

# Women Oppression and Toxic Relationships in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

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## Abstract

This study probes into the oppression and subjugation of women by men, and how the women get involved in different layers of toxic relationships with men in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. The purposive sample method is employed in the selection of the African novel, as women oppression and toxic relationships are the main thematic preoccupation of the novelist. Feminism is adopted as the theoretical framework of the study, with a particular focus on radical feminism. Socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation are amply demonstrated in the novel. The protagonist, Mara's experience is employed in highlighting how inimical women oppression and toxic relationships are to the African society. Mara is married off to Akobi, the son of a wealthy man in the village. Mara's marital woes demonstrate the various forms of oppression and toxic relationships women experience in the hands of men. The findings of the study evidently show all shades of women oppression and toxic relationships are bad practices which negatively affect women and the African society at large.

**Key words:** African novel, Radical feminism, Women oppression, Toxic relationships

## Introduction

This research work critically examines women oppression and toxic relationships in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. The issues of oppression of women and the toxic relationships have been pervasive throughout human history. Women have been subjected to various forms of violence, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, due to lopsided cultural constructions and patriarchal hegemony. Over the centuries and in different parts of the world, the proliferation of gender-based narratives depicts the fact that women have been oppressed, subjugated and have been sexually abused and oppressed.

This study delves into the specific forms of oppression against women depicted in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, and analyzes their impact on the lives of the female characters. It also interrogates the various instances of toxic relationships depicted in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and examines their effects on the lives of the female characters.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed is feminism, with a particular focus on radical feminism. Feminism denotes the activities of women and male sympathisers which are aimed at combating all forms of discrimination which women suffer as a result of their sex. This discrimination could be social, personal, economic,

political, educational, legal or literary. In view of this, feminism as an ideology is evident in various disciplines such as law, sociology, psychology, medicine, politics, education and literature. Feminism is the acting, speaking, writing and advocating on behalf of women's issues and rights, and identifying social injustice in the status quo.

Three distinct phases of feminism have been identified, based on different timelines. The first wave of feminism, according to Benjamin Nwaneri (2010), was during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The primary focus then was on the gaining of women's suffrage or right to vote. Margaret Fuller was the most influential feminist of the period. Her seminal work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) helped to create a universality in the women's rights movement. Second-wave feminism started in the early 1960s and continued throughout the late 1980s. It has existed continuously since then. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and reflective of a sexist structure of power, and is largely concerned with other issues of inequality. Significant books on of the period which shaped feminism discourse include: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, and Juliet Mitchell's *Woman of Estate*. The Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s as responses to perceived failures and backlash of the second-wave feminism.

As an economic theory developed by the socialist feminist, feminism highlights the disparity in the wages paid to men and women for the same amount of work done. As a social theory, it condemns the anomaly in the roles ascribed to individuals based on gender in the society, while highlighting the negative aspects of tradition and customs that favour men above women. As a political theory, feminism highlights man's monopoly of leadership position and castigates their control of the most important spheres of life. For instance, in the 36 states that make up Nigeria, there is no single female state governor. The country's National Assembly (the Senate and the House of Representatives) is also dominated by men. These reflect the discernibly patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. Feminists would find this trend disturbing.

As a literary theory, feminism celebrates and exposes the negative reality of patriarchy and its related culture and tradition of subjugating women and relegating them to the background, as reflected in the particular works of male and female writers. It is geared towards a realistic portrayal of women and exposing the burning issues affecting women in the African society. Elaine Showalter (1989) makes a useful comment on feminism as a literary theory: "Although feminism as a political ideology can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century, feminist literary criticism is a very recent invention." (Showalter 179). She gives a further explanation that it was after the revolutionary year of 1968 that women began to think of themselves as feminist critics, approaching literature with both a political perspective formed by the women's liberation movement, and a training in the contemporary institutions of literary study. The import of this is that socio-political

movements contributed significantly to the emergence of feminist literature and criticism, first in developed countries like the United States of America, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, and later in the Third World countries.

M.H. Abrams (1993) posits that feminist criticism, as a distinctive and concerted approach to literature was inaugurated in the 1960s. Western feminism is radical feminism. Radical feminism is a form of feminist theory that emphasizes the patriarchy as the root cause of gender inequality and advocates for the complete restructuring of society to eliminate gender-based oppression (Robin Morgan, 1970). Radical feminists argue that violence against women is a product of patriarchal society, and that the only way to eradicate violence against women is to fundamentally alter the power structures that allow for it to occur .

Radical feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the limitations of liberal feminism, which focused primarily on legal and political equality for women within the existing patriarchal system (Rosemarie Tong, 1989). Radical feminists argued that gender inequality is deeply embedded in society and that it cannot be addressed through reformist measures alone. Instead, they called for a complete restructuring of society to eliminate gender-based oppression.

Radical feminism sees the patriarchy as the root cause of gender inequality and violence against women. According to this theory, patriarchal systems prioritize male power and privilege, while women are relegated to a subordinate position. This system perpetuates violence against women by creating and maintaining power imbalances that allow men to exert control over women. Additionally, unlike liberal feminists, they see paid work as not liberating for women, as they often acquire the "dual burden" of paid work and unpaid housework, which maintains the patriarchal nature of the family. Some radical feminists even argue that women suffer from the "triple shift" of paid work, domestic work, and "emotion work," where they take on the emotional burden of caring for children.

Analytically, the main difference between between radical feminism and other types of feminism lies in the extent to which the social system based on the power struggle between the sexes is considered to be the root of further oppression, inequality, and injustice. Bonnie J. Dow (1996) opines that radical feminism theory is based on the fact that gender inequality is the foundation of all other theories and repression.

The feminist novel has continued to educate, inform and enlighten the woman to rise and fight for her rights. Sitting no longer helps; as the saying goes “a snake will not eat to its fill when coiled”. According to Lisa Tuttle (1986) the feminist theory is “the advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes”(107). Tuttle's position agrees with the later views of Charles Nnolim (2009) who argued that feminist writers and critics have “fought successfully for the right of women”(47). These positions show that the dominant tenet of feminist writings is the liberation of the woman and the drive toward equality among the sexes.

### **Gender Based Oppression**

Gender based oppression is the “oppression that reflects the existing asymmetry in the power relations between men and women and perpetrates the subordination and devaluation of the female as opposed to the male” (Ngendahayo 2). Ngendahayo further explains that gender based oppression exists within the framework of patriarchy as a symbolic system that engenders an array of day to day practices which represent the female gender poorly with the aim of oppressing them and relating them to the background. Gender based oppression comes in form of sexual, physical, mental and verbal oppression.

The underlying factor in patriarchy is power and status. Stressing further, Ifechelobi (18) says that “traditional African society as a patriarchal society is characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men where women are systematically disadvantaged, subdued and oppressed”. “Patriarchy is a broad network or system of hierarchical organization that cuts across political, economic, social, religion, cultural, industrial and financial spheres, under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men” (Makama 117).

In fact, any system that gives men undue advantage over women is considered patriarchal and oppressive against the female gender. A male is considered the head of the household and he controls productive resources, and reproductive capacities based on the notions that he is superior while the female is inferior. Ifeyinwa Ogbazi wraps it up by saying that “First, Patriarchy, essentially, makes reference to a male-dominated world, a world that has been strengthened by cultural prejudices and assigning traditional gender roles to the male and female sexes” (17).

Oppression breeds injustice which is discriminatory, dehumanizing and inferiority. It is usually imposed by the oppressors upon dominated and exploited individuals. It further serves as a means of enforcing oppression in order to secure advantageous conditions of living for its perpetrators.

### **Synopsis of *Beyond the Horizon***

**This is a story of a Ghanaian village girl – Mara, who enters into an arranged marriage with a man – Akobi, from the city who works at the Ministries. When Mara finally moves to the city to live in Akobi's one bedroom shabby shelter, he constantly abuses her. Mara, who is meek, evergreen to city-life and quite stupid, cooks, cleans their home and even sells various items at the market to support Akobi while tolerating his beatings, sadistic sexual demands and sleeping on a mat on the concrete floor while Akobi enjoys his dried-grass mattress. Mara is practically reduced to Akobi's slave.**

**With the help of a 'connection' man, Akobi travels to Europe with the intention of working to raise money to advance his social standings in the city. Akobi traveling to Europe brings honor to his village and Mara's family as he is seen as a man of great prestige. Months after Akobi leaves for Europe, Mara attempts to modernize herself, in the attempt to make Akobi fall in love with**

her. To Mara's surprise, Akobi later arranges for her to join him in Europe and Mara is more than delighted since she never dreamed that stepping foot in Europe would ever be her fate. Once Mara arrives in Europe (Germany, to be exact) with the aid of the 'connection' man, readers witness the manipulative ordeals Mara endures in a foreign land that leave her stranded.

Amma Darko skilfully the narrative in the novel purposefully towards portraying the reality of gender disparity in the present day African society. Some of the issues that are thematically injected in the story are: patriarchy, racism, colourism, domestic violence, pornography, sex exploitation, drug abuse, prostitution, the myths of living abroad ('Europe is heaven'), immigration, feminism, womanhood, sisterhood (between Mara and Mama Kiosk in the city; between Mara, Vivian and Kaye in Germany), village life versus city life, modernity etc.

### **Analysis of Darko's *Beyond the Horizon***

The motifs of women oppression and toxic relationships run through Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. The major forms of exploitation which manifest in the text are socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation. Through her protagonist's experiences which will be discussed hereafter, the author highlights their pervasive harmfulness in the African society and the need to eradicate them.

### **Socio-Cultural Exploitation**

Socio-cultural exploitation involves the social conditioning of women to accept patriarchal 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. As a girl, Mara is denied an education which would have equipped her with knowledge, skills and self-confidence, thereby facilitating her positive participation in contemporary society. Instead, she is subjected to early marriage, exploited by a father who marries her off to the son of a wealthy man in their village. Mara is, thus, "sold" to Akobi, a clerk, for "two white cows, four healthy goats, five lengths of cloth, beads, gold jewelry, and two bottles of London Dry Gin" (*Beyond the Horizon*, 3).

Conditioned to regard the man, her husband, as superior and, as such, deserving of her worship and obedience, she is taken to the city where she commences her duties as a wife, bearing in mind her mother's advice that "a wife was there for man for one thing and that was to ensure his well-being, which included his pleasure" (13). Mara dutifully plays the role of the perfect wife despite her husband's maltreatment which eventually degenerates into domestic violence. Mara holds on to the teaching that her husband is always right no matter what he does, a situation which prompts her friend and confidant, Mama Kiosk, to enlighten her thus:

Tradition demands that the wife respect, obey and worship her

husband but it demands, in return, care, good care of the wife. Your husband neglects you and yet demands respect and complete worship from you. That is not normal (13).

Unfortunately, this attempt to educate Mara on her traditional rights as a wife fails. She retorts: “Mama Kiosk, I probably have eyes that see blue where you see red. But I would still not like to exchange my eyes for yours. I like my eyes as they are” (14).

For Mara, the successful performance of her wifely duties supersedes everything else. Traditionally, Akobi fails to earn the privilege of being worshipped and obeyed by his wife, but he enjoys both by exploiting her naivety and determination to be the perfect wife. Evidently, Mara's social conditioning requires her not to question her husband's motives or actions. Ironically, Akobi only marries her as a careful strategy to use her ignorance, naivety and subservience to advance his life economically, much to her detriment. Mama Kiosk fails in her attempt to shake Mara's resolve by informing her that “there's a law that says [husbands] must [care for their wives]” (14) as Mara reveals:

I must say Mama Kiosk nearly convinced me at this point because even though it was true that I saw my mother worship my father daily, I saw, too, that father took ample care of me...But still I wasn't going to let Mama Kiosk spoil my marriage for me... (14).

Groomed to accept male superiority and domination, and to regard marriage as the zenith of a woman's achievement, Mara becomes prey to Akobi's selfish exploitation. This selfishness becomes even more evident when she announces her pregnancy and he responds with rage because the arrival of “her child” would deplete his resources and affect his plans for a brighter future which, ironically, does not include Mara.

As Helen Chukwuma (5) observes, the socio-cultural system “of deep-rooted norms and practices and belief in female subordination ... [breeds women's] passivity [and]... acquiescence to the status quo and so a perpetuation of it.” To end this form of exploitation, African women must seize every opportunity for consciousness-raising, break their silence and passivity and strive for recognition as humans deserving of equal dignity and respect as men. Had Mara been educated, she may not have fallen prey to early marriage; she would also not have been complicit in her exploitation by Akobi. She would have benefitted more from her sisterhood with Mama Kiosk and become more enlightened and assertive. She would also have demanded her rights as a legitimate wife. Evidently, self-awareness, assertion, individualism (even in marriage) and the rejection of the culture of sexism are avenues through which the socio-cultural exploitation of women in the African society can be eliminated. In agreement with this notion, Chukwuma (1994) asserts:

Culture is dynamic and, like every human phenomenon, is subject to

the pruning machinery of time which slices off outmoded parts to prune it to a modern, progressive, and more acceptable mould. Such change is not only desirable but inevitable. It is one that societies and cultures cannot fight against. Time changes everything and must therefore mould anew the African attitude to women (14).

The implication of the statement above is that, a change in negative societal prejudices and stereotypical attitudes towards women will diminish the socio-cultural exploitation of women. It is this change that Darko solicits through her novel.

### **Economic Exploitation**

Economic exploitation is rife in the African society because it embraces value systems that commodify women. It manifests through the manipulation of women for financial gain or gratification. Economic exploitation is, thus, another predominant theme in Darko's novel. Like Mara, many women in the African society are denied opportunities that would equip them to challenge and overcome gender inequality and subjugation. Subsequently, ignorance and poverty make them vulnerable to economic exploitation. Mara's father gives out his daughters in marriage with the total cooperation of his wife even though she is aware, as the daughters are, of their exploitation for financial gain. Mara reveals that her father's formula "for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters ... took into consideration the number of cows coming as bride price than the character of the man" (14).

In her case, poverty serves as the extenuating circumstance that propels him to choose Akobi because of his need of Mara's dowry to redeem his debt. Unfortunately, Akobi regards Mara as a "commodity" bought with the dowry his family pays to marry her. This gives him the leeway to maltreat her by subjecting her to neglect, domestic servitude, and economic exploitation. He had wanted a classy, educated wife and had set his heart on Comfort, a secretary at the Ministries where he worked. Rejected, he marries Mara in a carefully calculated plot to benefit maximally from her labour. He puts this plan to work when he forces her to supplement the meagre sum he provides for their upkeep. He later provides her with capital to start a trade with the proviso that she pays back with interest. Once Mara begins to profit from her trading, Akobi's "more important plans" become evident: he ceases to provide any more financial support and, to concretize his travel plans, sells off Mara's prized possessions - clothes and jewellery - to acquire a visa. Mara's assumption of the financial responsibility in their home is a violation of the stereotypic traditional "breadwinner code of conduct" which Wood (2009) explains thus: "Perhaps no other stereotype so strongly defines men in our society as does that of breadwinner. Men are expected to be the primary or exclusive wage earners for their families and achieving this is central to how society views men's success"

(237). Invariably, a man's identity and self-worth are linked to the successful performance of his role as the breadwinner. However, due to his ulterior motive, Akobi defaults and all efforts on Mama Kiosk's part to make Mara aware of this fail. As a last resort, she cautions Mara:

Mara ... this your Ministries man, he is not only a bad man and a bad husband, he has also got something inside his head. I only hope that he won't destroy you with it ... (17).

Apparently, Akobi exploits Mara economically to reserve his wages towards his journey to Europe while subjecting her also to domestic abuse to exert his control over her. He also neglects and refuses to acknowledge her in the presence of friends and colleagues. These actions should have been red flags to Mara had she not been so naïve and preoccupied with her socio-cultural commitments. Mama Kiosk's foreboding, thus, becomes even more significant when Akobi travels to Germany and comes to terms with the harsh realities of migrant life. To ease his burden and his way into a comfortable lifestyle with Comfort, he lures Mara to Europe under false pretenses. There, he continues to exploit her by pushing her, first, to work as a housemaid to earn her keep. Mara narrates

:

... I found myself working as a housemaid for a German family. I worked three times a week and sometimes at weekends if the Madam demanded it. Akobi took the money I earned as payment for the roof he and Gitte had provided over my head, for my food and transport, for the investment in my trip from home and for the cost of setting me up for my coming big job. (106).

The “big job” turns out to be prostitution which Collins (2005) defines as “exploitation for an economic purpose [which involves] the commodification of [women's] sexuality” (p. 177). According to The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR): “the development of a culture which condones the commodification of individuals (particularly women and children) in an effort to acquire material wealth, increases the vulnerability ... to fall victim to ... exploitation” (2018, p. 21). This observation holds true for Mara and millions like her who are trapped and subjected to modern-day servitude.

### **Sexual Exploitation**

Sexual exploitation is presented as an extension of economic exploitation. Mara becomes a victim when Akobi has her trafficked to Europe with the help of an organized trafficking ring on the pretext of uniting them. His objective, however, is to further exploit her financially through prostitution. Mara arrives in Germany where she is “reunited” with a cold and distant husband whom she can hardly recognize. Cobby, as he is now known, welcomes her with a lewd grin and remark:

“I can bet my all that this my most trusted friend Osey here was nice to you” (75). Osey blatantly subjects Mara to sexual harassment while accompanying her on the latter part of the journey, so she becomes uncomfortable and apprehensive, a feeling which increases when he later informs her thus:

... 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).

Mara is also casually informed that Akobi now has a German wife of convenience and she must, therefore, live with them as his “sister”. As an African wife, she is expected to accept this without complaint because the African culture condones polygyny. Thus, begins her journey of deceit and sexual exploitation for Akobi's benefit.

Two forms of sexual exploitation manifest in *Beyond the Horizon*: personal and consumer sexual exploitation. The first, Mara is subjected to in her marriage to Akobi, while the second occurs when she is blackmailed into prostitution to earn him money. Akobi has no love or respect for Mara but uses her for sexual gratification. When Osey urges him to “welcome” her to Europe properly, which he reluctantly does as a duty, she makes the following observation: “I could as well have been a four-penny whore ... drained of all dignity, filled with abhorrence” (83).

In Mara's case, the cost of her transportation to Europe, the debts accrued back home from money borrowed for the journey and her total dependence on Akobi place her in debt-bondage to him. Mama Kiosk's fears materialize as Akobi introduces her to prostitution by drugging and having her participate in an orgy with several men. By filming the orgy, Akobi and Osey blackmail her into prostitution in a sex nightclub.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) defines sexual exploitation as “a practice by which women are sexually subjugated through abuse of their sexuality and/ or violation of physical integrity as a means of achieving power and domination including gratification, financial gain, advancement. (as cited in Doezema, 1998, p. 37). This definition aptly reflects Mara's experiences and, as expected, the proceeds from the exploitation of her body are split among the exploiters – Akobi, Osey and the owner of the nightclub.

It is pertinent to note that sexual exploitation, like every other form of exploitation, is a violation of women's rights as humans. Mara only realizes the extent of her violation when she becomes aware that the real beneficiary of the rewards of her suffering is Comfort, now secretly resident in Germany, at Akobi's invitation. This is what prompts her to expose Akobi's shady deals to his German

wife, Gitte. Subsequently, Gitte divorces and reports Akobi to the authorities who arrest and jail him.

### **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed the forms of women's oppression and toxic relationships highlighted in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* with a view to revealing the factors responsible for them, and their repercussions on women. In the process of analysis, it has been established that the patriarchal nature of the African society facilitates three major forms of women's exploitation - socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation - as highlighted in the selected novels. Also discovered is the fact that these forms of exploitation are inextricably linked by gender inequality which sustains them, resulting in the subordination, dehumanization and marginalization of many African women.

Consequently, education, gender solidarity and awareness, sisterhood, economic independence and self-affirmation are advocated as some of the avenues through which women could be empowered to mediate such patriarchal tendencies to exploitation. The purpose of this study has been to examine critically and to expose domestic violence and its impact on women as metaphorised in the novel under study. The research work has disclosed the causes of domestic violence against women, the different forms of domestic violence that men inflict on women and the ensuing consequences and various instances of toxic relationships in the selected novel. The study reveals that domestic violence has an impact on women's lives and should be eradicated. The novelist has employed many literary techniques, including flashback to convey her messages. She has succeeded in impacting her readership by drawing her reader's attention to the drawbacks of domestic violence against women, and the psychological effects of toxic relationships on both men and women. The findings of the study clearly show that domestic violence and all shades of women oppression are bad practices which seriously affect women and society at large.

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