

'Leaving for Europe': Failure of Hope and the Problem of Return in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the socio-cultural and economic factors pushing Africans to Europe. The choice of Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* illustrates this idea. The paper explores the factors motivating the migration of Africans to Europe. The study draws from postcolonial concepts such as 'otherness,' 'marginality,' 'liminality,' and Paul Gilroy's postcolonial concepts of melancholia, and conviviality to explore those socio-economic and political factors that tend to limit the African migrant's ability to realize the dream of a better life in the West. The study also adopts aspects of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to examine the psychological crisis the characters go through due to the failed dreams of a better life in Europe. The paper also analyses how the novelist employs aspects of literary styles to explore the thematic concerns in the novel. The qualitative content analysis method is adopted for this study for a deeper understanding of social interaction in society. The study concludes that migration to Western countries is not a solution to Africa's poverty condition.*

Keywords: Migration, Illusion, Disillusionment, Postcolonial Melancholia, Conviviality.

Introduction

Beyond the Horizon is the debut novel by the Ghanaian novelist, Amma Darko. Darko beams her literary lens in *Beyond the Horizon* on the assumptions by many Africans of Europe as a continent where one practically picks gold on the streets. Many Africans are dissatisfied with the socio-economic and political realities of their home countries and they are pulled to the West with the hope that things will be better there. Oby Okolocha points out that there are diverse reasons leading to migration by Africans from the continent but, in many instances, the migrants aspire for something better which they are unable to get in their home countries (144). Many studies that have been carried out on the migration crisis in Africa have situated the primary cause of the exodus of Africans to the West as economic. However, this paper attempts to show how the economic motivations for migration by some African migrants are inspired by social and cultural factors as illustrated by the characters in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*.

The novel equally captures the disillusionment when African migrants realize that their expectations of an easy life in Europe are not exactly in tandem with reality as they settle in the new environment. Dominic Thomas observes that in African literature, today, there exists a wide range of works by authors from both north and south of the Sahara (and from numerous other geographical locations) addressing postcolonial circumstances, exhibiting a particular concern with the plight of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. (143)

Thomas' observation is apt as it captures the predicament of Darko's major characters in *Beyond the Horizon* as they grapple with living in Germany and the various disabling barriers that prevent them from fully accessing the socio-economic opportunities in their destination. Also, Alain Mabanckou alludes to the "fierce determination of the protagonists of contemporary African novels to leave the place of birth and go in search of another life" (78). This paper explores what the characters of Darko's novel encounter when their "fierce determination" collides with the true reality of life as an African immigrant in Germany.

Quest for Social and Economic Mobility in Europe

The tale of Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* revolves around Mara and her husband, Akobi, leaving Ghana for Germany in search of a better life and, though economic consideration is often touted as the reason for migration by many Africans, Laura Maria Agustin argues that the reason why people migrate cannot be reduced to economic issue only as there are "social factors" (25), that can equally influence migration as reflected in the case of Akobi. Celestin Gbaguidi agrees with Agustin's position as he asserts that Akobi's drive to travel to Europe is hinged on his need to meet a social requirement to "elevate his status in his community" (41). Mara is equally motivated by the social consideration to join Akobi in Europe. Philip Roman Jung equally asserts how societal hope can influence the decision to migrate to Europe and the United States by many West Africans as a way of improving their socio-economic status (273). Migration becomes, to many West Africans, according to Jung, a necessary means of elevating social and economic status within the community. Social motivation becomes the underlying reason for the quest for economic fulfilment in Europe for the major characters in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*.

John Arthur explains that the migratory trajectory of many Ghanaians is moving from the rural areas to urban centres and ultimately to the West (31) and the migration path of the two major characters follow that pattern. The worst of all Akobi's disappointment is that though in his village, Naka, he ranks very high because he is the first to earn a form four certificate and the girls practically fall at his feet, in the city he is unable to win the affection of a lady, Comfort, who is a typist in the ministry in which he works. To win Comfort's heart, Akobi believes he needs to improve his socio-economic status because girls like Comfort are moved by such considerations. He eventually settles for a village girl in Naka, Mara, but Akobi never abandons his desire to win the heart of Comfort. Akobi realizes that his salary as a clerk will not polish his socio-economic image before Comfort so he sets in motion a plan to leave Ghana for Germany. So clearly in Akobi's case, as Bruce Whitehouse explains, "social forces"

(22) account for his decision to migrate. He becomes one of those Africans whom Jung argues that the “absence of societal hope”(273) pushes them to migrate to the West in search of better economic opportunities that will elevate their social worth.

Akobi's perception of the economic situation in Germany clearly shows he lacks proper information about the reality of life beyond the horizon of Ghana. His motivation to leave Ghana for Europe is hinged on his belief that economic breakthroughs will come easily and this unfounded assumption is what Sigmund Freud terms an illusion, that is, when 'wish-fulfilment'(31) that is far removed from reality. He assumes travelling to Germany will “bring in plenty of money” (30). Akobi paints an Eldorado picture of Europe to Mara when he informs her of his intention to try his fortune beyond the horizon of Ghana:

'I am going to Europe to live there for just a year or two at most,' he began, 'and to work. Mara, do you know that there is plenty of factory and construction work waiting to be done there in Europe but with so little people to do them? That is why I sold your things, Mara. I want to go there and work, to work hard. And I tell you, I tell you upon the gods of Naka that, Mara, in a year, in just one year, you will see for yourself. I will make so much money that I can buy us everything! Everything, Mara! Television, radio, fridge, carpet, even car!'(34)

The media and many Africans living outside the continent, project incorrect information about life in the West and many aspiring African migrants do not take time to find out the authentic situation of life in the West. When they eventually arrive, many African migrants discover that the reality is very different from the notion of life in the West that they had cooked up for themselves and they end up becoming disillusioned. Akobi realizes that his dream of making 'plenty of money' is hampered by the marginality of his position as a foreigner.

The request by Akobi for Mara to join him in Germany brings up her illusionary vision of life in Europe. Europe to Mara is a special place, “somewhere near Heaven” (34). But to leave for Germany, Mara's mother, Akobi's family, and Mama Kiosk all play one role or the other just as in the case of Massala-Massala in Alain Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* and this confirms Arthur's assertion that, “In Ghanaian and African migration decision-making, extended family networks and webs of friends play a major role in facilitating migration.” (191) The quest for economic emancipation in Germany by Akobi and Mara as depicted in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* is modulated by social and cultural forces. The quest motif is also central to the motivation behind the two major characters embarking on the journey to the West.

The Notion of Europe as “Heaven's Stairway”

Mara in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* migrates to Europe through the route that Russell King and Aija Lulle term “clandestine entry”(27) which is a form of irregular migration because those who get her into Germany use forged documents. Again, how a migrant gets into a country in Agustin's view confirms a legal or illegal status on that individual and it equally determines the type of job the person can get (22). How Mara

and Akobi get into Germany is not the legal way and this confines them to the marginal space of German society.

Osey, Akobo's friend who picks her up at the airport, educates Mara about the survival strategies of Africans in Germany. Mara finds out that one of the strategies for circumventing the German immigration law is getting married to a German which will pave the way for the regularization of the migrant's immigration status as a legal resident. She resorts to this method later because she does not possess the right papers to stay and work in Germany. So her migratory path to Germany automatically designates her as an illegal migrant and that invariably places her at the margins of society, just as Jorge Capetillo-Ponce and Philip Kretsedemas surmise that the "marginality of a migrant" (6) is largely down to how the migrant became part of a given society.

From the airport, Osey takes Mara to watch a porn film, a foreshadowing of what her husband later subjects her to, and it shows the dastardly heart of Osey who prepares her for what is to come by trying to have sex with her on the train. Mara's heavenly illusory perception of Germany begins to fall apart at this point, just a few hours after she arrives in the country:

The people on the screen, they were ... that is to say, they were several men and women altogether; about fifteen or so; among them, black women, Africans; and they were doing it there... there on the screen! They were actually doing the thing plain there on the screen before everybody. And there was no trace of shame or whatever on their faces. Not one bit! It was a shock to me, my first shock, my first horror. And yet my first lesson too. It began to dawn on me that I was in a completely new society where the values were different from those at home. Action films at home may mean John Wayne. (61-62)

Things happen thereafter in quick succession and Mara's illusory notion of life in Germany gradually begins to clear. She is amazed when Osey beats Vivian his Ghanaian wife. She assumes that only happens in Africa not her heaven-like Europe. She admits Akobi beat her a lot in Ghana but "that African men also beat their wives in Europe somehow didn't fit into my glorious picture of European life. I was in Europe, yes, but I still did not know Europe, I'd stayed indoors all this while and had still not completely gotten rid of my image of Europe being somewhere near Heaven!"(73-74). When Mara meets her husband, Akobi, she observes that he remains the same uncaring and disrespectful spouse. Migration in the case of Akobi does not bring about attitudinal change in every migrant. The thought that Germany may have transformed Akobi into a caring and loving husband in Mara's mind "evaporated like a drop of coconut oil on a red-hot slab"(74). Darko's protagonist in the novel becomes disillusioned when it dawns on her that life in Europe is not as easy as she imagined in Ghana.

Survival Strategy in Europe

Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* depicts the strategies that many African immigrants devise to access socio-economic opportunities in Germany. One of the strategies is marrying a German to become a legal resident just like Osey and Akobi. The strategy enables immigrants to access certain privileges in their country of destination. It is a strategy Mara adopts later as a way of liberating herself from Akobi's oppressive hold. They resort to such practices not because they want to, according to Osey, but because it is the only way open to them to live as legal residents in Germany. This position aligns with Paul Stoller's assertion that the unresolved immigration status of migrants will not make them work legally and therefore earning good money is impossible in the West (101). Kaye tells Mara that like Akobi, her boyfriend travels to "Europe full of dreams. But these were shattered when he realized that the amount of money he was aiming for could take years upon years to raise" (117). Kaye's boyfriend decides to do what other men do to make fast money, coerce her into prostitution just like Akobi also does to Mara. Osey explains to Mara why many African immigrants resort to this practice:

"It is the only way out for us to live here. And why do we have to live here? Not because we want to, Mara. You will find out soon. But because many of us have sold our properties and inheritance and taken money from every member of our family just to come here to work in the factories we heard at home were in abundance and needing workers. You have to come here to know that it is not true. But we have already taken all this plenty money from back home. So how do we return home with empty hands? We must find the money somehow, fair or foul." (77)

Osey's position is at the very heart of the predicament of migrants, especially African migrants and it is why many of them grapple with the conundrum of returning to their home countries as a result of their failure to achieve economic success in the West. Osey and Akobi tell Mara that many Germans resent them as they see Africans as intruders. This resentment or hostility towards people from third-world countries by those of post-imperial countries or countries in the West is what Paul Gilroy refers to as "postcolonial melancholia" (109). It is not everyone or every country in the West that responds favourably to difference, and this is seen in the way aliens are treated and the immigration policies geared towards keeping migrants out. "Postcolonial melancholia" is also expressed in the attitude of Gitte's family towards Akobi because they are uncomfortable with the fact that he is different and so they refuse to accept Akobi as Gitte's husband. The frosty attitude of Gitte's family, her coworkers at the factory, and the people at the administrative office towards Akobi, because he is a foreigner, is what Gilroy argues, does not foster inclusiveness and hospitality, but rather creates resentment, anxiety, and fear in postcolonial cities between the immigrants and the mainstream society (111).

Gitte, on her part, illustrates the fact that peaceful cohabitation among people from different nationalities is possible in a multicultural society. Gitte just like Molly Simmons, Emily Noah and Bob Hamm in Uwen Akpan's *New York, My Village*,

fosters the notion of conviviality in Western societies. The idea of the absence of racism, fear, and animosity towards foreigners and the triumph of tolerance, peaceful and harmonious cohabitation in postcolonial cities is what Gilroy refers to as “conviviality”(xi). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi observes that African women, in many situations, are “beset by the problems of survival”(67) and this is true of Mara's plight in Germany. She realizes that for her to survive in Europe, she needs to adopt certain strategies and one of the strategies Mara adopts is to try to look out for herself more than when she was in Ghana.

Illusions and the Reality of Mara's Life in Europe

Darko uses the inner thoughts of Mara in the novel to reveal that she is finally in tune with the reality of life in Germany in the second half of the novel. So according to Gbaguidi “Life in Europe, the characters Osey, Mara and Akobi soon realize is not the glamorous days and nights they have seen in their dreams or people make them believe” (36). She discovers that without the necessary legal permit, she cannot work in the country, but she can only take menial jobs like housemaid because, to Osey, those are the type of work open to “an illegal nigger woman” (114). It dawns on Mara like Rogers Asempasah and Christabel Sam rightly assert, that her “initial fantastic conception of Europe as a kind of Eldorado for the postcolonial subject evaporates when she comes face to face with the reality of life in Germany.”(161)

Osey and Akobi later push Mara into prostitution after she is relieved of her job as a housemaid. It shows clearly that it is the work they planned for her all along and this supports Agustin's position that in some cases the woman “who never thought of doing anything sexual when accepting a trip to Europe is forced into selling sex” (32). They manipulate her into accepting it as Osey argues: “For an illegal nigger woman like you, there is no other job in Germany, Mara. If you don't get a housemaid job then there's only this. You understand? Because you are too illegal and too black for any proper job, you get it”(114). Mara's dark skin and immigration status set her aside as one of the non-European others who work by selling sex according to Agustin in Germany and other parts of Europe. Mara has no option as she goes along with Osey and Akobi to become a professional prostitute in a similar way to the women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and this reaffirms Ijeoma Ngwaba's position that whether in Germany or Holland women are discriminated upon especially women with black skin who are not considered to be good for any job but as “objects for pleasure and satisfaction.”(117)

“Othering” is set against Mara first as a black African and also as a black woman and these levels of discrimination become a barrier against her full inclusion and access to resources within the German society even when later she resides as a legal resident. Mara is marginalized in Ghana, a patriarchal society where women hardly have a voice, and in Germany, as a result of the colour of her skin, gender, and the profession she opts for. So Mara just like any subaltern woman in decolonized or transnational space, as Gayatri Spivak argues, is “doubly displaced” (60). She has no foothold in her home country or the host country. She occupies a liminal space both in Ghana as a woman and in Germany as a black commercial sex worker and so, her marginal

position takes both socio-cultural and geographical dimensions.

This state of affairs in the end reduces Mara to a wreck. She is emotionally and psychologically damaged as she resorts to taking drugs. She gets to a mental space where retracing her steps becomes increasingly difficult and the men around her bear part of the blame, from her father to her husband and then to Oves, the brothel owner where she works. The men in her life keep chipping little by little at her psychological balance to the point where she admits that she is “fast sinking into a place hotter than hell” (139). Mara's plight in Darko's novel, therefore, is in line with Ogunyemi's position that “Black women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks, they, with their men, are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as women, they are victimized by black men; and as black women they are also victimized on racial, sexual, and class ground by white men”(67). Again, of all the men in her life, the one who ruptures Mara's self-esteem the most is her husband, Akobi. Darko's position in the novel is in tandem with that of Ogunyemi when she states “I have added husbands because they oppress women the most” (1996, 119). Akobi's attitude towards Mara in the novel strongly buttresses Ogunyemi's position.

Although men control and shape the direction in which Mara's life goes, she is not entirely without blame. She is equally complicit in how things turn out for her in Germany. She is a willing tool in the hands of some of the men. She seems to invoke what becomes of her lot in Germany when in the euphoria of Akobi informing her of leaving for Europe she says, “If Akobi had suggested there and then a wish to sell me, in addition to my clothes and jewellery, I would gladly have agreed” (35). Thus, Mara's plight in Germany is a self-fulfilling wish. In Germany, she knowingly moves from one brothel owner to another even when she already has a five-year resident visa and she is in a position to get a decent job. Agustin points out that though some migrant women are deceived into selling their bodies for money in Europe when they have the chance to leave “they often prefer to remain in the industry” (35). So Mara contributes significantly to the devaluation of herself.

Mara's experience in Germany does not present as Asempasah and Sam observe, “Europe as the privileged place of redemption for marginalized subjects from the periphery of the global system” (155). Europe in Mara's case damaged her beyond repair as a result of the way she is treated by Akobi, her own choice of action, and the immigration bottlenecks of the country she settles in. As in the case of Mara, Europe may destroy rather than act as a site for socio-economic redemption for some African migrants like the two central characters in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*, Azel and his sister, Kenza or the Maestro and even the Mathematician in Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, The Magistrate and The Mathematician*.

Dejected Soul in Heaven's Stairway

Close to the end of the novel, Darko's protagonist is completely cured of her perception of Europe as Asempasah and Sam note “as the horizon of hope in the imagination of the postcolonial subject” (155). She can send money back home to her family but to the huge detriment of her overall well-being. She says at the beginning of the novel that

she is all by herself and alone in her room, feeling “so very, very far away on my own. So friendless, isolated, and cold... from the dejected soul my body harbours, a soul grown old from too much use of its shelter. Yes! I've used myself and I have allowed myself to be too used to care any longer” (1). In the end, she says, “Material things are all I can offer them (her family). As for myself, there's nothing dignified and decent left of me to give them”(140).

Freud sees illusion as a situation where what an individual envisages about something is different from what happens in reality (31), and this is largely the case of Mara and the other characters' perception of Europe as a continent where everyone can achieve socio-economic success but the reverse is the case when they arrive in Germany. For Mara in particular, to actualize her dream of a better life, she has to sacrifice her dignity and values to realize a certain degree of economic prosperity. She can provide material things for her family but she goes through one of Freud's aspects of melancholia which is “an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem ... filled with self-reproach and a (feeling of) being worthless” (345). She sees herself as a whore as she engages in demeaning sexual acts with different men for money and this is particularly damaging to Mara's psyche because she comes from a traditional African setting where women are expected to engage in sexual acts only when they are married and it must only be their husband that should see their nakedness. The disillusionment of Mara with her life in Germany just like Azel in Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*, places both of them in the category of those Isidore Okpewho argues, experience the “nightmare of immigration” (9) and who are eventually “broken by despair”(9) as result of their unpleasant experience in the country of destination.

Impossibility of Return

The depraved sexual acts that Mara in Darko's novel is made to undergo to satisfy some of her clients is the reason she considers herself worthless and she is ashamed to face her family back home in Ghana. This is the reason reverse migration to Ghana seems unlikely for Darko's protagonist. Mara cannot return to Ghana because of the job she opts for, just as Mark cannot return to Malawi in Helon Habila's *Travellers* because he decides to embrace his sexuality in Europe. The two characters pick a kind of lifestyle in the West that is not acceptable in their home countries.

The horrible things some of the men do to Mara such as spitting at her, the pain they put her through, and how one calls her a “nigger fool” (3) have all left lasting damage on her mental health to the extent that she is no longer the greenhorn who migrated from Ghana to Germany. Mara is lost forever as a result of her experience at the brothel in Munich and, unlike the women in Unigwe's novel, she has no one to offer her emotional support. Mara does not have the support of someone like Aman to Fina in Pede Hollist's *So the Path does not Die* or the “unstinting benevolence of Mr Mgeni”(129) to Salim in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*. Vivian is far away in Spain and she seems not to be in touch with Kaye. So Mara's spiralling down the abyss of drugs, sex, and eventual destruction seems inevitable as a result of the absence of an emotional support network by people who genuinely care for her.

Characters like Mara and Kaye can achieve a considerable level of economic success in Europe, but the way they achieve this success leaves a stain on their conscience that makes it practically impossible for them to return to their families in Africa. Just like Kaye, it is very unlikely that Mara will ever return to Ghana to see her mother and her kids. She cannot contemplate how her family will feel if they know how she gets the money she sends to them. Mara is able, to an extent, to meet the material and financial needs of her family in Ghana, but that comes at a great personal cost to her physical and psychological well-being. She sacrifices her chastity as a woman to provide for her family, and because of the stigma that is associated with the profession she opts for in Germany, she can no longer return to face her family in Ghana. Just like Faten in Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Mara understands the social and cultural burden it will be for her family if she decides to return to Ghana after earning a living as a prostitute and also participating in porn films.

She faces the problem of return and she is unable to circumvent it, so she will certainly never see her family again. The painful realization that she may never see her children and other family members again wreaks huge emotional damage on Mara. She admits that she may never return to Ghana, "I am stuck with Oves for the rest of my life. I have decided to stop thinking about ever going home. I just don't belong there any longer... There is no turning back for me now, I am so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine what being a non-whore is. I have problems recollecting what I was like before I turned to what I am now" (139). Mara is damaged beyond the horizon of redemption and so, reverse migration seems unlikely for her, unlike Joyce in Unigwe's novel.

The novelist adopts a cyclical narrative structure to show how Mara is transformed as a result of migrating from Ghana to Germany. Darko uses this narrative structure quite skillfully as the reader already knows something of the protagonist's past and future so that actions and words that might mean little suddenly take a deeper meaning. Darko employs the first-person narrative technique and this accords the story a sense of authenticity since the protagonist is the one who recounts her personal experience. This technique also gives the reader access to Mara's inner thoughts and her deteriorating physical and mental state in Germany. Darko's narrative style effectively explores the themes of migration, illusion and disillusionment in *Beyond the Horizon*. The narrative style helps enrich the reader's understanding of Mara's predicament in Ghana and Germany.

Conclusion

Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* explores to what extent the idea that good things in life can be obtained beyond the horizon of Africa. The experiences of the characters in the novel illustrate the point that the illusions of a rosy life in Europe and the reality are not the same for all African migrants. The paper examined the assumptions by many Africans of Europe as a continent where socio-economic dreams are realized and the frustration that comes when their expectations fall far short of the reality in their new milieu.

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