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The Girl-Child as a Victim: A Critical Reading of Amma Darko's Faceless

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Abstract: It is observed that the well-documented issues of oppression and discrimination have been an age-long tradition which affects the life of women, generally. The issues of forced marriages, sex trafficking, domestic and sexual abuse have seriously penetrated the society at large. They pose severe threat to the female gender (the girl-child). The researchers, having observed that no scholar had given needed attention to the tragedy of the girl-child in Ghana as portrayed by Amma Darko, sought to do just that. The study is thus carried out to ascertain the extent of gender induced burden on the girl-child and its adverse and far-reaching psychological implications on the female gender. Against this backdrop, this study examines Amma Darko's Faceleess. This work makes use of Objectification Theory which is, basically, the act of seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman as an object. In the core concept of this study, objectification connotes a patriarchal structure that evaluates the female as a means of (objects for) attaining satisfaction of certain self-desires and wants usually sexual and economic satisfaction. In order to critically analyse the status of the girl-child as a victim of societal oppression and objectification, excerpts from these selected novels are contextually discussed to show the extent to which these experiences and harsh reality often affects the female victims psychologically. Patriarchal Cultures are pinpointed as being the main cause of these ordeals, and therefore, needs to be revisited as it silences women and hinders their self-actualisation in the society.

Key words: girl-child; objectification; patriarchy; victim; sexual objectification

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INTRODUCTION

Since the appearance of women in African literature, they are stereotypes in their roles, ranging from breeders of children, home managers, to sexual objects. This lays credence to the social norms which have dictated certain gender roles for men and women. Men have generally been regarded as dominant, masculine and independent, whereas women are often portrayed as weak, sensitive and dependent. This dependence is on the men who determine the level of a woman's self-fulfilment. With this perception women became objects in the hands of men; objects to be used in one way or the other for the satisfaction of others. The objectification of women has in turn, aided patriarchal practices and the suppression of women in the society. One of the most durable and damaging stereotypes propagated in African literature is that of the woman as a sexual object. Many African writers are irresistibly driven to write about the sexual attributes and behaviour of the African woman. Sexuality is the main context in which her identity has been defined. They are not seen as worthy of thoughts and actions, rational in thinking, responsible and respectable.

African culture has played a major role in the domination of women by reinforcing and justifying men as superiors in their roles and actions. This ideology is termed patriarchy or patriarchalism, which emphasises that the man is lord and master, and therefore dominates, and as the superior being, must be obeyed at all times. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, in "Re-creating ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations" affirms this statement by declaring that "the ideology that men are naturally superior to women in essence and in all areas, affects the modern-day organization of societal structures; this ideology prolongs the attitude of negative discrimination against women and their dominance by the male folk" (34). Florence Butengwa also attests to this by stating that "a closer scrutiny of this culture would expose that only those aspects of culture which upheld the subordination of women are considered culture" (27). The African culture upholds the rights of men as heads, whose authority is not to be questioned and challenged, and their words are law and final. Women too have been brainwashed through years of objectivity and domination to believe and accept that this is true about the men and about themselves too.

Writing in the past, too, was typically a male dominated sector, as women were given minor or no roles at all in literature. The women in works written by men were non-significant, or the roles assigned to them were not honourable ones. They were just mothers, wives, mistresses, concubines or prostitutes. Female characters were given stereotypical roles, portraying women as obedient, passive and unintelligent, and most importantly as a physical object of men's sexual desire. The stereotypical notions about sexual nature of the African woman have been propagated mainly, though not exclusively

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by male writers. In some African novels, most of the women are forced to submit to sexual whims of the men. The women are victims of a double exploitation – economic and sexual – reflecting a patriarchal system which is sustained by the domination of women by men. Sometimes, the women are sexually exploited for reasons beyond their control. In confirmation to the above Kole Omotoso posits that "force, fear and the desire for survival explain the apparent ease with which the female characters succumb to sexual abuse" (200). This further lends weight to this research hinged on the theory of objectification.

Objectification Theory

According to Catharine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, objectification is the consequence of gender inequality that is constructed by the patriarchal society (McKinnon, 57). While based on Kant in Judith Herman's book, objectification is understood as treating or regarding a person "as an object, something for use" (Judith Herman, 57). In short, by combining the above assertions, objectification is understood as a product of a patriarchal system that regards women as objects of sexual satisfaction. Women as sexual objects mean that they are first and foremost "objects" and not humans. Evangelia Papadaki in an article, "Feminist Perspectives on Objectification" defines objectification as "seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman as an object" (5). When a woman is treated as an object, she has no feelings, opinions or rights of her own. In objectification, a person is owned by another which means the person owed lacks autonomy, self-determination, and integrity and treated primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses.

Apparently, sexual objectification is the treatment of women as sexual object, to be valued only for sexual satisfaction of men. It also occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire (Sandra Bartky 5). As women are objectified, especially as their sexuality is the main focus about them, young girls grow up thinking that their sole purpose in life is to appeal to a man and please his every desire even to their own detriment. This affects their orientation and development and brings about the persistence of self-objectification. According to Rachel Calogero (312), "self-objectification occurs when the objectifying gaze is turned inward, such that women view themselves through the perspective of an observer and engage in chronic self-surveillance". In justifying the above statement, Carole Heldman, a feminist blogger writes thus:

Women who grew up in a culture with widespread sexual objectification tend to view themselves as objects of desire for others. This internalized sexual objectification has been linked to problems with mental health (e.g., clinical depression, habitual body monitoring), eating disorders, body shame, self-worth and life satisfaction, cognitive functioning, motor functioning, sexual dysfunction, access to leadership and political

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efficacy. Women of all ethnicities internalize objectification, as do men to far lesser extent (2).

She goes further to make an interesting observation between the two classes or terms, "object and subject". She states "if one thinks of the subject/object dichotomy that dominates thinking in Western culture, subjects act and objects are acted upon. Subjects are sexual, while objects are sexy." As subjects, one has right to their own choices, actions, activities and responsibilities, while as an object, one is docile and inactive. As subject one is entitled to their sexual rights and freedom, the choice and right to be promiscuous as is the case with men, but becomes a stigma for a woman. Being sexual as a subject gives one the right to act upon, to desire and demand sex, but as an object, for a woman, she is acted upon, and she is suggestive of sex. She has no voice or mind of her own, and no choice or option but to comply. This is a clear manifestation of dominance of women by men. Their role is merely to succumb to the pleasure of men at all time. The woman is made to believe that she is only useful in bed, and her body does not belong to her but to the man (men) and no matter her level in life, the society still regards her as a slave, an object to the man.

This study, thus adopts this theory as a framework for understanding the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body. This theory posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. This framework places female bodies in a societal context with the aim of illuminating the lived experiences and mental health risks of women and girls who encounter sexual objectification. Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into – and perhaps enables – a host of other oppressions women face in the society ranging from employment discrimination and unequal economic opportunities to sexual violence, domestic abuse and trivialisation of women's work and accomplishments.

Plight of the Girl-Child as a Socio-cultural Victim

There are many different ways in which people can be objectified or oppressed. Many of these are unrelated to sex. It is, in fact, very much undeniable that any kind of person can be objectified in the sense of being stripped of autonomy and volition, and being treated as an instrument for the gain of others; as in slavery, or trafficking for manual labour, for example. And yet in current public debates about objectification, the term is almost always applied to the ways that women are represented – objectification is seen, usually through a heterosexual framework, as something specifically pertaining to women, their social position and agency. And in those public debates, objectification is almost always related to sexualisation, so that objectification is repeatedly collapsed with, and understood as referring to sexual objectification. Yet, Darko presents heavily the case of

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female objectification in such a lucid and erudite manner through her vivid and gory portrayal of the everyday experiences of the average Ghanaian woman, be it a full-grown woman or a girl child as we are led to see the characters of Fofo and Baby T, being objectified firstly by their mother who turns them into the street for her own monetary gains, thus leaving them at the expense of the insurmountable vices and creatures of the streets. The female oppression and objectification were portrayed here by Fofo and Baby T's mother who used them as a means of making money for her.

The novel demonstrates very clearly that parental irresponsibility exposes the family, especially the girl-child, to dangers, making them vulnerable to all sorts of attacks in society. In *Faceless*, Kwei and Kpakpo are irresponsible fathers; hence, their children become street urchins. We are even told that the father of Maa Tsuru disowns the pregnancy that produces her. Kpakpo, the stepfather of Baby T and Onko, sexually assaults Baby T. Consequently, Baby T goes into prostitution. She becomes a tool of sexual exploitation in the hands of the likes of Kpakpo, Poison, Maa Tsuru and others. All this happens because the parents shirk their parental responsibilities to their children.

Faceless adequately capture the vulnerability of women and gender discrimination in society. Fofo and Baby T in *Faceless* are victims of parental irresponsibility and societal negligence. Both of them suffer from sexual assault. Baby T is sexually violated by her stepfather with impunity, and she becomes a victim of sexual exploitation, she runs away from home as she feels her mother cannot provide the expected and necessary protection from the abuse she suffers almost daily at the hands of her supposed loving guidance. In the process of running away, she ends up being introduced into a life of prostitution; she eventually loses her life as she dies at the hands of Poison. Fofo and Baby T become street girls as a result of the recklessness and unfriendly attitude of their parents. They are presented as victims of gender oppression.

There have been arguments among male and female African writers on what some African female writers refer to as the negative portrayal of women by male writers who see women as the appendages and sex tools in the hands of men. In other words, female characters are depicted as prostitutes as if that is what women represent in society. For instance, Ekwensi portrays Jagua Nana in *Jagua Nana* as a prostitute. Similarly, Ngugi does the same thing with Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, as if men are insulated from prostitution. Baby T in *Faceless* is portrayed as a prostitute. The attempt here is not to denigrate the image of women in society but to expose and condemn the causative agents that predispose women to and make them vulnerable to prostitution and sexual abuse. None of the characters is projected as an object of defamation, castigation, or vilification for unethical behaviour, but as innocent victims of familial, societal, and cultural victimisation and oppression. Contrary to the belief of African feminist writers like Flora Nwapa and

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Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who have continued to criticise male writers for associating women with moral laxity, prostitution, and witchcraft in their works, Amma Darko portray both men and women as agents of moral unscrupulousness. In *Faceless,* Baby T is depicted as a prostitute, but so are Onko and Kpakpo, Baby T's stepfather due to their numerous sexual escapades and indiscretions. While the novel condemns the abuse of women, the men are attacked for being the instigators and instruments of cruelty against women in the society. Men like Kpakpo and Onko are condemned and criticized for being agents of cultural, colonial, and imperialistic brutality for their role in the objectification and oppression of women.

The tragic image of the African girl-child has been clearly portrayed in Amma Darko's *Faceless.* Our attention is called to the gory and traumatic experiences of African women who are stigmatised daily and viewed as second-class citizens. They have become the objects of victimization and oppression in a patriarchal society. The tragedies of Fofo and Baby T in *Faceless* can be attributed to two major factors as expressed by the writers. The first factor is the African traditional culture, while the second factor is the family system which confers the headship of the family on the husband and subordinates the wife to him. The scourge of stereotyping and discrimination and the domestic abuse of females remain the topmost worry of many female writers as husbands and men for that matter have the notion that it is their right to batter women when they think they are falling out of their rules. Thus, the act of beating a woman is termed an act of "correction". These women are then oppressed to the point that they lack a voice to defend their selves. Maa Tsuru and Baby T have no voices either as they are battered or sexually abused by the men who come their way. In *Faceless*, Onko, Kpakpo, Macho, Poison, Kwei epitomises male bigotry. For instance, Baby T is unable to survive the scourge of these men who happened to be in the life of her mother. Onko, the man she trusts like a father defiles her when she is barely twelve years. She is again raped by Kpakpo, Maa Tsuru's living husband. According to the novel, "Baby T lay there motionless, crying. The pain was distinct in her eyes. The trauma she had suffered had left its prints on her very person and her soul. She was in great physical and even greater mental pain. If the good Lord gave her long life, it was obvious she was going to require lots of strength and love to rebuild her dignity, herself love and trust" (136).

Maa Tsuru herself is not spared from the wickedness of the men she allows into her life; Kwei, a man known for his excessive drinking, batters her even without provocation. In one instance, 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" (124). As though that is not enough, portraying characteristics of a sado-masochist, "he returned to Agboo Ayee boasting that with immediate effect, they

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had better start calling him Dr. Kwei because he had single-handedly and very cost effectively terminated an unwanted pregnancy" (124). He does not want to take responsibility for his libidinal action, reducing Maa Tsuru to a mere object of sexual satisfaction.

The "Otherness" of a woman as a mother in Africa is even more enhanced in *Faceless* when financial insecurity makes a decent woman degenerate into acute immorality. Maa Tsuru has to push her children unto the streets so that they can bring home some fish and money since she had no meaningful financial support. This renders the children susceptible to the evils in society. Their vulnerability leads to the agony they all go through, for if Tsuru were educated enough or had financial security, she wouldn't have exposed her children this way. The feminist voice in the novel is therefore against the kind of structures in African society that reduces a woman to the property of a man when marriage, culture, history, politics and morality all intersect.

In *Faceless*, economically, Maa Tsuru has no financial means of supporting her own children. According to Kamame, "A woman like Fofo'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" (111). She relies on supposed husbands and in the process loses her moral strength, a tool that is vital to the survival of any woman in a world of male chauvinism. An example is the encounter between Maa Tsuru and Fofo:

> "I know Fofo. I know. Oh God!"
>
> "Don't bring God's name, mother. You knew what you were doing when you chose him over..."
>
> "It was for their sake," she pointed at the baby and the sleeping boy. "What should I have done?"
>
> "I don't know. But you should never have fed him and his sons at Baby T's expense. You don't see her. I don't see her. We don't know how she has grown to look like. All for what, mother? For what?"
>
> Maa Tsuru didn't respond. She wiped away fresh tears from her face and resumed from where she had left off. "Something happened, Fofo"
>
> "Something is always happening, no? Always. And had I not gotten the good sense to leave home, who knows, he probably would have made you send me away too to work for some woman to make money for you four to live on. No?"
>
> Maa Tsuru choked on saliva and coughed violently. "I don't have the strength to fight you with words Fofo," she spoke slowly, "and even if I did, I wouldn't do it." … (22)

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We see that even though Christianity and Islam (foreign religions) have gained ample grounds in Africa, traditional African religion remains an integral part of the contemporary Ghanaian woman, such that the power of a curse and superstition determines what Naa Yomo and Maa Tsuru think and how they behave. Tangled by the cords of superstition, Maa Tsuru allows superstition to gain the better part of her. Naa Yomo becomes a feminist voice against this and through her we get to know that Maa Tsuru is cursed and perhaps that is why she experiences a difficult life (91). She does not undermine the effect of the curse but she opines that women like Maa Tsuru must fight the odds that separate them from their own happiness and that of the people around them. They must live to defy their curses – the traditional beliefs and structures against the female gender. But instead, Maa Tsuru has accepted the psychology that she is a mere bundle only good for sexual gratification. This is what Babara Friedrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts refer to as "internalising an observer's perspective on physical self" (177)

From Naa Yomo, we are informed that Maa Tsuru's mother placed a curse on her daughter during delivery and on her death bed: "A dying woman clutching onto the last vestiges of life through hate, she cursed and cursed when the time came, and cursed and cursed as she pushed the little life out of her" (91). To epitomise her own regard for traditional beliefs, Naa Yomo does not blame Tsuru entirely for what happens to her. She believes that "only a woman robbed of her soul would do what she was doing". The problem with Maa Tsuru is what she was doing and not what something like a curse was doing to her. If Naa Yomo buried five children out of eleven (87), she thinks it is not too late for Maa Tsuru to turn things around. To her, there is more to life and Maa Tsuru can "salvage whatever is left of her soul" (91). In essence, passive women like Maa Tsuru are encouraged to fight for their lives and their well being. For that to happen they have to overcome what Friedrickson and Roberts refer to as psychological and experiential consequences of sexual objectification, namely: the emotion of shame; the emotion of anxiety; peak motivational states; and awareness of internal bodily states (181). But as a local, she is submerged in the psychic consequences, and thus yoked for life under the patriarchal culture.

Apart from contending with cultural elements like superstition, the city's economic and social demands on Maa Tsuru are held responsible for the troubles she goes through in *Faceless*. We learn from Sylv Po that "The phenomenon (of parental neglect) appears to be less prevalent in our villages" (111). Kamame explains why when she states that:

> The traditional setting of our villages, cohesion and familiarity is so imbued in the lives of individuals that women are more conscious of what they do.

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> But in the cities, there is a fragmentation, which results in behavioural flexibility. A woman like Fofo'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 (111).

Female inaccessibility to justice and the corruption in governmental set-ups is a prime feminist concern. The policemen in *Faceless* do not show interest in the investigations into the death of Baby T because to them, the deceased and her family are firstly, women and secondly poor, but most essentially, the force itself is ill-equipped to carry out its responsibility to the citizenry. Maa Tsuru herself is unmarried. She feels unwanted and without a voice to fight for her family so she sits by while nothing is done about the injustices meted out to her by Onko and others. We also get to know that "the need for some women to become attached to and become someone's wife is sometimes grossly under-rated and under estimated" (Darko 130). Maa Tsuru confesses the emotional trauma a woman goes through when the political, economic, and moral issues in her life do not go well. Darko ridicules women like Maa Tsuru by implying that ironically, this is perhaps the reason why Maa Tsuru kept allowing all those men in her life as she puts it:

> I am a woman and I was lonely. He gave me the right words. He said, 'I want to retire to bed with you at night and wake up with you in the morning'. It felt good. I had been without a man since Kwei's final disappearance from our lives. No man wanted me. I was a cursed woman. But cursed or not, I was still a woman. I felt like a woman. I needed to be wanted by a man (156).

Generally, the feminist voice in Darko's novels expect women in society to behave like Ms. Kamame and the MUTE ladies: to shield the younger females who are entering adulthood from the predators in society; to help them to find their feet and to watch each other's back. The call on society is clearly implied in her novel: a return to the traditional communal spirit whereby fellow women is there for each other and for all children at all times; to a society that appreciated the role and contribution of mothers; and where irrespective of the beckoning challenges, mothers were there for their children and vice versa. If mothers would forge close bonds with their children as Kabria does with her children, they could well protect and guide them through life. Children themselves desire to bond and submit to their mothers only if mothers would be there for them. They wish to be hugged even if they were "dirty" or "smelling of the streets" (2). If women in the twenty first century continue to battle with equality and recognition, then obviously the need for women to support each other cannot be over emphasized. Similarly, the need for women to take a second look at how much they contribute to the problems that militate against themselves is given equal attention in Darko's *Faceless*.

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