

Male-bashing and narrative subjectivity in Amma Darko's first three novels

Mawuli Adjei

Amma Darko follows in the tracks of the two leading Ghanaian women writers, Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo. However, as a writer, Darko differs in her approach to social, political and cultural issues. Her first three novels, Beyond the Horizon (1995), The Housemaid (1998) and Faceless (2003), all present and contest the culture of patriarchy. In her works, women are victims of rape, battery, betrayal, abandonment by irresponsible husbands, economic exploitation and obnoxious cultural practices. This perpetrator-victim relationship leaves women consigned to fear, trauma, suffering and death. All three novels thus adopt rhetorical violence and narrative subjectivity as a way of confronting and demolishing male dominance and exploitation.

1. Introduction

Narrative theory considers philosophical questions about the nature of narrative by viewing it from a variety of linguistic, social and political perspectives. From the aggregate of theories on narratology over the past three decades or so (Chatman 1978; Bakhtin 1981; Booth 1983; Greimas 1983; Brooks 1984; Martin 1986; Phelan 1989; Adams 1996), five broad categories have been identified: the syntactic, semiotic, phenomenologic, rhetoric and dialogic. However, as Fludernik (1998) notes, narratology need not be as formalistic as its reputation would suggest, and in recent years it has accommodated more thematic concerns, including the ideology of the narrator, function, the significance of gender in narrative, and the repurposing of narrative technique in marginalized ethnic and post colonial texts.

The “repurposing of narrative technique,” which is here defined as *narrative subjectivity*, manifests itself at a number of levels: the writer's commitment to an identifiable ideological, cultural or political position, the writer's sex as it impinges on engendered constructs, the writer's choice and manipulation of language, diction, imagery, metaphor, characterisation, focalisation and iteration, among other things. The extent to which one or a combination of these factors impact on the tenor and texture of the narrative helps to identify the particular position of a writer in relation to the issues explored in the text. In a feminist (con)text, this tends to subordinate the writing process to the pleasures, prejudices and the ideological and pedagogic intentions of the writer as a woman.

2. The Changing Face of Feminist Literature in Africa

Feminist literature in Africa has undergone tremendous change in the last two decades. A noticeable trend in feminist African literature today appears to be *radical separatist* feminism. Radical feminism is that brand of feminism which questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on theirs. Radical feminism attempts to draw lines between biologically-determined behaviour and culturally-determined behaviour. Separatist feminism, on the other hand, is based on the idea that ‘separating’ women from men enables women to see themselves in a different context.

Correspondingly, feminist criticism of African literature has also undergone changes. According to Verba (2007:1), the topics focused upon subtly shift over the years, especially since the 1980s when “feminist critics examined representations, or misrepresentations, of African women in literary texts.” Reference must be made to critics, mostly female, who tackle the representations of women in the works of African male authors (Davies 1986, 1991, 1994; Adams 1993; Aidoo 1992; Bazin 1989; Busia 1990; Chukumah 1990; Frank 1984, 1987; James 1990; Kalu 1993; Schipper 1987, 1996).

Katherine Frank (1987:14-15) is right in her assertion that in comparison with Western feminist literature, African women writers are more militant and radical. According to her, whereas in the contemporary British or American novel, “our heroine slams the door on her domestic prison, journeys out into the great world, slays the dragon of her patriarchal society, and triumphantly discovers the grail of feminism by ‘finding herself,’” in the African feminist novel, women do not only share responsibilities with men but also engineer “a destiny of their own [...] a destiny of vengeance.” It must be conceded, in the context of radical-separatist feminism, that the “destiny of vengeance” Frank refers to is a natural reaction to novels by African male writers in which, as Carole B. Davies notes in “Maidens, Mistresses, and Matrons: Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka Works” (1986), African women are presented in stereotypes of the “foolish virgin,” the “femme fatale” and the “matron.” In contrast, the “destiny of vengeance,” central to Amma Darko’s writing, is a significant counter-discourse to the (mis)representations of women in male writings.

3. Amma Darko’s Writing

Despite being a relatively new writer, Amma Darko has received quite an appreciable volume of critical attention. In *Broadening the Horizon: Critical Perspectives to Amma Darko* (2007), critics have approached her writing from mainly economic and socio-cultural perspectives. In “Writing Her Way,” Louise Zak points out that Darko’s novels tackle “the psychological and economic impact of colonialism on women, the injustices of patriarchal society, the conflict between the traditional values of the village and the pressures of urban life” (2007: 12). On the whole, almost all the critics in *Broadening the Horizon* concentrate on women as victims of patriarchal violence. Although a couple of them draw attention to women as complicit in their own predicaments, very little is written about the condescending manner in which Darko treats her male characters, whether the narrative is third-person or first-person. In all three novels, narrative “interjections peppered throughout the novel[s] remind the reader that the story [...] is, in fact, a narrative shaped by an opinionated and often ironic narrator who stands outside the narrative and assembles it” (78).

Darko is not atypical. According to Frank (1987:14), for the African woman writer, “man is the enemy, the exploiter and oppressor.” Darko fits into this frame of female writing which concentrates on men as enemies. As in the works of other African female writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Aminata Sow Fall, Maraima Ba, Zeynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta and Calixthe Beyala, Darko presents situations in which the relationship between men and women is one in which women are victims of various types of physical and psychological violence. Women are victims of rape, battery, betrayal, abandonment by irresponsible husbands, economic exploitation and obnoxious cultural practices. This perpetrator-victim relationship leaves women consigned to fear, trauma, suffering and death. In an interview with Raymond Ayinne (2004), Darko says:

We've started writing from our point of view because, for a while, you were writing for us [...]. So [...] if we are writing, probably there is some pain that has to come out. And I think rather than take it as male-bashing, you must take it as a means to better understand the women folk of Africa [...]. You were always portraying us as all-enduring, all-giving mothers and that is the attitude we find in males [...] but I don't want to be all-giving all the time, I don't want to be all enduring, *I want to be angry, I want to react* (italics mine).

Thus, in Darko's works, the text becomes the site to ventilate pent-up feelings about the experiences of women. The need "to be angry" and "to react" defines the way Darko treats women and girls in relation to men and boys in her stories. In the end, the social issues she projects are subsumed in the sheer power of male-bashing. Darko, through her narrative postures and significations, exhibits strong anti-patriarchal tendencies and attempts to deconstruct and demolish the patriarchal status quo by reducing men both to worthless, irresponsible, physically grotesque images and to wicked husbands and fathers in order to engineer a new social order in which women are in control of their common destiny. The result is that, taken together, there is not a single man of honour in her first three novels. The principal male characters are irresponsible fathers and husbands, drunkards, rapists, exploiters, predators and monsters. They are presented as though they are totally detached from the general social malaise and moral decadence, but are rather congenitally, inherently and pathologically predatory, sexually deprived, perverse and evil.

To tell the female side of the story, Darko employs a highly subjective female viewpoint which is expressed through verbal violence or language which is deflationary and condemnatory of men, including insults and curses; the caricaturing of male characters; the muting and banishment of male characters; creating assertive female protagonists who defy male dominance in words and deeds; creating female characters who are repositories of knowledge and wisdom and who act as commentators and counsellors expressing the female viewpoint; female counter-forces based on group solidarity; and through authorial intrusion in terms of sympathy and empathy.

3. Men through the 'I' of the Female Narrator: *Beyond the Horizon*

As Okiwelu (1998:107) points out, "the intrinsic linguistic value of the pronoun *I* is more than that of a subject of a sentence, which is a grammatical function" since its role is "semantically that of *subjectivity*." The first-person pronoun 'I' can be used in nuances of exaggeration, understatement, perception, prejudice, sentimentalism or lyricism. The 'I' is a fictional voice, or the *alter ego*, through which writers attempt to (re)present themselves. Through this fictional voice, writers are able to dramatize the different viewpoints and present their own diagnoses of society. Thus, within the framework of the first-person narrative, everything is seen *subjectively* through the eye of the 'I': the objects, concepts, conceits, perceptions and beliefs which pass through the lenses of that eye are filtered through the idiosyncrasies of the 'I', hazing, dimming, daubing, illuminating or totally annihilating them.

Beyond the Horizon, Darko's first novel, is told from a first-person narrative perspective. It is the story of the female protagonist, Mara, told by her through a series of flashbacks. It begins with Mara confronting a reflection of her battered self in an oval mirror, the result of years of physical and sexual abuse by men. Hers is a story told on behalf of

women, narrated from such a subjective perspective that there are no good men in the story. The only good men, especially in Naka, a small rural community in Ghana where the story begins, are anonymous, non-physical entities used only as illustrative references:

Naturally, not all husbands make wrecks of their wives. Many women in Naka were extremely content with their marriages and their husbands and wouldn't exchange them for anything in the world. And some good men still existed in Naka. (4)

On the contrary, once Darko begins develop the relationship between Mara and her supposed husband, Akobi, Akobi himself, his father and Mara's father become the quintessential defining archetypes of the male species. Akobi is exploitative, heartless and brutish. Akobi's father's wealth is derived from his job as an undertaker whose constant prayer is for the outbreak of cholera so he can profit from it. About Mara's father, we know nothing except his zeal to marry off his under-age daughters, taking more into consideration "the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man" (4).

As the story unfolds, it too easily collapses into an allegory in which Akobi, the principal male character, personifies Vice while Mara, the principal female character, personifies Virtue wrapped in the garb of innocence, naivety and vulnerability – and therefore an object of our sympathy. And she courts our pity and support through the overly sentimental and lyrical narration of her experiences, first with Akobi in Accra, and then with Akobi and his accomplices in Germany where she is forced into prostitution. She presents herself as a young, innocent, illiterate, trusting, unassuming woman trapped in a violent and exploitative relationship. On the other hand, she presents Akobi as callous, brutish, sadistic and exploitative. The greater part of the story is devoted to Akobi's capacity for violence on the one hand and Mara's extraordinary capacity for endurance on the other hand. Akobi is so consumed by a passion for violence that most times the reasons he resorts to such conduct are shocking. As Mara narrates,

When I didn't bring him the bowl of water and soap in time for washing his hands before and after eating, I received a nasty kick in the knee. When I forgot the chewing stick for his teeth, which he always demanded be placed neatly beside his bowl of serve food, I got a slap in the face. And when the napkin was not at hand when he howled for it, I received a knuckle on my forehead. (19)

In all, Akobi is presented as a man without any edifying human emotion, least of all, love. He performs his sexual duties in a primitive, perfunctory manner, without any sensual attachment, conjugal bonding or expression of love; a man who would "wordlessly" and authoritatively "strip" off his wife's clothes, have sex with her in a hurry and then order her "off the mattress [...] because he wanted to sleep alone" (22).

These abuses become so routine that they are part of the daily regime of Mara's portion as a wife, such that when Akobi eventually leaves for Europe, instead of relief, there is rather emptiness in her. She cries endlessly to fill that void because "his beatings, his kicks, his slaps, scolds and humiliations" (44) have become a permanent feature of the marital relationship.

Darko presents two contrasting pictures of these partners: the male partner as oppressor and the female partner as victim. Whereas the male partner is possessed by a spirit of violence and abuse, and performs accordingly without any human compassion, the female partner, in spite of her suffering, continues to show love and affection. According to Mara,

she “had grown used to Akobi [...] to his bullying, to the strength he possessed over me. I didn’t like what he meted out to me with that strength and yet, at the same time, that strength made me acknowledge him as my husband” (44). Her rationalization that male violence against women is what has come to define the image and conduct of the average marital union leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

In the second half of the story, set in Germany, Akobi moves from wife beater to wife exploiter. Together with his friend, Osey, and other men, he inducts the initially unsuspecting and vulnerable Mara into prostitution and lives off Mara’s earnings. Mara is reduced to a virtual slave, trapped in an alien country and a vocation which is both designed and run by unscrupulous men.

Over all, there is a sense in which the portraits of Akobi and Mara, as painted by Mara herself, appear grossly hyperbolic. Mara’s naivety, enjoyment of pain and endurance are often beyond belief. As for Akobi, he is a predatory monster, a raging matador driven by atavistic instincts of blood and gore. He is a sadist who enjoys inflicting pain on his wife, without revealing a modicum of human feeling. Yet Darko holds the view that “compared to some realities, Akobi is mild” (Higgins 2004:114). Akobi is thus a representative character who typifies and symbolises the male trait of violence.

4. Villains or Victims? *The Housemaid*

In Monica Bungaro’s article, “Victims and/or Victimisers? Women’s De(Con)structive Power in *The Housemaid*,” she posits that, “In the general atmosphere of corruption and exploitation [...] any distinction between victims and victimisers, abusers and abused becomes blurred” (2007:29). She also claims that there is no room for “bipolar perspectives” (32). However, in the context of narratology, there can be and indeed is a “bipolar perspective” since the writer is capable of seeing her principal characters through two different lenses.

In *The Housemaid*, Darko shifts from the first-person narrator to the third-person omniscient narrator – the female author – to present a story that examines the conflict between modernity and tradition, especially as it relates to men and women with different social and cultural orientations and tackles issues of gender, sex and sexuality, marriage and exploitation across the gender divide. The story vacillates between the village of Kataso and the city of Accra. Like Naka in *Beyond the Horizon*, Kataso is a village with an appetite for material showmanship and obsessed with things of the city. Again, like Naka, this passion alone is enough to dismantle all the time-tested mores, norms and values as the people find themselves sucked into the desires and defining symbols and images of the city – radio, television, fridge, rasta braids, American hip-hop culture, sleek cars etc. In addition, Kataso is also a grooming ground where boys and girls are sexually hyper-active. However, from the author’s point of view, while it appears on the surface that both boys and girls are giving vent to their teenage sex drive, Darko’s focus is on the irresponsible boys who are always on the prowl, callously and indiscriminately displaying their manhood all over the place: “Occasionally, some were booted out, on the chief’s orders, for gross misdemeanour” (30). The story is told of one Kofi Akorti who impregnates a fourteen-year old girl, bringing to twelve the number of girls he has impregnated. The chief of the village thinks that in the best interest of the village “Akorti carries his wilful and undisciplined penis away before he impregnates another (30).

The gross exaggeration of the above public announcement aside, the problem with Darko's position with regard to the sexuality of her male characters is that she ignores sexuality as a natural biological urge involving both males and females, as a shared passion and, consequently, a shared responsibility. To always impute bestiality to the male sex drive is to deny the whole process of being. The truth of the matter may lie in the fact that:

We are endowed with sexual natures – as the believing must acknowledge – that we participate in the ongoing rush of God's Creation. And you cannot separate the effect of that sexuality, upon the whole process of one's personality, by an arbitrary reference to whether the conscious quest is procreation or the gratification of a lower, more immediate and personal, need. In the passion of youth – however often misdirected – we see the power and purpose of our Maker. (Flossen 2004:3)

As in *Beyond the Horizon*, the men in *The Housemaid* are worthless, irresponsible, exploitative, physically unattractive or sexually depraved. Effia's nameless father represents the worthless and irresponsible rural man who "rinses his mouth [...] first thing in the morning" with *akpeteshie* (40). On the day Effia is to be apprenticed to Tika, Effia's father is seen "lying spreadeagled on the floor, oblivious to the flies buzzing in and out of his open mouth, and snoring as if it were doomsday" (41). And when it comes to pouring libation to invoke the blessings of the gods and ancestors for Effia's safety and prosperity, the old man is totally left out. Maame Amoakona, Effia's mother, suggests that if libation must be poured, "then my husband should do it," but her mother retorts: "Who says the gods will favour a drunkard over a woman?" (73). Her actually pouring the libation, and in so doing breaching the custom of libation as a male preserve, is a way of having women take over gendered male roles in a world in which men have become irresponsible, worthless, dispensable and irrelevant. That the old woman, who in the African feminist discourse usually symbolises tradition, prevails in the end shows that Darko approves of the conscious shattering of the status quo as a mark of female assertion and independence.

The Housemaid belies its title: it is not about Effia the house girl. It is about adult women, especially Tika, driven by material lust which they scheme to gratify through recruiting men to their cause and later dumping them. Tika's relationship with the men in her life is a good example. As a business woman, Tika is the one who exploits men using sex as a bargaining tool, who "gave up Owuraku and settled on four *useful* [italics mine] 'steady' lovers" (25).

The men are "useful" – as in 'useable' commodities of exchange. Yet these men are rather presented as exploiters who are in the game for lust. They are married men all: "Samuel, Riad and Eric all had a wife each, wore wedding bands, talked proudly about their wives and children, and wanted only *lust* [italics added] from Tika" (25). Thus, it is these men who are exploiting Tika and not the reverse. Besides, these are men cheating on their wives. Tika appears completely 'innocent' of cheating on her fellow women. Indeed, she is carefully crafted as a single woman.

To further denigrate men, Darko concentrates on the physique of one of the male characters: Nsorhwe. He does not deserve the hand of any self-respecting woman in marriage. Women enter into relationships with him because they want to exploit him. Cherry, the woman who eventually accepts to marry him, does so because she is "a very frustrated Ghanaian woman struggling to make a life in London" (83). Tika consorts with him because he is a bank manager who can facilitate loans any time. Effia picks on him for blackmail. He is a caricature personified:

Short, plump, plain-faced, square-headed, and with a pair of buttocks that would have better suited the behind of a Makola mummy, it was as if his creator was in a rather rotten mood when he made him. (82)

So ugly is Nsorhwe that the first girl he approaches for a night out considers it an insult:

She looked Nsorhwe in the face, appalled, shrieked in sheer horror, rushed to her room and cried for three hours continuously [...] she never considered herself ugly enough to warrant Nsorhwe daring to ask her out on a date. (53)

These descriptions constitute a deflationary medium through which the writer reduces the male character to an object of scorn and ridicule. Since there are no such descriptions of the physical attributes of any female character in the story, one assumes that these descriptions of men are part of Darko's subjective narrative technique designed to present men as both ethically and physically grotesque.

5. Men as Terrorists: *Faceless*

The most ambitious of Darko's works in the trilogy is *Faceless*, which incorporates most of the positions she adopts in her earlier novels. In *Faceless*, women and children are sexually and physically brutalised by the likes of Onko, Kwei, Kpakpo, Macho and Poison. Male violence, monstrosity and depravity are refracted through the conduct of these male characters. These monsters pervade the world of *Faceless* in a manner that leaves the reader, male or female, totally disgusted and angry. These are all men in the life of Maa Tsuru, the novel's central character. Onko defiles Maa Tsuru's daughter, Baby T, when she is barely twelve. The same girl is raped by Kpakpo, Maa Tsuru's live-in husband. The names of Macho and Poison are self-suggestive, and the characters prove beyond every shred of doubt that they deserve such names. Macho and Poison are the self-appointed landlords of the street. They administer their dominions with brutality. They are the ones who make the laws of the street and apply sanctions as appropriate. Poison and Macho combine physical violence with sexual abuse and get away with it. Kwei's name may not sound as ominous, yet he is just as devious and equally brutal in his dealings with Maa Tsuru. For a man given to excessive drinking, battering Maa Tsuru is common sport for him. In one such encounter, he "pounced on her like a cat on an unsuspecting mouse and began a vicious pounding spree [...] landing blows anywhere and everywhere and on every part of her pregnant body" (153). The sado-masochist that he is, "he returned to Agboo Ayee and told all that, with immediate effect, they had better start calling him Dr Kwei because he had single-handedly and very cost-effectively terminated an unwanted pregnancy" (153).

Set against Adade, the emancipated Kabria's husband, "who may not be our typical irresponsible husband or father" (Anyidoho, 2003, 16), these "men with devilish intentions towards vulnerable children, such as the wily rapist Onko pretending to be every child's Uncle, the bully Macho, or "the no-nonsense streetlord" appropriately named Poison" (Anyidoho 2003: 17) conjure the real face of male terrorism in *Faceless*.

6. Female Solidarity and Authorial Sympathy and Empathy

In the 19th century, German theorists developed the concept of *einfihlung* (“feeling into”) which has been translated into English as *empathy*. It signifies an identification with a person or object which is so close that the observer seems to participate in the posture, motion and sensations perceived, referred to as “inner mimicry” (Abrams 1981:49). As part of Darko’s subjective narrative style, she sympathises and empathises with her female characters. She also brings women together in group solidarity to share their experiences of pain, vulnerability and exploitation and to galvanise appropriate responses to male dominance. Among themselves, women are able, through collective confidentiality, to say things which otherwise seem unmentionable. Like Ramatuolaye’s long epistolary outpouring of grief to her trusted friend, Aissatou, in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, through which medium she is able to ventilate her feelings and positions on patriarchy in Senegalese society, in Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Housemaid* and *Faceless*, women are seen scheming and plotting to either banish men from their lives or have revenge on them. In so doing, Darko engages in “inner mimicry” by either directly or indirectly participating in the postures, motions and sensations of her female characters and protagonists.

In *Beyond the Horizon*, firstly, Darko’s sympathy is seen in how she presents Mara as simply stupid, naïve and vulnerable; she is totally incapable of reading between the lines. She is susceptible to the allure of the so-called good things of the world. For instance, while the reader struggles to come to terms with Akobi’s capacity for violence, he or she is jolted back into a new state of shock by the way Mara receives the prospect of Akobi landing in Europe. This news becomes the ultimate redemptive talisman which, in Mara’s naïve estimation, cures Akobi of any marital or moral iniquity. Her flight from ‘inferno’ through ‘purgatory’ to ‘heaven’ is so swift it crystalizes into a fixation and evokes symbols that have all along defined the relationship between her and Akobi – the dreams of the city now incarnated in the magic of Europe: “Television, radio, fridge, carpet, even car!” (34). Suddenly, the end justifies the means for Mara. Not surprisingly, there is a veiled attempt by the author to sympathise with Mara:

But now I let the thought sink in gradually deep into me till I began trembling and my heart began to pound unnaturally fast with excitement. *So carried away was I at that moment that if Akobi had suggested there and then a wish to sell me I would gladly have agreed.* (35, italics added)

Naivety and stupidity at its most absurd, one might say. Yet, the only image we have of Akobi is his unexplained manic-depressive and sado-masochistic predisposition. The author denies the reader the rationalisation that Akobi is equally naïve, stupid and vulnerable. He is equally a victim of the same fantasies founded on the cargo mentality. The devotees of this new deity are not gender-specific. The doctrines of this religion are Machiavellian in theory and practice. They are unwritten, yet forcefully etched on the collective unconscious. This explains the conduct of Akobi and Osey in Germany where they trade their wives for material gains. This explains why their wives accept to play along in their multiple roles as ‘sisters,’ commodities and prostitutes. This explains why their families back home do not care how they make their money in Europe. To understand Akobi, one needs to scrutinize not Akobi himself, but his world and the world around him.

Secondly, Mara, as a young woman who has no experience in city life, is able to cushion her suffering and ventilate her feelings and frustrations through her association with Mama Kiosk, who becomes a mother figure to her. As she herself confesses:

Between Mama Kiosk and me now existed a mother-daughter relationship. I had grown to trust her and talk openly with her about everything [...]. She was a true friend and a perfect substitute mother. And I valued her enormously. (23)

On the contrary, Akobi, an equally young, frustrated and vulnerable person, is left in the lurch. Unlike Mara, he has no godfather for support and counselling and is forced into depressive brooding.

Thirdly, Mara undergoes psychological development and catharsis towards the end of the story. She is able to take stock of herself. Although she has crossed the threshold, her confession is designed as a veiled purificatory and therapeutic act which does not absolve her of her complicity in her own predicament, but, nevertheless, allows her to retain her humanity – meditative, reflective, rational and remorseful. So do the other women in the story gain access to opportunities to repackage their lives: Gitte goes back to the loving arms of her family; Comfort starts a new life as the mistress (or is it wife?) of a Nigerian diplomat; Vivian marries an American GI and is bound for Chicago. On the contrary, Akobi and his other male counterparts have no such mitigating grace. They remain monsters consigned to hellfire.

Thus, the most obvious narrative technique in *Beyond the Horizon* is the extent to which Darko prompts the reader, through the lyricism and pathos of Mara's narration of her experiences in her own voice, to condemn Akobi for reducing Mara to a sub-human being. Mara's reflections of herself in the oval mirror at the beginning of the story are supposed to be the reflections of the whole of womankind, a grotesque reflection of the vulnerable, exploited, harassed, battered and abused women who elicit our sympathy. Unfortunately, this sympathy is quite undeserved. Perhaps Kofi Anyidoho is right in arguing that "Mara's own lie of making her people back home in Ghana believe that she is making it good in an African restaurant cannot redeem her from the life of shame and abuse she is condemned to at Ove's brothel" (2003: 10).

Fourthly, in *Faceless*, Baby T's murder is treated in a manner that suggests that the main burden of culpability and criminality is on the male characters, Kwei, Onko, Poison and Kpakpo. On the other hand, the female characters, Mama Abidjan, Maami Broni and Maa Tsuru, are shown to be responsible only to the extent that they are women with limited authority in a male-driven society and with weak morals. The condemnatory attitude of Darko towards these female characters is tempered by the author's view that these women are only guilty of little infractions and indiscretions of irresponsibility and exploitation of young girls, acts which, perhaps, deserve only some benign natural retributive purgation. For instance, Maa Tsuru must not be blamed much for pushing her children to the streets. Blame it all on her father. As the all-knowing Naa Yomo reveals, when Maa Tsuru's mother was pregnant, the young man responsible, that is Tsuru's father, denied the pregnancy. Worse still, he insisted he had never seen Tsuru's mother in his life, so "for each single day that she carried Tsuru in her womb, she levelled vicious insult at the young man" (120). On the day of delivery, seeing she was on the verge of losing her life, a "dying woman clutching onto the last vestiges of life through hate, she cursed when the time came, and cursed and cursed as she pushed the little life out of her" (121).

The deflationary and condemnatory words, epithets and curses in the Naa Yomo's lecture ring loud and clear. The words "curse," "hate" and "insult" resonate with such intensity that Maa Tsuru's own irresponsible lifestyle becomes totally submerged in this mythic and superstitious explanation, so long as it forcefully projects her father in such demonic light.

The ambivalence and paradoxes of Darko's empathy and sympathy with regard to her female characters are baffling. While she attempts to demolish the patriarchal social and cultural structures by empowering women, she also reinforces the stereotypical cultural mindset which, especially, projects women as physically and emotionally weak. Darko clearly justifies Maa Tsuru's irresponsible life by appealing to the myth of the so-called weaker sex. According to Kamame, unlike in the village, there is behavioural flexibility in the city. Thus:

A woman like Fofu's mother, whose 'village' happens to be inner city Accra, is more likely to lose her sense of onus rather speedily when pushed by joblessness and poverty and the non-existent male support. Her physical and emotional detachment from her children is made less difficult in the harsh conditions of her inner city life. She let go Fofu and her sister out onto the streets with virtually no guilt at all because her psyche had accepted the situation with ample ease. (140-41)

It is amazing, yet typical of Darko's portrayal of men, that there is no suggestion that the likes of Kwei, Kpakpo, Macho, Onko and Poison are also, naturally, predisposed to the same "behavioural flexibility" in the city.

In the matter of Baby T's death, Maami Broni, the powerful prostitute who employs Baby T as an apprentice prostitute, succumbs to the ruling of Poison because, even as a seasoned matron, "she was first a woman with feminine urges" (220). Again, like Tika in *The Housemaid*, and Mara, Gitte and Comfort in *Beyond the Horizon*, she gets away lightly, in her case, as an accessory and accomplice to the murder of Baby T, her only punishment being her tormented self after the murder when she confesses seeing "images in the splintered stone oozing blood" (230). According to her, "now that I have come forth and talked about it, it will go away. The weight of her spirit will be lifted" (230).

In contrast, Onko, who also undergoes a similar trauma in connection with Baby T's death, is made to commit suicide. Indeed, Naa Yomo shows no pity to a man now turned ghost: "He deserved it" (210). Darko's own authorial intrusions appear to endorse Naa Yomo's position. Suicide, the most damnable act in Ghanaian culture, appears appropriate as a punishment for the male accomplice, Onko, while for the female character, Maami Broni, all she needs is a confession. For Onko, as one who has taken his own life, the punishment is eternal damnation as the spirit of such people is "said to hover aimlessly and restlessly" because "God is said to always categorically ban such spirits from entering his kingdom" (210).

Finally, Darko's attitude to the whole question of *streetism* is reduced to young girls forced into the streets to fend for themselves. She conveniently ignores Maa Tsuru's two young boys, Fofu's elder brothers, who "by the time they struck ten [...] were running errands at the seaside and the fish market" (156). They are briefly mentioned in the story but are consigned to oblivion for the rest of the story.

7. The Banishment and Muting of ‘Good’ Men

Darko’s stories are crafted in such a way that, if there are any ‘good’ men, they die before the stories open. In *The Housemaid*, Tika’s loving father is ditched by Tika’s mother, Sekyiwa, and he dies before the story opens. He remains outside the story and is referred infrequently. Similarly, Naa Yomo’s husband, whom she fondly remembers and invokes with much reverence, dies before the story opens. In *Faceless*, Adade – not entirely irresponsible and devious as the likes of Kpakpo and Kwei – remains in the shadow of his wife Kabria. Sylv Po, the radio presenter of Harvest FM, appears to be a male role model; however, this is only a façade. As a radio presenter associated with investigations into Baby T’s murder, he is invisible. He is effectively barricaded behind communication gadgets. He is only a mechanical medium, a surrogate voice used by the female advocates of the all-female NGO, MUTE.

8. Towards a Lesbian Critique of Darko’s Works

I use the term ‘lesbian’ not in a pejorative or sexual sense, but a gender sense that involves gender relations in a socio-political and textual context, and as a direct contradistinction to ‘masculinism.’ I suggest that Darko’s construction of gender relations in her first three novels comes close to being designated ‘lesbian utopianism’ as no male-female relationship in her novels appears natural, normal or fulfilling. According to Crowder (1993:237), first of all, utopian writers of the 1970s and 1980s doubted that education, technology, and normal political processes could bring about changes. Second, the feminist and gay/lesbian liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s freed writers to examine problems of sexuality and to posit lesbianism as an alternative in a way not possible before. As a result, a majority of newer feminist utopian fictions portray all-female utopias that exist either in worlds without men, or which place the sexes at least in clearly separate spaces.

I do agree with Bonnie Zimmerman that too often, “we identify ‘lesbian’ with ‘woman,’ or ‘feminist’; we equate lesbianism with any close bonds between women or with political commitment to women,” and that these identifications “can be fuzzy and historically questionable” (1993:38). However, the idea of separatism or radical-separatist feminism, which is central to lesbian ideology, appears to be the foundation of the female bonding we find in Darko’s first three novels. I do also concede that most contemporary lesbian literature pushes for rhetorical non-violence. Yet, generally, violence, role-playing, disaffection, unhappiness and suicide “all exist within lesbian culture, and a useful criticism will have to effectively analyse these lesbian themes and metaphors, regardless of the dictates of ideological purity” (Zimmerman 1993:49). Thus, the rhetoric of violence, hatred, curses and separatism one finds in Darko’s works draws the works, advertently or inadvertently, into the circuit of lesbian aesthetics. More research is needed to explore this further.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that in Darko’s novels, she sets out to project women and their experiences as women, wives and mothers. Yet, there is hardly any dialogue between women and men. Women seek their own solutions to their problems, even though these problems are

supposed to be caused by men. And because the problems are supposedly caused by men, men are projected in a negative light as a form of female vengeance.

Danysh (2002:167) suggests that “women are taught to identify with the universal view of people”, and in attempting to discuss a woman’s voice, “it is beginning to be clear that, while the African male voice may be easily identifiable as male, the female voice is less distinctive.” Nothing could be farther from the truth. Darko’s language is to a large extent subjective and clearly discernible as a female voice. In *Beyond the Horizon*, that voice is in the voices of Mara, Mama Kiosk and Vivian; in *The Housemaid*, of Tika, Sekyiwa, Maame Amoakona and Teacher; in *Faceless*, of Kabria, Vicky, Diana, Aggie and Kamame.

All these constitute only one side of the stories, which goes contrary to “the tradition of continuity in African literature” (Gikandi 1987:72). According to Gikandi, this kind of discourse and rhetoric is very exclusive, its “stylistic perfection instigates against the establishment of a live dialogue with majority of the people they speak for” (73).

Darko is certainly radical and belongs with the likes of Mariama Ba, Flora Nwakpa and Buchi Emecheta in whose novels women seem to find only pain in their relationships with men, but both on their own and in their relationships with other women find “female solidarity, power, independence” (Frank 1987:33). She also panders to lesbian separatist utopias in which men are depicted as “inherently violent, hierarchical, incapable of humane, or even human, relationships with women, children, the earth, or other men” (Crowder 1993:242).

So, is Darko pushing for a women’s world without men? According to Frank (1984:40), from Virginia Woolf to Coleridge to Heilburn, an androgynous ideal in literature has further problematised gender issues because it is unclear whether androgyny “implied sexual equality or sexlessness, or whether it sought to abolish or fuse sexual stereotypes [...], bisexuality or asexuality.”

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Mawuli Adjei (Ph.D)
Department of English
University of Ghana
Legon,
Ghana

sogbo_lisa@hotmail.com

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