



## TWO WOMEN, DIFFERENT TREATMENTS: EXAMINING THE STRENGTH AND LIMITATION OF PATRIARCHY IN AMMA DARKO'S *BEYOND THE HORIZON*

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### Abstract

Literary works are always open to new and diverse interpretations that broaden the understanding of literature as a complex and interesting art form. Like every literary text, it is believed that Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), despite existing critical works done on it, is still capable of instigating new concerns. Thus, this paper seeks to further investigate the text through a comprehensive analysis of how the author handles the critical theme of patriarchy. Specifically, it examines how the novel captures the dynamics of patriarchal influence in an evolving world, in terms of how it strengthens or limits the powers of men in the relationship with women, and the implications for feminism. The paper uses the qualitative analysis approach, which involves subjective and critical interpretation of data primarily sourced from the novel, with secondary sources; such as online journals and textbooks, providing scholarly support. It relies on postcolonial feminist theoretical perspective, which attributes the continued oppression of women to the legacies of colonialism. The paper reveals that men maintain control only over women who adhere to patriarchal philosophy, but whereas they appear incapacitated when confronted by women with modern inclinations. This suggests that while the former is still a possibility in some Africa societies, the latter represents a challenge to patriarchal absoluteness. It concludes that both instances represent the complexity involved in a bid to totally strip men's privileged position in society.

**Keywords:** Literature, Feminism, Qualitative Analysis, Oppression, Postcolonial

### Introduction

Patriarchy is a part of every human society, especially African. It is well acknowledged across cultures that patriarchy gives the male sex the power or authority to expressively dominate (Handique, 2015). The domination is targeted at the class of the female sex which is marked by imposing on them cultural and traditional practices with an attachment of expectations. By social tradition, the female sex is predominately known for her motherhood status and the traditional role expectations has compelled her to accept that she occupies an inferior position comparable to men in the society (Beauvoir qtd in Postal, 2009). This social relation which smoothens the object of consolidating patriarchy in the society has no doubt given rise to abuse and victimisation of the female sex by the male. For long, a lot of unending arguments have been generated in scholarly works blaming the exploitation, oppression and suppression of women on cultural and traditional practices. This has in turn impedes the development of women, denying them of reaching their full agency (Essien, 2021; Offiong et al., 2021). Literature, which is a work of art that is adjudged to be a reflection of prevalent social conditions and relationships (Ngara, 1989), is one platform that has continued to generate contentious views and given shape to the issues of women's condition in the society.

Discussing patriarchal oppression of women in Urhobo and Igbo songs, Omoru and Lemoha (2014, p. 176) observe that oppression, domination, and subjugation targeted at women have been noticed as recurrent themes and tendency in literary representations. This is an uncontestable truism about literature giving the corpus of literary works of feminist undertone, particularly, the prose-fiction genre that have been produced over the years, representing the different imaginative contributions of writers across the world (whether male or female) that provide a wide spectrum of the contentious issues of



women's victimisation in the society. Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* like a few of her fictional works, belongs to this category; this is irrespective of the fact that the writer is a woman. Indeed, since the publication of the work in 2006 by Heinemann, the fact cannot be disputed that it has attracted the attention of quite a number of literary scholars who, traditionally, were inspired and guided mostly by the main objective of revealing how the work is couched with the recurring themes of women's exploitation, oppression.

As with every literary text, the belief is that *Beyond the Horizon* is still capable of instigating new concerns, so much that it makes literary scholarship a field of an unending debate. It is in the light of this statement of fact that this paper embarks on further investigation of the text. The aim is to carry out a comprehensive analysis on the subject of patriarchy in relation to women's oppression as explored in the text. The paper critically looks at how the novel captures the dynamics of patriarchal influence in an evolving world, in terms of how it strengthens and limits the power of men in the relationship with women, and what this portends for feminism. This is done through the method of qualitative analysis, which involves subjective and critical interpretation of data majorly gotten from the text, which serves as primary data. Also, data gathered from secondary sources, such as online journals and textbooks are used to provide scholarly backup to the analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted feminism as its theoretical framework. Feminism is one theory which, according to Golban and Ciobanu (2008), was intended as a political orientation spurred by the writings of individuals, but soon became a movement, which, after the evaluation of the conditions of women under patriarchy, sought to emancipate them. In other words, feminism prioritises understanding the place of women in society and asking questions about how they are oppressed, and craves for ways to liberate them from all forms of oppressions connected to patriarchy, a system of male domination. Hence, this paper bases its analysis on the relationship between the male and female characters as reflected in the texts, in order to show how women are victims of patriarchal oppression. In view of this, Jasim et al. (2019) remark that the feminist approach has become the only route to attract the world's attention to the injustice women have suffered in the hands of men.

Feminism is said to have given birth to different forms used for the interpretation of literary works. Out of the various types, this paper relates its analysis, specifically, to the postcolonial feminism, which is also identified as Third World Feminism. As the name implies, it is one of the types of feminism that draws its characteristic features from everything that has to do with colonialism (Tyagi, 2014). This includes postcolonial setting, in terms of how it has impacted on societies that were once under colonial domination; from the cultural, political to the economic life of the people, mostly from the angle of gendered realities of non-white and non-western women. According to Hussain (2019), postcolonial feminism centres on former colonised nations, focusing on the women under patriarchal influences, with the hope to reveal the dominant culture suffered by those women in the society. Therefore, postcolonial feminism encourages women to rebel against the traditional biases imposed on them through strict traditional norms encouraged by colonial legacy. This theory is, therefore, to help the paper concentrate on explaining how men have forced women to remain under the impact of traditional norms, and the extent to which women, on their part, have been able to turn it against their male-oppressors.

### **Patriarchal Strength: Mara as the Stereotypical Soft-Ground**

It is acceptable to say that men are known to exercise the absolute authority vested in them by their own making. But women, on their part, have wittingly and unwittingly contributed to their own undoing, as far as the topic of their oppression under patriarchy is concerned (Ode, 2010). This is clearly blamed on the need for women to act in line with the traditional expectations of motherhood, which does not absolve patriarchy of its shortcoming because of the more serious ethical questions it raises about modern society (Opomu & Oboli, 2026). As such, the negative effect of wanting to be loyal to patriarchy has formed the core of the much talked about women's oppression in virtually every society. Darko's novel builds on the connection between the faithfulness of women and their oppression. With this, on



the one hand, the novelist tends to explain that therein lies the strength of men to sustain the dominance and oppression of women. This has greatly helped to foreground the standing of the novel as a feminist writing with focus on issues of the various forms of oppression. This is why Umezurike (2015, p. 153) admits that Darko uses her fiction to challenge the oppression of women by patriarchy, judging by her presentation of the story's central character, Mara, suggesting that the oppressed women must reconstitute their subjectivity from subaltern positions; positions of disadvantage and subjection.

The travails of Mara (who happens to be the narrator), premeditated by her husband, Akobi, are shown to have a link with her acceptance and obedience to the overriding laws and rules of men. The travails, as portrayed in the novel, have to do with 'abandonment, her oppression and exploitation, and the series of sexual abuse and domestic violence to which her husband subjected her'. These and other indications of patriarchal subjugation which Mara goes through in the hands of her husband, results in the loss of her dignity. The realisation of the loss of dignity and the resistant to patriarchy shown thereafter by Mara is what Umezurike believes resonate with feminist position that challenges women to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. In the meantime, Darko's concern on the complacency of women is demonstrated through Mara's understanding that the traditional woman in the African society does not have problems accepting and performing the duties assigned to her on the basis of her sex without the feeling of being unnecessarily subjugated. This is because, she is not different from the traditional woman who "knew her role and rights, and was conversant with society's basic rights and division of labor between men and women as well as children" (Ogot, 1976, p. 22). Darko, therefore appears to be concerned with how to bring out this traditional woman to notice for the purpose of enlightening how women have helped to continue the tradition of patriarchy (Marfo et al., 2015).

Truly, that is what the reader sees through the behaviour of Mara as she is shown to be too willing to demonstrate the status of motherhood in conformity to the core practices of patriarchy. Consequently, in keeping with the norm of patriarchy, Mara wittingly or unwittingly makes herself vulnerable to her husband. This is to the extent that she is excessively maltreated as if she is originally married as a slave. This goes to show that the vulnerability status which is brought about by her submissive adherence to the traditional views about women, stands to define and characterise the strength of patriarchy. Adobi acts only in response to her weakness as a woman that lacks the wisdom and energy to interrogate patriarchal powers. In fact, she cannot act otherwise, judging from experience and her background. Hence, she will cease to be a woman. As an insight to what informs her position, there is a clue to the role played by her father, representing the old generation in the novel, who through his actions passes on the patriarchal ideology to the young generation, especially, within his household. Seen as the promoter of patriarchy, he is entrusted with the critical role of laying the foundation that in the future subjects Mara to all the forms of abuse, trauma and exploitation she encounters in the novel, after he has succeeded in trading her off like a commodity with Akobi's father without her consent.

Before Mara is welcomed into Akobi's home in the city and begins to play her role as a wife, her observation about the society she lives, especially the social relationship that exists between her parents, had instilled in her the consciousness that she lives in a male-dominated society where the vital thing women are taught to learn is to be passive, loyal and submissive to their husbands at all times. Then, guided by this consciousness, she knows her limit; that is, she is not in a privileged position to know and do anything different from what her society imposes on her. This is affirmed in her revelation later in the story when, in a conversation with Osey's wife in Germany, she says:

I only know that a girl grows up, is given to a man by her parents and she has to please the man, serve him and obey him and bear him plenty children. (86)

Therefore, she is prepared to behave like her mother in every aspect that conforms to patriarchy. The first impression she records about women's passivity in matters of patriarchy is when her mother wholeheartedly accepts and show extreme excitement about her husband's choice of men for their daughters. The narrator hints that it is a general thing when she remarks that "Many women in Naka were extremely content with their marriages and their husbands and wouldn't exchange them for anything in the world" (4). This is an indication that as a woman and a wife, she cannot run away from



such arrangement. And even when she thinks about her elder sister's experience and her future, she has no option than to accept the choice of her father. And her thought on the reality influences her relationship with her husband from the minute she finds herself in his house and lives through it towards the end of the story.

As presented in the novel, so long as she struggles to prove and maintain her affinity to patriarchy, she denies herself a new orientation that will give her the strong-will to breakout of Akobi's stronghold. Until the concluding part of the story, she is adamant to accept ideas and suggestions outside the notion of patriarchy which she has allowed to influence her. It is by her strong desire to remain faithful and be totally submissive to patriarchy that describing her a "Greenhorn" is justified. As repeatedly called by Mama Kioks, Greenhorn, obviously is not a good depiction of her character as a woman but a characteristic flaw Darko points out is responsible for sustaining patriarchy on one hand, and brings about her downfall on the other hand. She is forewarned of the consequence in all her appetites to promote patriarchy by doing everything to please her husband at her detriment. Hence, Mama Kioks' several efforts at dissuading her from having too much faith in her husband even when she is aware that things will not change soon falls on deaf ears. Mama Kiosks speaks to her from the position of experience, a woman who knows "the truth" about patriarchy. Seen to be free from the bondage of patriarchy unlike a naïve Mara, she is so categorical about any hidden intentions of Akobi when she cautions Mara:

this your Ministries man, he is not only a bad man and a bad husband, he has got something inside his head. I only hope that he won't destroy you with it before you too start seeing red with your eyes like I do. (17)

Later, she appeals to Mara to use the opportunity of her husband's migration to Europe to "forget him and start thinking wholly about yourself and your son" (46). But because Mara is blinded and obligated to patriarchy, she fails to grasp and ponder on the wise counsel, and allows it triggers her to discover the *self* in a woman and its worth that is crucial in moderating the strength of patriarchy, if not defeating it completely. Her desire to continue to embrace the domination of her husband and reject any notion opposed to patriarchy is captured in her response:

I have plenty respect for you Mama Kiosk...and I look up to you many times as my mother. And you are so good to me too. But I don't like this that you are saying to me, Mama Kiosk. I don't like it at all. (46)

At this point, the reader may have seen that Mara is under the spell of patriarchy that seems serious and insurmountable. She evinces a sense of comfort and fulfilment in continuously attempting to give a lifeline to the system that has reduced her womanhood to nothing. Instead of her liberating herself, she is motivated to excite her husband with about her faithfulness to his domination, unaware that the more she impresses him the more she exposes herself to danger. Darko presents her in a way not unlike female characters in male writings who exhibit typical feminine weakness and surrender themselves to male domination (Vyomakesisri, 2017).

As noted earlier, this attitude is not limited to Mara alone but is shared by many women in the fictional Naka, of whom Mara's mother serves as a role model. By extension, undoubtedly, it is still the practice among women in many societies. This is where Darko's major concern in the novel lies. This is why even feminists sometimes excuse men for the effects women suffer under patriarchal subjugation; as Beau (2018) points out that the rule of patriarchy has nothing to do with men as individuals per se, but rather that women have found themselves playing a significant role in maintaining the laws and rule of men. This involves women helping to carry out the so-called 'rules of men'. That is exactly what Darko attempts to project in the minds of the readers, challenging their perception of the oppression of women by men. She wishes to show that Mara chooses to play into, and "enforce the rules" of patriarchy, by viewing all of Akobi's maltreatment as normal. As an oppressed woman, she fails to validate Elaine Showalter's view of insanity (a term used to designate the state of a woman's mind) that patriarchy stops women from functioning as normal and healthy individuals in society (Quay, 2009).



At moments, the reader is hopeful and expects that Mara takes certain actions against the norms and practices of patriarchy to escape from oppression, but she refuses. By doing so, Darko shows that she continues to place herself in a position of weakness, which contrastively boosts the strength of Akobi's patriarchal influence. Therefore, the moment she expresses her rejection of Mama Kiosk's choice of action, it is certain that she will pay dearly for her resolution to remain under the rule of her husband, particularly judging from Akobi's personality traits. As Darko is desirous to prove, Mara's subsequent actions expose her weakness further. A smart and emotionless Akobi capitalises on her foolishness and subjects her to the cruelest form of abuse: forced prostitution. This happens to her in Germany as the story changes its setting from Africa to Europe. She is first persuaded to deny her marital status to Akobi and claims to be his sister, as the only way out of their endangered stay in a purported heaven. As morally despicable the acceptance and exhibition of such behavior will indicate in every clime, it is seen as normal from the perspective of patriarchal considerations because it pleases the man. The woman is denied her sense of reasoning and is thus subjected to psychological torture.

Yet, it must be imposed on her because, as expected, she does not accept it of her own accord. Mara connects this scenario to her fate as she allows Akobi and Osey (both patriarchs) to decide it for her. Her first surprising protestation in the relationship is overwhelmed by her strong sense of duty to please her husband:

And I realised that they hadn't expected that I would put up any resistance and ask the many questions I shot at them. Akobi was over-confident that I was the Mara of back home who said yes and bowed to every order without question. He saw now that he shouldn't have been so confident. Since so much depended on me, I could easily give the game away and it wouldn't be only me that suffer the consequence. Akobi was now trying to be cautious with me. And anyway, if I didn't go along with what they were demanding of me, what other alternative did I have? So, I said nothing more. I just decided to sit there and let them go on planning my fate. (80)

She continues in this fashion of naivety that emboldens Akobi to climax his hold on her by forcing her into prostitution for the sole purpose of achieving his long patriarchal pursuit of material things, which we know from the onset is the catalyst for his untoward behavior and actions in the novel. Her awareness of Akobi's secrets and intentions behind her prostitution, and the effort she makes to free herself from his bondage, which ordinarily is in line with feminist ideology, is insignificant. This is because the damage has already been done to her dignity; that is, devalued as human. Hence, she falls short of being taken seriously as the heroine in the novel.

### **Patriarchal Authority and Limitation: Comfort as the Stumbling Block**

Darko's fiction as a feminist work does not end only with the reflection of the possible conquest of patriarchy, but also with the elevation of women to a pedestal where they are seen to be immune to the influence and control of men, so that they are placed at parity with men. This section is to contrast the social relationship that exists between Akobi and Mara as analysed above, with that of Akobi and Comfort. The aim is to establish the fact that patriarchal power can be contained to a very large extent by women. The novel insinuates that this is possible, even as it plays out in the traditional system of the Ghanaian society that allows the room for polygamy. This is observed in how Akobi shuttles between the two women: Mara and Comfort, with the intent to show, most importantly, the truth that both women behave differently on their parts, while he treats them differently, or unequally, still as a patriarch. The reason for this inevitable contrastive portrayal is not far-fetched. Comfort, although not traditionally married to Akobi, is not the type of woman we see in Mara. Although she is not as clearly visible as Mara in the story, the narrator provides the listeners with critical information about her, upon which they can conveniently draw the conclusion that she is a liberated woman, even if they are forced to disapprove of her dependency on the men folk for material things.

As per what makes her different, records show that she is a:

typist or a secretary at the Ministries perhaps, who bathes with skin-bleaching soaps and applies skin-lightening creams, and who does wonders with hot combs and creams to her stubborn kinky hair to turn it long, straight and silky. (5)



From the above, she is a modern woman who has freely taken to the ways of the city. The best description that fits her character and appearance is “sophisticated”, disclosed by Akobi’s German wife, Gitee. The fact that she is a working-class woman like Akobi, makes her attracted to him. Comfort knows her worth as a sophisticated woman even though she lives in a world ruled by men. Because she sees herself equal with men at all times, in any locality she finds herself, she is not in any obligation to succumb to patriarchal authority. This is why Akobi is unable to make her say yes to his proposal to marry him initially. As an enlightened woman, her rejection is obviously based on her awareness that Akobi is in want of the material things she needs most in life in order to live a comfortable and decent life, because if this is not the case, she is bound to live a wretched life; neglected, oppressed, abused and exploited, just like Mara. She is guaranteed of such convenient life only in men of wealth, like: “bank managers, dubious businessmen and senior civil servants who could finance their requirements” (p. 5), not poor messenger clerk like Akobi that is not even able to take care of a submissive Mara. This indeed, limits Akobi’s patriarchal pride and grip on women so that he becomes frustrated and defeated after he had hoped to conquer Comfort like Mara. The limit to his power when matched by the firmness of an enlightened Comfort is revealed below:

So, he was soon back in Naka to borrow money from his father.... He didn’t come alone but with a pretty city woman who in pomp and style he introduced as a special friend he had brought along to show the beauties of Naka. Comfort was her name, a typist at the Ministries, and the truth was that Akobi was hoping that witnessing at first-hand the high esteem he enjoyed in the village would impress Comfort and get her uttering a breathless ‘Yes’ when he later proposed to her. But it was a miscalculation. A sad one, for Comfort’s admiration ended abruptly the moment they left the boundaries of Naka. And the very next day, back within the walls of the Ministries, Comfort gave him a nasty cold shoulder” (6).

Akobi learns, from Comfort’s treatment and attitude towards him, the kind of woman she actually is. Hence, he chooses to see her from a different perspective; a woman who must be treated the way she wants and given respect to, just like himself or men in general. He decides to treat her like a queen if he must win her love. It is for the sake of his excessive, selfish desire; to impress Comfort, that Mara’s dignity is sacrificed. It must be observed here that Darko’s prose has alerted her readers to a dimension patriarchy is adopting in order to survive in the face of strong feminist opposition. What is uncovered is that if certain women are to be accorded respect and placed as equals to men, other women must have to be sacrificed. This speaks of the craftiness of patriarchy. In the novel, Mara must remain under patriarchal rule for Comfort to be seen as posing a threat to patriarchy and forcing it to yield to feminist contentions. Akobi has seen that it is impossible to penetrate and conquer Comfort, except he offers her with the taste of life she desires. That is why he explores the weakness of Mara to make Comfort the woman she dreams to become. When Akobi takes Comfort to Germany, he does so with the money he realises from the sale of Mara’s jewelry without her awareness and consent. But when he asks Mara to join him in Germany, because she is weak and voiceless, he leaves the total responsibility of raising the money for her and her family members.

In Germany, he continues succumbing to Comfort at the expense of Mara. While Comfort does not allow the setting make her shift her position, Mara continues to be helpless and used as the sacrificial lamb. Gittee in a dialogue with Mara explicitly makes the point about the quality of the two women, and emphasises on the difference between them:

Because you are his sister and not his cousin. Cousins are more likely to sleep together than sister and brother. And you were different...simple, not sophisticated like Comfort. I noticed too that Cobby has power over you. He controls you. It wasn’t like that with Comfort at all. She had the power. She controls Cobby and shouts at him. Then, too with Comfort, Cobby wanted a different arrangement...and at our own expense. He didn’t want her to live in the same apartment with us like you did. (124)

Gittee’s observation about Comfort above runs contrary to the men’s view of women as “mere objects to be acted upon; things who owe a debt and allegiance to men by virtue of their sex” (Ngara, 1989, p.



37). It is a pointer that among the “weaker sex” are women who are no longer playing the role of submissive wives or concubines, as Comfort is presented. Comfort, even while depending on Akobi, is still able to measure up to him in the exercise of influence. It shows that Akobi, the patriarch, is mindful of and frightened by the opposite sex, which calls for a restraint on his authority. Mara, until this revelation, is the traditional submissive wife who tolerates patriarchy to her own disadvantage, while Comfort is different.

### Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the understanding that literature has no end to its meaning and interpretation. Hence, it built on existing studies of Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, with the hope of further, adding to the debate and knowledge generated from the text, which concerns the topic of patriarchy and the oppression of women. Therefore, the focus is on the need to explore the nature of, and challenges to patriarchy in the face of mounting pressure from feminists to whittle down patriarchal influence. Deploying a qualitative analysis approach, the paper has been able to examine how the novel reflects the way patriarchal influence on women, which amounts to their oppression, is affected by societal realities. As such, attempts were made to establish the grounds in which patriarchal power is strengthened, and the conditions under which it can be contained.

After a thorough analysis of the role of the novel’s critical characters, the paper reveals that men can maintain control only over women who are loyal to patriarchal ideology, but those same men appear impotent when confronted by women who, under the influence of modernity, have broken free from the stronghold of patriarchy. Mara’s status as a traditional woman, and her belief and determination to uphold the absoluteness of Akobi’s authority, are simply used against her. It is only in this way that Akobi becomes the demi-god that men strive to be and maintain. However, Akobi’s power is contained by another woman, Comfort, who is inclined towards modernity. Representing a transformed woman, her firm belief to social relations between both genders goes beyond threatening patriarchal influence, as shown in the way she humbles Akobi. The implication of these two different scenarios is that, while the former is still a possibility in some African societies, the latter is seen as a dent, thereby bringing to the forefront the argument that patriarchal power is not absolute. Yet, together, both cases direct attention to what lies ahead for efforts to totally strip men of their privileged position in society.

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