

Social Commitment in Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* and *Faceless*

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Abstract

When a literary work is conceived, it demonstrates the fact that a writer is sensitive to the world around him or her and thus, his or her work bear the responsibility of creating an impact positively on that society. This paper arises from this fact and exemplifies how Amma Darko is socially committed to shaping the moral conscience of contemporary African society using her novels – *The Housemaid* and *Faceless*. Using social theory as a theoretical bearing, the paper analyses the novels and discovers that Amma uses especially her characters and settings as forces to create a social transformation in contemporary African society.

Keywords

social theory, novel, cultural, social change, impact of literature

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Introduction

Social commitment is by its very nature an act or an art of dedication by a writer to the development of human values. Its role as a potent medium of moral development entails more of responsibility than privilege to the writer. It carries a great deal of social significance especially when it is committed to uplifting humanistic gestures and principles. The publication of a literary work is essentially an act of commitment through which the writer seeks to present ideas relating to perceptions about life visible in that society. This in turn, denotes a pledge, an involvement of the nature of a binding promise, implying a clear stand in a specific problem arising out of a deep consciousness of the various dimensions of the issues inherent in that given society.

This is why John Anthony Cuddon (2013: 139) says that “a committed or engaged writer is one who through his work, is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes especially those which are political or ideological and in aid of social reform”. This affirms the fact that literature emanating from any society does more than enlightenment. It is a tool for the propagation and fostering of change within that given society directly. This is primarily the case with Amma Darko whose literary novels are greatly committed to the erasure of social and moral decadence inherent in rural Ghana and Africa largely. She joins fellow Ghanaian female writer Ama Ata Aidoo as well as other female writers across Africa in focusing on the social ills of modern African society, especially issues that concern and affect the African girl child and women particularly. Her commitment as a writer in Ghana expands to an inclusion of themes that range from general national corruption and greed, the role and view of women in modern Ghanaian (and African) society, destructive woman-to-woman dynamics, pursuit of education, and the politics of poverty as well as polygamy and its economic and social influence on African family values. Albeit, these subjects are inherent in her novels, this paper is basically an exploration of Darko’s resolve in the enlightenment campaign on the essence of education for the eradication of the social menace in rural African societies generally, immoral sexual behaviors, cruel cultural practices against women, the consequences of poor parenting the street child phenomenon, the consequences of greed and corruption. The focus is on two of Darko’s novels – *The Housemaid* and *Faceless*.

1. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts social theory as its theoretical framework which serves as an anchor to the explication of the commitment of Amma Darko’s works to the development of moral standards in the African society. According to Austin Harrington (2015: 1), “Social theory can be defined as the study of ... ways of thinking about social life. It encompasses ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behavior, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity and ‘civilization’. This implies that an author’s thoughts and depictions about the above mentioned component of a particular society especially in a critical manner. In this regard, the idea that a writer’s depictions in literature portray his/her commitment towards the change and development of that society introspectively is re-emphasized. Social Theory is a naturalistic theory that focuses specifically on social issues and the drive towards “revolutions and utopia, and numerous other concepts and problems in social life” (Harrington, 2005: 1). Social theory aims at social change. It establishes itself as an important tradition in criticism because according to Harrington, it is “...believed that people

who [do] not pause to engage in contemplation and reflection [have] no points of orientation for conducting their lives in practice” (2) Thus, for Amma Darko, commitment in this sense is about a re-think of the moral decay, social deterioration of her contemporary African society. She therefore reaffirms herself in practice by depicting through literature using the novel genre, the social life obtainable in the African setting as shown in her novels under study to further cause a social change in behavior for development.

In fiction, the fictional society becomes a background against which the personal relationships are studied and individuals are merely illustrations of the aspects of the way of life. Thus, Social theory is chosen to aid the analysis of Amma’s depiction of the rural illiterate society in Ghana and Africa largely with a view to enunciating a social change for the better and a re-shaping of the moral decay visible in the novels as applicable to the real society.

2. Synopsis of *The Housemaid*

The Housemaid is a short novel which tells the story of the homicidal death of an abandoned baby and the different responses of women and the men. Woven through the plot is a bottom-line concern - that is, the truth about what it takes for women to advance economically and professionally in a male-dominated world. This is what Tika, the protagonist, discovers after failing her fifth-form exam at school. As the story unwinds, it becomes obvious that without adequate education and professional training, women like Tika end up sleeping their way with men to the top of their careers. Tika seeks to remedy a familial omission: she would spend some of her wealth training a girl from her dead father’s extended family, undoubtedly a fitting memorial gift to her beloved father, who was ill-treated by her mother. Efia comes on the scene as the trainee housemaid, gets pregnant, then, blames it on one of her mistress’s lovers, an impotent civil-servant. As Efia’s grandmother and mother’s extortion plan falls apart, Efia runs away and soon delivers a down-syndrome baby girl who dies minutes after birth. Out of fright, Efia disposes off the baby’s body, which has decomposed from being carried around in a plastic bag.

News of the discovery of the body of the baby in the thicket spreads throughout the town, reaching her porter friends, one of whom turns her in. Efia shows up to give an account of what happened, but ironically, the novel’s tension is resolved by the deft, quick thinking of one of Efia's porter friends, whose motive is quite simply to cover for herself and her cronies.

3. Amma’s Show of Commitment in *The Housemaid*

The Housemaid is Amma Darko’s social satire about life in a contemporary African society. Its chief focus is her emphasis on the essence of obtaining education which is a basis for enlightenment for the progress and development of a society. She uses the character of Bibio to challenge parents who have taken likely the issue of education and have not considered the relevance of prioritizing education for children especially the girl child. Mami Korkor becomes surprised at her ten-year-old daughter who finds every avenue and opportunity to make it clear to her that because of her neglect for education, their condition cannot be improved. She says “too bad. You should have sent me to school to learn some manners then. But since you rather let me stay home to play mother to you and your friend’s sons — boys I’m only three years older than

— where else can I learn my manners but in the streets?” (Darko, 1998). Bibio’s reply is Darko’s authorial position on the neglect of the essence of education and its value to the development of a society. By Bibio’s comment, Darko’s dedication to the enlightenment of the African initial intuition against the education of the African girl child to serve as an illumination on the fact that educating a girl child is an emancipation tool from continuous poverty to development nationally. This call also goes a long way in support of contemporary agitations for the female gender recognition in the polity and policy formations globally.

The Housemaid is a combination of diverse and difficult social positions of women in the African society. Amma Darko begins the text with a warning about the significance of the status of being female. The resounding effect of the warning is further confirmed by the account of one typical, desperately poor old woman who is made a scapegoat for her family’s poverty and then ostracized from her village. The main illustration of this derogatory position of women in the society is evident in the suffering undergone by Effia when she leaves the city. Faced with reprehensive return to the village and the dreary prospects of life in Kataso, the pregnant Efia flees and takes refuge with her former village playmate, precariously surviving in a particular centre as a porter. When her child is born mongloid, and dies soon after birth, she flees again, secretly taking the child’s body with her to have it buried in Kataso. In the end, it proves fortunate for her that she is frightened away from the dead child’s body, for the villagers would have condemned her (or her grandmother) for witchery, had they seen the dead body. At the end of the novel, Tika and Teacher’s discussion illustrate a heathenized society which treats the women folk with disdain and neglect, thus:

“So what do you think would have happened had she delivered that damaged baby in Kataso?”

“I cannot even begin to think about it!” Teacher replied. “But as sure as night turns to day and day to night, believe me, Kataso would have been thrown into a frenzied orgy of witch-hunting. And only God knows how many poor lonely old widows would have been spared. So we can thank God not only that Efia did not give birth in Kataso, but also that the remains were found in a state beyond identifying as having Down’s.”

“God help Ghana’s poor, lonely old women!” Tika muttered to herself.

“And God help us all!” Teacher added. (105-106)

By these authorial comments, Darko insinuates that this very harsh and cynical notion of women’s lot and of village immorality should be set off. A replacement of this is the receptive ability and a sense of communal village responsibility that Akua and her friends took upon themselves for the pregnant Efia. They help look after her and show intense concern at her disappearance. Thus, this depiction by Darko exemplifies the way whole generations are being ruined in African societies as a result of social neglect and scorn for single parents. Single mothers face this the most. Darko’s novel describes how many of the girls from the villages end their lives in precarious and dangerous conditions, thus, describing with commitment a social tragedy in contemporary African rural society.

Amma Darko also uses the Kataso setting to examine the effect of sexual irresponsibility inherent in contemporary African society generally. Kataso is a grooming ground where boys and girls are sexually hyper-active. From the author’s perspective, while it appears on the surface that both boys and girls are yielding to their teenage sex drive in Kataso, Darko’s responsibility is on the depiction of irresponsible boys who are always on the prowl, cruelly and indiscriminately

displaying their immature sexual behaviours. She uses the chieftaincy decision of the traditional ruler of Kataso to elucidate the possibility of curbing waywardness in a society. For instance, the story is told of Kofi Akorti who impregnates a fourteen-year old girl, bringing to twelve the number of girls he has impregnated. The chief of the village thinks that in the best interest of the village, “Akorti [should carry] his willful and undisciplined penis away before he impregnates another twelve girls” (Darko, 1998). This defines Darko’s commitment to the campaign against sexual immorality and irresponsibility in contemporary Africa. Darko does not stop at this; she continues to frown at the level and extension of the display of this sexual irresponsibility even by adults like Tika and Madam Sekyiwa – Tika’s mother. The mentorship that plays between Sekyiwa, Tika, and later Efia signifies Darko’s illustration on the consequences of poor parenting and guidance. The tragedies that befall both Tika and Efia arise as a result of loose parenting efforts, and Amma Darko exercises her duties of educating parents who flaunt nonchalance to the negative behaviour of their children in contemporary Africa. This nonchalance has necessitated the growth and expansion of various social vices such as cultism, kidnapping, corruption, examination malpractice, and a host of sharp practices and malpractices prevalent and existing amongst numerous societies especially the African society currently. Darko hopes that as ‘charity begins at home’, so will every good deed that leads to national development begin from the nucleus of the society – the family.

As part of Amma’s commitment as a writer to enhance social consciousness on the consequences of greed and corruption, she demonstrates its ugly nature in the attitudes of Tika’s adversaries. Her advisers particularly Efia’s grandmother and her mother (as well as her drunken, greedy father), have their own ideas about getting their hands on Tika’s cash, since they are distant relatives and since Efia will be there, “planted”, so to speak, in Tika’s household. The plot they hatch is for Efia to fall “innocently” pregnant, so that her mother and her grandmother will pretend intense outrage and heartbreak, but will somehow push Tika into adopting Efia’s baby which will be in their interest, as a medium to their wealth creation plot and exploit at the detriment of Tika. Similarly, the Custom Officers’ attitude at the border gates amounts to acts of corruption against the state. The Chief Custom Officer at the border in most cases declines cash offer as bribe, preferring sexual satisfaction. All these are demands that are inimical to the progress of any state. For instance, in the case of the intention of Efia, Efia’s grandmother and her father, tradition considers their desire a sacrilege and can lead to a generational curse that will leave rhetorical questions unanswered for decades. It is also adverse for a Custom Officer (talk more of Custom Officers and or Chief Custom Officer) to demand enticement at a border when on patrol. The consequences are grievous when considered at any formal polity engagement. Thus, by these depictions, Darko’s desire is for Africa to get enlightenment on the mishaps eating up the social and economic setup of the African continent generally. The same strong will for social change goes for the context inherent in *Faceless* as shown in the analysis below.

4. Synopsis of *Faceless*

The novel opens when fourteen-year-old Fofu is sleeping on an old cardboard at the Agboghloshie market. In her sleep, she dreamt of living in a home with a roof and a toilet, a dream shared by other street children like her. She is suddenly woken up by Poison, a street lord who attempts to rape her. Fofu resists him and runs to Odarley, her best friend who lives in a

rented wooden shack. Fofu’s mother, Maa Tsuru, informs Fofu, that her elder sister, Baby T is dead and that Poison threatened her into silence over Baby T’s death and urges Fofu to leave for her safety.

Kabria, a mother of three children, who lives in the neighbourhood in Accra and works with MUTE - a non-governmental agency runs into Fofu at the Agbloghoshie market while shopping for vegetables. Kabria stands with other spectators at the spot where Baby T’s body was found. Fofu then tries to steal her purse. She rescues her from the angry mob who intends to lynch her for her act. Fofu reveals her identity and tells Kabria that Baby T is her sister. influence of Kabria, MUTE gets interested in Baby T’s matter and grants Fofu protection by taking her into temporal custody while conducting investigations regarding Baby T’s death. Baby T is the third child of Maa Tsuru and is born after a brutal beating. Her father disappears, leaving her mother to fend for herself and the children. Her mother finds a new lover Kpakpo, who sexually abuses Baby T. She reports the rape incident to an uncle who lives in the same compound with them, and he rapes her also. Baby T is later forced to a prostitution ring consisting of Madam Abidjan, Maami Brooni and Poison, the street lord and ring leader. She is made to work as a child prostitute in Maami Brooni’s brothel with her earnings sent to Maa Tsuru (her mother) who simply turned a blind eye.

Onko visits a native doctor who tells him that Baby T is the reason for his problems. So, he goes in search of Baby T as Kpakpo helps him connect with her once again. Poison eventually leads Kpakpo to Maami Brooni’s brothel where Baby T works as a prostitute. Baby T is reminded of what Onko did to her in the past and vehemently refuses to sleep with him. Enraged at her refusal, Poison slapped and beats her into submission. Baby T later found dead on the concrete floor with her head split open. She was alone with Onko in the room at the time of her death. Onko committed suicide thereafter. The consequences of this goes to demonstrate that streetism as a contemporary menace shortens the life of young prospective youths who can be useful to the society in future. The onus is hereby vested on parents to consider the option presented by the juxtaposition of the Kabria family with the Maa Tsuru family to correct wrongs made to save African youths from the deadly hands of streetism.

4.1. Analysis of *Faceless*

In *Faceless*, Amma Darko sets for herself the social task of portraying with empathy the manner in which some mothers allow themselves to be burdened by discriminatory cultural, social, and even religious structures. The end result of such behaviour is the mothers’ failure in the eyes of their daughters in whose judgment such mothers stand forever condemned. Darko’s second task is to portray victorious mothers who apply foresight, courage, and reasoning in their determination to confront and overthrow those socially constructed norms and practices which undermine a mothers’ sense of self. Darko elevates these victorious mothers as role models for their daughters. She presents mothers whose life stories teach readers that an awareness of the value of mothers can transform their societies in numerous positive ways. Thus, this also stresses the fact that the role of mothers is not limited to only the nurturing children but (as Darko expands it to encompass) their contribution to solving national problems and contributing towards national development. Basically, it is Darko’s desire to depict the distinction between positive and negative motherhood as she contrasts the portrait of Maa Tsuru and Kabria. Kabria and her colleagues at MUTE respond to social change by rejecting all those strictures that militate

against women's self-realization. Two examples will be cited here to reveal the basic differences in lifestyles of Maa Tsuru and Kabria.

Darko's elevation of Kabria and positioning her as a role model for her readership while condemning the other (Maa Tsuru) because of the irresponsible choices she makes is highly effective. Albeit, these mothers (Kabria and Maa Tsuru) are both challenged by the trials of motherhood, Kabria is able to strategize in such a way that she is not burdened by these trials. She prevails over all challenges and is able to raise her children in a decent manner. Maa Tsuru is an opposite to Kabria in the sense that she allows the trials of motherhood to cower her into irrational resolutions. She is not only incapable of reasoning but she allows her children to suffer the repercussions of her irresponsible behaviour. By this juxtaposition, Darko is able to emphasize the consequences of poor thinking and indecisiveness, poor educational qualification attainment, and low level of formal interactional abilities which serve as Maa Tsuru's deficiencies, as a mother. Consequently, the commitment displayed here by Darko is for every reader to acknowledge that education is an emancipation tool from poverty, and that educating the girl child is a factor that needs to be considered in every ramification for the continuous development of any nation especially on the African continent.

The street child phenomenon is also another reality that is treated in the novel. As the novel begins, without any preamble, the author launches us into the world of the street child where we find Fofu, Baby T, Odarley, Macho, Poison and other malnourished children are living. It is a world where the struggle to live defeats the essence of living itself and where the semblance of comfort remains forever an illusion. The street child merely exists rather than lives. At night they strip off their clothes and with all the careless abandon that is laced with an ever increasing hopelessness, find an escape route from their pathetic existence as they engage in sexual misbehaviour. The causative of the street child phenomenon is always poor or loose parenting. If Baby T, Odarley, Macho Poison had experienced good parenting or had come in contact with formal education like Kabria and her children, the least would have ever occurred to them as the misfortune of becoming street children and ending up as destitutes and consequently facing death in different dimensions like they did. These depictions are Darko's fervent dedications to the enlightenment of her society for its development basically (Darko, 2003).

Baby T is typical of the street girls who are occasionally found dead and dumped somewhere in the slum. Sexually abused by her stepfather Kpakpo and the supposedly generous Onko, Baby T is handed over to Mama Abidjan by her mother, Maa Tsuru, possibly to prevent her from further sexual abuse. Baby T is introduced into prostitution unknown to her mother and to cover it up, Maami Broni regularly sends an envelope of money through Kpakpo to her. This money is actually part of the earnings from Baby T's prostitution. Basically, the street children of Sodom and Gomorrah are not born in those conditions they find themselves. Their unfortunate state is the result of a conspiracy of several factors which range from poverty at home, family break-up to brutality in their homes. The fragile peace at Maa Tsuru's home, for example, takes a turn for the worse when Kpakpo steps in as the children's stepfather. Unable to bear the nightly creaking bed and the moaning from their mother as Kpakpo makes love to her MaaTsuru's two sons leave the house in frustration.

In a subtle artistic ingenuity, Darko hints at one of the solutions to the menacing social problem of parents abandoning their children on the streets. Darko uses a reporter from one of the

broadcasting stations to achieve this. The journalist asks some street children during a survey about their most passionate dreams. One of the boys says his joy will be

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 when 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. 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 (Darko, 2003: 3-4).

A similar response is derived from one of the girls who also decries that “I wish to be hugged even if I am smelling of the streets (Darko, 2003). What can be inferred from the responses of the children interviewed above is the inescapable fact that street children are first and foremost from loveless homes. Children need love and care in order to develop naturally. A home devoid of these vital ingredients of human development is nothing but a huge prison to the child. He or she therefore, sees the open streets as a comfort zone. This is especially common during teenage years when the urge to take to the streets to celebrate one’s “freedom” is rampant and this is Darko’s utmost concern in this novel.

That a functional and conducive family capable of restraining children from the streets is possible is the rationale for Darko’s story of the Adades. This family may not be perfect as witnessed the eccentricities of the elusive husband and father, Adade. Yet the family is intact without any of the children thinking of seeking shelter on the streets. There is room for all including the old and battered Creamy. The children are in school and together the family members can sit for meals daily. That in spite of her tight schedule of work Kabria can still go the extra mile to keep the family together not minding Adade’s familial indifference is a testament to the fact that a workable family is not beyond the reach of single parents like Maa Tsuru.

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If keeping children off the streets is possible as demonstrated by the family of Kabria, rehabilitating those already on the streets is not an insurmountable task too as seen in the narrative. This is the significance of MUTE, a non-governmental organization that is basically into documentation and information build-up on similar situations. MUTE is a four-member all female organization dedicated to keeping female teenagers off the streets. Together with other organizations and Harvest FM Radio Station, which helps in the publicity of their work, MUTE helps in providing training facilities for these street teenagers willing to learn a trade and improve themselves. It is MUTE who rescues Fofu from her depth of almost social and psychological damnation after the death of Baby T. Through MUTE, she is convinced to abandon the streets stop associating with her street friends and undergo a series of check-up at the Korle-Bu Hospital for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (Darko, 2003).

Amma Darko uses many instances to portray the social ills inherent in the African 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 powerlessness the institution have been reduced to in our society.

The police station stood in a very busy area and is, simply put, a sorry sight with 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.... (Darko, 2003)

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) plays 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 non-governmental agencies, even though not sponsored by the government seek the interest of the people. They investigate Baby T's death and rehabilitate Fofu. These are the practical instances the author uses the selected novels to display her commitment towards the development of her society from social ills. Thus, the setting of the novels alongside its characters becomes useful tools for Darko to achieve her aim.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that literature does more than creating fun and providing information. This is why Lawrence Olanrele Bamidele's (2000: 4) claim that "...literature ... is a discipline pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it and desire to change" it becomes necessarily acceptable and applicable. To examine an author's commitment to his or her society is basically an observation of the author's perception of that society and his or her aspiration to modify the structures inherent in that same society for the better. Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* and *Faceless* are typical demonstrations of an author's commitment to adequately transform a society for good. These novels are her quest to make a change for the contemporary condition and state of youths across Africa. To say the least, the present state of immorality and social decay of the African youth has continued to raise concerns and discourses. The commitment displayed by Amma Darko in these novels is not just a realistic re-presentation of the social situation of Ghana, but a critique of the psycho-social behaviour of the lot of many youths in Africa.

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