

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A CRITICAL
DISCOURSE ON AMMA DARKO'S *BEYOND
THE HORIZON***

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) which includes rape, wife battery, domestic abuse, emotional assault, among others, has become endemic in our society. This menace has been ravaging mainly the female gender in Africa. Unfortunately, this monster is a product of the society as it is wrongly structured by patriarchy where the male gender has the utmost power, authority and privilege over the female. This natural injustice against the African girl child is what Amma Darko *Beyond the Horizon* seeks to tell in the country, Ghana, which is seen as a microcosm of the African continent. Thus this paper highlighted the dehumanizing way the girl child is been treated as a result of cultural practices and the traumatic effect on this particular gender where religious beliefs and traditional norms of the society is governed by patriarchy. It observes that the central character, a victim of GBV is a typical poster child of this malaise and also investigates the possible ways in which the she can liberated.

Keywords: Gender, Violence, Inequality, Patriarchy and Trauma

Introduction

In Africa the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) sprouts from gender inequality which results from the excessive assertion of power masculinity or even vice-versa. This is facilitated by cultural beliefs, societal structures, economic power, and religious interpretations, which mostly serve as agents of patriarchy. GBV is an old reoccurring practice in Africa that could be in the form of sexual rapes, female molestations, forced marriages, sexual harassment, torture, and denial of girl-child's education, commodification of wives, daughters, and social relegation of women in the society. Gender inequality, the precipitator of gender based violence is seen as a variable tool used against women in the society. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) observes that "... gender inequality is a characteristic of most societies, with males on average better positioned in social, economic, and political hierarchies ... gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain the behaviour of women and men in ways that lead to inequality" (UNDP, 2013:3). Furthermore, gender-based violence according to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN, 1993). In the opinion of Uwameiye B.E. and Iserameiya F.E., gender-based violence in Africa (Nigeria) is seen from a larger spectrum, it entails much details and specifics as a result of some prevalent cultural and sociological issues faced by women in the patriarchal society. Accordingly, they note that:

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GBV against women in Nigeria occurs in many areas especially domestic and includes rape, battery by their husbands, verbal abuse, incest, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, denial of right to choose spouse, denial of the right to own a property, refusal to permit women to work or to control their own income, refusal to allow the girl child to go to school, refusal of affection or sexual satisfaction, trafficking with the intention of using them as commercial sex worker and widowhood rites (Uwameiye B.E. and Iserameiya F.E, 2013: 114-115). These traumatic and dehumanizing acts which are subsumed under GBV in Africa are mostly done by members of the immediate family, especially spouses. In line with this, J.I.B. Adinma *et al* assert that “irrespective of the category of gender-based violence – physical, psychological, economic and sexual, the spouse plays a leading role as perpetrators of GBV” (2019). This is well portrayed by Amma Darko in her debut Novel, *Beyond the Horizon*, where the protagonist is commodified by husband. She vividly depicts the way women are seen as subservient, incompetent of reasoning and creatures made for the erotic and economic satisfactions of men.

Dako, a Ghanaian novelist wrote her debut novel *Beyond the Horizon*, in 1995 where she tells the ugly tale of oppression, subjugation and commodification of women in Africa like Ama Ata Adioo, Akachi Adimora Ezigbo, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saddawi, she joins her voice against women subjugation and abuse. Although the novel is written a decade and half ago, Dako craftily lays bare prevalent issues that have consistently affected society. In Ayindoho’s (2003:1) view, the text portrayed “immediate and startling impact, as much for the timelessness and urgency of its

subject and message, as for the shocking, freshness and frankness of the narrative voice”.

The novel tells the story of a young girl, Mara, who is forced into marriage by her father to the son of his debtor. Mara, though hesitant about his father’s choice for her even when he, Akobi is the most educated bachelor in her village, she is ready to be used as the only available premium to settle her father’s debt. After the marital rite, the timidly unexposed Mara joins her husband in the city who works as a clerk in one of the government ministries. His one room apartment is an eyesore of poverty from where one leg of the center table is raised by cemented brick pieces, to the dried-grass mattress and the unhomely dirty setting that made the protagonist doubts if she was at home until Akobi told her she was home. She receives all forms of maltreatments from her husband until she is trafficked by the same husband to Germany for prostitution and pornography. However she gets her husband arrested and jailed with the little exposure she gets as a prostitute but Mara sees her life as a waste and unredeemable. The novel exposes the complicity of families towards the victimisation of their daughter as a result of poverty and hunger. In this case, the girl child usually becomes the sacrificial lamb of the family as she is sold like a property in the form of dowry to her husband who will in turn maltreat and abuse her as he deems fit. The families seek for material gains and pleasure at the detriment of her education, happiness and freedom. Anyidoho (2003) observes again that Darko, “tells one long and disturbing tale...of a diseased society that...has developed a tragic ability of guiding its young ones, especially the girl child, into a life dedicated to prostituting every conceivable virtue for the sake of flimsy material possessions”. She is striped of her human right and relegated to the background as her fate is decided by patriarchy.

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Another aspect that Darko exposes readers to in her text, *Beyond the Horizon*, is the way and manner African cultural practices “leave women consigned to fear, trauma, suffering and death” (Adjei, 2009:48). As these cultural norms “make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices or compromises” (Quayson 2007:585). This is the fate of the protagonist, Mara, who is tamed, exploited and destroyed by her staunch attachment to her village traditional practice that makes her inferior to her husband despite the voice of warning from Mama Kios in the city. Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo (2019) sees Mara’s major problem as a socio-cultural exploitation from patriarchy, she defines it as “the social conditioning of women to accept patriarchy notions and values which devalue them, reinforce their supposed inferiority to men, and leave them open to manipulation and exploitation. Socio-cultural exploitation plays a major role in the victimization of Mara, the protagonist of Darko’s novel” (138). As a greenhorn without education, skill, and self-confidence, she automatically becomes a manipulative tool at the hands of Akobi, her ruthless husband who would never spare any moment to abuse her emotionally, physically and psychologically.

From the foregoing portrayal of the protagonist experiences and character by Darko, it is seen that the major literary theory that preoccupies the novel, is trauma. This is seen from the opening of the text till the end. The protagonist is traumatized and dejected as she is shanghaied into marriage with Akobi who finally subjects her into prostitution in Europe where she sees herself beyond redemption. Inette Swart’s (2014) description of trauma scenarios and effects aptly describes Mara’s experiences in the novel. According to her “...the term [trauma] brings to mind associations of pain,

shock, disillusionment, life-altering experiences, human aggression and betrayal, and not uncommonly criminal deeds...” This is her encounters in the text, start from her unconsented but orchestrated marriage of her and Akobi by her father.

Discourse

The novel opens with traumatic depressive thoughts by the protagonist, who sees nothing about herself but shadow before an oval shaped mirror. She has a reminiscence of her former beautiful childhood experiences filled with hopes and love of a closed-knit little village family in Ghana, which sadly now has turned into an unhappy and frustrated life of a woman residing precariously in Germany. she soliloquizes: “ I am virtually naked...this coldness I feel does not grip my body so much as it does my soul...from the dejected soul my body harbours, a soul grown old from too much use of its shelter”(1). She takes a long look at the image of her supposed self, the image she feels as the leftover of the young innocent promising girl who is tricked and coerced into prostitution by her husband while in Germany. She laments:

I am staring painfully at an image. My image? No! – what is left of what once used to be my image. I keep hearing chuckles and pantings, wild bedspring creaks, screaming oohs and yelling aahs. They are coming from rooms that are the same as mine. And in all of them there are pretty women like myself, one in each room waiting to be used and abused by strange men” (1).

This commodification, abuse and molestation by strange men is the climax of Mara’s suffering for being of the female gender in a society governed by patriarchy. Her dreams and aspirations are withered and shattered in Europe as a result of

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forced marriage and lack of education. It is a conscious fact in the continent that millions of girls do not have access to education despite some efforts made by world organisations to promote the girl child education in Africa but the societal cultural stance favours the boys over the girls as they believe the male children will keep the family lineage.

Thus, Grace Offorma while quoting Okeke *et al* (2008) identifies some factors responsible for this peril, according to her: “...poverty, and lack of sponsorship, quest for wealth, bereavement, engagement of children [girl child] as house helps” (2009) deters the females from school. She went further to specify some African countries where this act is a prevalent practice. She reveals that:

In Ethiopia, girls are sometimes abducted for marriage when they are no more than eight years. In West Africa they are recruited from poor rural families to work as domestic servants in coastal cities or even neighbouring countries. In South Africa, a recent report by Human Right watch warns that sexual violence and abuse are hampering girl’s access to education. In Afghanistan, they have simply been barred from school under the Taliban regime (Offorma, 2009: np).

From the above assertion, it is seen that in some African countries, the girl child is denied the fundamental human right to education. Her only source of personal empowerment and freedom is decided on her behalf as marriage is portrayed as her ultimate goal and prerequisite for to be acceptable in the society. Offorma (2009) recounts again that “some of the girls are given to marriage against their wish and when refused, they are threaten with death. The children are given to

marriage at a tender age in quest of dowry from husbands” (np). These dowries are often use to ameliorate the financial hardship in families or communities.

The depiction of forced marriage in the novel is traced to the high level of poverty that ravages Mara’s family as her father is much concerned about the dowry which could salvage the present financial status of their home as it will invariably help to offset his debt, and Mara, the naïve girl is the sacrificial lamb. It makes no difference as it is an acceptable practice in many African communities, Darko also portrays it as a traditional norm in the family and Naka community in general. The same is done to her elder sister. She recalls the unusual excitement from her mother the day her marriage plans was discussed –

Mother excitedly beckoned to me...drag me to her hut and breathlessly told me the good news. Your father has found a husband for you, she gasped, a good man! All I did was grin helplessly because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that mother had given my elder sister two years before. Found, too by father. And my sister was now a wreck (4).

It is obvious that cultural rules, tribal norms and traditional family patterns do not care about the girl’s future and safety as greed, selfishness and chauvinistic masculinity becloud their good sense of reasoning since these “practices are driven by social cultural patterns that reinforce gender inequality” (2018 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery). However, young Mara does not hesitate before her mother, she only wants to know the man who is her would-be husband but her mother denial her such luxury, she asserts; “Oh dear child, mother said, you know your father would consider it rude if I should disclosed him to you.... Dress up’ she urged me, I am certain

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he will send for you soon”. She is like a commodity that can easily be disposed at the convenience of its owner and will be bought by the highest bidder.

Mara’s forced marriage is as a result of being a girl child and seen as a handy commodity by her father to settle this heavy debt he owes Akobi’s father thus Akobi’s maltreatments on her since she is his procured property. This is essentially because according to Meghan Burns; “When people are thought of as commodities or property, they are diminished and dehumanized and do not have the power to make their own life choices. In many cultures, a female is property – first of her father and then of her husband. These men decide her fate and she expected to obey” (23). Akobi understands these cultural privileges that is why he only needs her either for his erotic satisfaction or to impinge upon her his superiority by way of physical abuse. She 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 served 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 knock on my forehead... when Akobi close the door on the two of us in the room, one of two things happened. He either beat me or slept with me” (19-20)

Mara sees all the dehumanizing and maltreatments from her as normal. Without protest she concedes, accepting all as a ‘good wife’ and commodity she has been taught by tradition.

Since she is used to pay her father's debt and that of her community. As for Soraya (2006) and Boyden (2012) "this kind of practice creates an economic incentive where girls are sought and married early by her family to the highest bidder". This is the case of the protagonist as is given to the family's creditor and also, to recompense the financial status of her home. She asserts; "[For] a man he owed money to have come and forcefully claimed his debt in the form of eight of father's eleven goats. So my dowry came in handy... he had proclaimed that he would gladly have given me away even for one goat. But like I said, Akobi's father bought me off very handsomely" (6-7).

Unfortunately, due to patriarchy, the hunger and hardship which her dowry is supposed to salve still remains as her father diverts it for his personal pleasure when Mara laments that "father had used the goats and cows to remarry." This is the plight of many young girls in Africa as they are exploited domestically, socially and culturally in the bid to satisfy the patriarchal society.

Domestic violence which serves as a reoccurring theme in the novel is one of the major aspects of Gender Based Violence. This practice finds its resonance in Africa tradition where male see the female sex as weak and irresponsible. African woman are tamed to accept the ill treatments from the men. In her opinion "I still regarded my suffering as part of being a wife, and endured it just like menstrual pain". The same case as Celie, the protagonist in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, who is uncertain why she is constantly being abused by husband. In Letter 12 she recounts that; "I don't fight ...but I'm alive.... I make myself wood.... Celie, you a tree". These women reveal how they manipulate their emotions to endure the sufferings meted on them by their husbands in order to be acceptable in their society. Mara narrates again that:

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That he had bought me no new clothes and me still with only those I had come in from the village, and that in spite of this he had also forbidden me to sew any of the clothes he had presented me with as part of my dowry, I saw also falling under ‘obey and worship’ your husband as my parents and family elders stringently repeated to me.... I consider normal (13).

Through this pathetic master/slave relationship that exists between Mara and her husband, Darko aptly gives a proper view of patriarchy in Africa, as it unleashes its superiority venom upon the female in order to exert its authority. In enacting these authorities which could be in the form of tradition or culture, they make laws that would be favourable to men and relegate or denigrate the women. In many Africa countries, eighty percent of the executive positions are constantly being occupied by men, even in the political or economic sectors, women are seen as dumb. This dumbness is what Darko describes in her text when Okobi sold the leftovers of his wife’s dowry to travel oversea for greener pasture without her consent and she not inclusive of his big dream instead he trafficked her for prostitution, where he and the brothel manager are sharing the proceeds from her prostitution. This traumatic experience Mara encounters in Germany is overwhelming when she is first welcomed with the news of her husband living with a German wife and she is to live with them as his sister from Africa. In there, she is drugged and blackmailed into prostitution. She reveals; “a video film that showed me completely naked, with men’s hands moving all over my body. Then some held my two legs wide apart while one after the other, men...took turns upon

me...Akobi blackmailed me ...to do the job at Peepy”. This unscrupulous decision of greed against Mara demoralizes and traumatizes her till the end of the novel. She sees herself as nothing but an empty lost soul who cannot find her way back home as she “have decided to stop thinking about ever going home...[since she does not] belong there any longer... [she is] fast sinking into a place hotter than hell” (139).

Conclusion

Amma Darko’s novel tells the evil lurking patriarchy affecting women in our different societies, especially Africa, where many female dreams and ambitions are constantly destroyed, aborted and sacrificed in order to fit into the men’s world where gender inequality reigns. Little or no interest is given to women’s wellbeing. Worthy of note is that the writer reveals how Mara is able to pay Akobi back in his own coin due to the level of exposure and awareness (though in the hard way) she gains while on the streets of Germany as a prostitute. Invariably, Darko is urging for a better exposure to that African girl child, which could be in the form of formal education, learning a skill as economic empowerment and having a voice to express herself and make personal choices about life and living.

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