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Violence and Violation of Women's Rights in Amma ko's *Beyond the Horizon*

This world that we live in is cold.
God, it is very cold.
Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon*

Beyond the Horizon (1995)⁸¹ opens with the confession and introspection of the protagonist-narrator looking at herself in an oval mirror in a brothel in Germany where she is forced into prostitution. Her image or rather “what is left of what once used to be my [her] image” (1) reveals a dejected and a wrecked body, a body “misused and abused by strange men” (1). In fact, the very first lines of Amma Darko's first novel show the moral, physical and psychological violence which Mara, as the protagonist is called, is subject to and her impossibility to break the chains of her enslavement.

“Friendless, isolated and cold” (1), she is as well “naked” in all senses of the term. The predicament in which Mara finds herself is devastating and simply inhuman. Her nakedness and her isolation show her fragility and vulnerability: she is defenseless. When she stares painfully at her image in the mirror or “this bit of garbage that once used to be [her] me” (3), she reflects on her transformation from an obedient and subservient Ghanaian daughter into a wretched prostitute. Looking at her devastated figure and body, she cannot but cry bitterly because she “fear[s] what [she] see[s]” (2):

Tears are building up in my eyes. They always do when I stare at what is left of me. They are blurring my vision and are rolling down my face in agonizing rhythm like the beating of the devil's own drums...ta...ta...ta...dropping down one after the other, painfully slow, painfully gradual, onto these two flappy, floppy drooping things I called my breasts, my tired graceless bosom.[...]
I may be dirty, old and overused but I can still feel emotions. And that is why I cry sometimes. And when I've got my crying to do I sit here alone before my large oval mirror and stare painfully at this bit of garbage that once used to be me and I cry (1-3).

It is worth mentioning that the rhythm of her tears which sounds like “the beating of the devil's own drums” and the use of anaphora “painfully” and its repetition (it occurs thrice in the quotation above) uncloak her doom and her

⁸¹ Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon*, London: Heinemann, 1995. All the references in this paper are taken from this edition.

suffering. Moreover, her breasts that are now “flappy, floppy and droopy” and compared to “things” show her decrepitude which without doubt is beyond retrieval. She becomes “a bit of garbage” ready to welcome any kind of dumped waste: she is dehumanized.

But her pain becomes more vivid and searing when she ponders over her situation and over the disgusting bruises on her body. Her little finger, for example, is “bent. Its bone’s been displaced and it looks weird” (2). Likewise, when she thinks of her mother she wonders:

What my poor mother back home in black Africa would say to these hideous traces of bites and scratches all over my neck, should she ever have the misfortune of seeing them, I fear to imagine. They extend even far beyond the back of my ears, several bruises and scars left generously there by the sadistic hands of my best payers, my best spenders. And even back down my spine too run a couple more – horrendous ones which I fortunately do not suffer the distaste of seeing vividly like those on my neck, and so I care less about them. (2)

It is through a flashback that Amma Darko tells the reader how Mara becomes a prostitute in Germany. She comes to Germany at the request of her husband who is living in Hamburg, Germany. Mara and Akobi, her husband, come from the same village, Naka, in Ghana. According to their tradition, it is Mara’s father and Akobi’s father who have arranged their marriage without seeking first the consent or the approval of Mara. The “good news” of her marriage is told her by her mother: “ ‘Your father has found a husband for you,’ she gasped, ‘a good man!’” (4). But, Mara does not share her mother’s enthusiasm because it reminds her of her sister’s situation married two years before: “All I did was grin helplessly because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that mother had given my older sister two years before. Found, too, by my father. And my sister was now a wreck” (4).

Mara’s helpless reaction and the comparison she makes with her sister who is now “a wreck” after her marriage foreshadows her own doom. In fact, Mara’s father is more preoccupied with the dowry and money that this marriage entails than the well-being of his daughters. Indeed, Mara’s father “took more into consideration the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man” (4). As Mara puts it, “my dowry came in handy” (6) to enable him to pay his debtor. Also, Mara’s father “was flattered that the first Naka son with a school certificate should choose his daughter for a wife. So much so that I later learnt that drunk from palm wine and belching boisterously, he had proclaimed that he would gladly have given me away even for one goat” (6-7).

Nonetheless, Mara is not given away cheaply. Rather, she is “bought off very handsomely” (7) by Akobi’s father and therefore she becomes henceforth Akobi’s “wife... and *property!*” (7, italics added). So, she “was given away to this man [Akobi] who paid two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloths, beads, gold jewellery and two bottles of London Dry Gin to my family, and took me off as his wife from my little African village, Naka, to him in the city” (3). Mara becomes a commodity in the hands of both families. She is put on the global economy market place. Note the use of the verbs “buy” and “give away” which connote a sort of merchandizing. Thus, woman is not a human being but a mere piece of goods. This kind of practice can be compared to slavery in the sense that girls are given away in exchange for material things or gains. Later, the girls become their husband’s property. They are abused, exploited and battered. In the case of Mara, she becomes a housemaid rather than a wife.

When she is brought to the city by her husband, she finds herself in an awkward situation. She is trapped in wedlock, sharing nothing with her husband except receiving orders, worshipping and obeying him. Far from being Akobi’s wife, she becomes his servant, his housemaid and slave:

When I didn’t bring him the bowl of water and soap in time for washing his hands before and after eating, I received a nasty kick in the knee. When I forgot the chewing stick for his teeth, which he always demanded be placed neatly beside his bowl of served food, I got a slap in the face. And when the napkin was not at hand when he howled for it, I received a knuckle knock on my forehead. (19)

She does all the house chores and even pays all the bills. On top of this, she is mercilessly and repeatedly beaten up by Akobi. The novel is replete with various cases of mistreatment, violence, humiliation and violations of women’s rights. First of all, the reader cannot but be flabbergasted by the reaction of Akobi when Mara tells him that she is pregnant:

‘I was by Mama Kiosk today and told her that I haven’t had my blood for two months and she says I am by all means carrying a baby.

‘Mama Kiosk says you are pregnant?’

‘Yes, Akobi,’ I answered. And sat on the chair because I felt a sudden dizziness.

‘Did Mama Kiosk sleep with you?’ he asked, still in that disregarding tone. I felt a cold sweat seep through my pores. I didn’t answer. Then suddenly there was this angry roar of ‘Get up!’ like an over-irritated boar and the next second I was up at attention on my two feet.[...] He studied me like he was studying filth.’

‘And why did you get pregnant?’

'Pardon?' I replied spontaneously, and before I knew what was happening ... Wham! First slap ... wham! wham! wham! three more in succession.' (16-17)

Also, when Mara gives back the money Akobi lends her to begin trading – hawking boiled eggs – without interest as Akobi would like, the latter slaps her:

We were in there alone now and the air about us was heavy. Then he turned and faced me and studied me briefly, cynically; and I sweated my first sweats of doubt. Then he snatched the money from me, counted and re-counted it, God knows how many times, then to my utter astonishment, slapped me hard across the face. I was stunned. [...] So this slap with its shockpain hurt me more than ever. [...] 'What do you mean paying without interest?' he bellowed eventually. I didn't know what interest was so asked meekly, 'What?' And at the same instant I saw his clenched knuckles ready to knock pain into my forehead. (20-21).

After beating her up, he forces her to have sexual intercourse: "wordlessly, he stripped me of my clothes, stripped off his trousers, turned my back to him and entered me. Then he ordered me off the mattress to go and lay out my mat because he wanted to sleep alone (22)". Mara cannot sleep because the room and the floor are infested with mice, roaches and all kinds of insects: "I lay there on the mat spread on the hard floor, trying to tolerate the mice and cockroaches, my eyes wide open. I lay there like that until the first rays of the morning sunlight streamed through (12)". Mara's predicament parallels the one of Ifeyiwa married by force to the old and brutal Takpo in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* (1996).

It is obvious through the passages quoted above that the novel is relating a blatant violation of human rights in general and women's rights in particular. The violence which is inherent to Mara's ill-treatment cannot be overlooked or ignored. More often, domestic violence and its subsequent consequences are minimized and considered to be a private domain. In addition, most of the victims do not know their rights and/or dare not to complain.

Mara is locked in the traditional education which assigns the domestic role to women. She accepts and endures everything subserviently as her "karma" or her "fate." Hence, despite Akobi's askew behaviour, she looks on it as normal because...

Mother had taught me that a wife was there for a man for one thing, and that was to ensure his well-being, which included his pleasure. And if demands like that were what would give pleasure, even if just momentarily, then it was my duty as his wife to fulfill them. So that even those nights when he ordered me to sleep on the thin

mat on the hard floor, even if I laid there and could not sleep and suffered a splitting headache the next day because of lack of sleep, I still regarded my suffering as part of being a wife, and endured it just like I would menstrual pain.[...] I saw also as falling under 'obey and worship your husband', as my parents and the family elders stringently repeated to me at the end of the marriage rites. In other words, that, too, was for me normal. (13)

Not only are women victims of this patriarchal society, but also they are their own victimizers. They perpetuate the tradition, that is, their own victimization by educating their daughters to obey the rules that nurture the inequality and the violation of women/girls' rights. As Gay Wilentz rightly puts it, "women too often uphold practices that proscribe their choices and rights as women" (2000, 44). The role played in the process of their own victimization is the subject matter of Flora Nwapa's novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1967) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

On the contrary, Mama Kiosk does not follow the subservient posture of Mara nor her mother when she states that "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). The voice of Mama Kiosk serves as a counter-discourse which challenges or legitimates the normalcy of exploitation and the patriarchy discourse.

Although she is ill-treated by Akobi, she is happy and delighted when the latter sends a letter from Germany to ask her to join him. Western countries in the eyes of Akobi, Mara and the likes are paradise on earth, "Heaven itself" (34) where everything is possible. Europe or America becomes, for the young men/women of the African continent, the place to go, by all means, to fulfill their dreams and their families' expectations. Hence, Akobi does not hesitate to borrow money and sell Mara's dowry – gold jewellery (her "only life insurance, the only property [she] owned in life" (31)) and clothes – to go to Germany. He thinks he will make so much money in Germany that he can buy everything: television, radio, fridge, carpet, car and build a "beautiful block house" (34) at home. He adds that in "Britain the people are so rich that they throw fridges away" and in "Germany they throw cars away" (35).

Akobi's dreams and his expectations are reminiscent of the possession mania that grips the post-independence Ghanaian society portrayed by Ayi Kwei Armah in his seminal novels *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1969). The worship of flimsy material things which Ayi Kwei Armah terms the "cargo cult" is also at work in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Unlike Akobi who has gone to Germany to fulfill the

“Cargo” dream, Baako in *Fragments* and Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* have gone to America and England to acquire knowledge and come back to put it at the service of their community. But they are surprised and shocked to find that their society is “no longer at ease” and the old dispensation is no longer valuable.

“Der Verkaufte Traum”⁸² of Akobi (“Cobby”)⁸³ turns out to be a nightmare beyond the horizon and soon Mara also learns the hard realities that await immigrants in this “blank of whiteness” (Odamtten, 1994, 120) called Europe. Mara is deceived, betrayed and humiliated when she learns that Akobi is married to a German wife named Gitte. Mara, once more, accepts to play the role of Akobi’s sister and maid. As an illegal immigrant and penniless, Mara is trapped in a vicious cycle and her “dream evaporated like a drop of coconut oil on a red-hot slab” (74). Her survival depends solely on Akobi. The last straw that buries her dignity is when Akobi brings her to a club at night where she is abused and sexually assaulted by various men and the scene recorded or taped:

The room was filled with people, all men, and they were talking and laughing and drinking. And they were completely naked! There must be at least ten men for what I saw were at least twenty.

Then they were all around me, many hairy bodies, and they were stripping me fondling me, playing with my body, pushing my legs apart, wide apart. As for the rest of the story, I wish that the gods of Naka didn’t witness it. (111)

This scene may remind the reader of Mara’s nightmare on the eve of her departure. In her dream, she hears “Akobi’s deep-throated laughter” and sees a large room filled with “thick misty smoke” and “many faces of all kinds and sizes” (56) that emerge from the smoke and encircle her. Her nightmare which functions as a premonitory dream foreshadows her entrapment. The symbol of the circle invokes her impossibility or incapacity to free herself from her damnation. “Many faces of all kinds and sizes” that encircle her represent different clients with whom she sleeps.

The video which Akobi has made of Mara shows her “completely naked, with men’s hands moving all over my body. Then some held my two legs wide apart while one after the other, men, many men, white, black, brown,

⁸² “Vekaufte Traum” literally means “The Vending Dream”. It refers to the German title of Amma Darko’s novel *Beyond the Horizon* which was first published as a German translation under the title *Der Verkaufte Traum* in 1991.

⁸³ Akobi has changed his name to suit his new status as “been-to”. Akobi becomes “Cobby” in Germany.

even one who looked Chinese, took turns upon me”(115). This video film is used to blackmail her and to force her into the dark and pitiless world of prostitution. That is how Mara, the innocent girl from Naka falls into the “darker side of life” (Mwangi, 1973, 105) in Hamburg, Germany: she works as a prostitute at Peepy.⁸⁴ The money she earns as a sex worker is put into Akobi’s bank account. Mara’s naivety, confusion and innocence are rendered by the use of words such “flabbergasted,” “baffled,” “perplexed” and “surprised” which punctuate her statement. In Mara’s own words: “I was all muddled up. I understood the world no longer” (110). Mara is called “greenhorn” by Mama Kiosk because of her naivety.

Mara is not the only woman or wife to be a victim of those who exploit the misery of innocent poor people to fulfill their macabre plans. Unfortunately, many “Maras” are exploited, assaulted and raped every day “beyond the horizon.” They are defenseless and are at the mercy of criminals. Like Mara, Kaye and Vivian have gone through this unscrupulous exploitation and humiliation from their husband and boyfriend. Kaye is brought to Frankfurt, Germany by her boyfriend who “coerced her into prostitution, pocketed every mark she made and kept her in the trade by blackmailing her with pictures he had clandestinely taken of her in action with different men” (117). Similarly, Osey, Vivian’s husband, forces her into prostitution and pockets the money she earns. The story of Mara, Kaye and Vivian is reminiscent of Abigail’s story in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* (2006). Abigail, the young protagonist of Abani’s novella, is tortured, raped and forced into prostitution by her own relative who has brought her to London from Nigeria.

Pondering over their plight, Mara cannot but confess bitterly: “She [Vivian] was a helpless woman who, without her Osey, could move neither to left nor right. And she would probably even stop breathing if Osey ordered her to. *She was like me. Our men brought us here and we were at their mercy*” (90, italics added). Trapped in this predicament, they have no solution to free themselves.

Mara leaves Hamburg for Munich with the help of Kaye. There, she joins another brothel owned by a certain Oves. Here, what she earns belongs to her but she is a mere pawn, a slave at the disposal of Oves. “This man I call Oves [...] is my lord, my master and my pimp. And like the other women on my left and right, *I am his pawn, his slave and his property. What he orders, I*

⁸⁴ Peepy is a sex club owned by Pompey, a German man, and Kaye his African wife. She was a prostitute but as Mara puts it, “Kate was herself still partly in the trade [...] when time and interest allowed” (116). But, most of the time she helps her husband to manage the club.

do" (3, italics added). The narration goes full circle and comes back to the first chapter. In fact, the first pages which open the novel are the chronological end of the novel. The novel opens with the dejected image of Mara which normally ends the novel. This narrative structure may remind the reader of the beginning of Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease*, where the novel begins with the trial of Obi Okonkwo which normally is the end of the story. And it is through a flashback that the reader is aware of Obi Okonkwo's misfortune.

Stripped of her dignity, Mara cannot go back home. She is afraid to be ostracized and she is "stuck with Oves for the rest of my [her] life" (139). For her, "home will have to remain a distant place" (*ibid.*) because she fears that the video film Akobi has made of her will show up there if she goes back. Stuck in Munich, she decides to earn more money, that is to sink completely into prostitution in order to offer material things to her family and her two children:

At Oves' I have plunged into my profession down to the marrow in my bones. There is no turning back for me now. I am so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine what being a non-whore is. I have problems recollecting what I was like before I turned into what I am now. I think a lot about my mother and my two sons. Recently I started getting so sad with the thought of them that I began pleasing my men less. And that nearly landed me in trouble with Oves. [...] So when I am down, when any of us is feeling down, Oves gives us 'snow' to sniff, to make us high. Now I can't go through a day without sniffing 'snow'. I am hooked on it. *I am fast sinking into a place hotter than hell. But I know this. And that is why I have decided that before I sink too deep I will make as much money as possible for my mother and sons back home.* (139, italics added)

What makes Mara's pain more excruciating is her knowledge that she will never succeed in bringing her head out of the water into which she is sinking irretrievably. Before she completely sinks, "I have issued instructions to them [my parents] to find a small cement house in town which I can buy for my two kids, so that when I sink too deep beyond help they will at least have a decent place to lay their heads. *Material things are all I can offer them. As for myself, there is nothing dignified and decent left of me to give them*" (140, italics added).

By sending material things home, Mara, unknowingly, perpetuates this "Verkaufte Traum" which cannot be reached by everyone. Not only, "Mara's own lie that she is making it good in Europe working in an African restaurant, cannot redeem her from the life of shame and abuse she is condemned to at Ove's brothel" (Anyidoho: 2003 10), but also nurtures and sends other aspiring immigrants into the lion's mouth. And yet, are her society and family

ready to welcome her if they discover her true story and the hell in which most immigrants live in Europe?

Where Mara's tragedy lies is that she is stuck in a "place hotter than hell" and victim of Akobi's greed and selfishness and her family/society's great expectations and yet nobody will believe her when she decides to break the taboo and tell the truth about her nightmare. Osey warns Mara not to speak out. He asks her:

Who will believe you at home if you return and tell them that there is no work, and that German people too are themselves without job? You will be accused of being a born failure, or they will say you offended the gods and ancestors, and that you are trying to justify your shame by dissuading other people from going to Europe to try their luck. (77)

Through Mara's story, Amma Darko brings forth and denounces the plight of many women who are subjugated and live in sub-human bondage. She not only points out the failure of the leaders in Africa in general and in Ghana in particular to live up to post-independence expectations but also "exposes human foibles and the conflicting nature of characters caught in a nation and world where personal, political, economic and historical forces threaten to destroy the fabric of communities fascinated and often blinded by the dazzle of globalization and materialism" (Odamtten: 2007 9).

By choosing Mara as the protagonist-narrator, Darko seems to give voice to the voiceless victims to voice their plight. The violation of women's rights and its subsequent consequences far from being located solely in Africa, Asia or South America are also found in the West. Women are commodified, turned into sexual objects, raped, beaten up, exploited, and humiliated. Amma Darko's novel *Beyond the Horizon* challenges the male hegemony. The male characters depicted – Akobi, Osey, Mara's father – are ready to sacrifice everything when money is at stake. To acquire what Ama Darko calls "the much worshipped trappings of life à la civilization" (57), gleaming material things, they are ready to walk on corpses. Hence, to fulfill his dream, AKobi makes of Mara "a sacrificial lamb" (115) beyond the horizon.

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