

A Critical Overview of Amma Darko's Faceless- a Review

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Abstract: *Amma Darko is a renowned Ghanaian writer whose contribution is geared towards fighting the course of the poor and needy in our society. Faceless like her first two novels, the Housemaid and Beyond the Horizon is intended to justify the view that Darko's aesthetic presentation in the novel is feminist. Several issues are raised in this novel. The issues are pertinent in our society and Darko, being a keen observer of human life has painstakingly written about them to expose the wrongs in the society and the moral lessons to be learnt from this piece of writing. This paper gives an overview of Darko's perception of the Ghanaian society and concludes by juxtaposing both positive and negative comments about the text.*

I. Summary of the text

The story begins with a street child, Fofu who earns her livelihood by washing vegetables and pick pocketing. She befriends another street child, Odarley and together they brace themselves for the harsh treatment of the streets. Fofu is nearly raped by Poison (the street lord) and is left with many unanswered questions. She is later hit with a blow of the death of her sister Baby T who is brutally murdered and dumped at the market square. This tragic loss leads her into the pursuit of justice and vengeance for the death of Baby T. After the perseverance of MUTE and Sylv Po, an epidemic is uncovered and the details of the fate of thousands of street children are laid bare. The perpetrators are then identified and the source of streetism discovered. Fofu is given a second chance to live a better life and her dream is actualized. The text is divided into three books.

Book One

Darko recounts the alarming situation of the complex details of street children and slum life in Accra with a fourteen year old girl Fofu being a victim of streetism. In book one, many issues and activities are put forth by the writer to arouse the interest of readers. The main theme of the text which is streetism is highlighted and emphasized. Some activities of those on the streets like prostitution and survival of the fittest is also unveiled. Mention is also made of people who would want to assist and support those on the streets. The major and minor characters in the book from Fofu who is the major character, her family, what led her into streetism, her activities on the streets, dreams and aspirations, the turn around and how it happened. Maa Tsuru, her activities ranging from giving birth to many children, her inability to take care of them, helplessness and irresponsibility amongst others are introduced.

Book Two

In this book, the author records Maa Turu's relationship with Kwei and the superstitious beliefs of the African man which to a larger extent was made to believe that the fertility of Maa Tsuru is even considered a curse. Amma Darko illustrated the events that occurred after Kwei left the scene and went on to introduce Nii Kpakpo as the new lover. The devilish acts of Kpakpo are brought to bear in his bid to sleep with mother and daughter. In this same book, the way Fofu and Baby T came by their names is explained.

Book Three

This book also opens and because it is the last in Faceless, it involves a lot of lessons. It begins with Kabria battling with her VW beetle popularly known as "creamy" which has been problematic to Kabria. In this book, there is a whole lot of action as MUTE, Sylv Po and Harvest fm gets down into action. Investigations into the death of Baby T have begun. All necessary quarters that must be contacted to help the investigation is on course.

II. ISSUES IN THE TEXT

Amma Darko uses many instances to portray society. Among such issues include the attitude of government functionaries to their work. The police are cited in this story as public servants who are to champion the course of citizens in the society. However, the vivid description of the police station as well as the attitude of the Inspector symbolically depicts the inefficiency and powerless this institution has been rendered to in our society.

The police station stood in a very busy area and was, simply put, a sorry sight Broken windows, leaking drains, cracked walls and peeling paint greeted Vickie and Kabria. The officer behind the outdated front desk, who seemed very bored with his world, his job and his very own self too, responded to their loud and clear greeting with a sullen nod... (pp.80-82)

In the same vein, the narrator contrasts the work of the police to that of the media and the MUTE group. While the police have been portrayed as powerless and inefficient, the media wield power and authority in this society. Considering the role the media (Harvest Fm) played in the unfolding of the story by assisting in exposing and uncovering some of the causes of street child, one needs to commend them. The media's role has become very essential to all and sundry.

Significantly, the role of the MUTE group should also be commended for being the mouth piece of the ordinary people in the society. Most NGOs even though not sponsored by the government seek the interest of the people. They investigate Baby T's Death and rehabilitate Fofo.

The belief in traditional religion and superstition is also heightened in the novel. The narrator reveals our traditional belief which we so much cherish and adore. These traditional beliefs influence our lives in so many ways. In the case of Maa Tsuru's family, we are made to believe they are cursed and this has reflected in their lives. Kwei's mother believes in superstition based on her traditional beliefs and prohibits her son from his involvement with a cursed woman. Witness her words:

Twice in the past, I woke up in the morning and you were gone. This time, it is I asking you to go. Go! Kwei, go! Go far away from here. The number "five" has always been in conflict with the spirit of this family. She is carrying your fourth child. Have you noticed? I shall not sit down idly and watch you go on to make fifth child with her. I shall not allow you to bring such calamity to bear on this family. So go away. It is the only way to keep you away from her. Go away. And this time, please, stay away for good. For the sake of us all... (p.126)

Our traditional religion is so powerful that if well managed can help curb so many outrageous incidences happening in our society. It is imperative for Africa to go back to acknowledge and recognise their customs and tradition, for adherence to such traditions will result in a disciplined nation.

Darko pays attention to the ordinary people in the society. She is so passionate about the plight of ordinary people to the extent that she presents most of her characters as grass root people. In the novel, there are the middle class group and the grass root category. Kabria, Addade, Dina and Sly Po are the adults who belong to the middle class while Maa Tsuru, Maami Broni, Kpapko, Kwei etc are grass root people. The portrait of Baby 'T', who is tortured throughout the novel, reveals the writer's focus on the grass root. Fofo and Odartey are made to play roles which depict the way of life of the ordinary people. Fofo has been rejected and pushed into the streets to fend for herself and her family as well:

A part of Fofo was and would always be the fourteen years that she was; but the harshness of life on the streets had also made a premature adult part of her. She was both a child and an adult could act like both; talk like both; think like both and feel like both...A handful of children and a few adults were already there and doing their own thing under the scrutinizing eyes of some early rising pigs and vultures. They found a free spot. Odarley raised her dress and pulled down her pants and got straight to business. Fofo also lifted her dress and squatted. Odarley who was observing her, shot out, "You are wearing no underpants?" (p.6)

It is worth noting that the setting of the story at Agbobbloshie specifically Sodom and Gomorrah is a typical slum area which seriously needs the attention of government. This is also to expose the hustle people go through to secure accommodation in Accra. Most houses in those areas do not have the basic necessities of life, like toilet facilities, etc.

The image of feminine gender is projected by the persona in this novel. The role of MUTE which is basically all women affair is to buttress the fact that what men can do women can do better. MUTE spearheaded and championed the voice of the voiceless. Fofo's grievances reach the government and the public with the assistance and intervention of MUTE. While women like Dina, Kabria are depicted as independent minded people who are able to decide their fate, others like Maa Tsuru, Maami Broni are unintelligent and narrow minded. Dina divorced her husband and singlehandedly set up MUTE. Kabria is able to combine role of wife, mother as well as pursue career.

Kabria often wondered which of them needed a more urgent release of tension. Whether it shouldn't be she, who after having been labelled the weaker sex, had to, in spite of a full time job, perform all of her traditional duties at home, without an iota of relief. Every day after work, how Adade set off en route to go and release his tension, she had to go and pick the children from school, head straight for home, change clothes, and go to the kitchen to see to dinner. Only to have him declare first thing on arrival home after releasing his tension... (p.14)

Maa Tsuru is feeble, suppressed and deceived by men. Men take her for granted and consistently used her for their selfish gains. Fofu's character contrasts that of Baby T. Fofu has the feminist spirit, so she is able to fight for her right, but Baby T like her mother is easily manipulated and influenced by the pressure from outsiders. This is evident in her involvement with Kpakpo, Onko and Poison.

Marriage is an important institution in our society. Darko has portrayed the concept of marriage because of its role in society. Two types of marriages are revealed in the novel: the marriage between Kabria and Adade, one portrayed as an ideal one as compared to Maa Tsuru's relationships. Kabria and Adade's marriage is that of a typical Ghanaian marriage where the woman is solely responsible for taking care of the home and the man's responsibility is to contribute only in cash to the up keep of the home. The only time Adade had to come home early to take care of the children received reactions such as:

*You won't be home when he comes?
So what will happen? Mum, it is okay.
You can go. If dad comes and we want
something that we would have asked of
you, we will tell him to pretend to be
you and do it for us. (p. 97)*

Amma Darko frowns upon educated men whose commitments to marriages are indifferent to that of uneducated men. Both educated men and uneducated men behave alike in this institution of marriage. One would expect men to pay attention to their children at home but they prefer the company of friends to that of their wives and children. Maa Tsuru has been involved with several men. Her involvement with Kwei ended up in the birth of Baby 'T' who never had any name from her father. Also, Kpakpo was not different. Maa Tsuru was deceived into believing that she was on the verge of getting married to Kpakpo which never materialised.

The author describes Maa Tsuru as primitive and unintelligent whose view about marriage is "a woman would rather maintain an unworthy man in her life than be seen as a woman with no man in her life" (p. 187). This has been the practice in our society where the number of live-in sexual partners is gradually outweighing that of the married couples and the responsibility of parents is determined by the type of marriage one engages.

The issue of battered women arises in the eyes of the narrator. Maa Tsuru, pregnant at a time, was pounced on by Kwei, a lover who is unhappy because he is not ready to father the child Maa Tsuru is carrying. Without any regrets, he goes about boasting about after this ungodly act:

*Maa Tsuru had just opened her lips to ask what
was amiss when she felt Kwei upon her. He pounced
on her like a cat on an unsuspecting mouse and began
a vicious pounding spree. He pounded Maa Tsuru
with his fists, landing the blows anywhere and
everywhere and on her pregnant body. The daylight
went out of Maa Tsuru. She began to bleed. Kwei grinned.
He pulled her up by one arm, held her by the back of
her neck and pushed her out of the house. Then he returned
to Agboo Ayee and told all there that, with immediate effect,
they had better start calling him Dr. Kwei, because he
had singlehandedly and cost effectively terminated
an unwanted pregnancy. (p.124)*

Baby 'T' is also beaten to death; Fofu also suffers from the hands of poison. Men who are supposed to protect women rather use them as 'punching bags'. This should not be encouraged in our society.

Moreover, children in the novel are enrolled into all kinds of trade through no fault of theirs. Child labour is a menace in our society which should be curtailed by the government. Fofu, Odartey etc. are deprived of access to education because of their parent's irresponsible life styles. The narrator recounts that these children also send money to their parents for the family's upkeep. Baby 'T' and Afi (the house help of Dina) are sold into prostitution. Unfortunately for Baby 'T' who does not benefit directly from the proceeds of the prostitution, she dies early. Afi, on the other hand is fortunate to have escaped from the woman she was sent to. Child Labour needs to be eradicated from our society. The rules governing Child Rights should be properly enforced in Ghana and this will help ease the burden of these children who are abandoned with their dreams dashed:

“My dream, began the boy, “is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy in 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... She is always in a hurry to see my 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.” (pp.1 & 2)

III. Conclusion

One would allege that *Faceless* lambasts men by hammering only the bad side of them and portrays them in a very bad light. Also, one wonders why the suffering of women in the novel is unending with the exception of the protagonist, Fofu who gets the second chance to amend her life. Although the writer may have reasons for the divisions of the novel into three parts, the chunk of the narration is done in book one; book two has only three chapters.

What makes the novel an intriguing one is the flamboyant language used. There is clarity of language which keeps readers in suspense and also makes the story fresh and a life.

The cover of the book is in black and red. Artistically, red signifies danger while black signifies sadness, pain, agony, anguish and death. The overview of the book is about activities of miscreants and how they inflict pain on some people resulting in the death of a character. Sexual promiscuity and rape is also rife in the story. The book, did not, relent in its effort to talk about the various social vices in our community. Anyone who reads the story will attest to the fact that most of the scenes are not pleasant and as such the red and black colours used. The suspense also made the red colour all the more important. The death of Baby T, the commission of suicide by Onko, and the battering of Maa Tsuru that led to her miscarriage give credence to the black colour. The black and white mask/head/face with two additional shadows, tells any artist, on first hand, the twists and turns of the novel, and how intelligence, tact and discipline is needed to unravel the mystery and find the perpetrators of the various crimes.

Anyidoho's back page note also gives the book more credibility and dignity as the man in question is a distinguished scholar of language and literature, and has also risen through the ranks to become a professor in the language. Sub-Saharan Publishers have once again proven that they do not just bring out publications for the sake of publicity, but they bring out publications that are, indeed, worthy of being published.

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