistance or resentment? *QUEST: An African journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*. XX: 97-118. Retrieved on July 5, 2010 from <http://www.quest-journal.net>.
- Ezeife, A. C. (2014). Lexical Indices of Authorial Gender Ideology in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*. In *Journal of Pan African Studies*. Vol. 7, No. 3: 48- 64.
- Fowler, R. (1981). *Literature as social discourse: the practice of linguistic criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gibson, K. (2004). English only court cases involving the U.S. workplace: the myths of language use and the homogenization of bilingual workers' identities. Retrieved Nov. 27, 2009, from <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=93>.
- Haug, F. (2005). Gender relations. *HIMA Dictionary*, 1 (2): 279-302.
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1975). *Language and women's place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lamidi, M.T. (2009). Gender-neutral pronoun usage among selected second language users of English in Nigeria. In A. Odebunmi, E. A. Arua and S. Arimi, (Eds.), *Language, gender and politics: Festschrift for Yisa Kehinde* (pp. 191-236). Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- Litosseliti, L. (2006). *Gender and language: Theory and practice*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- McArthur, T. (2003). World English, Euro English, Nordic English?. *English Today* 19(1), pp. 54-58.
- Motschenbacher, H. (2010). *Language, gender and sexual identity: Poststructuralist perspectives*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Orabueze, F. (2010). The prison of Nigerian woman: female complicity in Sefi Atta's *Everything good will come*. *African Literature Today*. 27: 85-102.
- Orchardson-Mazrui, E. (2005). The impact of cultural perceptions on gender issues. In C. Creighton and F. Yieke (eds.), *Gender inequalities in Kenya* (pp. 144-165). UNESCO.
- Platt, J., H. Weber & M.L. Ho (1984). *The new Englishes*. London: Routledge.
- Poynton, C. (1989). *Language and gender: Making the difference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yusuf, Y. K. (1988). A critique of the linguistic argument for the possibility of dexeasing though by degendering English. *Ife Studies in English Language* 2(1), 87-92.
- Yusuf, Y. K. (1993). The diffusion of the male-favoured praising, persuasion and consolation in Yoruba and sexist naming in English. *Research in Yoruba Language and Literature* 4, 1001-1004. Real
- Yusuf, Y. K. (1997a). Yoruba proverbial insights into female sexuality and genital mutilation. *Ela: Journal of Africa Studies*. 2, 118-129.