A Review of Ayesha Hurrana Attah's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*

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Abstract

The paper reviews Ayesha Hurrana Attah's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*. It uses a qualitative approach by revealing the significance of telling the African history from the African perspective of the indigenous African. The sample is purposefully chosen because the text is relatively new and demands an exposure into how Africans contributed immensely to the Atlantic slave trade. It portrays the kind of patriarchal society and trade routes under a careful eye for historical detail. The paper again provides the heterogeneity of slavery that captures the different shades of slavery in relation to what African history is. A major weakness the paper reveals is that the book produces evidence to explain Africa's contribution to the slave trade and tries so hard to conclude that Africans should not blame the Europeans for subjugating them. However, the text fails to provide the dark and rotten side of the European tyranny as some researchers have done to construct the depth of exploitation in relation to Africa's way of dealing with slavery.

Keywords

Slavery, African Slavery, Patriarchal Slavery, Indigenous African Slavery, The Heterogeneity of Slavery

1. Introduction

Ayesha Hurrana Attah was born in Accra, Ghana in the 1990's under a military dictatorship. She studied Biochemistry at Columbia University (USA). She wrote and published her first novel, *Harmattan Rain* with fellowship from Per Ankh Publishers and trust Africa. *Harmattan Rain* was short listed for the 2020 commonwealth writers' prizes Africa Region. Ayesha was educated at Mount Holyoke College and Columbia University and received a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from New York University in 2011. Her second novel is *The*

Hundred Wells of Salaga which gives the evidence that slavery as an economic relationship has been an indigenous African concept and Ghana is of no exception (Fage, 1969).

The text showcases the pre-colonial 19th century Ghana in a parallel description through the story of two young women, Amina and Wurche. The story presents Salaga as a bustling town in Northern Ghana where the notorious slave trading market center and the 100 wells are situated. According to Kopytoff (1998), these wells were supposed to give the slave a final bath before leaving the slave market to the coast for onward transport along the Atlantic Ocean. From the narrative, Amina, one of its protagonists, lives with her father and two wives and children. Amina receives rumours about people who are stolen to be sold and taken to the big water but this does not worry her because her own life is stable and punctuated by caravans that pass through the town until her home is attacked by slave raiders who take her away into slavery. Her resilience aids her to spring back into shape after going through such a difficult time of being separated from her home and forced on a journey.

Wurche belongs to a noble family who rather benefits from the slave trade and thus has equipment and foreign gifts to prove it. Miers and Kopytoff (1997) point out that slavery was not about the question of ethics at that time but was a long tradition meant for revenue. However, the Asante, British and German forces appear and threaten the power and trade of the local people. Wurche, with her mischievous boyish charm, courageous and spirited princess, is more interested in sitting in on her father's assemblies than learning to be a good wife from her grandmother, Mma. Her political role, when she finally gets one, is as a bride to Adnan, a gruff, dominating man with whom her father needs to build an alliance (Attah, 2018: p. 86).

The major areas considered in this review are the strengths, weaknesses, recommendation and a conclusion.

2. Strength

The Hundred Wells of Salaga has the significance of telling the African history from the African perspective of the indigenous African. For example, the text examines a part of West African History and showcases the time when domestic slavery was big business. The twin towns that describe the trade routes of the domestic slavery are clearly given as Both Kete-Krachie and Salaga Kpembe. Atta skillfully portrays the kind of patriarchal society and trade routes under a careful eye for historical detail. In the novel, the twin towns are urban market centers. Salaga-Kpembe and Kete-Krachi are described as towns located immediately adjacent to each other in symbiotic relationship (Attah, 2018: pp. 18-26). One partner of the twin settlement is made up of traditional elder nucleus with its indigenous chiefs, religion and strong ties of kinship. The other side or twin town is also made up of strangers who are centered on a major market center and inhabited by Muslim traders and their relatives. They usually wield some political

autonomy though the ultimate depends on the traditional indigenous twin town. For example, the narrator says, “To prevent the bustle of Salaga from encroaching on them, the royals of the twin towns of Salaga-Kpembe restricted Kpembe to royals. Everybody else was welcome to stay in Salaga.” (p. 19) According to Miers (2003a) power struggle between the traditional authorities and the Muslim traders emerged in Kete-Krachi. This kind of factional struggles for power and severe competition for goods and services resulted from the expansion of population by the British to enter into Krachiekrom and the consequent formation of the Kete zongo. Through this, the Muslim traders quickly gained control of much of the wealth generated by the booming trade. Their presence altered the entire power structure of the traditional authority. The British also took advantage of this and encouraged a further use of the Salaga-Krachie-Accra trade route. This brought about a thriving market town with a plurality of people who represented coastal groups and this brought about the struggles between the Muslim traders of Kete and the traditional authorities of Krachie. Atta skillfully presents history of Ghana through this spectacle of the twin town phenomenon.

The next important significance is how Atta presents the notion of slavery. As perceived by a lot of writers, Africans attempt to comprehend the notion and their conquest in connection with the trans-Atlantic slave trade through the British onslaught. But, *The Hundred Well of Salaga* clearly interrogates the social standing of African domestic slavery. From the text, Atta complicates the idea of slavery in relation to what “African history” is. Atta emphasizes on status, ethnicity and culture. Wurche’s power over Amina as her slave defeats the idea of the two women sharing a sense of solidarity in the kind of patriarchal society presented in the text. Wurche’s marriage to Adnan for political and ethnic alliance/reasons supports Atta’s careful eye for domestic and historical detail about the African domestic slavery. Significant changes in social relations of groups to the productive process and a rapid increase in the level of exchange value is realized within the community. The social relations of groups here, was based on economic, classism that resulted in dynamic political restructuring of the community. For example, Etuto forms relations with Adnan the Dagbon prince for a political reason. Miers (2003b) explains this in his article that social relations were under stress and competition during the late 19th century Kete-Krachie was very complicated.

A third significant factor provides domestic slavery within decorative designs in permanent basis of inclusion and exclusion. The text examines how the evocation of a slave meta-system that circulates cultures and their functions in the African society excavate the ongoing forms of slavery in contemporary Africa. Though Wurche is a princess in the story, the kind of patriarchal setting still presents her as unfree. Wurche has been resisting the strictures of her society; being herself a royal. Again, having a brother, her position was clear to everyone. She has to marry to forge alliance to make her father Kpembewura strong. Though she is intelligent and has everything a man needed to be a good ruler, she is seen

as a woman. Atta uses such instances of patriarchal slavery to highlight the important issues of contemporary scholarship in African feminism.

The text further presents gender issues which have gained credence in contemporary society as another significant. Atta uses how Amina's body is exposed at the Salaga slave market for a buyer, to showcase the presence of gender scholarship as a form of slavery in contemporary writing. The highlight of gender sensitivity in the text shows how gender scholarship has received credence in contemporary writing. Atta's novel supports the trend of gender issues and how the female African writer perceives slavery in contemporary African writing.

3. Weakness

One major weakness is that the book ends abruptly without giving the detail of Wurche's success as a redeemer of the plight of women as she sets out to do from the beginning of the text. It appears as if the writer was rushing to finish in order to deal with another business.

Readers may find the ideas presented by Atta so complicated because of how she uses the parallel views of the two women. One may find the story uninteresting since the connection of issues is unclear from the beginning.

In dealing with the issue of slavery, Atta produces evidence to explain Africa's contribution to the slave trade and tries so hard to conclude that Africans should not blame the Europeans for subjugating them. However, Atta fails to provide the dark and rotten side of the European tyranny as some researchers have done to construct the depth of exploitation in relation to Africa's way of dealing with slavery. Her analysis this way does not produce enough evidence to conclude that Africans should be blamed for their own predicament.

The text again tries to present traces of homosexuality in the text. Atta attempts to produce the idea that homosexuality existed way back in Africa as early as the 17th century when she sets the story. She does this using Wurche's character but she is not confident enough to point it out categorically to the readership to have the impression that this contemporary cancer that needs proper attention persist in Africa and that it even persisted in precolonial Africa. Perhaps Atta is not confident enough due to the fact that the African culture frowns on this act though persistence is inevitable.

4. Recommendation

The point where the two women meet should have been a converging point for building the strength of the African woman as a redeemer of the plight of women. Atta sets out from the beginning of the text to provide resilience through Amina and Wurche.

As Atta started from the beginning, issues presenting African feminism was clear but events to build the success of this ceases at a point. The meeting of the two women at the very last chapter should have strengthened a clear stance on African feminism and that could have been more interesting.

The exploitation process that paints pictures of European contribution to the issue of slavery is rather not clearly exposed. It seems that Atta is more interested on Africa's involvement than providing the European side of the story of slavery as researchers convey about contemporary slavery scholarship in postcolonial discourse.

Gender scholarship in contemporary writing exposes the existence of homosexuality in Euro-America and elsewhere. In trying to expose matters about gender sensitivity like this, Atta should have pointed out without prejudice if only she sees that traces of this cancer clearly exist in Africa. At best, Atta should have been silent on this if evidence for support was not very strong and authentic.

I recommend this text to researchers who are still reading for insight into slavery scholarship in post-colonial discourse. Its content will be relevant especially in the area where there are biases of inclusion and exclusion since information about precolonial history of Salaga, the most important slave market in the 17th century Ghana is provided.

5. Conclusion

The Hundred Wells of Salaga challenges the assumption that supports slavery as linked to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It does well to provide a more hopeful vision of how to address the trauma that colonialism has put Africans through. However, there were certain lapses that the text does not thoroughly deal with. The text lacked the culture of examining evidence rigorously, getting to the end of the story and constructing practical solutions to specific problems. Even so, *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* made a strong case on tackling the problems to the trauma experienced by Africans and Ghanaians in particular as a result of colonization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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