



## **“Living in Bondage:” Pessimistic Feminism in Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon***

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### **Abstract**

The contemporary African fictional category exhibits significant interest in feminism, including diaspora feminism, especially with the expansion of women's geographical and cultural spaces from rural and urban to diasporic settings. This represents a theoretical attempt at correcting the gender imbalance. Ironically, such efforts are often undermined and trivialised by a reluctance to portray fully liberated female characters, even in less restrictive contexts. The noted incongruity and cynicism, by diminishing the regularly constructed female autonomy, demand serious attention from literary scholarship. Guided by MacKinnon's notion of Female Objectification and pornography, this study examines the continued exploitation of women, both at home and diaspora, in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. First, it identifies the nexus between the portrayal of commodification, gender disparity and feminist protestations, without ignoring their socio-economic and political implications. The study further demonstrates that the inescapable and enduring denigration of African women, embodied in the character Mara, tends to render the long-anticipated emancipation of women unattainable. Lastly, it concludes that Darko's feminism exhibits elements of cynicism and ambivalence, even as it represents gender inequality as inimical to sustainable human development.

**Keywords:** Bondage, commodification, culture, pessimism, contradiction, self-autonomy.

## Introduction

The 21st century is overtly intolerant of inequality, especially as regards race, class and gender. Gender inequality has consistently attracted the attention of governments, non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and scholarship, at global and local levels. The advocacy for gender parity has problematised and politicised gender, with revolutionary writings like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) providing the substance, vocabulary and formula for feminist thoughts and itineraries. African Feminism, formally inaugurated in the late 20th century, interrogates "discriminatory traditional customs" that inferiorise and marginalise women in different African societies of the world (Abass & Fusun, 2017, p. 159). Despite the advocacy, many African countries, like Ghana, seem far away from achieving the UN SDG 5 – gender equality. For instance, the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Ghana 117th out of 156 countries, and based on its progress, 23rd in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, "Ghana is doing worse than most countries in advancing towards gender equality", and such inequality is sustained through "agencies of socialisation," including family, school, peer groups, and media

(Amoah & Dome, 2022, p. 1; Appiah-Kubi, Ceter & Luboder, 2020, p. 77). The primary text of this research, set in Ghana, vividly dramatises this within its African and diasporic contexts.

In the present "age of migration" (Castle & Miller, 1998, p. 41) where Africans constitute a significant proportion of migrants in the West, gender inequality appears to have migrated with Africans to diasporic societies, such as the UK, the United States of America and Germany. This is evident in developments like human trafficking, extensively explored by the novel under study. The 2018 Global Slavery Index records that 40.3 million people are victims of trafficking globally, 71% female and 29 % male, with Africa accounting for 23% of the total population subjected to this modern form of slavery. Sexual exploitation is classified as the "most commonly identified" form of human trafficking, constituting 79% of cases (UNDOC, p. 6). Furthermore, UNICEF (2017, p. 1) notes that Ghana serves as a "source, transit and destination" country for sexual trafficking. Thus, Ghanaian girls, like the protagonist of the novel, are regular victims of the international menace. This explains why trafficking, with its attendant sexual exploitation and pornography, is considered as a "gender-

based violence" (Nwadinigwe & Osarenren, 2007, p. 309; Russell, 2014, p. 533). In the same vein, the 2015 United Nations General Assembly (UN – GA) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 affirms that such violence against women exists in both public and private spheres and must be urgently addressed. Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* serves as a medium to interrogate this social problem.

Literature, as a cultural product, contributes meaningfully to the global efforts to reclaim and represent erased female individualities and perspectives, particularly within the context of emerging developments, such as migration, diasporic experiences, and human trafficking. These literary interventions aim to liberate contemporary women from enduring cultural constraints. The attempts are manifest in texts like Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister the Serial Killer*, Ruby Yayra Goka's *Even When Your Voice Shakes*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and Amma Darko's novel, *Beyond the Horizon*. Consequently, the sexual exploitation of women continues to attract significant scholarly attention, both within and outside the literary domain, and from different perspectives.

## Literature review

Non-literary studies on gender disparity in contemporary African societies largely focused on their cultural foundation and consequences. Jousse (2021, np) observes that despite "significant progress," Africa is "still strongly marked" by gender disparities and their attendant violence, as women experience subordination by their spouses and these have profound socio-economic and political impact. Furthermore, the African Development Report (ADR, 2015, p. 104) identifies "less freedom ... significant reduction in the level of autonomy" enjoyed by women in their households as a consequence of gender violence. Again, African Gender Index Report 2019 (p. 11) and Mikidady (2022, p. 14 & 15), individually identify "restrictive ... discriminatory ... cultural" norms and practices as "impetuses" behind dominant gender inequality in Africa and observe feminist scholars' efforts to "devastate" such "cultural holds." The studies highlight efforts toward gender parity, the persistence of inequality within heterosexual relationships, and their impact and cultural dynamics, which this study explores from a literary perspective.

The significant contribution and artistic intention of (African) feminist writings in truncating patriarchal bondage are noted

by several literary essays. According to Fafa (2020, p. 90 & 91), feminist consciousness is reflected in literature which has "become ... a creative tool" employed by African writers to interrogate subordination and the culture that informs it, in order to elevate African women. Tulası (2022, p. 2) adds that the texts articulate the "collective erasure" of women by restrictive cultural stipulations, aiming to "change the dynamics of power" towards "crafting possibilities of liberation." Thus, the scholar identifies the goal of feminist writings, without ignoring its root in inequality, gender and culture. Again, Tulası's attention to cultural demands which constitute "persistent bottlenecks" to the freedom mission (p. 2) suggests the contradictions that attend Darko's feminism and which this research is centrally interested in.

Shifting attention to characters, Begum (2006, pp. 111, 122 & 144) detects portrayal of women characters who "do not accept passively, the ... cultural or political ... conditions" inflicted upon them. Furthermore, Muthoni (2020, p. 683) identifies attempts by female characters to achieve unrestricted independence and fulfilment by escaping oppressive "matrimonial contexts" as a "prevalent motif" in feminist fiction.

These interpretations validate characters' revolt against bondage within heterosexual relationships but tend to ignore the encoded acquiescence to exploitation and its implications.

Darko's cynical and equivocal approach to sexual exploitation of African women at rural, urban and diaspora settings has not escaped scrutiny by critics. Osaghele and Ohiwerei (2019, p. 434) observe that the novel dramatises women's exploitation in "traditional ... (and) modern" societies. Though the scholars' reading also notes the novel's expansive canvas, its submission that it dramatises how women can conquer "various forms of oppression" (436) needs re-examination, considering Mara's life of irremediable bondage. Other essays address this gap.

Awitor's observation of denunciation of commodification at home and in diaspora and "impossibility to break the chains of her (Mara) enslavement ... (and) sub-human bondage" (2019, p. 183 & 175), illuminates the territoriality and incongruity of *Beyond the Horizon*.

Umezuruike (2015, p. 293) accentuates the cynicism component in submitting that Mara's development from "naivety to self-knowledge ... instead of liberating her" from her long marital bondage, "still keeps her captive." The last two essays,

respectively, align with the argument of the essay, but fail to accord profound attention to the articulated ambiguity and pessimism. To make up for identified gaps, the research attempts to demonstrate how the observed inescapability and irreversibility are knitted into the victimisation of female characters in rural, urban and diasporic environments, introducing ambiguity and cynicism into the autonomy project of the text, and other typical feminist texts.

### Methodology

To achieve its objectives, the study adopts the first arm of its title from the 1992 Nigerian movie, *Living in Bondage*, generally considered the formal beginning of Nollywood, because it adequately conveys the irremediable exploitation under focus. It selects the Ghanaian Amma Darko's contemporary novel, *Beyond the Horizon*, motivated by the need for an exhaustive examination of the subject. The choice is primarily governed by the novel's post-colonial Ghanaian rural, urban, and German settings, and its interest in sexual and economic exploitations of women, within heterosexual relationships. The research engages in character and setting analysis through a close reading of the text. Analysis is mainly steered by three major factors. The first is how characters'

perceptions, beliefs, words, and actions exhibit and suggest the inferiorisation, subalternisation and victimisation of women, as well as contradict efforts towards their freedom. The second is the cultural role of patriarchy in perpetuating the condition, and the third, the psychological, physical, economic, revolutionary, and gender implications of the noted commodification. Moreover, the examination is facilitated by relevant secondary print and internet materials. The research adopts its interpretative lens from MacKinnon's feminist notion of Objectification and Pornography.

### Theoretical framework: MacKinnon's notion of objectification

Objectification is developed as a "key term" and an essential framework for comprehending, researching and mediating in gender relations in sociocultural contexts where the female body is sexually objectified (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 38; Szymanski et al., 2011, p. 6). Objectification, as a scholarly subject, is traceable to Kant's 1760s to 1794 *Lectures on Ethics*, popularised by works of anti-pornography critics Dworkin and MacKinnon and admitted into feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s.

Catharine MacKinnon's 1987 notion conceptualises objectification as a

concomitant factor of gender inequality constructed and perpetuated by pornography and found in all established heterosexual relationships, such as marriage. For MacKinnon, "to be sexually objectified means" imposing a social meaning on one that positions them "to be sexually used," and female sexuality is socially constructed, on the basis of its looks, as a thing/object, which can be purchased, possessed and consumed by male sexuality "for sexual pleasure" (p. 138 & 173). She submits that the perception of women as objects, rather than humans, validates their abuse. Therefore, in MacKinnon's 'imposition account', women are exhibited as suitable "objects of instrumentalising attitudes and treatment," in a manner that weakens their autonomy and status (Jutten, 2016, p. 28).

MacKinnon attaches freedom and rationality to personhood, perceives its existence as "an end to itself," and assumes that women, by possessing instrumental value, cannot be described as an end in themselves as they exist to the "end of male pleasure" in pornography (p.173). She defines pornography as a "sexual reality" (p.173) and:

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through

pictures or words that also includes women dehumanised as sexual objects, things, or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission or servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. (176)

MacKinnon explains the consent and economic factors of objectification by stating that in pornography, men "create scenes" in which women desperately crave their sexual violation and conquest with "money (as) the medium of force" (1993, pp. 28 & 148). In MacKinnon's "sexual subordination theory," Malone (2017, pp. 12 & 13) identifies two interrelated theories of "inequality and ... gender," and the proposition that social disparity is "not a problem of differences" in biology but the active use of the difference in maintaining "masculine dominance." The scholar also notes MacKinnon's suggestion that to end sexual objectification, pornography-

dependent gender disparity must be de-established.

MacKinnon's notion is considered capable of bearing the analytical burden of this research for a number of reasons. First, it provides for the comprehension of the role of culture in the (sexual) bondage of female characters within the text's patriarchal societies. Second, its focus on all heterosexual relationships, irrespective of location, renders it suitable for analysis of commodification within different types of heterosexual relationships in rural, urban and diasporic societies of the novel. Third, the pornography component provides a robust conceptual standpoint for identification and examination of the nature, process and impact of serial sexual exploitation of female characters. Last, the acquiescence and money elements can account for the respective failed attempts at freedom, and Mara's degeneration to drug addiction and porn films. Thus, the concept supplies the impetus for the research's conclusion that Darko's feminism displays cynicism and ambivalence, by its perpetuation of sexual exploitation and gender inequality, even as it represents both as inimical to human development.

### Synopsis

Armah Darko's novel *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) is a homodiegetic narrative which

opens from the end. The protagonist Mara is both the narrating and experiencing 'I.' It chronicles Mara's life as a daughter in the village, wife in the city and prostitute in diaspora. She was sold by her father to Akobi, who took her to the city, where he abuses her physically and sexually. Akobi misleads Mara into migrating to Germany, after him, and there blackmailed her into prostitution and pockets all her earnings. Eventually, she escaped Akobi's asphyxiating grips and gained financial independence, but is trapped in a life of sexual exploitation, drug addiction and porn stardom. At the end of the plot, Mara is perpetually alienated from her family, which benefits from her unalleviated commodification.

### Living in Bondage

*Beyond the Horizon* provides some of the most lurid and disturbing images of economic and sexual exploitation of African women within heterosexual relationships. Apart from Mama Kiosk, no other female character achieved untruncated victory. However, by its severity, intensity, unremittingness, and irreversibility, Mara's abuse is unrivalled and is largely responsible for the cynical and ambiguous character of the text. Mara's progressive exploitation and chronic bondage exhibit four major

stages across rural, urban and diaspora societies, each inaugurated by a physical journey. The portrayal suggests that, in Africa, to "come into the world as a she" (Darko's *The Housemaid*, 1998, p. 3) is to be sentenced to life imprisonment. The protagonist's name, Mara, seems deliberately adopted, from the biblical book of Ruth (1: 20), to achieve a dramatisation of her corresponding bitter experiences, as an African woman.

The origin of Mara's servitude and victimisation is traced back to her "little African village, Naka" (p.3), using flashback and lodged in her wet and muddled appearance, from her repeated journey to the village well. The accompanying lack of self-autonomy and commodification of African women, as daughters and wives in the family, are subsequently displayed in the total exclusion of Mara and her mother from the selection of Mara's husband, primarily governed by bride price and social status, rather than the "character of the man" (p. 4). Intensifying the transactional image, Mara is "bought ... off very handsomely" with beads, gold jewellery, hot drinks and cows (p. 7). Osaghele and Ohiwerei (2019, p. 437) explain that in patriarchal African societies (represented by Mara and Akobi's respective fathers), the girl-child is considered a "commodity to be sold"

and denied the rights over her body and choice of husband. Thus, using the marriage episode, *Beyond the Horizon*, animates SDG 5.3 which advocates the eradication of "forced marriage" it recognises as one of the "harmful practices ... forms of discrimination" against women. This is towards creating a more egalitarian society, identified by the UN as one of the six central capacities necessary for sustainable development.

The extensively exploited marriage episode is not without contradictions and cynicism, deeply etched in Mara's recollection of her elder sister wrecked by a marriage, ironically announced as "good news" by her ecstatic mother. The introspection prefigures Mara's city experience, as Akobi's wife, and depicts the role of female acquiescence in women's restrictions. The philosophy of the road, postulated by Mara's mother, functions as a manipulative strategy that conceals commodification as a cultural construct, laces it with determinism and inevitability, to elicit approval, moderate discontentment, and eliminate probable revolution. This is demonstrated by the Foucauldian concept of discourse as a mechanism of power and control. It implicates women in their imprisonment, more intensively depicted in the urban setting of the novel.



Mara's journey to the city only condenses her freedom, as signposted by Akobi's miserable, tiny, rodent-infested, leaking room, located beside a "public toilet and rubbish dump" (p. 8). Juxtaposed with the "large compound and ... backyard garden" of village huts (p. 8), the image, through the comparative technique, effectively communicates the amplification of Mara's bondage, portrays African city slums and interrogates the preponderant rural-urban migration. Patriarchy is again implicated through Mara's eccentric and tyrannical landlord, while their "first conflict" (p. 9) anticipates feminist rebellion.

Apart from domestic servitude and denial of right of choice that attend Mara's life in her rural home, her enslavement is intensified in the city by economic and sexual exploitation, domestic violence, lack of decent clothing, comfortable sleeping space and freedom of association. For instance, Mara is neither appreciated for hawking to keep the family nor paid for domestic chores, but is raped, punished with knocks, slaps and "nasty kicks" (p.19) for disremembering little details such as properly positioning Akobi's chewing stick and napkin, and, most ridiculously, for getting pregnant. These link objectification to sexualisation of the female body within heterosexual

relationships. By working out the impact of domestic servitude and violence on Mara, the text advocates "shared responsibility" and recognition of "unpaid care and domestic work" and denounces exposure to "inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" within the family (UN SDG 5 and Article 5 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Mara's loss of autonomy within her marriage in the city repudiates her rationality and thus her personhood. It interrogates Little's submission that the urban centre liberates women to choose their path and achieve autonomy (1973, pp. 20 & 28). Consequently, the novel suggests that despite her geographical mobility, the post-colonial African woman is hardly free from the bondage of her rural predecessor. Its feminism is, therefore, laced with pessimism.

The epistemological underpinning of Mara's condition is, again, manifest in her account that she is strictly and repeatedly told to "obey and worship" Akobi because she exists solely for his "pleasure" (p.13). Thus, women's object position is culturally constructed as their "unchangeable fate" (Begum, 2006, p. 113) and makes them "slaves to their husbands." Therefore, Mara lacks the "ability to understand" the irregularity encapsulated in the victimisation she

loathes but accepts as part of her marital obligations (pp.13 & 26). The text also emphasises exploitation of biological differences in the patriarchal quest for control, through Mara's belief that worshipping Akobi prevents her from becoming "less of a wife" the same way absence of menstruation would make her "less of a woman" (p.16). That perception displayed a normalisation and decriminalisation of women's victimisation within the marriage institution.

To the text's credit, it engages in an explicit denormalisation of female victimisation, and retooling of its authorising cultural logic towards its possible termination. Using dialogue and the character Mama Kiosk, its counter-discourse interrogates Mara's understanding 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 (emphasis mine). (p. 13)

The cultural proviso is validated in the spousal relationship between Mara's

parents, in which the wife "worship(s)" the husband, who gives her "ample care" (p. 14). Notably, Mama Kiosk functions as Mara's city mother and is characterised as compassionate, supportive and an archetypal independent African city woman. Her relationship with Mara dramatises the feminist concept of sisterhood.

Mara's eventual attempts at breaking out of her marital enslavement in the city are constantly shadowed by contradiction and cynicism. Four incidents, perhaps more than others, illustrate this. First is her loud verbal protestations against the same domestic violence she tolerated when Akobi attempted to "knock pain" into her forehead for repaying his loan without interest (p. 21). This is reinforced by her escape from the room that conceals her regular victimisation and resolve not "to take anymore" and to leave the marriage if Akobi assaults her again (pp. 21 & 22). Mara's psychological victory is suggested in her delight over Akobi's embarrassment at his exposure as a wife-beater, despite the civilised gentleman image he struggles to maintain (pp. 21). However, the nascent revolution is immediately shredded to pieces by Mara's subsequent submission to her marital rape and sexual victimisation, instruction to sleep on her

thin mat in her pregnant state and ban on Mama Kiosk's house. All these inject pessimism and ambivalence into her previous efforts at freedom, and, by extension, Darko's feminism.

The second significant moment is her public fight with Esiamia at the bus station, where they hawk petty goods. The physical fight has a psychological dimension as Mara's unusual courage and aggression derive from the "deep, deep loathing" she feels towards her husband and father, both symbolically embodied in her "enemy" Esiamia (p. 27). By beating Esiamia "so well," knocking out her front teeth, through the strength she never knew she possessed, and earning praise as "the mighty one" (p. 27), Mara unleashes her suppressed power, dislodges the dominance of her abusers and gains an elevated status that reverses her cultural denigration. Emblematically, the fight represents a battle against her objectification and captivity within the patriarchal world. Ironically, another woman becomes the target of her retaliation against patriarchal oppression. Mara's victory is, again, smeared by the loss of her major means of income, as a result of that conflict, and Akobi's refusal to provide for the family, in spite of Mara's advanced pregnancy.

Thirdly, Mara's flight from the city to her natal home in Naka could have been considered a triumph had her proposed divorce elicited her mother and sister's support. However, Mara receives "very little sympathy," several reproaches and is "not ... welcomed back to the family," because her father cannot return her bride-price (pp. 28 - 29). By accusing Mara of nursing high expectations, her mother and sister disapprove and terminate the feminine quest for freedom, in a manner that casts pessimism and contradiction into Mara's earlier triumph, marked by her flight from her city home. The women's attitude, together with the possessiveness of Mara's new stepmother, once more illustrates women's contribution to their cultural humiliation. The included narratives of juju and sleep-inducing herb, respectively and eloquently speak for the neglected, but effective indigenous religion and herbal medicine in contemporary African societies.

Mara's most pronounced and last rebellion against her servitude in the city results from her disinheritance by Akobi, who, without her consent, sold her "only life assurance," including a premium gold jewellery and waist-beads, to procure his travel documents to Europe (p. 31). Recruiting a broken block and an

assertive statement "not ... to do" his bidding (p. 33), as weapons of defiance, Mara, again, attempts to break the chains of her bondage. The impact is reflected in the uncertainty and "shock" on Akobi's face (p. 33), foreshadowed in his earlier surprise over Mara's overt refusal to perceive his public rejection of her as "the most natural matter-of-course thing" (p. 26). The dislocated centre table symbolises the deestablishment of the culture that authorises Mara's victimisation. By attributing the rebellion to Mara's "growing confidence ... (and) "God-given courage" (p. 26), the text replaces cultural docility with natural audaciousness to individualise the woman, interrogate and dislodge her biologically-determined social degradation.

However, Mara's rebellion is, once again, closely accompanied by cynicism and contradiction, in its inconclusiveness. To maintain Mara's restrictions, Akobi restrategises from coercion to persuasion and employs religion by invoking a blissful Europe and the gods of Naka. His triumph is obvious in Mara's immediate reversion to uncritical obedience, couched in her description of his words as "holy ... the right thing" (p. 34). By observing Akobi's realisation that he "had won" (p. 37), Mara establishes her own

gullibility and conquest, and this satirises and contradicts her previous conclusion that she is not "as naïve as before" (p. 26). Thus, the dramatised freedom project is again imbued with pessimism and foreshadows Mara's extensive exploitation in Germany.

*Beyond the Horizon* acquires a profound diaspora identity as the setting shifts from Ghana to Germany, with Akobi and Mara's voluntary and illegal but separate migration, to earn "so much money" (pp. 34). From these dimensions, the primary text connects with novels like Uchenna Nwosu's *The End of the Road* (p. 54) and George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (p. 274), as it depicts several Africans who illegally migrate to the West, driven by misguided notions. In Germany, Mara's early exposure to pornographic film, sexual overture, open "domestic rape" (p. 84), identity swap and domestic violence all suggest extension and deepening of her bondage within her new diaspora society. In Mara's observation that "African men also beat their wives in Europe," like they do back at "home" in Africa (p. 73), the narrative maintains African women's captivity, implicates both home and diaspora spaces, contextualises it within heterosexual relationships and traces it back to African culture. Through Osy's carefree account

of several African Mary Magdalenes in Hamburg and classification of Mara as "Akobi's bundle," Mara realises that "nothing pleasant" awaits her in Germany (pp. 71 & 69). The Biblical allusion and evident depersonalisation effectively prefigure Mara's enhanced captivity in Europe, and in a manner that reverses every presumed advantage of her migration, and thus her victory. This is amplified in Mara's identity as an "illegal nigger woman ... too illegal and too black for any proper job," except domestic hand and prostitution. Ironically, the African woman's slavery is deepened in a supposedly free Western society where she is perceived and treated like a "monkey" by "civilised" indigenous population (pp. 114 & 76). The contradiction is apparent. Consequently, the text escalates the gender-based disadvantage from racial and class perspectives and so dramatises the concepts of Subaltern, by Gayatri Spivak's, Intersectionality, by Kimberle Crenshaw's and Othering, by Edward Said.

The extended objectification of African women within heterosexual relationships, even in diaspora, is, again, manifest in Mara's increased workload, including her "very, very hard work," as a paid housemaid to a German family of seven, unpaid hand for Akobi and his German

wife, Gitte (106), and Akobi's secret sex partner. The cultural underpinning of the instrumentalisation is disclosed in Akobi's view that African women love work and are reared to "work ... even harder" than men, and Mara's understanding of domestic chores as her duty (p.108). Akobi's insinuation that African women enjoy pain is interrogated by Mara's admission of exhaustion and disinclination towards her unending tasks, which tell the physical and psychological impact of her exploitation. The embedded injustice is expressed in Gitte's submission that it "wasn't fair" (p. 108). Ironically, Mara's entire earnings go to Akobi as payment for her accommodation, feeding, migration fare, and prospective big job (106). Akobi and Mara aptly and individually represent the typical objectifier male and objectified female. Mara's worth as an economic, sex and domestic slave renders the anticipated better life abroad impotent and invigorates the text's cynic character.

The pessimistic attribute of Darko's feminism in *Beyond the Horizon* reaches its peak with the text's inauguration of prostitution, and attendant extreme and irreversible commodification. The gender, cultural and economic dynamics are expressed in the account that African men sponsor the expensive migrations of

their spouses from Africa to Europe, and make "fast money" with them by blackmailing them into prostitution (p. 117). This account is best validated by the drugging, recorded gang-raping, and blackmailing of Mara into prostitution, after selling and making her a "property of ... a sex nightclub" proprietor, Peepy (pp. 114 & 115). The term "property" defines Mara's object value as a means of male sexual pleasure and financial benefit. Vivian and Kaye also experience such overt commodification by their respective spouses and male objectifiers. The women, like Abigail and Nneoma, in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, represent a significant number of trafficked African women in diaspora. Consequently, drugs, rape, audio-visuals, blackmail and debasement are coercive pornographic instruments employed to secure the "cooperation and submission" (Ibanga, 2019, p. 271) of the enslaved women. The episode corroborates Awitor (2019, p. 181) and UNDOC's (2009, pp. 7 & 6) separate reports that traffickers and their victims are usually related and or share the same national background and classification of trafficking as "a crime ... enslavement" through which victims are subjected to criminal abuse and degradation.

Additionally, energising the captivity leitmotif, the text tells that the girls' spouses and pimps "took... control" of all their "whoring profits" (p. 118). What makes the sexual exploitation more melancholic and nauseating is that the three girls are, respectively, trafficked and kept in sex slavery by their spouses to gain "financial advantage" (Sorna and Reza, 2023, p. 411). Ironically, the used and the abused women are completely excluded from the monetary benefits. The women's total lack of autonomy, depersonalisation, commodification, and attendant sense of helplessness are succinctly articulated in Vivian and Mara's separate lamentations. The former reveals that she migrated to Germany "full of hope" only to live under the strict "order ... control" of her husband, Osey (pp. 89 & 90). The latter discloses that after the "long journey from home" she is "robbed of" everything, including her "dignity" (p. 115) and wishes to return to Naka and her nobler hawking. According to Yuval-Davis (p. 44), migration can be considered as "resistance and transgression," when recruited by women towards escaping environments of victimisation, transcending culturally-constructed restrictions and procuring an enhanced life. The girls' migration, instead of advancing their wellbeing,

heightened their condition of captivity and therein lies the incongruity.

The objectified characters' necessary rebelliousness represents attempts by enslaved African women in diaspora to escape servitude. Therefore, Mara "wakes up" and becomes "less a fool" (p. 119) with her realisation that her husband does not have the "power... to decide" her fate and control her life as "the body being used and misused" is hers and so she has a right to its returns (p. 119). Vivian and Kaye also reach the same conclusion, at different times. The definition of Mara's vagina as "her capital" (p. 119) clearly illustrates the commodification of her womanhood. The revolt recalls Leslie-Ogundipe's (p. 547) thesis that a "woman's body is her inherent property, not to be owned, used, and dumped by men." The realisation empowers women to practically resist their commodification. Such episodes within the plot system reinforce the revolutionary tendency of the work.

However, the freedom ventures, like their predecessors, are smeared and enfeebled by palpable ambiguities and inconsistencies. The three females, separately, liberate themselves from the sexual and economic captivity of their spouses and become the financial backbones of their families back home.

However, the freedom is hardly holistic as it involves harsh sacrifices and concessions. Each still ends up as a prostitute and property of another male objectifier. Vivian is exploited by her drug-addict boyfriend. Kaye is trapped with Peepy and his brothel, as a partner, wife and occasional prostitute to his clients. Mara is acquired by a "new lord ... master and ... pimp," Oves, and becomes his "pawn, his slave and his property" (pp. 33 & 3) though she gets Akobi imprisoned for his crime against her and Gitte. Akobi's incarceration dramatises the concept of crime and punishment. However, Mara's "victory ... does not much compensate" for the extreme dehumanisation meted out to her (Umezuruike, 2015, p. 293). The dramatised heterosexual relationships are structured upon theories of gender and inequality and have an economic dimension.

Very few sentences aptly demonstrate the perpetuity of the bondage ingrained into Darko's feminism as lucidly as Mara's understanding of her geographical relocation from Peepy's brothel in Hamburg to Oves' in Munich, in terms of "from frying pan to fire," and Kaye's observation that Mara has little choice (p. 133). The irreversibility is expressed in her being "stuck with Oves" and there is "no

turning back" (pp. 139 & 140). Thus, she remains an object sold by her pimp to male clients who buy her for their sexual pleasure. The journey motif provides a new setting for an effective dramatisation of Mara's deepened enslavement and final deterioration to a place "hotter than hell" (p. 139) as she, stripped of all dignity and decency, descends from prostitution to drug addiction and prospective porn stardom. Her addiction illustrates the role of dangerous stimulants in the sexual exploitation of women and calls attention to substance abuse among the youth. The tragic energy of Mara's exploitation in Germany is intensified in her conviction that she can "never succeed" in her attempt to escape the deep dark pit into which she is "sinking irretrievably" (Awitor, 2019, p. 182). By refusing to save Mara from bondage like Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie respectively did with Nneoma and Beatrice, in *Trafficked* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the text shies away from deconstructing the cultural structure it tacitly condemns, and this weakens its efforts at female freedom and intensifies its cynical atmosphere.

No comprehensive analysis of female victimisation in *Beyond the Horizon* can afford to ignore the express culpability of the woman, financial and educational

dynamics. Thus, Mara admits that, though an involuntary party, she is not "totally blameless" (p. 139). She detests the "horrible things" one of her "best spenders" does to her, but still offers him her best smiles because she likes "the money that came with it" (p. 2). The contradiction tells Mara's equivocal attitude towards her sexual objectification. It explains the predicament of several "profanely rich ... pretty African women" who consent to sexual exploitation "for money" (p. 68), mostly spent on their families back in Africa (p. 2 & 139). African families are therefore implicated in the objectification of women. This is validated in Kaye's belief that her family values the money she sends to them more than her dignity. Sessan (2002, 45) observes that the female in diaspora is treated as a money-making tool for her disadvantaged family in Africa and terms it "feminisation of survival." The story of the unnamed prostitute in Mainz whose family sold property to rescue her from prostitution because they care more for "her dignity" than all she sends home (118) suggests the text's view of the role of family in the liberation and rehabilitation of trafficked victims. However, the novel, by its portrayals of unalterable objectification, rejects its own counsel, and this heightens its inherent contradictions and



pessimism. Moreover, in Mara and Kaye's permanent alienation, depicts several Africans who are irrevocably disconnected, physically and socially, from their original African homes and families. Additionally, the role of education in discontinuing female bondage is suggested using dialogue and the principle of contrast. Thus, Mara and Vivian's respective educational deficiencies are juxtaposed with an unnamed African female university student described as a "proper lady" and assigned a decent and respectable life even within a bi-racial heterosexual relationship (p. 88).

In *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara's condition as a prostitute in diaspora reveals the most vicious face of enslavement of African women, and perhaps one of the most lurid images of dehumanisation in African fiction. The several pretty women in Oves' sex parlour in Germany "waiting to be used and abused by strange men" (p. 1) testify to the significant population of females in sexual bondage, controlled by male objectifiers. It also dramatises such sexual exploitation as a "hidden crime" enacted in "brothels and illicit massage parlours" and sustained by a "stream of paying clients" (Moossy, 2009, p. 3). The construction of pornographic postures of sexual subordination of

women through words and gestures, as manifest in "chuckles and pantings ... screaming oohs and yelling aahs" (p.1), maintains the perception of women as objects of pleasure, rather than persons and ends in themselves, and portrays women as relishing their humiliation. Ironically, the supposed pleasure and heavy makeup mask "painfully slow" tears, isolation, loneliness, scars, bruises and deformity, which further define pornography. Thus, the criminal sexual commodification undermines victims' physical, social and psycho-emotional development, and by extension, national development (UNODC, 2009, p. 1), as adroitly communicated in Mara's "piece of garbage," body wasting from "too much use" (pp. 1 & 2). The co-existence of contrastive emotions of pain and pleasure exhibits an oxymoronic tendency, further symbolised in Mara's neither round nor square oval mirror, and is, in a way, reminiscent of David Diop's "painful laughter" in the poem, "The Vulture." By first positioning Oves' isolated sex parlour, and its sexually exploited women, immediately before introducing him, the text constructs a close connection between unremitting female bondage, attendant alienation and heterosexual relationships, within a diaspora context. The brothel's hidden

location tends to shield Oves from the same legal institution that punishes Akobi, and this, again, expresses contradiction. Its direct connection to homosexuality and suicide heightens the text's erotic, aberrant and cataclysmic tenors. Remarkably, the adept and copious employment of the first-person narrative technique and dialogue amplifies the victims' voices and facilitates a better comprehension of their experiences in rural, urban and diaspora settings of the novel.

### Conclusion

*Beyond the Horizon* exhibits an intimate and comprehensive engagement with the perpetuation of African women's commodification across interregional spaces and the impact, especially from sexual and economic perspectives. The eloquent textualisations, from the beginning to the end of the story, further darkens the tragic ambience of the novel. It also interrogates the general

conclusion that African feminist writers focus on resisting patriarchal conquest and that:

Women can live their lives the way they want to and also be responsible for their own livelihoods and future ... portray independent women characters who go against all odds to fight for their space and promote ... survival for African women (Muthoni, 2020, p. 678).

The novel keeps her female characters, especially Mara, in intensive interminable bondage, within heterosexual relationships in its rural, urban and diasporic settings, despite several attempts at freedom. Consequently, Darko's feminism exhibits irrefutable pessimisms and ambiguities, even as it displays the objectification of African women as inimical to personal and national development.

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