

Womanist Reading of Amma Darko's *Faceless*

Maweta TRAORE

mammitraore@gmail.com

Université Alassane Ouattara (Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire)

Abstract: This work analyses with the complicity of Amma Darko through her novel *Faceless*, the precarious condition of African women. It exposes how African society makes African women's plight very pathetic. so, through Maa Tsuru, Baby T and Kabria life, the pathetic living condition of African women in the African community is well presented. Facing that domination and exploitation womanism helps demonstrate the suffering of African women in African society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, sexism, exploitation, domination, womanism, suffering.

Résumé : Ce travail analyse avec la complicité d'Amma Darko à travers son roman *Faceless*, la condition précaire des femmes africaines. Il expose comment la société Africaine rend la situation des femmes africaines désespérantes et pathétiques. Ainsi à travers la vie Maa Tsuru, Baby T and Kabria, la condition pathétique de la vie des femmes Africaines dans la communauté Africaine est parfaitement mis à nu. Faisant face cette domination et exploitation, le womanism aide à démontrer la souffrance de la femme africaine dans la société africaine.

Mots-clés: Patriarcat, sexism, exploitation, domination, womanism, Souffrance.

Introduction

“The term ‘patriarchy’ literally means the ‘rule of the father.’” (Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, 1999:181). Furthermore, patriarchy according to Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, it is the father (MAN) who controls, who gives instruction or education in a society. That is to say, it is men who should instruct what to do or not. In African culture, men are considered as demi-go. It is they who dictate this society rules in which they are the sole well off. Critics clarify the fact that Africans are interest of the community counts, and not in the interest of individual. Thus, community opinion is very important in Africa. And this opinion is mainly dominated by men. In order to show how patriarchy is manifested in Africa, *Faceless* is used as the corpus of this work. So, It is in this posture that the following study uses womanism as theory. It helps analyses how women are dominated and exploited in male dominated cultural system in Amma Darko’s *Faceless*.

The metaphor of the story is manifold. By portraying Ghanaian women in particular and women in general in patriarchal world, Amma Darko denounces both women who are victims of patriarchy without thinking of how to make end to it and women who despite their education are still subject of patriarchy. It is such a context that rises to my interest in the following topic: “womanist critics on Amma Darko’s *Faceless*”. To preclude any misunderstanding on this topic, it is of capital importance to really show what patriarchy is. Despite the different viewpoint between them and effort, each kind of women is suffering from patriarchy in *Faceless* and critics failed to take to such orientation. The literature review makes it evident.

In their article entitled “Mara’s Rising from Total Submissiveness to absolute Emancipation in *Beyond the Horizon* by Amma Darko,” Téophile Houndjo and René-Kinée Allamagbo analyze African women’s struggle against patriarchy. For Houndjo and Allamagbo, Dele Maxwell Ugwanyi analyzes Amma Darko’s female characters as women who fight against patriarchal domination. Also, drawing on feminist linguistics, Leonard A. Koussouhon, Patrice A. Akogbeto and Ayodele A. Allagbe view that Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Housemaid*, *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* “overtly counter existing conventional ideologies of gender positioning” (Koussouhon et al., 2015: 314). For Kousouhon et al., Amma Darko denounces in these novels that for many decades male ideologies have reinforced the

traditional social structures as male dominance, patriarchy or institutionalized sexism in all societal strata.

In this novel, the characteristic of patriarchy is well shown as it is presented by different type of men; there are those who are lazy and nasty, and those who are arrogant or proud. Thus, Patriarchy is shown in all its characteristics through Amma Darko's men's characters. For this reason, Patriarchy in *Faceless* consists in analysing sexism and the pain of women in *Faceless* and the burden of womanhood in *Faceless*.

I. SEXISM AND THE PAIN OF WOMEN

Patriarchy according to Julian wolfreys et al. in their book *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, is:

Patriarchy is the name given to the whole complex system of male dominance by which most societies are run now and were run in the past. Patriarchy includes the systematic exclusion of women from rights of inheritance, to education, the vote, equal pay, equal rights before the law. (Julian Wolfreys et al., 2006: 76)

Patriarchy in this context, demonstrates that the fictional worlds portrayed by Amma Darko is full with male dominated cultures. The present section shows that in the different communities depicted by the Ghanaian novelist that men rule their women without their consent. They even decide their fate and destiny.

Faceless, Published in 2003, is about Maa Tsuru who loses grip on her own life and the lives of her children leaving them at the clemency of the predators. The story is also about four educated women workers at NGO known as MUTE through which they fight to bring light to the plight endured by Fofo, Maa Tsuru's 14-year old daughter. The novel shows the two characteristics of women: the wife at home and the one who must combine work and family life.

According to sexism as mentioned in this section, refers to any form of “domination which leads to discrimination, exploitation, or oppression expressed by men, women or any institution” (Hooks, 1984: 47). Amma Darko's *Faceless* is replete with such kind of sexism. The Ghanaian novelist portrays African sexist community in *Faceless* in order to represent how African community treat their women in Ghana particularly and in Africa in general. In the Ghanaian community in Accra precisely, men are the kings and women their subjects; and it is what Macho power in Agbogbloshie market on Fofo shows:

‘Eh, are you forcing?
 But what should I do?
 You will get piles oh!’ she rose.
 ‘Don’t go and leave me, please!’
 ‘I am waiting; but you are keeping too long. Do you hear the
 Lorry revving? Macho would be here any...’ (Darko, 2003:32)

Macho is the king of the gang, so their fear him as a demigod. And Macho is a sexist who abuses particularly of the girls of the gang as he wants. Fofo and her friend are in the bathroom but not serene because they fear the arrival of Macho at any time. And they are afraid of this arrival, as it can be worst because they are girls. The society already teach that boy is important than girl, and that already, at his young age, has this education inside his mind, so applies it on his fellow girls. In *Faceless*, the sexist act is not only presents in this part; the novelist also portrays families’ preference for male child. In the novel, after giving birth to two female children namely Obea and Essie, Kabria who is the wife of Adade and a worker of the NGO known as MUTE, is looking for if possible only one male child to render her family normal. From the narrative viewpoints, the reader discovers that “because Kabria had two daughters already, she was desperate for a son” (Darko, 2003: 37).

Thus, though Kabria has two daughters, she is desperate because she does not have a son. The fact that she has lost hope shows that she holds preference for a male child. Beyond Kabria, it is the entire community that is conceived as a sexist community. A child being a product of a culture, it follows that Kabria’s attitude of male child preference shows how African community functions. Her attitude exposes that the community gives preference to a male child. Thus after that patience, her wanted son finally come. And because the community teach it, Kabria’s only son Ottu thinks that he is the most precious and Darko shows it : “Mum, do you know that I cut short your problems by coming as a boy and earned you respect?” (Darko, 2003: 37)

Kabria’s problems as exposes by Darko, is the community’s postures toward women in case they do not give birth to any male child. Since the community has a penchant for male child, the mother who does not have a male child among her children is going to bear the pain of continuing giving babies until she gives birth to a baby boy. This is the case of Ottu’s school friend’s mother. If it is not because of Ottu’s school friend who is the only one boy among his mother’s six children, Ollu counts that “his friend’s grandmother would have insisted and ensured that his friend’s mother continued to bear more and more children till she bore a son” (Darko, 2003: 38). The sexist magnitude of the community is well shown when Ollu goes on

to relate his mother that “because his friend is the only son among the six children, his Mum never punishes him” (Darko, 2003: 38). Thought the father’s mother who is a woman is the person claiming on the fact that Ollu’s school friend’s mother gets a son despite the five girls. This justifies that it is African community that makes man over woman.

In addition, the sexist attitude of the community has for result women’s pain. In fact, women being frustrated, their hearts bleeding they are in pain. Community does not take care of women’s mood; everything is in favor of men. Thus, thinking about the community view on her as a mother of only two daughters, Kabria feels desperate. Similarly, the insistence of Ollu’s paternal grandmother on the fact that her son’s wife gives necessary birth to a male child pushes this one to get six children on her charge. Not only does she live the pain of giving birth to a baby several times but also, she undergoes the pain of feeding, rearing and caring about these six children.

Sexism takes a dramatic facet in *Faceless* when reference is made to the abandon that Maa Tsuru’s father inflicts to her mother. In the novel, Naa Yomo counts to Kabria and Vickie, the women of the NGO named MUTE, that:

By the time the baby’s shoulder burst through her and tore to shreds the lining of her womanhood, the curse was on her lips. She was fading away, but wasn’t going to go without a legacy. The cord was still uncut when she yelled that may her lover and his descendants after him, suffer in more ways and in more forms than he had made her to suffer. Someone shouted that she was dying. I cried that she should be made to undo the curse first. But it was too late. She lay there dead, while they took the child away. The child with no mother and whose father and his lineage had just been cursed. A child, cursed by her own mother.’ (Darko, 2003: 122)

These words of Naa Yomo express the sexist attitude of the father of Maa Tsuru. The man has “dishonored her before she could be purified and properly initiated into womanhood” (Darko, 2003: 121). As he impregnates her, he denies any responsibility and let goes of her in traumatic pain. The worse is that the community does not show any solidarity or compensation to make justice. The man who impregnates her is left free in the community while the woman is bearing the traumatic pain and is dying alone.

In addition, Amma Darko’s depictions of Kabria and the grandmother of Ollu’s friend plus the regular absence of Maa Tsuru’s father in the family are for the novelist to make known the Ghanaian society as patriarchal community. The novelist does not hide her wish to unveil the suffering that women endure because of men sexism in this community portrayed in *Faceless*. Not only are women brought to be seen as men’s properties and weak sex for whom men must decide and provide for but also, they are othered as object, and get value only when

they deliver male sons, conditions that make women cry their soul out. And this is criticized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her critical work *In Other World* (1987). Kabria, Ollu's mother and Maa Tsuru' represents these women in a condition where they are othered by the community and must not show any dissatisfaction face to men sexism. This is the same case with the debut novel of Amma Darko *Beyond the Horizon* when Mara explains:

I have yet another handicap too, my little left finger. I think often of the game my mother used to play with them, my fingers. Childish game when I was her innocent naïve child. 'Give your hand,' she used to say. And I would give it to her. And she would take it, usually my left hand, and spread out my five fingers on her thighs, her coal-black thighs. And start the song: this one cries gaa gaa gaa, this one asks what is wrong, this one says maybe hunger, this one says let's go take and eat, but thicky Tom thumb won't agree, he say I'll tell when father comes, and so small goes crying on, gaa gaa gaa. (Darko, 1991: 2)

This declaration from Mara justifies that, men from Naka decide the fate of their women. Not only do they decide whether their women can read or not but also, they dominate and beat them because they are women. It is the situation in *Faceless* that women like Maa Tsuru, Maami Broni, and Baby T are exposing. Thus, with all these injustices, women have to be silenced according to the community. African women must undergo all these atrocities and injustices because they lack courage and boldness to express their plights in order to change their dilemmas. Despite the fact that Baby T is beautiful and young, she is illiterate, ignorant and naïve, hence unable to defend oneself and the others in the same situation with her.

Therefore, Luke Okolo clearly in Of Patriarchy, Gender, Paradox and Inference: A Feminist Import in Amma Darko's *Faceless* shows the white heat which make some women as: Maa Tsuru, Maami Broni and Baby T impuissant face to that sexism:

Instead, women like MaaTsuru, Baby T, and Fofo bear the yoke of their recklessness. This implies that their oppression is institutionalised. It is paradoxical, however, that the yoked women are rather unwilling to resistmen. Likewise, men cannot resist women. Take for instance; Maa Tsuru readily opens her doors wide for any man that knocks on her door ranging from Kwei the father of Baby T, Fofo and the absconded two boys, and to Kpakpo the father of the two little toddlers. The men and woman find each other irresistible and return to their usual nuptial life after a respite of quarrel or regrets. (Luke Okolo, 2023: 4-5)

Institutionalized because Africa society in general and in Ghanaian society is particular is governed by men. It is question of patriarchal community, everything are dieted by my men, while women must undergo. Even in the twenty century and twenty-first centuries, African women still suffer greatly at the hand of sexism and have to endure this pain. According to

education gives to woman, it is normal that woman must be the charwomen, the babysitter because it is her who has to take care of the children, at the same time works in western activity or job. So the looking of being this good wife makes Kabria in that situation face to her husband Adade:

She managed a smile for him at the door after Abena had opened the gate for him. But inside, she fumed at her recollection of all that long and easy talk about how if a woman wanted to keep her marriage always fresh and her husband all to herself, she had better make him feel good at home. (Darko, 2003: 83)

According to African tradition, women have to endure without complaint. Ghanaian women have silenced all that injustices toward them. All that injustices because, according to African culture, it is on back of women that lay the home; reason why it is her who not only take care of the children, food but also, the wellbeing of her man. Likewise, Adade come to work, and once at home, it is his wife Kabria who has to look very pretty for him. Over and above taking care of the all the family, she has to be beautiful for him. But if it was the contrary it will be a sacrilegious for the society be

II. THE BURDEN OF WOMANHOOD

In *Faceless*, men set women in patriarchal conditions as described by Obioma Nnaemeka that follows: “Patriarchy constructs the institution of motherhood while women experience it” (Nnaemeka, 1997: 5). This stance developed by Obioma Nnaemeka is an ideology held by Amma Darko when she attributes the plight of the Ghanaian society to the “the equation of the essence of womanhood to reproduction” (Darko, 2003: 138) by patriarchy. Though it is men who construct womanhood of the community, it is women who experience it. As Kamame puts it for Sylv Po, the presenter of Harvest FM in *Faceless*: “Who is frowned upon more in this society? The single unmarried mother or the childless married woman? ‘The latter,’ Sylv Po replied” (Darko, 2003: 138). To avoid being frowned upon in the society, the Ghanaian characters portrayed in the fictional society “are pressurized to prove their womanhood whether they can adequately care for a child or not” (Darko, 2003: 138).

Furthermore, it is this policy dictated by the patriarchal society or men that explains that a single unmarried mother or childless married women are imperfect woman. And to avoid being this kind of woman, and prove their womanhood coordinated by the patriarchal society, they feel oblige to marry and necessary look for a baby in particular, boy child. Despite the fact

that they are not ready for the marriage, they feel themselves oblige because of the pressure of the society.

Moreover, men are the ordained but not in the fulfilment. It is men who dictated womanhood but are absent in the fulfilment. Though it is men who construct womanhood of the community, it is women who experience it. The theme of men's irresponsibility is described in *Faceless* by Amma Darko. In this novel, the author presents women's plight which occurs as the result of men ruling the family in an irresponsible way. This happen in the following passage:

‘My dream,’ began the boy, ‘is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy on her face at the sight of me. I want to be able to sleep beside her. I wish her to tell me she was happy I came to visit her. Whenever I visit her, she doesn’t let me stay long before she asks me politely to leave. She never has a smile for me. She is always in a hurry to see me back. Sometimes I cannot help thinking that maybe she never has a smile for me because the man she made me with that is my father probably also never had a smile for her too. One day she said to me, ‘Go. You do not belong here.’ If I don’t belong to where she is, where do I belong? But I know that it is not just that doesn’t want to see me. She worries about the food that she has. It is never enough. So she worries that it may not suffice for her two new children if I joined. The ones she has with the man who is their father and who is her new husband. He hates to see my face. I often wonder what it is I remind him of so much’ (Darko, 2003: 26)

This discourse of the little boy is significant in several ways. At first, it is a discourse that exposes the community in which his mother lives as a patriarchal community. A first, man gets the mother impregnated with no childcare and provision for her disappears from her life. In this precise condition, the family is enduring father absenteeism. Though the boy was born of a mother and a father, the father plays no role in his caring, rearing and financial needs. The issues of childcare and child rear fall under the responsibility of the boy's mother.

In African tradition, men are authorized to be irresponsible; since, It is shown nowhere that the community blame men for their irresponsibility. It comes after that the community bring up man superior to woman. Man is shown as the incontestable leader of women to the point that the community closes its eyes on his irresponsibility and nastiness vis-à-vis his woman. The laziness of the father is considered as normal, because the community silenced it. The boy's life and concerns fall upon the responsibility of his mother as the few times he spends with her shows.

Admittedly, the mother does not permit the boy to stay long with her. But at least, she does not reject him. Her use of kind words to let him go shows that she cares about him and she

loves him. She tells him to go thought, she wants him to stay, but with all their needful: food, well-being, father's love, father's responsibility and everything that comes with it. The boy even attests that the mother does not reject him when he justifies her attitude by the presence of the two babies that she alone has to care about. Contrary to the mother, the father rejects the boy. Nowhere in the novel, has the writer portrayed the boy having a slight contact with his father or it sympathy vis-à-vis him. The absence of any contact of the boy and his father in the novel is for the novelist to blame that Ghanaian community to be a patriarchal society that allows men to dictate womanhood and make women endure it for their financial and emotional care.

In addition, feeling the crack of bearing alone the charges of the children, and deciding to go to Kwei for help, Maa Tsuru discovers the following: "His door was opened by a woman twice her size and endowed with a bosom the size of two extra-large watermelons. This was most unexpected. Another woman in Kwei's room when she was carrying his third child?" (Darko, 2003: 151). Kwei behaves like the man of the family and break his relation with Maa Tsuru without her consent, without any problem from her. It is the end and it is the end, the reason is not important for him. He does not assume his responsibility of father but he goes on to take another woman just because he is the man.

As readers, we can understand the irresponsibility of one man. But when after the first husband, the second husband reproduces the same irresponsibility, we blame the community to set a patriarchal system that allows men to use women as sexual object and then leave all the burn to women alone.

Indeed, the boy is not the only character whose father is irresponsible. Fofo is another character of *Faceless* who though being born from a biological father and mother remains homeless. The street is the place where she lives. Her street live is exposed to many risks and dangers. The following passage shows the street as Fofo's living place:

Fofo was smiling because she was having a dream that was far removed from the realities of the life she lived. It was a dream as in the group of thoughts and images experienced during sleep. And in her dreams, she was living in a home with a roof. She was there when it suddenly began (end page 26) to rain and she was going to rush to somewhere in search of a safe and dry place to huddle close to other kids for warmth when it dawned on her that she had a roof over the head. And in the home with a roof, there was a toilet. A toilet with a roof. She smiled so wide when she felt the urge to attend to nature's call that the angel watching over her smiled too. In the dream, she simply entered the toilet with a roof and did her thing. (Darko, 2003: 26-27)

In addition, Kpakpo who is the step father of Baby T exposes another face of the atrocity of patriarchy. Kpakpo shows it as much as, he behaves as an animal with his stepdaughter. Baby T, the daughter of Maa Tsuru his wife to whom, to whom the girls share the love between a father and a daughter; the writer exposes it in the mind of Fofo “their new father” and to whom has frequently sexed the girl’s mother, wants to have the same sex with the same Baby T. The following passage demonstrates it:

Kpakpo took Baby T’s hand and sat on the bed. He placed Baby T before him and signaled her to remove her dress. Baby T obeyed as though in a trance. He savoured Baby T’s maturing body hungrily with his eyes. Then he brushed the back of one hand over Baby T’s breasts and drew down her pants. They fell to the floor. (Darko, 2003: 163)

Baby T is brutalized and raped by her step father because he desires her. And both, she and her sister have to undergo this severe and chronic mental, this injustice because it is him; the head of the family, the man who decides for everything of his family. And Baby T and Fofo have to wear that heavyweight because this act is part of their womanhood. Undergo this atrocity is an evidence to show that they are good girls or women because they respect African tradition or Ghanaian community. And Ghanaian community congratulates this kind of girls or women by showing that they are good girls.

The Ghanaian community in *Faceless* cannot be denied to be a patriarchal community in which men’s irresponsibility sets women in motherhood burden; as the new husband goes on to have two babies with the boy’s mother with no financial means for her to survive with the children. Not only does the new husband fail to provide for the family but also, he hates seeing the boy close to his mother. This situation is similar to Fofo’s mother Maa Tsuru. Kwei who is the husband of Maa Tsuru leaves her during her third baby. Not only, he does not care condition of his wife, but makes this one and her two children in total unhappiness and this family have to undergo it.

CONCLUSION

The reading of *Faceless* has proved that for Amma Darko, the community is a patriarchal institution that oppresses women. The novelist is concerned with the fact that the society gives privilege to men to dominate women. There is an African proverb that says that a good woman is this one who behaves as a duck. In fact, when the drake wants

to have sex with duck and that it is aware about it, the female leaves itself walk and maltreated by the male; and when the drake is satisfied about it conjoint, it put its sex to her and injects its seed. Thus, it is normal that Maa Tsuru, Fofo, Baby-T, Kabria and Ottu's mother have to behave as a duck. So according to African community, a good woman must endure pain by men because it is him the master. In *Faceless*, the traditional community express sexism against women in such a way that though Kabria has already two female children, she was yearning for female child. This has also been the case of Ottu's school friend's parents. Thus, all these are conditions to respect African womanhood.

Definitely, sexism and the pain of women, the burden of womanhood in *Faceless* permits to know how the suffering of women could negatively change the world. Women could be helpers or partners for men, but instead, they are ill-treated and denigrated by African society. And the fact that African woman is miserable affects their children like Fofo who is among the street children of Agbogbloshie. In fact, Fofo with her only fourteen years and seeing the precarious condition in which her mother is, this one opt for the street and Baby-t used by her mother and sept father die in prostitution. With these injustices, the future of the world in which we are is menaced. As the word is composed of the future of children, but if this future is destroyed, the world is lost. Womanist view has been used in Amma Darko's *Faceless* in order to show what African women undergo as atrocities in African societies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Darko, Amma. *Faceless*. Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2003.

Darko, Amma. *Beyond the Horizon*. England: Heinemann, 1995.1991: 2)

Edgar, Andrew and Sedgwick Peter, *Concepts in Cultural Theory*, 1999:181

Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984: 126.

Houndjo, Théophile and René-Kinée Allamagbo. "Mara's Rising from Total Submissiveness to Absolute Emancipation in *Beyond the Horizon* by Amma Darko." *The International*

Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention Vol. 6. No. 10 (2019): 5663 - 5673.

Koussouhon, Leonard A., Patrice A. Akogbeto and Ayodele A. Allagbe. "Portrayal of Male Characters by A Contemporary Female Writer: A Feminist Linguistic Perspective."

International Journal of Advanced Research Volume 3. Issue 12 (2015): 314 - 322.

Obioma, Nnaemeka. "Patriarchy constructs the institution of motherhood while women experience it". New York: Peter Lang, 1997.

Okolo, Luke. Of Patriarchy, Gender, Paradox and Inference: A Feminist Import in Amma Darko's *Faceless* 2023: 4-5.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other World: Essay in Cultural Politics*. New York and London: Methuen, 1987.

Wolfreys, Julian al. *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*. Second Edition. London: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2006.