

Social Tragedy in Amma Darko'S Faceless: The Plight of Street Children

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No seed grows into harvest joys without planter's diligent labour of love. Until we come to understand this as parents, as family, as community, we will forever stand condemned by the anguish in the eyes and the voices of our children, forever guilty of 'the nurturing of... prospective soul(s) into the devouring jaws of the streets'.

Kofi Anyidoho, Introduction to *Faceless*, p.21.

Abstract

In every household, children are 'the joys of motherhood' and families. However, children cannot grow normally and decently without the care and the protection of their parents/family/society and government. In many African countries, homeless/street children roam about the street to beg for food and money and become easy preys for the sadistic and unscrupulous predators. This article examines through Amma Darko's *Faceless* (2003) street children phenomenon, their plight and the irresponsibility of the adults be parents/family members and community. The causes of this phenomenon, the violence that it nurtures and the misfortunes street children are facing in the hands of the 'street lords' are also highlighted. Most of the time, street children are forced into prostitution and are sexually active before their teens with its subsequent consequences.

Keywords: street children, child abuse and prostitution, violence, irresponsibility, poverty.

The predicament of street children portrayed by Amma Darko in her novel *Faceless* (2003) reveals the social tragedy which Ghanaian society is confronted with. It is a diseased society which cannot control or take care of its children. They are sold, given away, abandoned to the streets. One question that comes to the reader's mind is 'why should somebody living right here in Accra and under a secure roof, let go of his or her child on the streets?' (75) Even if 'there is a story behind every street children' (75), it is obvious that parents, society as a whole and government have failed to cater for them. Their plight is overlooked, ignored or seen as normal. Sacked from home by their own parents, they find refuge in the 'devouring jaws of the streets' (42).

Odarley, Baby T and Fofu's muddle in *Faceless* (2003) echoes many children's suffering who lack basic needs – shelter, food and clothes – to keep their soul and their body in harmony. More importantly, the dream of street children is their parents' warmth, tenderness, love and attention. As a street boy puts it,

"My dream' [...] 'is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy in her face at the sight of me. I want to be able to sleep beside her. I wish her to tell me she was happy I came to visit her. Whenever I visit her, [...] she never has a smile for me. She is always in a hurry to see my back. Sometimes I cannot help thinking that maybe she never has a smile for me because the man she made me with that is my father probably also has never had a smile for her too"(26, italics added).

Also, a street girl adds:

"One day a kind woman I met at a centre made me very happy. Before I went there, I knew that by all means she would give me food. But this woman gave me more. She hugged me. I was dirty. I smelled bad. But she hugged me. That night I slept well. I had a good dream. Sometimes I wish to be hugged even if I am smelling of the streets"(26, italics added).

The dream of these children is very simple. One may think these children's dreams will be material things. Instead, what they need is just a helping hand. They need to be secured and know that somewhere there is somebody who cares for them. Unfortunately, they are abandoned to the streets like a vulgar and unwanted burden. Around them there is a void of sympathy and attention. As children, they are already at the margin of their society. The violation of these children's rights is blatant and they have nobody to turn to. They suffer from lack of affection and protection. Beyond these children predicament, it is the 'moral decay' of Ghanaian society that is spotlighted.

According to street children in the novel, some of the reasons that their parents abandon them are: poverty, joblessness of their parents, maltreatment of their stepfather and hunger. One of the street boys says that his mother does not want him because 'she worries about the food that she has. It is never enough. So she worries that it may not suffice for her two children if I joined' (26). Moreover, he adds his stepfather 'hates to see his face' (26). Fofu, the co-protagonist of the novel, becomes a street child at age of fourteen. She leaves home because there is no money and no food at home. Her father has left the house without warning. It is through a dialogue between her and Kabria and Dina (the workers of MUTE) that the reader is aware of the causes that 'dump' Fofu on the streets:

“So you started going out to beg because there was no money?”

“And no food. That was more pressing,” she went on. “When there is no food, you don’t wait to be asked by anyone to go out and beg. Hunger is a foe and it is overpowering. When it pushes you, you go. It was the same with Baby T.”

[She is] “[m]y old sister. She too dropped out of school in Class two.”

“She used to say that as for hunger, you either took charge of it or it would gain total control of you.”

“She was always saying that, especially when I was suffering stomach cramps and dizziness from it. Then I would suffer nausea and feel like vomiting. But there was almost always nothing in my stomachs. So I would retch and retch and end up with a sore throat” (129-130).

The street children (Odarley, Baby T and Fofu) depicted by Amma Darko suffer from absentee father. Their father has left the house without warning. The ‘new father’ who enters their mother’s life hates them. Mother carries alone the burden of the household on her shoulders. In this case as Ms Kamame, a guest speaker on Sylv Po’s radio show Good Morning Ghana (GMG), says, “the responsibility of the mother doubles. She becomes the only caretaker of the child’s emotional or physical or financial needs. Or all three combined. That means performing the tasks of two” (137). Most of the time, there is no means to take care of the children, there is nothing to eat. Then, the children strive to survive by all means, to ‘take charge’ as Fofu puts it: ‘that meant finding money for food through any means possible. Fair or foul. Begging? Stealing? Whatever (130). Due to the foes of hunger and the utter destitution in which Fofu finds herself, she says cynically that, she ‘knew poverty’ because she ‘saw it’ (52). She is tormented by hunger in such a way that she feels ‘dizzy’, ‘feels like vomiting’ and has ‘stomach cramps’.

What is disarming and incomprehensible is that Maa Tsuru despite that she has no means to look after her children continues to ‘dump’ them in the world. After the four children (two sons and Baby T and Fofu) with Kwei who has left the house abandoning the children, she has other two sons with Kpakpo, a jobless and irresponsible man who ‘entered mother’s life and pushed us all out of it’ (187). The irresponsibility of mothers who ‘brought forth for the sake of bringing forth, a hungry mouth created not of want’ is pointed out when a ten-year-old Bibio asks her mother to know why she continues to bring forth her sisters and brothers when she finds out how irresponsible her husband is: “why, after making Nerely with him, when you realized how irresponsible he was, did you go ahead to make Akai, me and Nii Boi as well?” (Darko 1998:11). Likewise, Fofu asks Maa Tsuru, her mother:

“So you will do it again, won’t you?” she wailed at her mother. “If he [Kpakpo] returned today you would let him in and probably get yourself pregnant by him again, won’t you? Why? Mother, why? What life have you been able to give those of us you already have? Look at the boys here. [...] These two at your feet are already going hours without food. Only time, and they will also be venturing out onto the streets to fend for themselves. [...] So let me understand you, mother. What is it you want?”(188).

Through Bibio and Fofu’s questions appear their utter disgust and reproach as far as their mother’s attitude and behaviour are concerned. They behave in an irresponsible manner by bringing children forth just for the sake of bringing them forth. They seem to apply the popular saying: “you give birth. God will take care of the child” (138). Their ignorance, their misplaced priorities and the effect of absentee fathers and the hunger that gnawed the whole family send the children on the streets: ‘You offered us all generously to the streets, mother. You made the streets claim and own us’ (188).

Once on the streets, children are exposed to different kinds of vices, abuses, and violence (drug, sex, alcohol, pornography, rape, thieving, pickpocketing, harassment among others). Fofu and Odarley, for instance, drink directly from bottles of the local gin *akpeteshie* (kill me quick) and watch pornographic movies. They steal, pickpocket and do odd jobs to survive. The girls are vulnerable because they become quickly the targets of the bullies and the sadistic persons like Macho, Poison and his group. They rape them and rob them of whatever money they have on them. Some of street girls (children) are merely seven years and ‘rape was their first sexual experience.’ In addition, ‘many were child prostitutes’ (56). They are sexually active before their teens. It seems that because of hopelessness and hardship on the streets children take drug and alcohol to soothe their pain. The enclave of Sodom and Gomorrah which hosts the destitute, the increasing migrants from the north and street children is notorious for its vices. It is in this environment, this enclave where ‘filth and sin, suffering and ignorance, helplessness and woes ruled the days’ (93-94) that children, girls like Fofu and Odarley are forced to survive. In this enclave where rudeness, ruthlessness and toughness are the rules, there is no place for sympathy, trust or faith. Children act, talk, think and behave rudely to claim their territories. Having been abandoned, they need to adopt a survival posture to cope with their ruthless world. Hence, children/girls like Fofu, Odarley ‘grew up never ever really experiencing what it meant to simply be a child’ (94). Their childhood has been stolen.

A part of Fofu was and would always remain the fourteen years that she was; but the harshness of life on the streets has also made a premature adult of part of her. She was both a child and an adult and could act like both; talk like both; think like both and feel like both. What she wanted to do was to say a whole lot of things to hurt Maa Tsuru, and cause her pain. [...]

“So? Doesn’t she [Maami Broni] sometimes come to [give you money]...”

“I know Fofu. I know. Oh God!”

“Don’t bring in God’s name, mother. You knew what you were doing when you chose him over...”

“It was for their sake,” she pointed at the baby and the sleeping boy, “what should I have done?”

“I don’t know. But you should never have fed him and his sons at Baby T’s expense. You don’t see her. I don’t see her. We don’t know how she has grown to look like. All for what, mother? For what?” [...]

Maa Tsuru choked on saliva and coughed violently. “I don’t have the strength to fight you with words Fofu,” she spoke slowly, “And even if I did, I wouldn’t do it” (46-47).

One may be baffled by Fofu’s manner. However, if we analyze her speech it is clear that she points out the carelessness/irresponsibility of her mother as well as her own suffering. Her toughness is not but the reflection of the streets’ manners. Her rough manner is reminiscent of Bibio’s behavior towards Mami Korkor, her mother ‘the very person who bore her into her misery’ (Darko 1998:11):

‘Too bad. You should have sent me to school to learn some manners then. But since you rather let me stay home and to play mother to you and your friend’s sons-boys I’m only three years older than – where else can I learn my manners but in the streets?’

Mami Korkor’s jaw dropped.

‘And don’t forget, Mami Korkor, that this very blouse I am wearing also came from the rubbish dump.’

Overwhelmed by Bibio, Mami Korkor was at loss (Darko 1998: 11).

Bibio as well as Fofu do not fail ‘to make it clear to her mother that she was to blame for their pathetic life’ (Darko 1998:11). Darko’s portrayal of social tragedy/plight of street children brings to mind Chris Abani’s novel *Graceland* (2004). In *Graceland*, Abani depicts a society plagued with diseases where street children, ‘beggar children’ wander on the streets to bake their daily bread amidst of squalor, violence and promiscuity. Bridge City ‘one of the many dusty flyovers that littered the city’ (Abani 2004: 306) in *Graceland* (2004) can be compared to Sodom and Gomorrah, a sprawling and swampy ghetto of Accra, Ghana, where Fofu and other street children live in anonymity in *Faceless*.

While Fofu is lucky to be rescued from the streets and will start her rehabilitation program as the novel ends, her older sister Baby T perishes in ‘the jaws of the streets’. It is through a flash-back that the narrator unveils the mysteries that surround Baby T’s death. In fact, she is also sold to the streets like Fofu. Unlike Fofu, she is given away to Maami Broni as a housemaid. But, she is later forced into prostitution by the latter. It is worth mentioning that Baby T is sexually assaulted by Kpakpo, her stepfather and abused/raped when she is not even yet twelve by Onko, a member of her family:

[...] Onko asked Baby T into his room to collect money to buy food for both of them. [...] He unexpectedly locked the door and pushed an unsuspecting and too trusting Baby T into his bed, pinned her down, forced a handkerchief inside her mouth and torn off her pants. Three times he did it, and left her bleeding on his bed (168).

Then, ‘Baby T lay there motionless, crying. The pain was distinct in her eyes. The trauma she had suffered had left its prints on her very person and her soul. She was in great physical and an even greater pain’(166). Most of the time the sexual abuse/ assault and battery committed against children happens within the family’s circle and no one finds it necessary to raise the matter beyond mere disgust. The fact is sometimes completely denied and the abused child is advised not to speak out about his/her assault.

What is revolting is that no action is taken by Maa Tsuru against Onko and/or against Kpakpo. Worst, she is silenced with the ‘thick wad of notes’ Onko sticks into her hand and asks her to “‘drop the matter. Forget it ever happened and spare us all the trouble’” (168). By accepting the money to ‘drop the matter’, Maa Tsuru has forfeited her own child’s future and has encouraged Onko to continue his sexual harassment: he is a paedophile. The only solution she finds is to send Baby T to Maami Broni, an old ‘graduate’ prostitute ‘of Ivory Coast’s red light district’ (219), on the advice of Kpakpo.

It is under the wings of Maami Broni with the complicity of Mama Abidjan and the ‘streetlord’ Poison that Baby T’s life definitively takes the wrong side of the tracks. She is forced to sell herself, to trade her body for money. To cope with the situation, Maami Broni ‘introduced her to the ‘devil weed’. It helped. Once Baby T began to use it regularly, carrying out her ‘duty’ with several men night and day become bearable’(221). Also, in *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Mara becomes addicted to drug in order to carry her sexual trade with several men. ‘Now I can’t go through a day without sniffing ‘snow’. I am hooked on it (Darko 1995: 139). The fruit of Baby T’s work is harvested and shared with Maami Broni, Poison, Mama Abidjan (a retired prostitute from Abidjan) and Baby T’s own mother. Maami Broni used to bring her envelope containing money. Thus, for years, ‘Maami Broni came to symbolize the arrival of an envelope containing money, whenever she showed up in the house. It always brought a smile to Kpakpo’s face and a wince to Maa Tsuru’s, who nevertheless never turned it down’ (172).

The trade of human body for financial gains or purposes is a common subject matter in Darko’s oeuvres. For example, in *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Mara is coerced into prostitution in Germany by Akobi.

Likewise, in *The Housemaid* (1998) and in *Faceless* (2003) Efi and Baby T are forced to sell their body. Considering girl/woman's trade and street children phenomena, Kofi Anyido suggests that Darko's narrative is a 'provocative tale of a society that has developed a tragic ability of guiding its young ones, especially the girl-child, into a life dedicated to prostituting every conceivable virtue for the sake of flimsy material possessions' (10). Indeed, Darko's society is entrapped in a restless and relentless consumerism where 'materialism becomes the new religion, money the new God' (Larson 1972: 262).

Baby T's life comes to a brisk end when Onko steps in again. He is looking for her pubic hair to perform a ceremony in order to put his business out of its slumber. He spares a lot of money to influence everyone including Poison to sleep with Baby T. But she refuses to give in for Onko. Poison becomes furious and beats her to death:

"You either agree to give him pleasure or I'll remove you from here and put you to work at 'Circle'" he threatened Baby T.

"I won't go to Circle!" she cried at Poison.

"Then serve him" Poison ordered.

"No!"

"why?"

"I won't"

Wham! The first slap landed. Another followed in quick succession. Baby T felt the right side of her face go momentarily numb.

As he stared blandly at Baby T, he slowly unbuckled his leather belt and drew it rhythmically out through the trousers hooks...

Baby T felt only the first lash, which landed across her shoulders. The right side of her face felt dead already.

Baby T was lying with a split head on the concrete floor. A bizarre image came to Maami Broni's mind. It was the image of splinted stone oozing blood. A stone struck against steel.

Baby T was dead (225, 226, and 227).

If appropriate measures have been taken when she is first raped, Onko won't have an occasion to pursue her and cause her death. After the rape, the narrative voice says that 'If the good Lord gave her long life, it was obvious she was going to require lots of strength and love to rebuild her dignity, her self love and trust (166). Unfortunately, she will not live long to 'rebuild her dignity' nor 'her self love and trust' in this cruel world which claims prematurely her life.

It is through a flashback that the reader discovers the mysteries that surround Baby T's death. Indeed, the novel opens with Fofu roaming endlessly on the street in Sodom and Gomorrah and the discovery of Baby T's corpse (chp.3) on the market place behind a blue rasta hairdressing kiosk salon. "Her face was so mutilated... and her head... ah! That too was completely shaven. In fact, all the hair on every part of her body. [...] Whoever did that to her could not have had a soul. The person definitely has no soul" (67). Baby T's tragic story unfolds when Kabria, a co-protagonist and her working team at MUTE decide to find out the person who is behind Baby T's death. In so doing, they raise awareness of the plight of street children. Thanks to the cooperation of Fofu, the workers at Mute and Sylv Po, a producer at Harvest FM radio, Poison is unmasked.

The mutilated face of Baby T comes to symbolize all the downtrodden, destitute street children who are faceless. Their identity is erased. They are invisible minorities whose plight is not heard. They are voiceless. Their invisibility or absence gives probably the title to the novel *Faceless*. Baby T's mutilated body/face is reminiscent of an unnamed mutilated girl found in a public parc in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* (1995). Omovo, the protagonist, the painter, fails to draw/remember her face because it is terribly mutilated. She cannot be recognized.

Despite Maami Broni's revelation concerning Baby T's death, Poison, the 'Poison of the streets' is still roaming freely on the streets. In addition, Maami Broni is not arrested. This impunity reminds the reader of Fofu's yearning for government: "I said government. I want government" (73). Unfortunately, the government is nowhere to be seen. Even the police station is deprived of the basic tools (telephone, vehicles) to conduct a serious investigation and arrest the criminals, the predators and protect the victims. 'What she [Fofu] doesn't know is that Government itself has lost its priorities, its sense of direction, it has become dysfunctional and deaf to the cries of children abandoned or sold to the merciless streetlords of the Poison kind, and their equally heartless female collaborators such as Maami Broni [and Mama Abidjan]' (17-18). Through Fofu's innocent claim Darko points out the failure of post-independence regime/government to protect its children and its citizens.

At the end of the novel, Onko, gnawed by remorse, commits suicide: he hangs himself. However, what is disheartening is that no one seems to be guilty or responsible for what is happening to these children. Superstition prevails and Maa Tsuru, Onko and the likes hide themselves behind the 'curse' or the 'devil' that push them to act nonsensically. To top it all, the victims become guilty of their misfortunes. As Onko

unceremoniously says, 'it was she [Baby T] who started pushing herself on me. [...] She was always hopping on my laps and provoking me. I didn't just get up one day to do it with her. She led me on'(167). Maami Broni also lays the blame on Baby T's head in order to dwindle 'her guilt to zero': 'If Baby T liked sex as being alleged and was already doing it anyway with men old enough to be her father, for free, then why not put her in the business and make it profitable for everyone?' (219). The question that may torment the reader and that the intrusive narrative voice asks is to

comprehend why a middle-aged woman who could be somebody's mother or grandmother, who probably is indeed somebody's mother or grandmother, would allow her conscience to sink so low as to agree to put a girl who could be her daughter or granddaughter, into trade of prostitution without qualms, and make it her task to train a young girl to become good at trading her body for sex (219).

Through this passage, Darko questions the level of implication of women in this social tragedy. Maami Broni works with Poison to sell girls into prostitution. Maa Tsuru gives her daughters freely to the streets. Odarley's mother sacks her from home. Fortunately, there is a harmless Naa Yomo who 'somehow' represents 'the old order of sanity and care' (Odamtten 2007: 93) in this environment of hopelessness and desperateness. Naa Yomo's character may remind the reader of Naana, a guardian of traditional values in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1970).

Darko's novel *Faceless* offers a commentary on a diseased society which has lost its control over its children. They are offered cheaply and without remorse to the streets where they are sold, exploited, abused, sexually assaulted and forced into prostitution. Daughters are exchanged for material gains, especially for money. If the male characters are painted as victimizers, women also play an active role in this process of victimization. As Naana Banyia Horne asserts: 'Gender oppression persists because of the support some women lend to the victimisation of other women' (1999: 321). The role played by women in the process of their own victimization is the subject matter for instance in Flora Nwapa's novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1967) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

Human's dignity is betrayed and corrupted at the profit of a consumerist society. Moreover, far from playing its Hegelian role, Government is absent, rather non-existent. If Government has helped Fofu and Baby to pay their school fees and buy their uniform, maybe they will not end up to be street children and subsequently fall into prostitution. Maybe Baby T will not be trapped in the 'devouring jaws' of Poison, the 'streetlord'. Poison's violent acts echo his own suffering when he was a child. He has suffered in the hand of his stepfather and has grown up on the streets. Imagine how this society would turn out if street children phenomena are not dealt with properly and seriously. Until street children and all the 'faceless' plight is conveniently tackled, Ghanaian society will be 'no longer at ease' and there will be 'no sweetness (t) here'. Darko's unflinching determination and commitment to reveal painful truths of her diseased society and then raise awareness seem to be a first step towards a cure.

In any case it is the parents' responsibility to cater for their children whatever the case may be. In fact, Darko questions the parenthood (womanhood and manhood). It is not sufficient to 'dump' children aimlessly into the world, 'to sow the seeds of human life in quick, repeated sessions of reckless ecstasy' to claim to be parents. 'Beyond the delight of tears, beyond the passionate intensity of countless orgasms, the future of our children, of our own morality and ancestry awaits our constant vigilance and careful nurturing' (21).

Notes

1 - 'The joys of motherhood' is reminiscent of the title of Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) in which she narrates the plight of women and children a patriarchy society.

2- MUTE is a non-governmental organization which main preoccupation is to gather data, information that regular libraries do not stock. Thus, 'Every social, gender and child issue was of interest to MUTE' (63).

3- Odarley is Fofu's friend. She is sacked by her own mother after her father has left the house. *Faceless* as she is, her background is not revealed. The reader does not know much about her.

4- It refers to Chinua Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* (1970) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here* (1970). The two works, published in the same year, deal with the theme of disillusionment as far as the post-independence era is concerned. Other Ghanaian novelists such Ayi Kwei Armah (*The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), *Fragments* (1970) and Kofi Awoonor (*This Earth, My Brother* (1972) deal with the same theme in their novels.

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