

CLANDESTINE, CIRCUMSCRIBED AND CODED: SEXUALITY IN DARKO'S *BEYOND THE HORIZON* AND SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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Abstract

This paper explores sexuality in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1991) and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975). The African tradition regards issues of sexuality as a suppressed discourse which is integrated into a discreet, symbolic language. The portrayal of sexuality and its modes in which individuals realise themselves as subjects of sexual desire have been widely studied but works in which these characters have been presented as subjects of concupiscence have received very little attention. Adopting Michel Foucault's notion that the history of sexual experience involves the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity in a particular

culture, this paper examines the libidinous practices of characters. The paper concludes, among other things, that: firstly, Darko and Saadawi's writings represent the African notion which considers sexuality to be a silent discourse; secondly, both novels manifest various forms of psychosexual attitude by the characters and the quest for sexual freedom and power.

Keywords: African sexuality, clandestine, circumscribed, taboo, sexual freedom

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Introduction

The concept of sexuality has been covertly described over the years in early African texts like Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Minutes of Glory: And other stories*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, amongst many others. Most of these writers refrained from the explicit portrayals of sexuality because it is presented as a forbidden discourse. Over the years however, the concept of sexuality which been defined by Goettsch (1989) as "the individual capacity to respond to physical experiences which are capable of producing body-centred genital excitation... independent of bringing physical experiences" (p. 250) has been embraced by African writers, particularly women writers like Nawal El Saadawi, Amma Darko, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Bessie Head.

Amma Darko and Nawal El Saadawi in their novels, *Beyond the Horizon* (1991) and *Woman at Point Zero* (2007) respectively, portray the observation, as purported by Foucault that, sex not being 'repressed' is not a totally new idea (p.81). There appears to be a contested idea that the concept of sexuality in the African context is usually limited to the males. In arguing this assertion, it is important to note that sexuality and the subject of sex in the African culture and context, though not necessarily limited to the males, is however a repressed discourse for the females. According to Uko (2011), female sexuality was despised and condemned. A woman who showed interest in her sexuality was therefore symbolically posing an affront to manhood, which was redeemable by both men and women. However, female writers like Darko and Saadawi defy the normative ideology of repressing the need to voice issues of sexuality in their works. Scholars like Frias (2002) are of the view that the literary discourse on sexual politics and the writing of the female body by African female writers are quite intriguing, bearing in mind the cultural background. This cultural background, which is African, is what I have already referenced as "circumscribed" and "clandestine". This African perspective marginalizes the domain of sexualized complexities and brings to the fore various contestations over what should be accepted and what should not be accepted. Gohar (2016), for instance, argues, "El Saadawi invades taboo territories in Arab culture. She intentionally exonerates male brutalities against women in a society, which viciously suppresses female

sexuality under a religious veil.” (p.175). It should be noted that though Saadawi is of indigenous African descent, she is of Arab ancestry and as such, Arab culture. She seeks to project and empower women from her part of the world from male subjectivities. Amma Darko has, on the other hand, been described by Adjei (2009): “Darko fits into this frame of female writing which concentrates on men as enemies” (p.48). He makes this assertion on the premise that Darko’s first three novels present and contest the culture of patriarchy. Scholars like Gohar (2016) and Adjei (2009) therefore, believe that these women writers vociferously depict gender stereotyping as well as sexual vulnerability and exploitation of women in their novels. Saliba (1995) is also of the view that Sadaawi, in giving voice to Firdaus, the protagonist in her novel, may be classified as a response to the tradition of Arab literature which fails to give women a voice other than that which is dislocated in patriarchal discourse. To her, *Woman at Point Zero* should be read with a political/historical context in mind.

Though scholars like Gohar (2016) and Adjei (2009) issue condemnatory assertions which describe the writings of these women writers as biased and dehumanizing males, it is essential to argue that these women highlight issues of patriarchy, gender stereotyping, female exploitation, amongst many others. Some of these issues are characterized by the indispensable focus on sexuality, which is sometimes considered a circumscribed form of discourse in the African setting.

In examining the portrayal of sexuality in the two novels, this paper takes a two-pronged dimension in its discussion. Firstly, the paper argues that Darko and Saadawi present female characters who, though abused and violated sexually, are concupiscent and yield to the art of sexual involvement with less regret but with greater chances of improving their lives and their lot. These women oscillate between offering sexual satisfaction and wielding power due to their bodies and sexual prowess. Secondly, Darko and Sadaawi in presenting these female characters, overtly portray and present sexuality in their novels. The paper therefore analyses the female protagonists in both texts: *Beyond the Horizon* and *Woman at Point Zero* using the concept of sexuality by women who break the norm of society in distinguishing themselves as prominent sexuality writers. Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* centers on the protagonist Mara, who is married to Akobi in Ghana and endures all forms of abuse and ill treatment from her husband. As immigrants in Germany, Akobi exploits Mara as a sexual commodity through prostitution. It is

through enlightenment that Mara is able to empower herself and break away from the power Akobi has over her.

Similarly, Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* which is set in Egypt depicts Firdaus, the protagonist, as a very intelligent woman who is deprived of the opportunity of furthering her education due to poverty. She is taken to the city by her uncle and circumstances lead her into prostitution. Later, she becomes empowered and kills her pimp.

Employing these two texts in my analysis, I bring to the fore, the portrayal of the psychosexual attitudes of the two protagonists, Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* and Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. I draw on Foucault's concept of sexuality and argue, "power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden" (p.83). I reiterate that the discourse on sexuality by Darko and Saadawi in their novels is an attempt at projecting and revealing the coded and circumscribed form of sexuality through the characters, Mara and Firdaus. This revelation becomes a means of not only displaying the characteristics of these protagonists as being concupiscent, but also as wielding power in the discourse of sexuality in patriarchal society.

Body and power in *Beyond the Horizon* and *Woman at Point Zero*

Both novels portray an important role that enlightenment plays in the lives of the two main characters, Mara and Firdaus. It should be noted that this form of enlightenment becomes a channel for their sexual perversions though the enlightenment sometimes differs from character to character. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara's enlightenment is introduced as a culture shock. Finding herself in a different country and in a different environment, she recounts, "What a film! I know films... This action that I saw horrified me and left me sitting in my seat heated up with my mouth wide open" (p.61). Arguably, though this movie is quite "strange" to Mara because of the exposure to sexual scenes which were not typical of Naka, the village where she had her upbringing, it nevertheless rekindles her sexual desire, which I posit, cannot be concealed even in her shock. The phrase 'heated up' implies a kind of innate sexual desire which though not obvious to people around, arouses her libidinal tendencies in such a 'strange' setting. This 'heated up' may be related to the fact that her husband Akobi has been absent for a

long period hence being ‘starved’ sexually for some time and craving for some attention and sexual contact. Similarly, Firdaus in her outing with her uncle remarks:

...and that night took me to the cinema. I saw a woman dancing. Her thighs were naked. And I saw a man hugging a woman. Then he kissed her on the lips...I hid my face behind my hand and did not dare to look at my uncle...Later he told me that dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin, but now I could no longer look into his eyes. (p.21)

This movie unveils the libidinal tendency which has been hidden and unexplored in her. Though she has been quite intimate with the same uncle since childhood, the movie becomes an initiation to her psychosexual attitude. Her refusal to look straight into her uncle’s face cannot be interpreted as a sign of shyness but rather an indication of the strong sexual attraction she has for the uncle. Accepting that something strange is happening to her body as she fantasizes about her uncle after the movie gives the impression that she is embracing her personality as one craving for sexual satisfaction.

Just like Firdaus, Mara secretly admits her crave for sexual encounter and satisfaction when she thinks, “For who said a lorry-station boiled-eggs hawker like me didn’t know romance? Not only did I know it; I craved and expected it” (p.60). You are assuming that romance and sex are the same thing. Mara says she craves romance. This is not the same as her just craving any old person to have any kind of sex with. Though her sexual craving makes her human, it should be noted that her open admission of this same craving will depict her as a deviant in the society. Her repressed voice which precludes her from declaring her expectation of romance is, therefore, significant. Its significance lies in the fact that though the gendered psychosexual attitude of the African woman is to be muted and suppressed, Mara’s muteness becomes a voiced identity which marks her as concupiscent. Djoussou (2020), who defines a colonized body as one which “symbolizes a site of violent and libidinal experiences to the limit that it can sustain” (p.24), avers that the colonized woman’s sexuality is in endless want of fulfillment; thereby affecting her life as well as her environment. In Mara’s case, her environment, coupled with her want of sexual fulfilment affects her in harnessing her libidinal desires which, she feels, are coded and tabooistic. The patriarchal environment she finds herself

in is fraught with expectations of women who are expected to repress and suppress their sexual urges.

In discussing the psychosexuality of the characters, it is of essence to note that Mara narrates events that lead her into having a disfigured left finger. She attributes this disability to one of her clients who makes her play pretend so he can enact the revenge meant for his wife on her. She confesses bearing all the pain because of her job. Scholars like Aiyetoro and Oworodu (2018) are of the view that the frequent abuse of her body leading to sore cracked lips, hideous traces of bites and scratches, several bruises and scars... is interpreted as the display of male power, since male pleasure, as we find in the text, seems to be inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting and exploiting. In addition, I assert that the disfigured hand of Mara, for example, is a symbol of perverse sexuality. Darko's effort in bringing out this form of fetish sex is a way of representing the different kinds of psychosexual attitudes that exist and are performed to obtain certain sexual satisfactions. It can be claimed that Darko not only writes about sexuality in her novel but goes further in exploring extreme forms of perverse sexualities which include sadism on the part of Mara's customer.

It is obvious that inasmuch as Mara keeps voicing her unhappiness in having multiple sex partners or being a prostitute, her frequent episodes of sexual activities stem from the fact that she will be enriched and able to cater for her family back home. To this, she says:

...Every day, apart from Sundays, I took on at least three men...If I was sleeping with men and charging them for it, it was me giving myself to them. The body being used and misused belonged to me...Once a prostitute, always a prostitute. The stamp would never leave me...
(pp.118-119).

Firdaus makes a similar comment when she remarks, "For after all, I was only a successful prostitute... (p.9).

In both quotations, it is noted that the acceptance of their bodies as sexual vessels which satisfy men from all walks of life becomes the ideal agency to their financial breakthroughs amounting to their ability to cater for their families. It gives them a sense of power, control, and confidence. Awitor (2013) is of the view that Darko's selection of Mara as the protagonist-

narrator is a means to the voiceless victims voicing their plight. This assertion contrasts Frias' (2002) explanation:

African women who were trapped into European prostitution pay a very high price for their one-way ticket to glorious Europe, but in return they often obtain an agency that somehow allows them to master their own bodies and minds, while appropriating control of their own financial gains (p.8).

Therefore, Firdaus' assertion marks a form of enlightenment for these female characters. She acknowledges the import of her profession and the wealth she has made from it over a period.

Mara's consistent use of her body is portrayed by Darko as a very convenient way to amass as much wealth as possible for herself and her family back in her village. Her body therefore represents an escape from poverty. Due to this representation, prostitution becomes a very profitable business for her. She confesses, "Taking on seven men a day was crucifying but I was aiming for a certain amount of money, plenty money, and the sooner I raised it the better, since the longer the time, the greater the danger..." (p.120).

Firdaus similarly comments:

I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in. There were so many of them...For they were all married, all educated, all carrying swollen leather bags, and swollen leather wallets in their inner pockets (p.61).

It is essential to note that Darko and Sadaawi, in portraying Mara and Firdaus respectively in the African context, challenges Foucault's (1990) view that sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness. Though this assertion by Foucault was not made based on African orientation or perception, it is observed that attributing these sexual irregularities in both Mara and Firdaus's lives are not only equated to their professions, but also symbolise the pleasure they experience in executing their roles as prostitutes. In the African context therefore, their 'mental illness', also psychological, cannot be treated as an ailment. Rather, it is a psychological issue

underlined in their quest for money which motivates them to become ‘irregular’ in their sex lives. This irregularity is observed in the frequency they have sex with their customers. Irregularity, therefore, becomes an antithesis of morality as well as an urge to better themselves in all aspects of their lives. Firdaus’ ability and potential in manipulating the roles she is cast in by the more powerful is evident in her embracing of prostitution as a means of liberation. (Saliba 1995).

It is essential to note that the pride associated with being a sex worker is revealed after some period of denial in the prostitution business. The inevitable negative identity associated with sex workers in Africa as cheap, immoral, dirty, and deviant at the initial stages begins to wear off when the characters finally embrace their bodies and accept themselves as people beyond assistance. Mara breaks all the rules and principles taught her to make enough money. According to her, “...as for the morals of my life my mother brought me up by, I have cemented them with coal tar in my conscience” (p.131). This statement implies the revelation of truth that has been concealed in Mara’s conscience over a period. This truth in its reality, I argue, is what keeps Mara on her feet as a sex worker. Her ability to hide her morals becomes a form of arousal and adventure in her job. By cementing these morals, Mara is open to all forms of ‘immorality’ which she has been nurtured and oriented against. Her orientation now falls in line with Foucault’s (1990) view that pleasure is not equated to any law on permission and forbidden (p.57). The forbidden aspect in Mara’s case is the immorality her mother never taught her. Firdaus similarly remarks, “It’s not that I value my honour and my reputation more than the other girls, but my price is much higher than theirs” (p.82). Her acceptance of her worth as a sex worker is highly priced and her awareness of her reputation as a very expensive prostitute becomes her trademark in the industry. Her experience coupled with her fame can only be attributed to the fact that she has no iota of morality in her lifestyle or as will be assumed by others, in her nurturance.

Mara and Firdaus both project themselves as wielding enough power to determine the men they wish to have sexual encounters with. When Mara tells the reader, “I wished he would be a little more informal. I wouldn’t have minded at all giving him my services for free” (p.136). The idea of giving him her body as a free token of appreciation depicts the oxymoronic mentality of an individual who previously complains:

When I wasn't sleeping with a man, I was crouching over a bucket of steaming hot water diluted with camphor and alum. Sometimes the treatment left me with a numb vagina, so that I even felt nothing when the men were sleeping with me, but it was better than the pain. On top of it all, I was swallowing scores of pain killers and tranquilisers every day and taking drugs to keep me going. Only when I had my period did I get some rest. (p.120).

These two different instances portray the appropriation of Mara's sexual fantasies and her acceptance of her body as a source of power over men which she can offer whenever she desires. It should be noted that at this stage, all that matter is how she feels and this feeling tends to reflect in her unspoken stance. Her realization of power over her own body opens a magnitude of opportunities she believes she has access to. Firdaus displays the power her body has over men in her bargain with the prince who approached her:

Come with me.

I held back and said, No.

I will pay whatever you ask for.

No, I repeated.

Believe me, I will pay you anything you want.

You cannot pay my price, it's very high.

I can pay any price. I'm an Arab prince.

And I am a princess.

I'll pay a thousand.

No.

Two thousand, then...

Three thousand, I said.

I accept. (p.106)

Firdaus' power over the Arab prince is not based on wealth or fame. It is based on her body which becomes a bargaining tool for her. Her reference to herself as a princess connotes her

acceptance as royalty and as a powerful person. This status she creates for herself oxymoronises her identity as a princess on one hand, and a prostitute on the other and makes her a unique individual. According to Saliba (1995), “Firdaus whose name means ‘paradise’ in Arabic is both a martyr and mystic, both prostitute and holy woman, both heaven and hell, as the language of the novel suggests”. This binary description given to Firdaus in addition to her description as a princess and a prostitute buttresses the argument of oxymoronic individuality attributed to her (p.136). The power she has over her body dictates her preferences. Foucault sums this relationship between power and sex when he opines that “power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden.” This understanding of power also explains the power of discourse between the two, that is, Firdaus and the prince. It is obvious that Firdaus has an upper hand in the conversation between her and the prince. Her powerful nature is evident in how she addresses and bargains with the prince. Mara and Firdaus both wield enough power through their sexual prowess. Their sexual lifestyle may be categorized under any of the binary system labelled by Foucault, yet theirs is strictly for survival. Irrespective of the perspective one decides to analyse the lifestyle of these characters, their actions are based on a different logic: survival.

It should be noted that later, both characters question their lifestyles and their future. These self-assessments and questionings urge them to take total control over their own lives. Mara in her contemplation remarks:

I resigned myself but at the same time I began to wonder. Why couldn't I take control of my own life since after all, I was virtually husbandless and, anyway, what did my husband care about a woman's virtue? If I was sleeping with men and charging them for it, it was me giving myself to them. The body being used and misused belonged to me. (p.118)

Firdaus, makes a similar remark when she says:

How many were the years of my life that went by before my body, and myself became really mine, to do with them as I wished? How many were the years of my life that were lost before I tore my body and myself

away from the people who held me in their grasp since the very first day? (p.74).

The reality of exploitation and denigration of their bodies without any benefit become a source of power and inspiration for Mara and Firdaus. They question themselves on the essence of their roles and commitments as sex workers for people who do not care about them. In the case of Mara, it is the husband, whereas to Firdaus, it is her pimp. These people in question are only after the money after exploiting the women. In fact, the realization of being exploited becomes preliminary in the later actions of Mara and Firdaus. Though it can be argued that they longed for total control over their own bodies, finally getting the control does not deter them from continually abusing these same bodies they longed to own.

Conclusion

Darko and Saadawi as African female writers employ contrasting pictures of sexuality in their novels. These pictures portray the female characters as either victims or initiators. Though arguable that their authorial intent is to bring to the fore the various sexual exploitations of the female in patriarchal societies, the quest to foreground these sexual acts and scenes as well as the different forms of sexuality empowers them to use vivid descriptions and sexual discourse, which are considered taboos in the African discourse, especially from the perspective of the African woman. These writings agree with Foucault (1990) who opines that speaking about sexuality from a rarefied and neutral viewpoint is in itself significant. The significance, therefore, lies in the contribution of these women writers in their writings to portray sexual oppression in a subversive manner.

Finally, the acts of concupiscence by Mara and Firdaus, are attempts to defy the established coded and circumscribed discourse on sexuality as recognized in Africa. These female writers, Darko and Saadawi have thus broken the code of silence on female sexuality in Africa.

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