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Re-gendering the New African Migrant Novel: Relational and Migrant Masculinities in *The Bad Immigrant* by Sefi Atta

Reconstruyendo el género en la nueva novela de migrantes africana: Masculinidades relacionales y migrantes en *The Bad Immigrant* de Sefi Atta

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Abstract: This article studies notions of masculinity in Sefi Atta's novel *The Bad Immigrant*, particularly focusing on the proposed frameworks of relational and migrant masculinities. The aim of this paper is to analyse how the protagonist Lukmon, as a literary representation of Nigerian immigrant men in the United States, portrays the failure of adapting to the reconfiguration of gender practices that accompanies migration. In order to do so, I not only examine his issues in preserving his main role as provider but also reveal a misogynistic and sometimes violent attitude that now informs his sense of manhood.
Keywords: Masculinity; relationality; migration; African migrant literature; Sefi Atta.
Summary: Introduction. Theoretical Perspectives on Masculinities. Reading Masculinity in *The Bad Immigrant*. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo estudia las concepciones de la masculinidad en la novela *The Bad Immigrant* de la escritora Sefi Atta, centrándose en una propuesta basada en los marcos teóricos de las masculinidades relacionales y migrantes. El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar cómo el protagonista Lukmon, en tanto que representación literaria de los hombres nigerianos inmigrantes en Estados Unidos, describe el fracaso en adaptarse a la reconfiguración de prácticas de género que acompaña a la migración. Para ello, no solo se examinan sus problemas para

preservar su rol principal como encargado del sustento de la familia, sino que también se destapa una actitud misógina, algunas veces violenta, que ahora informa su sentido de hombría.
Palabras clave: Masculinidad; relacionalidad; migración; literatura africana de migrantes; Sefi Atta.
Sumario: Introducción. Perspectivas teóricas acerca de la masculinidad. Leyendo la masculinidad en *The Bad Immigrant*. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

The lives and struggles of migrant men remain to this day a strikingly underexplored theme in African literature in English, despite their relevance to contemporary diasporic narratives. While a considerable amount of scholars have studied masculinities in depth (Raewynn Connell, James Messerschmidt, Andrew Gorman-Murray, Peter Hopkins), only a few have focused on the intricate interplay between migration and masculine identity (Katie Walsh, Raymond Hibbins, Ndungi wa Mungai, Bob Pease) and the poor implementation of migrant masculinities in relation to other fields of arts and humanities also reveals several limitations in cross-disciplinary engagement. As a result, it is possible to contend that it is time to examine the intersection between masculinity theories, migration and contemporary postcolonial literary practices.

Moreover, one can observe that, just as "men have rarely been the subject of research on gender in Africa" (Lindsay and Miescher 1), the inquiry into the representation of migrant masculinities in African literatures has likewise been marginal or overlooked in academia. In light of the need for studies that address migrant masculinities critically, this article attempts to "explore the experiences of men *as men*" (Hibbins and Pease 4) in contemporary African migrant literature, thereby contributing to an underexplored dimension in the research in the field.

For that reason, I will examine the novel *The Bad Immigrant* by Nigerian American author Sefi Atta, which offers profound insight into the understanding of the crisis of masculinity lived by some Nigerian immigrant men. In order to achieve this, I will make use of different critical theoretical contributions which have been grouped into two sets: on the one hand, relational masculinities, and on the other, migrant masculinities. Immediately after the discussion of these methodological tools, a text-centred analysis unfolds serving as the main body of this study. My proposal establishes a reading of the novel that far from viewing the character of Lukmon solely as an educated immigrant commenting on

racial tensions, it instead problematises and interrogates his masculine identity.

1. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MASCULINITIES

1.1 Relational Masculinities: The Construction of Men as a Group

Gender identities and their expressions should be assessed from a framework of relationality that deliberately diminishes the role of individuality. Since these gender identities and expressions transcend subjectivity, as they depend on a number of social and cultural factors, theoretical perspectives into this matter must consider an extended network which goes beyond the individual person. Scholars, such as Sally Robinson for instance, have approached gender as "a relationship of hierarchy and power among individuals and not the property of separate individuals" (151). On a similar note, Harry Brod has also emphasised that gender is part of a collective picture inasmuch as it is "not an attribute of individuals at all, but a relational category" (165). Both these claims not only underscore the intersubjective dynamics of gender but also confirm the necessity of adopting specific approaches to gender that take relationality into consideration.

The forerunners of critical masculinity studies have not been completely oblivious to the relational nature of gender either. In point of fact, when analysing hegemonic masculinity, Raewynn Connell and James Messerschmidt have effectively brought attention to how gender "is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity" (848). In addition, Pierre Bourdieu has similarly noted that manhood is "an eminently relational notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity" (53). Hence, masculinity and femininity have consistently been interconnected and they have been formed discursively and in opposition to each other. For patriarchal systems, gender is binary, it entails a hierarchy and requires a performative display of the differences between men and women. As Allan G. Johnson highlights, patriarchal regimes want men "to be in control at all times, to be unemotional (except for anger and rage), to present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women" while women are "assumed

(and expected) to be just the opposite, especially in relation to men" (13). In view of this, it becomes clear that gender categories are "always constructed in the context of a broader social order" (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 6) and that it is the responsibility of critical men's studies "to explain more fully the relational construction of masculinity and the power relations sustained by its hegemonic definitions" (van Hoven and Hörschelmann 7).

In general, masculinity has been seen as something that simultaneously belongs to the self as well as to the realm of politics. For Bettina van Hoven and Peter Hopkins it can be defined "as a form of identity (i.e., a process of identification whereby particular traits, personal qualities, and attributes are seen to be masculine (or not)) and as a form of ideology (i.e., a doctrine or set of beliefs dominant in institutions, society, and culture at large)" (492). In this sense, masculinity manifests as "a social, historical, and political construct" whose performance actually "interrelates with space, place, and time", allowing for the same person to reveal "a different kind of masculinity and/or femininity at different times and in different contexts" (492). For many, this sense of specificity is a tacit condition for an accurate critical inspection of men, since "the starting point for any understanding of masculinity that is not simply biologistic or subjective must be men's involvement in the social relations that constitute the gender order" (Carrigan et al. qtd. in Berg and Longhurst 352). In addition, some experts warn us that "masculinity is both temporally and geographically contingent" and therefore it becomes necessary to acknowledge the plurality of masculinities insofar as they "are highly contingent, unstable, contested spaces within gender relations" (Berg and Longhurst 352). Considering all these observations, it is essential to speak of masculinities in the plural and to pay attention to the adaptability and interconnectedness of gender discourses. For this very reason, I propose the methodological approach of relational masculinities for textual and cultural analyses.

According to Andrew Gorman-Murray and Peter Hopkins, it is possible to conceptualise masculinities "as *relational* achievements—that is, masculinity/masculinities is/are constructed in *relation* to other entities, including bodies, identities, institutions, ideas, social norms and categories, and historical and geographical contexts" (6). Not only that, these authors also sustain that this relationality remains "an ongoing and ever-changing process, as masculinities are continuously reconstructed in and through these social and material relations" (6). Put differently, being

a man "requires active maintenance" (Cornwall 244), as it prescribes a sequence of making and remaking identity, especially in front of others. In a similar manner, Peter Hopkins and Greg Noble have used the term "relational masculinities" to refer to how masculine identities are "constructed processually around senses of similarity and difference" (815), an observation that certainly goes along with theoretical premises of relationality which defend that "[a]ll identities are relational [because] all rely on *not* being something else" (Lawler 12). On this basis, I attempt to associate the field of masculinities with the theoretical model of relational ontologies which not only "gives primacy to the relations between entities as a constitutive element of their existence" but also "presumes the inseparability of one entity from another" (Spyrou). To that end, Karen Barad's discussion of relationalities of becoming is key to understanding the so called approach of relational masculinities. As a result, a "man" could never be an independent, pre-existing entity but rather a performative unit co-constituted through diverse entanglements that "acquire[s] specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity" (172). Therefore, men have to be analysed as subjects who become gendered in their social performance and interaction, whose existence is delimited by the existence of other beings and whose identities are profoundly shaped by context, place and time.

1.2 Migrant Masculinities: The Re-Construction of Men in a Foreign Country

Due to the fact that context, place and time are indeed crucial for comprehending gender, it is of utmost importance to underline their influence on the formation of migrant masculinities. African émigrés, for example, often experience a disruption in their masculine identity after moving to Europe and America, where they encounter challenges regarding the perception of their masculine self. Seeing that their relocation means adapting to a previously unknown set of values and behaviours, navigating new social norms and redefining their roles within their families and communities, migrant men are faced with the dilemma of deciding if it would be better for them to change. As some scholars have suggested, it is necessary to interrogate whether transnational spaces "produce even greater opportunities for the reinforcement of prevailing gender ideologies and norms, or, conversely, . . . provide openings for men and women, girls and boys to question hegemonic notions of gender"

(Mahler and Pessar 42). Since they can either adhere more firmly to their already established patterns of masculinity while finding new forms to reproduce them or abandon them altogether when engaging in a radical reconfiguration of their gender behaviour, it is imperative to analyse what remains the same and what is altered for these men.

Building upon the necessity to examine the elements of continuity and of transformation in the overseas experiences of these men, it is essential to consider some of the cultural elements that affect the re-construction of their masculine identity in the country of arrival. Migratory movements do not occur in a vacuum, for they are heavily shaped by the social conditions that exist in the subject before, during and after the journey. In the case of the stories depicted in the bulk of contemporary African novels, relocations are usually motivated by economic reasons. Thus, the manhood of male characters is intricately tied to their ability to finally achieve financial success within the host society, especially in relation to their families and other fellow immigrants. In this sense, migration is more often than not "perceived to reconfigure masculinities by enabling or inhibiting a male migrant's ability to be a successful 'provider'" (Walsh 518) and clearly reinforces a traditional paradigm of Western masculinity, applicable to a certain extent in the postcolonial context to middle-class African men living in big urban areas who relocate in search of employment opportunities and who tend to replicate this role. In a similar manner, when these African men become transnational migrants, they start coping with pressures "to be the main breadwinner in the societies in which they are settled, and to continue to maintain their authority in the family" (Hibbins and Pease 5), proving that they are somehow still in command, even if this was not necessarily their case in the first place. This is Lukmon's situation in *The Bad Immigrant.*

Usually, what changes for these men in the diasporic context is the scale of "a range of personal, cultural, educational and systemic barriers" (Hibbins and Pease 5) that they must face on a daily basis as racialised, foreign others. These new constraints usually foster deskilling in the labour market of their host countries together with a diminishment of rank in their households, seeing their power and status undermined, particularly in relation to women. For this reason, experts have also called attention to migration as a process that "entails a constant *reworking* of masculinity", endowed with "tensions between gender ideologies in the homeland and the country of settlement" as well as with "a renegotiation of work and social life within changing networks of family and employment" (Hopkins

and Noble 815). This perspective points out "the geographical contingency of gender identities and relations" (Walsh 519), due to the fact that migrant masculinities may vary according to contextual differences as they are influenced by the convergence of "old" and "new" cultural practices and values.

Migrant masculinities should not be discussed merely as identities located in a new transnational space where broader sociocultural and geopolitical forces merge, but more importantly, as constructs actively assembled and negotiated within that very context. This cultural reconstruction of masculinity occurs in what we might call the *diaspora space*, a spatial framework which not only recognises the "confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (Brah 141) but also includes "the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (181) when experiencing the "effects of crossing/transgressing different 'borders'" (242). A thorough examination of migrant masculinities in the diaspora space underscores the entangled histories and relationships between migrants and non-migrants, and it undoubtedly proves beneficial when emphasising how identity formation is shaped by transnational flows of culture, power, and belonging. Therefore, Nigerians in the United States are exposed to the interaction of different narratives of how to be a man and they also observe how their masculinity gradually adapts to align with the expectations and beliefs of their new communities. In their case, they move "from a culture that is more communal and family-oriented to one that is individualist, materialistic and consumer-oriented" (Mungai and Pease 110), which causes significant difficulties and impediments to preserving their previous roles as men. The ideal of a provider for the family that they had been in touch with is now framed differently, marked by a predominantly neoliberal conception of success. Similarly, their ideal of a family leader has now been dispossessed of its entitlement of an authoritarian, strong-handed rule. This implies that the assumptions they used to hold about being a husband and a father are probably no longer applicable.

Indeed, it is noticeable that "premigration gendered and social hierarchies are being challenged and contested in the hostland, as diasporic conditions force the majority of African men to rethink their masculine identities within diaspora households and society" (Pasura and Christou 530). While they might have to readjust to new social and cultural realities, African migrant men will still try to pass as honourable, glorious men who are venerated to a certain extent. In this way, it is their "desires and efforts

to claim positive recognition" that drive them to obtain a certain degree of *respectability*. And, in light of this, we can correlate the approach of relational masculinities with migrant masculinities, as their masculine identity relies on positive recognition by others. In other words, migrant men achieve a sense of accomplishment regarding their new positions and roles if and only if their diasporic families and communities welcome this reworking of their gender self-awareness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all men will be able to achieve this, as some of them may fail in this process, and could end up resorting to violence, turning their home into a living hell, or abandoning their family and their future plans in the host country.

2. READING MASCULINITY IN *THE BAD IMMIGRANT*

The novel *The Bad Immigrant* thoughtfully follows the trajectory established by *A Bit of Difference* in giving voice to the experience of mobility. In both novels, Sefi Atta offers a nuanced critique of class privilege and gender roles while opening up "a productive space of critical inquiry into the pre-scribed production of Africa and the figure of the African in the West" (Knudsen 166). Through the story of a family that represents the broader profile of Nigerians arriving in the United States—individuals with high levels of education and a clear intention to settle permanently (see Imoagene 689)—, Atta includes a male protagonist who is continuously learning "about the workings and peculiarities of race relations" ("Racism") and who scrutinises how middle-class immigrants can "occupy structures of privilege" as well as "inhabit structures of oppression" (Adebayo 291). Not only that, her portrayal of Lukmon Ahmed-Karim also serves as a compelling case study for understanding the (re)construction of masculinities for Nigerian migrant men. For this reason, I argue that the novel enables the critical exploration of the reworking of gender identity in migrant families. As a result, a close reading of this book displays the author's "gift for dialogue and perusing intimate family cris[e]s" (Ossana-Álvarez 87) and allows for a complex discussion on how masculinity needs to be constantly reenacted and reassessed. Since "[n]o man is automatically granted the status of manhood" (Noble x), Atta's fictional character is trapped in a vicious cycle of reaffirming his position as a man in a manner that diverges from previous practices, as these past gender assumptions are no guarantee of maintaining his role within the family in the present. Drawing on the

theoretical framework proposed above, the next two subsections will employ the exposed ideas referring to relational and migrant masculinities to study the novel.

2.1 "What Kind of Man Are You?": Lukmon's Failure as Provider and Authority Figure

The uncertainties brought by the new life of the Ahmed-Karims in the United States are the true source of the crisis of masculinity that Lukmon experiences in the novel. He recognises from the very first page that he was not completely convinced of moving and that it has always been his wife Moriam who was in charge of the details concerning their migratory process. It was her who applied for the green card lottery, sorted out documents and meetings and took care of all these prior arrangements while still in Nigeria: "I couldn't stop her . . . She filled out our immigration application forms and arranged our medical tests and interviews at the US Embassy . . . To raise money for our journey, she traded gold jewelry and sold our furniture and other belongings" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 2). Not only does Moriam seem to be way more resourceful and proactive than her husband, she is also eagerly attempting to modify their living conditions and, theoretically, succeeding in doing so. Certainly, while in Lagos, he felt relatively at peace and never questioned the established family dynamics, nor did he perceive his wife's resoluteness as a source of threat of any kind. However, this may have been a concern that has remained latent—one that did not make him uneasy until the social, cultural, and economic context of the family changed with their arrival to the States.

Actually, for him, the image of a life abroad did not carry along any sense of security and he admitted he had some reservations about it: "I had my doubts from the very beginning—for one, about my job prospects. But Moriam didn't give up until she had made her case" (1). Truth be told, Lukmon was right in not spotting himself coming across abundant opportunities and his worries about his career opportunities have remained constant since their arrival to America in the summer of 1999: "There was a possibility that I might have to return to graduate school . . . We had enough money to tide us over for the summer, but it was unsettling not knowing when and where I would find a job" (15). As a matter of fact, the Ahmed-Karims can meet their own expenses throughout the summer only

because they are staying at his cousin Ismail's place. This precarious situation involves their exposition to a more powerful masculine presence, Ismail, who has to be revered and thanked in every circumstance and who now serves as a constant reminder of the protagonist's subordinate position.

During this time period, Lukmon lacks material means and cannot be relied on to secure a future untouched by hardship. As experts have commented, "unemployment brings into sharp focus the centrality of the wage as an affirmation of masculinity" (Brah 57) and makes it especially hard for migrant fathers to feel at ease. Therefore, Lukmon is a desperate man seeking for any possibility of remaining relevant for his nuclear family and his attempts to secure a position that aligns with his career expectations unfortunately result in deskilling. Such an adjustment is perceived not only as negative and unwanted but more specifically as degrading. In this manner, his carefully cultivated intellectual abilities, which up to that moment had helped him fulfil the role of provider and made him proud, are something that he can no longer cling on to. Taking a low-skilled job is perhaps the best chance he has now to contend with the perceived failure associated with unemployment. So, even though he is "more educated than the US average citizen", he eventually accepts "a menial job" considering that his Nigerian diplomas are practically useless in this country, thus becoming an easy target for "labour market discrimination" (Serón-Navas 231). Given that his wife also needs to undergo a series of examinations in order to obtain the necessary qualifications for practicing nursing in the host country, he has no choice but to start working as a security guard to maintain the family in the meantime.

This new job of his as security staff in a cosmetics shop entails an ambivalent position. It allows the family to move out of Lukmon's cousin's house, thus becoming indispensable for their independence in the US, but it also symbolises the many obstacles that need to be surmounted for an immigrant life to be considered successful. To begin with, he acknowledges his economic struggle as provider: "I could barely afford to provide for my family with what I earned as a security guard" (80). Then, there is a passage that further illustrates other sides of his vulnerability as an unqualified racialised foreign worker. Lukmon is asked to escort an African American man who has allegedly been seen stealing to the manager's office. It turns out to be a big misunderstanding, for the man is an attorney whose only suspicious movement has been putting his own

wallet back inside of his pocket. Still, the incident brings along some masculine interethnic confrontation: "'Goddamned African' . . . 'You're lucky you didn't mess with me'" (115). The scene is relevant because we see how Lukmon has to obey his affected white female boss as well as be at the mercy of angry customers while coping with both situations happening at the same time: "I wasn't sure what humiliated me more, his dressing me down in front of her, or her coming to my defense on the assumption that I was there to do her dirty work" (115-16). This is definitely a blow to his masculine pride; the experience of defencelessness in front of a woman in the middle of a whirlwind of xenophobia when his sole intention is to keep putting food on the table.

His fragility intensifies as the narration progresses. Lukmon feels attacked when his wife suggests that he could become a stay-at-home dad as soon as she finds a job, because in his own words: "What kind of man does that?" (118). She seems serious about this proposal and does not force him to give an answer immediately but Lukmon views himself as utterly disappointed by the role he is left in, apart from being quite reluctant to this proposed change in their positions: "She might as well have asked me to get a vasectomy. It would never occur to me to rely on Moriam to be the wage-earner of our family" (118). His wording compares this modification of roles with an actual instance of emasculation and denotes that his masculine self in this moment relies both on not yielding to his wife and on not abandoning his primary role. As a matter of fact, my claim here is that his response is a manifestation of his anxiety about losing his masculine authority; firstly, in relational terms, given that Moriam will hold more power over him and this will diminish his position within their family, and secondly, in what concerns the respectability of a migrant man, as Lukmon is on the verge of becoming a stay-at-home dad, performing tasks typically associated with femininity and being symbolically emasculated as a husband financially dependent on his wife.

In spite of his initial hesitation to let his wife carry this heavy responsibility, he ultimately decides to quit his current job when Moriam is hired in a nearby hospital: "I stopped working . . . and took over most of her chores at home" (133). Lukmon's new role is predominantly domestic and is conceived in very sexist terms. The situation is described as his taking part in tasks that were initially meant for her as a woman and as a wife; as though he was never meant to bear responsibility for household duties. It would not be wrong to say that the circumstances have forced him to accept this reconfiguration of gender and labour practices,

subsequently promoting a decline in his Nigerian postcolonial sense of masculinity rooted in what Cornwall calls "[n]otions of legitimate control embedded in a man's capacity to be the responsible provider" (237). He seems to consent to this in the end but expresses nonetheless his dissatisfaction with the suppression of his sexuality: "She earned more than I had as a security guard, which would have been all right, if we were having sex more often" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 188). Their poor sex life is something that will gradually become a huge torment for him, as it will be later discussed in the following section.

Not earning a wage makes him concerned, because the family relies now on Moriam's new salary to overcome their delicate economic situation. Although this is not as dreadful as he might have initially thought, Lukmon's self-perception is by now quite pitiful and miserable: "Being a househusband wasn't exactly challenging work, but I often felt worthless" (197). Hence, he actively decides to recover his professional activity, not due to necessity, but just so he can build again some self-esteem: "I had to get a job as soon as possible. I needed to for my own self-respect. Success to me was teaching African literature in an African Studies department" (228). His masculine self is indeed invigorated when he is accepted for a visiting professorship in Middlesex, Mississippi, but the offer comes with a particular set of inconveniences, as the rest of the family stays in New Jersey. For example, he is needed when their son Taslim takes the family car and does not make it back home on time. Moriam calls Lukmon and tells him: "I want you to take care of this now, as a father and as a man" (305). The protagonist's response expresses profound discontent with the instability of his position and the continual construction of his identity through external circumstances: "The woman ought to make up her mind. When I was home, she'd wanted me to switch roles; now I was away, she wanted me to switch back" (306). Additionally, his own thoughts betray him and reveal that, although he makes occasional efforts, the reality is that he generally fails his children, not engaging in a mindful and diligent upbringing of them: "There were times I was conscious of playing a role as a father and this was one" (307).

As a matter of fact, the ambivalent relationship that he nurtures with his offspring has several negative consequences for him. In a given moment when he comes back from Mississippi and tries to confront the insolence and rebelliousness of their eighteen-year-old, Taslim, Lukmon lives an unpleasant moment marked by his son's negative perception of him: "'Why didn't you just stay there?' Taslim said. 'We were doing fine

here! Mom went to work! She paid our bills! What did you ever do, except sit around correcting our English and whining about America?'" (349). Matters escalate between them, Lukmon grabs him by the collar and blames Moriam for their son's impertinence, for having failed at drawing boundaries in his absence. In a matter of minutes, he reaches the point of physical fighting and abuses his son, catching him off-guard while he was taking a shower. Violence becomes in this way Lukmon's desperate strategy to claim back his authority and it shows his inability to handle their personal issues in a relaxed and empathic manner. As time goes by, his lack of control over the family can no longer be ignored. He confesses: "I was scared. I'd been unable to provide for them for a while. I couldn't protect them fully. They'd changed so much I could hardly recognize them and I had no control over a single one of them" (356). Lukmon's words perfectly portray a failed masculinity, in view of the fact that Yoruba culture regards the position of husband as someone "vested with control over the household" (Cornwall 235). His flawed manhood is met with surprise by his own wife who pronounces: "'What kind of man are you?' . . . 'How could you do that to your son?'" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 361). As a result, it can be argued that Lukmon embodies the figure of a man who has been unable to reconstruct his sense of masculinity within the new transnational context, resorting to violence as a means of asserting himself as the man of the house.

2.2 The Man Who Did Not Know He Hated Women: A Misogynistic Husband Fallen from Grace

Despite having a good educational background with extensive academic credentials, Lukmon's views on women are illustrative of misogynistic thinking and reflect many aspects of the patriarchal ideologies he has been internalising along the years. First of all, as a young man he has to step up for one of his sisters in very patriarchal terms, as evidenced by his striking his sister's ex-husband with a punch. In response to the man's disrespect toward his sister, accusing her of a supposed lack of proper manners—likely attributed to poor upbringing by their mother as he suggested—Lukmon engages in physical conflict with him. This represents not only an example of masculinistic competition but also his duty to defend his family's honour, particularly his mother's and his sister's. In contexts involving women beyond the family domain, he also shows a slight tendency toward misogynistic bias. For instance, as an academic who has

specialised in the field of African literature, he keeps acclaiming a long list of admirable authors exclusively composed of men writers until his daughter Bashira's sound advice compels him to include women in the syllabus of his literature classes. Not to mention how surprising it is to see on other occasions the countless ways in which female authors' contributions are disregarded and treated with disdain: "Not that I was opposed to African women writers, but their domestic preoccupations put me to sleep" (42).

Women are described mainly through sexist stereotypes in his own romantic life as well. His memories of Lucy—a white English classmate he encountered during his time in London as a student—reveal a certain aversion toward Caucasian women and interracial relationships. This attitude further reflects Lukmon's particular form of prejudice against white people as well as a subtle hint of machismo that permeates all his anecdotes, such as his criticism of the first girlfriends he ever had as though they were utterly annoying for "talking about remaining a virgin" or "so loose" for "sleeping with three guys [he] knew" (189). In a similar manner, when he narrates how he first met his wife Moriam, he highlights that he felt lucky to have the chance to interact with somebody who had not been sexually active before, exposing between the lines that such a behaviour was deplorable for a woman but probably permissible for a man: "I was just glad that a fine chick who hadn't been passed around was talking to me" (12). Not only that, he also explains that he generally caught women's attention unintentionally, which worked well for him, while being conscious that something was off: "she talked to me only because she thought I was a nice guy. Why women assumed I was nice, I never knew. They mistook my silence for shyness. I was usually thinking about how to get them to go to bed with me" (12). Next, when referring to the media content that Moriam is fond of, he takes personal offence as a man at the biased representation that they allegedly offer: "And men? According to the television programs she watched . . . we were violent and depraved. We abused and subjugated women. We raped and killed them. We stifled them simply by being men" (197). These examples are illustrative of how he constructs his own identity relationally through a certain degree of opposition to what women supposedly do and think.

In a clear demonstration of male chauvinism, he implies that beauty is the trait that made him respect, tolerate and appreciate women: "she didn't know how lucky she was because I would never put up with bad behaviour from an ugly woman" (13). Then, in a specific moment of the novel, when

he learns that his cousin Ismail is having an affair with his female boss, Lukmon belittles her professional achievements and translates what he is being told to match his sexist worldview: "she had broken the glass ceiling by using her brains, he said. I took that to mean she was not attractive" (28). To him, if these initiatives to achieve professional growth are the truly relevant thing to tell about her, it means that she clearly does not conform to conventional beauty standards or does not have a pleasing appearance, which was, apparently, the thing that mattered the most to Lukmon. But his sexist focus on aesthetics does not pertain only to his interactions with unknown women and he also applies it to people within his own social circle. Take for example Lukmon's participation in the African Literature Association conference, where he meets up with Ranti Shonubi, "a fellow student from [his] PhD years at the University of Ibadan" (201). As soon as she sees her, he feels drawn to her because of her outfit, finds her short hair exhilarating, admires her beauty and inevitably assesses her strong-minded and opinionated character, for he claims that she is "as contrary as [he] remembered" (202). Within the span of two pages, it is already palpable not only the scorn with which he hears her reflections on gender and feminism but also an undeniable objectification of her body: "The more she talked, the more challenging it was to concentrate on what she was saying anyway. Why did women do that? Expose their breasts and expect men to listen to them?" (204). Later on, towards the end of the novel, Lukmon airs again his opinion on female partners and frames it in such a way that despite the fact that it begins as a praise, it actually ends up in derogatory terms: "Women were wonderful. Women were fantastic. Women would be amazing if they'd only be quiet occasionally, and have sex more often" (257). As it can be easily noted, he passes from expressing rejection of both chaste and promiscuous women to voicing his obsession with women who delay and/or decline sexual encounters with men. This well-constructed inconsistency in his morals shows that although he might not be aware of his own bigotry, his prejudice against women is blatantly displayed for readers and is key to understanding his masculine identity.

Most of Lukmon's negative comments about women are really connected to the underlying resentment he has been growing towards his wife. It could be argued that in fact his troubled relationship with Moriam is what exacerbates his misogynistic attitude throughout the whole book. Lukmon knows that his wife is in command and both pretend that this is not the case, in order to avoid shaking the foundations of their family unit:

"She could almost make me believe I was in control" (61). Their lack of a healthy sex life as a couple is also one of the most recurrent topics in the novel as well as one of the biggest issues in their turbulent marriage. Through his rage towards her for "having turned [him] into a eunuch" (63), Lukmon discloses the reconfiguration of gender practices in the diasporic household and sees his conception of "married man" readjusted. He notices that her wife's domestic obligations and personal hobbies are now different, that she is freer to act as she pleases even if this means confronting her husband's wishes: "She was always too tired to have sex, but she was never too tired to go shopping" (188). At certain moments, he attempts to bring up the subject via humour but fails to realise that his remarks are extraordinarily insensitive: "Go and shop, and when you're finished, come back here and make up for your bride price" (219); "Her hair was dyed a color she called cinnamon. I'd told her the color made her look like a loose woman and it was a shame she wasn't" (238). Lukmon's reaction to her new day-to-day life, which indeed includes lots of shopping and hair salon appointments, is no less than suggesting the possibility of banishing his wife to find a new subservient one: "I warned Moriam that I would send her back to Nigeria and get my sisters to fly over a village woman who would cook, clean and fulfill her wifely duties if she wouldn't. She found that funny" (189).

Rather than remaining a simple joke, as Moriam interprets it, this evolves into the perfect example of husbands considering whether it would be pertinent to reclaim traditional values in order to "regain their privileged position again" (Pasura and Christou 533). However, this perception is not exclusively his, as it is shared by many other immigrant husbands in the novel who believe that their wives do not conform to established gender norms while they are in the West. For instance, Dr. Aderemi specifies that the gender dynamics at the barbecue held at the Ahmed-Karim's place would have been really different had they had it in Nigeria: "'If we were home', he said, 'they would be serving us food on their knees'" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 245). These men are realising that they have ceased to enjoy favoured treatment in the host country, although in many cases they are truly embracing a fantasy, an idealised representation of their marital dynamics back home. Lukmon, for instance, notes how the external circumstances at play in Lagos would have induced his wife to display greater attentiveness and affection: "She was too comfortable in America; that was the problem. In Nigeria, she would be afraid of the competition. She would have to perform her wifely duties on a nightly basis in case

some other woman might" (190). Nonetheless, this probably fails to capture the reality in a faithful manner. In this regard, his view is that the American way of life is to blame and their new life circumstances actually make him hold grudges against his wife. This will result in their interests and opinions progressively diverging, thus becoming more and more detached from one another in the course of their navigation of the diaspora space.

Another striking episode in their married life is when he discovers that she keeps a vibrator in the drawer of her bedside table. Still flabbergasted, Lukmon urgently needs to know all the details: "Look at you, barely off the boat and already behaving like a bad woman. I will beat the hell out of you if you don't tell me who gave this to you" (320). The excessively violent language he uses and his disproportionate rage likely stem from a slight suspicion that his wife could be telling a lie when claiming that it was a birthday present, which would only increase his feeling of betrayal. Learning that she was actively seeking ways to explore her own sexuality without him would have destroyed to the core his sense of masculinity. Nevertheless, in Lukmon's view, Moriam still violates the behavioural expectations placed upon her and ignores the manners of a decent Nigerian woman by accepting such a gift. She is going against her culture and joining what he calls the group of "badly behaved Nigerian women" in America (243). Moriam represents in this context sexual agency and displaces her partner from the so-called husband's "exercise of exclusive rights to sexual access and control" (Cornwall 240) by opening up the possibility of masturbation and female-centred pleasure. Her detachment from traditional values brings along not only a great humiliation and rage for Lukmon but, most importantly, the deterioration of his masculine self.

CONCLUSIONS

Like many other Africans in the United States in their quest for a satisfying immigrant life, Atta's protagonist and narrator is rearranging his sense of self. Driven by his wife, Lukmon leaves Nigeria behind in order to forge a new path for his loved ones and in so doing he inevitably confronts intra-family disagreements and tensions. The new sociocultural context allows Moriam to embrace the privileges of personal freedom as a woman, not merely as a wife, while also providing young Taslim the means to defy the authoritarian tendencies of his parents. Both situations simultaneously push Lukmon to unimportance, to seeing his expected position as head of

the household continuously destabilised. Indeed, Lukmon is no longer reliable as a provider and slowly evolves into an emotional stranger for them. He fails to accomplish a harmonious and balanced reconfiguration of his masculine identity, and resorts to both verbal and physical violence. Similarly, not only does he show his prejudice and bias against women in many different contexts, he also reaffirms his manhood precisely by doing that. As a result, it can be claimed that his sexism has been of core importance in the development of his masculinity and now functions as a shield for his weak standpoint as a migrant man. Completely overwhelmed by the versatility of his wife in New Jersey, Atta's male protagonist also discovers an unusual fellowship with other Nigerian men through reclaiming traditional gender roles and is even tempted by the possibility of polygamy to rework his masculine power within their marriage.

As this study has demonstrated, the character of Lukmon deliberately portrays the challenges associated with masculinity lived by many Nigerians abroad, whose sense of manhood is eroded through relational dynamics stemming from their migrant condition. Although this exploration provides valuable insights, further research is needed to see the convergence of critical masculinities and new African diasporic fiction. The task now is to find texts and narratives that revolve around the presence of progressive black masculinities and other positive gender discourses in the African immigrant communities.

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