Thinking a Post-coronavirus Africa: Reading Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* in the Era of Covid-19

Rogers Asempasah

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Rogers Asempasah
University of Cape Coast

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed Africa's precarious position within the global system. Once again, Africa is looking to the West for salvation in the form of vaccines and loans. Beyond the economic crisis, however, perhaps the most telling impact of the pandemic is not death but the shame of being postcolonial—a shame that arises from the painful realization that the postcolonial is still a condition of dependency. There is therefore a growing discussion on the possibility of a post-coronavirus Africa. However, much of the discussion is taking place in the sciences and the social sciences, to the neglect of the humanities, especially literature. This paper addresses this lacuna by arguing that Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) can help us think about a post-coronavirus Africa. Focusing specifically on the title of the novel as encapsulating a narrative of crisis that decolonizes the "beyond" and a subtle pedagogy on how to transcend post-colonial conceptual and material dependency on the West, the paper argues that Darko's exploration of the shame of being postcolonial and postcolonial liberation is relevant to thinking about a post-COVID-19 Africa. It concludes that Darko's ethical and political vision is located in her subtle affirmation of Fanon's call on Third World countries to strategically de-link from Europe and the West in order to realize and inaugurate a genuine postcoloniality.

Contact: Rogers Asempasah: rasempash@ucc.edu.gh

> *Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves. Their reflectiveness results not just in a vague and uncommitted awareness, but in the exercise of a profoundly transforming action upon the determining reality. Consciousness of and action upon reality are, therefore, inseparable constituents of the transforming act by which men become beings of relation.*
> *Paulo Freire, "Cultural Action and Conscientization."*

> *What are we if we see nothing beyond the present, hear nothing from the ages of our flowing, and in all our existence can utter no necessary preparation of the future way?*
> *Ayi* Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*

Introduction

Amid the ongoing global crisis spawned by the coronavirus pandemic, there is a growing call for a post-coronavirus world that must be radically different from the present global order (Allison 2020; Mimiko 2022; MacMillan 2020; Steil 2020; Schake 2020). This is in spite of the emergence of the Delta and, lately, Omicron variants, all of which remind us of the unpredictable and monstrous character of the virus and the general culture of fear, uncertainty, and disruption that are gradually becoming the new normal. Writing in the *Financial Times* on the coronavirus crisis, novelist and political activist Arundhati Roy captures both the pandemic's unsettling of norms and the opportunity it presents:

> Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. *And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality* (2020; emphasis mine).

However, this hoped-for difference or desire to escape what Mbembe elsewhere calls "the inhuman order of things" (8) is contingent on rethinking bioethics and human epidemiological vulnerability, the geopolitics of vaccines, and the concept of human security. Above all, it requires a radical overhaul of the current global interconnectedness or interdependency and its concomitant unequal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and grievability. This is because the pandemic has destabilized the global supply chain and national economies, reconfigured what counts as normal and abnormal, and heightened the divide between the Global North and the Global South. As Kavanagh and Sing put it, the COVID-19 pandemic "has challenged conventional wisdom and empirical understandings in the comparative politics and policy of health" in a way that calls for a shift in our thinking about "preparedness, capacity, and democracy" (997). Furthermore, the world is witnessing the emergence of new forms of racism and biopolitics of containment and exclusion (Bailey and Moon 2020; Samuel, Chakraborty, and Joy 2020).

For countries of the Global South, especially those in Africa, the pandemic has rekindled discourses of crisis, dependency, postcolonial failure and shame, and alternative futures. Unsurprisingly, these discussions are taking place largely in the health sciences, social sciences, science and technology, and in institutional reports (see *Africa CDC* 2021; *Africa Pulse* 2021; Afriyie, Asare, and Amponsah 2020; Amewu, Asante, Pauw, and Thurlow 2020; Hajjar 2020; OECD 2020; United Nations 2020).[1] In the midst of the ongoing fetishization of scientific knowledge and expertise in virology, vaccinology, and immunology, one may be forgiven for saying that literature has nothing to teach us about the urgent protocols of survival like corporeal distancing, lockdown, wearing of masks, handwashing, vaccination, and booster shots.

I come to this discussion fully aware that literature does not provide, as Ikem puts it in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), "prescriptions" for socio-political transformation (148). Nonetheless, as an imaginative arena, literature allows us to experience forms of being and sociality that force us to reflect on what is acceptable and what is not, what is ennobling and what is dehumanizing. In fact, part of the enduring power of fiction is that it does not simply alert us to the depths of human depravity or evil; it also shows us the human capacity to transcend catastrophe, evil, and shame. Also, I come to this discussion fully aware of the rich body of fictional works that deploy historical and imagined plagues to explore issues such as the pain and commonness of human suffering, fear, uncertainty, betrayal, greed, love, and resilience in the face of unimaginable suffering. Examples of these works are Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1350), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague* (1722), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1942), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) and Veronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men* (2017). These and other literary works that have caught the public imagination in these COVID-19 times show that imaginative works on plagues or pandemics constitute an important modality on how societies remember, reflect on the fragility of life, and re-imagine both the present and the future.[2] This is not to suggest that literature's capacity to think otherwise is limited to works that revolve specifically around plagues and pandemics. Fictional works not based on plagues have been crucial to the way we think, especially about possible futures (see Asempasah and Saboro 2021; Asempasah 2019; Bloch 1986; Jameson 1986; 2005; Smith 2016).

In this paper, I reflect on how Amma Darko's debut novel, *Beyond the Horizon* (1995; henceforth *BH),* can help us think about Africa's future in 'dark times' like the COVID-19 pandemic. By "dark times," I mean a period of time characterized by a set of conditions that expose humanity to incalculable vulnerability and grief, calling into question existing norms. However, as Arendt has noted "Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, and often weak light" that some men and women in their works will engender in us (7). I find Darko's novel apposite to thinking about the future in these pandemic times because, as I shall argue, it mobilizes what I call "the shame of being postcolonial" in order to rethink postcolonial liberation. Nothing could

be more urgent in these times than rethinking postcolonial liberation. If there is one thing the coronavirus pandemic has taught those of us in postcolonial locations, especially in Africa, it is the shame of being human. I use the locution "the shame of being postcolonial" to mean two things: first, to describe a form of shame that emanates from a sense of frustration, abandonment, and fragility as a result of the unacceptable failure of the postcolonial nation-state to make life livable in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. As I looked around the world, especially in the early stages, at how governments in the Global North responded to the pandemic, I could not but feel a terrible sense of despair and shame that life in the postcolony does not count. This shame is especially poignant when we remember that decolonization was envisioned as the transformation of "spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them" (Fanon 28). Roy captures the idea of "the shame of being postcolonial" I am trying to articulate here. According to Roy, the lockdown imposed on India by Prime Minister Modi on March 24, 2020, ironically revealed India's shame to the world. Roy locates the shame in "the calamitous lack of planning or preparedness" that exposed India's "brutal, structural, social, and economic inequality as well as her callous indifference to suffering" (n.p). For observers of the chaos that followed the lockdowns in various African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, the Indian situation was not peculiar. I propose therefore to generalize Roy's observations as constitutive of the shame of being postcolonial in the era of the "necropolitics of Covid-19" (Lee 2020). As I conceive it, the shame of being postcolonial in these coronavirus times has less to do with exposure to conditions of lethality, although that is crucial. As various theorists have argued, the postcolonial is characterized by violence, death, and disorder (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Mbembe 2001). Conditions of lethality are therefore not new in the postcolonial world, which is why the shame of being postcolonial generated by the coronavirus pandemic is not so much about death as such but about the painful awareness of the failure of the postcolonial nation-state to provide the essentials of staying alive during the early months of the pandemic.

Secondly, the shame of being postcolonial is the result of my realization as a postcolonial subject, that my survival is dependent on the generosity of the West, China, Japan, and, lately, Turkey. What this generosity also shows is that we must be wary of sweeping claims that "Covid-19 [has] exposed the universal vulnerability of the individual" (Der Derain and Gara 103). Such generalizations gloss over the differential distribution of abandonment, vulnerability, and shame that the pandemic has so starkly brought to the fore. For example, on September 7, 2021, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Ghebreyesus, lamented that while more than 5.7 billion vaccine doses have been administered globally, less than 2% of that figure was in Africa, a continent of about 1.3 billion people. As I write this paper, rich countries are administering booster shots to their citizens, while in Africa, fewer than 8% have received the mandatory one shot. The problem, according to Mr. Ghebreyesus, is not that "African countries don't have the capacity or experience to roll out COIVD-19 vaccines. It is because they've been left behind

by the rest of the world" (*UN News*, 14 September 2021). What can be more shameful than this temporality of waiting for the generosity of "the rest of the world"? From the postcolonial subject's perspective, what can be more shameful than the emerging vaccine nationalism or apartheid (Banerjee 312)?[3] In all of this, two questions become imperative: what has Africa done with her independence? What can Africa do to abrogate this shame of being human in the postcolony? It is precisely here that I shall argue that *BH* becomes remarkably useful to think with.

It is important to state from the outset that *BH* is not about plagues or pandemics like Veronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men* (2017), which focuses on the 2014 to 2016 Ebola outbreaks in West Africa. Published in 1995 and set against the backdrop of the social and economic crisis that engulfed Ghana and Africa in the 1980s, *BH* centers on the fetishization of Europe as the horizon of hope among Ghanaians and the crisis that ensues from the dissolution of the fetish as a result of an encounter with the real Europe. Narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Mara, the novel traces the experiences and transformation of Mara from a position of incredible naivety into a tragic but mature reader of the subtleties of oppression and liberation. Nothing in *BH*, therefore, comes close to actual plagues, pandemics, epidemiological crises, and vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, *BH* is about a different kind of crisis: the desperate migration of Africans to Europe in search of greener pastures as a pathological social-cultural imaginary that produces disposable subjects and shame. In the last two decades, we have seen on news channels the tragic results of this fetishization of and desire for Europe by postcolonial subalterns in the images of corpses and rescued Africans on the Libyan coast, the Italian coast of Lampedusa, and in the dark alleys of Euro-America).[4]

Bakhtin's concept of "great time" inspires my use of *BH* to reflect on a post-coronavirus Africa. In "Response to a Question from *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," Bakhtin draws attention to the impossibility of limiting a literary phenomenon to the single epoch of its creation or contemporaneity (3). Bakhtin contends that a great work of art "gains in significance because it enters great time" (4). By "great time*,*" Bakhtin is referring to the "posthumous" significance of the text (5). *BH* is perhaps more relevant to the ongoing discussions on thinking beyond the current state of "weird immobility" (Žižek 12) because, as I will show, the title encapsulates a radical act for the socio-political transformation of Africa. In other words, Darko's novel forces us to reflect on how to transcend the shame of being human at the margins of the global political and economic system or order. Consequently, I will argue that while the novel's immediate focus is on the shame that awaits undocumented African migrants in Europe, Darko's ethical and political concern is how to transcend this shame. I locate this bifocal sensibility in the novel's title. First, the title speaks to a crisis of expectation resulting from a traumatic and dehumanizing encounter with Europe as the horizon of hope. This interpretation of the title, I argue, affirms Bhabha's assertion that "the "beyond" is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past" (2). Second, and this is the crucial insight the paper seeks to proffer, the title is a cryptic

invocation of Fanon's framing of genuine Third World liberation in terms of strategic de-linking.

The decisive insight in *BH,* therefore, is more radical than the Bhabhalian interpretation I have suggested above. For Darko, as for Fanon, the "beyond" makes sense only in relation to a definitional or conceptual transformation. Hence, for Fanon and Darko, postcolonial liberation lies in interrogating or decolonizing notions such as the "beyond"; it also means transcending the fetishization or allure of Europe and America as the horizons of hope or possibility. In other words, what Africa requires in this era of waiting for vaccines from the West, or turning to others for the resolution of Africa's problems, is the decolonization of the "beyond." By exploring shame and postcolonial liberation in *BH,* the paper places Darko's novel in dialogue with critical discourses on postcolonial shame, postcolonial futures, and the ongoing discussions on the possibility of a post-coronavirus world.[5] Hence, the paper shifts the discussion from patriarchal violence and dehumanization, sex-trafficking, prostitution, and pornography, the commodification of the subaltern woman's body; alienation and reinvention, subversion, female resistance, shame and agency, the quest for feminist solidarity, bodily integrity, and redemption, that have dominated the critical reception of the novel, to that which is truly radical in *BH*: the Fanonian subtext (Awitor 2013; Djossou 2020; Gbaguidi 2014; Higgins 2006; Jonet 2007; Umezurike 2015).

The next section focuses on crisis, reading, and the genesis of the idea for this paper. This contextualization is important because reading and interpretation are entangled with the socio-economic and historical locations of not just the text but also the reader. The third section discusses the shame of being postcolonial in *BH* and how this shame constitutes the basis for Darko's articulation of an alternative postcolonial vision. The penultimate section dwells on the Fanonian resonance and the issue of a post-coronavirus Africa and the world. The final section is the conclusion.

COVID-19 Blues: Lockdown, re-reading, and the genesis of post-coronavirus thought.

This section traces how the idea of a post-coronavirus world in specific relation to *BH* emerged. The traditional notion of reading the novel as a solitary activity or experience ignores the complex dialogical process wherein the reader is entangled in horizontal and vertical encounters with diverse voices, texts, histories, languages, and discourses. For me, nowhere was this truer than during the lockdown in Ghana, where I live. During the period of corporal isolation brought on by the COVID-19 lockdown, literature provided me with an intimate and critical contact zone with other worlds.

On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) a pandemic. The Director-General, Tedros Ghebreyesus, described the pandemic as "the defining global crisis of our time."[6] The world was gripped by panic and fear. In Ghana, the initial response of quite a number of people was one of nonchalance; for many,

the coronavirus was the Whiteman's disease and, therefore, had nothing to do with Africa (see de Graft Aikin 2020). With this response, they were not only engaged in the all-too-human practice of othering; they were also, unfortunately, demonstrating a certain lack of awareness about how viruses are transmitted. However, things began to hit home when Ghana reported its first COVID-19 case. To curtail the spread of the virus in Ghana, President Akufo-Addo on March 27th announced bans on school activities, social gatherings, and temporary lockdowns in the Greater Accra and Ashanti Regions, effective March 30, 2020. The lockdown resulted in a slight change in the narrative: COVID-19 was no longer the Whiteman's disease, but a disease of the affluent. The reasoning behind this was not difficult to identify: the first cases were among Ghanaians and foreigners who had returned to Ghana from abroad. In a country where the majority of the population lives in poverty, traveling abroad is considered not just a privilege reserved for the affluent but a luxury coveted by many.

The three-week lockdown brought in its wake the agony of isolation, the collapse of businesses and livelihoods, the distrust or suspicion of the other, even the intimate other, and a general disruption of everyday practices and conviviality. As epidemiologists and virologists from the Ghana Health Services, Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, Legon, and the Kumasi Centre for Collaborative Research in Tropical Medicine (KCCR) suddenly appeared on national television to warn of a looming catastrophe, people started to pay heed, somewhat. As we watched the unfolding tragedy in Europe, especially in Italy, and later New York, we began to fear for Africa especially as the initial warnings by WHO and other health experts was that Africa was going to be the hardest hit continent. On national television and radio stations, the discussion turned to Ghana's and Africa's preparedness or lack of preparedness, Africa's contribution to global research and knowledge production, and the possibility of a post-coronavirus Africa and the world. It is significant to note that the initial doomsday prophecies regarding Africa did not materialize. However, the emergence of the Omicron variant in South Africa and the recent lockdowns in Shanghai, China, show that Africa may still be potentially at risk.

Ironically, the lockdown was not altogether negative. As a result of the ban on school activities, universities in Ghana were forced to innovate. The most significant innovation was that online teaching and learning suddenly became the norm (see Agormedah, Henaku, Ayite, and Ansah 2020). The University of Cape Coast, where I teach, hurriedly organized training workshops for lecturers on how to use the University Learning Management System (UCCLMS) to deliver lectures online. The era of what Breen refers to as "coronavirus pedagogy in the zoomscape" was born (3). For the first time, I taught my MA (Sandwich) course, "The Novel in Africa" online. It was both a challenging and stimulating period: the copresence of instructor and learners in synchronous time. One of my students was located in Nigeria! One of the primary texts on the course readings list was Amma Darko's *BH*. Before the coronavirus pandemic, I explored the novel with my students along the following lines: its place in the historical development of the novel in Africa; narratological issues of voice and point of view; thematic issues like female bodily

commodification, patriarchal violence, and the quest for bodily integrity. We also looked at the intertextual resonance generated by the name of the protagonist, Mara. In particular, we dwelt on the Judeo-Christian and Fante meanings of Mara as fundamental to Darko's recalibration of postcolonial gendered violence, shame, and fraught redemption. Furthermore, we discussed *BH* as a reversal of the imperial gaze, especially in relation to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which is also on the reading list.

During the lockdown in 2020, however, as I prepared to teach *BH,* this time to a cohort of students I could only see via zoom, I began to reflect on its significance to the unfolding crisis in Africa. As I re-read the novel, Mara's enclosure on the outskirts of Munich took on a different significance, especially her isolation and aloneness. Like Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," *BH* spoke "out loud and bold" in a contemporary voice of crisis, vulnerability, abandonment, and hope. Unlike Keats, however, Darko's novel insisted on my precarious location within the global allocation of hope, opportunities, abandonment, and grievability. I was rooted in the painful realities and shame of pandemic existence in the postcolony. At the same time, I was particularly fascinated by the new insight that the novel has the potential to help us imagine a post-coronavirus Africa. In that moment of radical epiphany that literature seems uniquely equipped to provoke, the pessimistic, or what I referred to above as the Bhabhalian interpretation of *BH,* was supplanted by a Fanonian vision of postcolonial futurity. In the next section, I shall focus on the Bhabhalian reading of Darko's text, as it is essential for grasping the necessity of the Fanonian voice.

Beyond the Horizon and the shame of being postcolonial

On first reading *BH,* one comes off with the impression that it is an altogether pessimistic novel, with the protagonist caught in a double bind or totality wherein redemption is an impossibility. How else can one explain Mara's Pyrrhic victory at the end of the novel, as encapsulated in her *decision* to go into prostitution as a full-time profession? Given that Mara had been an unwilling conscript and accomplice of patriarchal manipulation and the fetishization of Europe, her choice of prostitution as a profession in Germany may be regarded as a momentous awakening. In the perverse moral universe, the novel traces for us, the end game arrives in the realization that surrender to, rather than escape from, the apparatuses of bodily commodification and dehumanization may well constitute the ultimate redemptive act. In such a diabolical world driven by the capitalist ethos of what the prostitute Wanja, in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood,* calls "eat or you are eaten," radical action or agency is, ironically, not a negation but an affirmation of the existing ethic of dissolution, inessentiality, or annihilation of being. It is within this logic that we should locate the Bhabhalian vision of the novel. What Mara, the protagonist, realizes in Europe at the end of *BH* is the cruel insight that "the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past..." (Bhabha 1).

Lured by Akobi, her husband, Mara leaves Ghana for Germany, full of great expectations. However, her initial hope that she was escaping both patriarchal violence and poverty is overturned by her realization that patriarchal violence at home is linked to the illicit trafficking and prostitution of subaltern women in Europe. Men run the show everywhere! Whether at home or abroad, men can work together to exploit women. Of course, it could be argued that by extricating herself from the financial and bodily control of Akobi and Oves, her masters, Mara has finally gained her freedom. Frías locates the liberating potential in *BH* in Mara's choice. According to Frías, Darko "revises and rewrites the traditional trope of prostitution by depicting the lives of African women who [...] ironically choose prostitution as vengeance, defiance, self-assertion, and financial independence" (12). What if the liberatory potential in *BH* is located elsewhere other than in Mara's act? In other words, what if Mara's scandalous act is not the redemptive path suggested by Darko? Rather than pursue this hermeneutics of vengeance, defiance, and self-assertion (a la Frías), I read Mara's choice of prostitution as Darko's critique of the limited options available to subaltern women in Europe. More importantly, it is Darko's way of showing Mara's unwitting insertion into the capitalist or globalization logic of abjection, disposability, and shame. Just as her father exchanged her for "two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloth, beads, gold jewellery, and two bottles of London Dry Gin" (3), so has Mara, by her decision, bargained her freedom away. It is, therefore, easy to appreciate why the novel seems to hint at the difficulty in giving an account of the self by subaltern subjects caught in the global circulation of bodies. To read *BH* in the way I am suggesting here is to grasp Darko's strategy of the representation of the shame of being postcolonial and her decolonization of the "beyond." The shame of being postcolonial is conveyed through the experiences of dislocated African subjects, especially women like Mara and Kaye in Europe, who are presented as disposable subjects of the twin systems of patriarchy and global sex trafficking, prostitution, and pornography.

One way to understand the link between the "beyond" and the shame of being postcolonial in *BH* is to read the novel as Darko's rewriting of the migratory subjectivity, shame, vulnerability, and redemption in the Book of *Ruth* in the Old Testament. The Book of *Ruth* is a story about tragedy and God's redemptive work, just as *BH* is about shame and the failure of redemption. In the book of Ruth, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, are forced by famine in Bethlehem, Judea, to migrate to Moab. Unfortunately, Moab didn't offer the salvation they had hoped for. Naomi loses her husband and two sons in Moab. Meanwhile, the situation in Bethlehem has changed for the better. Therefore, Naomi makes the decision to return home. However, the Naomi who returns is different: she is impoverished and accompanied only by her widowed daughter-in-law—Ruth. Confronted by a now dispossessed Naomi, the womenfolk of Bethlehem could not hide their bewilderment: "Is this Naomi?" (1:19). Ashamed of and embittered by her changed fortunes and her new status as a failure, without social status and recognition, Naomi changes her name to Mara, which means "Bitter". As she says, "Don't call me Naomi, she told them, call me Mara, because the Almighty (Shaddai) has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty (1:20). It is significant

to note that Naomi means "pleasant"; therefore, "Naomi" no longer reflects her bitter experiences and changed status. As Asempasah and Sam put it, Naomi's new name, Mara, "represents the supreme designation for a calamitous state of dispossession and shame" (158). It can be argued that biblical Mara represents an archetypal figure of female migratory subjectivity that is characterized by dispossession, shame, alienation, and the crisis of identity. Therefore, "Mara" encapsulates "a particular form of contingent existence," that is crucial to Darko's strategy of unsettling the image of Europe and exposing the abject condition of a category of postcolonial women in Europe (Asempasah and Sam, 158).

So, when Darko names her protagonist "Mara," she is at the same time invoking the biblical story of Naomi. However, Darko registers the problematic nature of the postcolonial subject's shame by departing from the Book of *Ruth* in two significant ways. First, unlike Naomi, Darko's Mara refuses to return home because conditions there have not changed for the better and also because she is afraid of the shame that awaits her. Secondly, Mara refuses to change her name when she is encouraged by Kaye, her friend, to do so. According to Kaye, "You are no longer you, Mara. You've changed. "By this, Kaye is referring to Mara's awakening from naivety. Unlike the biblical Naomi, Mara objects: "No, Kaye. I'm still me. I have just understood the world better" (127). Mara's refusal to change her name is important to how Darko frames trauma and redemption in the postcolonial context. According to Asempasah and Sam, Mara's "insistence on keeping her name is a recognition that genuine liberation is a process and not a single dramatic event" (159). In other words, while both the writer of the Book of *Ruth* and Amma Darko insist that genuine redemption can be located in the transformation of 'home' rather than in the "beyond," Darko, unlike the Book of *Ruth*, denies Mara a redemptive genealogy. Like Naomi, for whom Moab or migration for greener pastures turns out to be a tragic experience, Mara realizes that Germany or Europe has nothing to offer except material things (140). By framing Mara's experiences within the context of the Judeo-Christian narrative of migration, shame, and redemption, Darko not only reframes the postcolonial shame of being human but also hints at the necessity of liberation yet to come. For postcolonial subjects, Naomi, as a condition of pleasantness and freedom, is yet to come.

Furthermore, Darko also interrogates the "beyond" as understood in postcolonial locations like Naka (Mara's home village) by confronting the reader, in the first few pages of the novel, with the unspeakable pain faced by postcolonial female migrants like Mara and Kaye in Germany. The Germany we encounter in Mara's first-person narrative is a place of shocking dehumanization and commodification of subaltern women's bodies. It is this unsettling of Mara's image of Europe that is at the heart of Darko's strategy of reversing the gaze and the notion of the "beyond." When we first meet Mara, she is "sitting before a large oval mirror, starring painfully at an image." However, she quickly dismisses that image; "My image? No! —what is left of what once used to be my image? (1). A few paragraphs later, she describes her image in the mirror as "this bit of garbage that once used to be me, and I cry" (3). It is important to note that in the first few pages of *BH*, Darko

seems to be rewriting Lacan's "Mirror Stage" in order to capture the abjection and shame that postcolonial migrants like Mara face in Europe. Unlike the Lacanian mirror in which the infant is confronted with an "Ideal I," in *BH,* the oval mirror confronts Mara with an image that is a negation of the "Ideal I." For Mara, shame resides in the tragic difference between the image in the mirror and what she was before she came to Germany. The mirror presents Mara with her bodily devaluation as a result of the sexual abuse she has suffered from her clients. Therefore, in Mara's mirror, there is no "Ideal I."[7]

Mara's condition in Europe is unique to her; Darko gives us a peek at the widespread sexual exploitation of women. It might be useful to quote in full how Mara captures the fate of these tragic commons in Europe:

> And from my left and right, all about me, I keep hearing chuckles and pantings, wild bedspring creaks, screaming oohs and yelling aahs. They are coming from rooms that are the same as mine, rooms where the same things are done as they are in mine. And in all of them, there are pretty women like myself, one in each room waiting to be used and abused by strange men. They are all about me. And yet here by myself, alone inside my room, I feel so very, very far away on my own. So friendless, isolated and cold. I am just in brief red underpants, so I'm virtually naked, but that is not why I feel so cold because this coldness I feel does not grip my body so much as it does my soul. It's deep inside me that feels this chilliness, from the dejected soul of my body harbours, a soul grown old from too much use of its shelter. (1)

The invisible women in the above passage are victims of a system of bondage, sex trafficking, and prostitution. These are, to borrow David Scott's felicitous phrase, the new "conscripts of modernity" (2004). They flee poverty and violence at home with the hope of acquiring the trinkets of modernity, only to be turned into disposable bodies. In the above passage, Darko confronts the reader with the condition of migrant women in Europe, which is so unsettling given that Europe has generally been imagined as the horizon of hope and re-invention by postcolonial subjects like Mara and Kaye. Furthermore, Darko extends her strategy of defamiliarization wherein Europe is presented as an unhomely space for undocumented African migrants through an emphasis on the specific location from which Mara tells her story. Darko draws an intimate connection between Mara's experiences and the specific location or place she is narrating her experiences. This can be gleaned from the fact that Mara is telling her story from an isolated house on the outskirts of Munich. The place is significant not only because it signifies Mara's marginal status in Europe, but also because it is a space of illicit desire, shame, and tragedy. The house, according to Mara, once belonged to a wealthy German who built it purposely for "his frequent clandestine rendezvous with the greatest love of his life, who, like him, was male." (3). When the truth about the original owner's queer desires became public, he committed suicide. This site of dangerous and transgressive desire is later converted into a brothel by Oves. Oves, Mara tells the reader, 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 do. That's my karma." (3)

Two things are worth pointing out in the above quotation. The first thing to note is that Oves' lordship over Mara and the other ladies is not different from Mara's father's power and ownership over his daughters at Naka, Mara's village in Ghana. It is precisely in this sense that the "beyond" can be defined as neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past. Secondly, shame produces death. This point is crucial to how Darko mobilizes shame as a strategy for articulating alternative horizons, or 'beyond.' Unlike the original owner of the house, who commits suicide, it is to Mara's credit that she does not commit suicide. Despite that, the novel shows that she suffers social death, which is one more reason she cannot return to Ghana. Contrary to the belief among the people of Naka that Europe was "not just near heaven but heaven itself" (34), Mara, upon her encounter with the real Europe, comes to the conclusion that Europe is "hotter than hell" (35). As a result, gone are Akobi's claims, in Ghana, that in Europe "there is so plenty of factory and construction work waiting to be done... but so few people to do it" (34); that in "Britain, the people are so rich that they throw fridges away? And in Germany, they throw cars away "(35). Mara's shame, then, must be understood within this context of disappointment and realization that the difference between Europe and Africa, especially in their treatment of marginalized women, is one of degree rather than of kind.

It is to Darko's credit that at the end of the novel, Mara gains control over her income. As Mara rationalizes her action:

> But I was beginning to consider this situation as my karma. 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 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. What had that got to do with Akobi? So why should the money I made go to him? What had he ever done for me? Once a prostitute, always a prostitute. The stamp would never leave me. So why care about a sex orgy video with me in it? What power did he have to decide my fate in Germany…So why did I wear myself out with men and let him take the money? If I couldn't help myself out of my situation then why not turn it to my advantage? (118-119).

Following this awakening, Mara works hard to legalize her stay in Germany (she is given a five-year visa). She gets Akobi arrested and imprisoned, gets Comfort, Akobi's shadow wife, deported to Ghana, and redirects the money she was making from her prostitution into her account rather than the previous exploitative arrangement where the money went to Akobi and Pompey. However, this financial independence and her decision to become a prostitute do not go far enough. As I have argued, she has only succeeded in accelerating her own destruction. As she put it,

> When I was not 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 felt nothing when the men were sleeping
> with me…On top of it, I was swallowing scores of painkillers and
> tranquillisers every day and taking drugs to keep me going. (120)

Indeed, at the end of the novel, Mara is hooked on "sniffing 'snow'" and "sinking into a place hotter than hell" (139). Tragically, Mara's solution is to make as much money as possible for her mother and sons back home (139). The last lines of the novel summarize Mara's tragedy and the shame of being postcolonial: "Material things are all I can offer them. As for myself, there's nothing dignified and decent left of me to give them" (140). Perhaps, what saves Mara and makes her a memorable character in contemporary African fiction is her implacable recognition of the compromised or contradictory nature of not only her supposed freedom but also postcolonial liberation generally; for as long as Europe or the West remains the horizon of hope and self-fashioning for postcolonial people, Africa will continue to lose its human resource to Europe.

Thus, through Mara's experiences in Germany, Darko reveals the limits and fatality of a form of thinking and subjectivity that resides in a dubious socio-cultural definition of Europe as the "beyond." It is dubious because, as Mara painfully realizes, the image of Europe circulating in the postcolonial socio-cultural imaginary is tragically different from the real Europe one encounters in Europe. It is dubious because imagining Europe or Euro-America as the horizon of hope is defeatist as it constitutes a new form of colonization or enslavement that, as Ayi Kwei Armah shows in *Fragments* (1971), is undergirded by a cargo mentality. The result is that metropolitan locations are figured as the Paradise to be desired by the margins of the Empire, while the post-colonies are reduced to producers of raw materials seeking salvation in Europe. Read in this way, the crucial question *BH* poses is this: "How can we rethink the location of the "beyond"?" As indicated earlier in the paper, this question is pertinent in thinking about a post-coronavirus world. In the next section, I shall argue that the ethical and political vision of Darko's title lies not just in its contestation of Europe as the "beyond," as we have demonstrated in this section, but in its subtle re-affirmation of a Fanonian vision of genuine postcolonial liberation that thinks the "beyond" in terms of conceptual and qualitative transformation of Africa.

Re-affirming Fanon, rethinking the "beyond"

Whereas the previous section has been concerned with showing that Darko's representation of Europe as a place of shame and the commodification of female bodies for undocumented migrants like Mara affirms Bhabha's claim that the "beyond" is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past, this section focuses on the Fanonian voice summoned by the title of the novel. As we shall see, it is this alternative voice that sheds light on Darko's ethical and political vision. In the "Conclusion" of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon reflects on what genuine Third World liberation would mean. This was an urgent issue for

Fanon because of what he saw as the "nauseating mimicry" or "imitation" of Europe by the newly independent nation-states of the Third World (251; 252). For Fanon, decolonization or national liberation means a new set of relations or humanism and the invention of concepts. In other words, decolonization, properly understood is "the liquidation of all untruths implanted in the [native] by oppression ... the existence of men and women who are truly liberated... who are truly masters of all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society" (Fanon, 250), can only become genuine and meaningful on condition that the post-colonial nation-state abandons Europe as a model and place of re-invention. For Fanon, this was necessary not only because Europe has failed to live up to its historical mission of humanizing the world; it has also turned out to be "a negation of man" (Fanon 252).

While *BH,* as we have shown, does not necessarily dwell on the nauseating mimicry or imitation of Europe as the curse of the postcolonial nation-state and its citizens per se, the title nonetheless summons and affirms Fanon's call on the postcolonial nation-state to de-link from Europe. Like Fanon, Darko's title suggests that genuine post-colonial renewal or modernity must be located beyond Europe as the horizon of hope. This means developing the necessary concepts, political ethos, and economic and development paradigms that emerge not only from the specific historical experiences of colonial domination and expropriation but also from the consciousness of decolonization as an opportunity for colonized people to start "a new history of Man" that is radically different from European imperial history and adventurism (Fanon 252). Herein lies the insight that Darko's title dialogically reaffirms Fanon's emphatic claim: "If we wish to live up to our people's expectations, we must seek the response *elsewhere* than in Europe" (254; emphasis mine). It is precisely this "elsewhere than in Europe" that I would suggest Darko's title, *BH,* evokes. Read from this radical perspective, Darko's title suggests that the possibility of genuine postcoloniality requires that Africa redefine its place in the global system in ways that pay attention to the socio-economic transformation of the continent. In that way, "an alternative future in which the youth, in particular, can identify with a more humane society in which massive poverty and powerlessness are not considered inevitable features of life on the continent" can really become a possibility (Neocosmos 158).

It is crucial to emphasize that the idea of de-linking in Darko's title that I have traced to Fanon has been theorized by Mignolo as an imperative for reconstituting the world. For Mignolo, de-linking means "to de-naturalize concepts and conceptual fields that totalize reality..." (459). Mignolo argues that de-linking leads to a "de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (453). Understood in this way, a Fanonian reading of Darko's title is relevant to the ongoing discussions on the possibility of a post-coronavirus Africa. Darko's title, therefore, encapsulates an emancipatory thought and ethic necessary for rethinking Africa's place in the search for a post-coronavirus world. What Darko, following Fanon, teaches us is that a genuine post-coronavirus world would be one in which Africa's rich resources, both

material and human, are tapped and directed towards making it a paradise for its people. Not only that, a genuine post-coronavirus Africa would require a radical interrogation of the dominant Western epistemologies, politics, and social and political paradigms that are foisted on poor countries by the West as conditions of modernity. Only in this way will the culture of dependency, the desire for the West, and the shame of being disposable subjects in Euro-America be abrogated. Only in this way will Africa emerge as a viable horizon of hope or possibility for Africans who currently see Europe, America, and, lately, China as their only places of re-invention. To read *BH* with Fanon in mind is to come to the realization that Darko's representation of the tribulations of African women in Europe is her way of critiquing the post-colonial nation-state and the current form of globalization that merely creates a desire for the West. In the diegetic world presented in *BH*, Mara and the other post-colonial subalterns in Europe represent the new wretched of the earth. Thus, the title of the novel represents Darko's call for a revision of Africa's colonial and neo-colonial structures of thought and practice.

Some readers might counter that the Fanonian voice invoked here borders on isolationism and is, therefore, antithetical to the contemporary three-pronged ethos of globalization, transnationalism, and interdependence. Such a charge would be unsustainable because it assumes that Fanon was against globalization or global interdependence *tout court*. On the contrary, Fanon was keenly aware of the inevitability of global interaction and interdependence. Consequently, not only does he insist that no nation can keep aloof from other nations, but he also comes to the profound conclusion that international consciousness lives and grows on national consciousness (Fanon 199). This position holds for Africa's transformation in a post-COVID world. Within the context of the current vaccine inequities, with Africa appearing to be the most disadvantaged continent, a truly post-coronavirus world would be one that is no longer insidiously entangled in what Mignolo (2017) calls the "colonial matrix of power." This goes beyond investing in robust healthcare infrastructure as well as research centers and institutions that would provide early warning on Africa's vulnerabilities. It also requires "epistemic reconstitution" of ways of thinking, ways of life and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed" (Mignolo 2). Africa cannot do this alone. However, as Darko and Fanon suggest, Africa must eschew the traditional attitude of looking to the Global North for salvation because they will prioritize their needs and citizens before they consider Africa when it comes to the crunch. Otherwise, why must the WHO repeatedly remind the world of its responsibility to Africa? There is no doubt that the challenges of today demand global solutions, but global solutions must first be conceived as the aggregate of national and continental solutions.

Conclusion

The paper began with two epigraphs that emphasize the transformative power of consciousness and action upon reality and the necessity of seeing beyond the present structures of thought and feeling. Both epigraphs emphasize the imperative of change in

the face of existential crisis. The coronavirus pandemic continues to evolve and poses an existential challenge to the world. All over the world, people are beginning to realize that we cannot continue with business as usual. The time has come for a paradigm shift in conceptions of self and others, global interdependence, governance, development, and health. Nowhere is this more urgent than in Africa. The coronavirus pandemic, therefore, offers Africa, in particular, the opportunity to rethink its place in the global system; it also presents an opportunity for Africa to rethink what it means to be postcolonial. It is precisely in this spirit that I argued for the relevance of Amma Darko's *BH,* as an important text for reflecting on what a post-coronavirus Africa would mean. The paper has shown that *BH* is particularly germane for thinking about a post-COVID-19 Africa because it insists on rethinking concepts like "beyond" that encapsulate structures of thought and feelings that are inimical to African subjectivity and Africa's place in the world. More importantly, the paper shows that *BH* is crucial because it mobilizes the shame of being postcolonial to think of an alternative postcolonial future. It located this emancipatory thought in Darko's title which evokes and affirms Fanon's call on Third World countries to institute genuine postcoloniality by strategically de-linking from the colonial matrix of power. It is this liberatory thought that is relevant to thinking about Africa's place in a post-COVID-19 world. Darko's title subtly suggests that Africa's future lies in how it succeeds in working out this de-linking so as to emerge as a truly global player. The potential for a genuine post-coronavirus Africa that is radically different from the current state of dependency and shame is great. However, this can only be achieved through deliberate policies and strategies that will reposition Africa from the margins to the horizon of hope for its people. This demands an act of will that calls into question residual colonial and neo-colonial images of Euro-America as the "beyond." Finally, the paper shows that African writers are social thinkers and, therefore, are engaged in dialogue with postcolonial theorists and notions about Africa's future. While *BH* is not about the coronavirus pandemic, the title's insistence on reversing the gaze of possibility from Euro-America to Africa constitutes Darko's emancipatory thought that should guide Africans in their quest for a truly post-COVID-19 world. It is precisely within the context of Bakhtin's notion of great time that *BH* can be said to offer glimpses of hope in pandemic times.

Notes

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[1]See, however, Chrystopher Spicer, "Weep for the Coming of Men: Epidemic and Disease in Anglo-Western Colonial Writing of the South Pacific" (2021), Prachi Priyanka, "Impacts of Pandemics in 20th Century India: Through the Lens of Hindi Literature," and Milan Kroulík, "Pandemics and 'Zombies': How to Think Tropical Imaginaries with Cinematic Cosmologies" (2021).

[2] See for example, *English Studies in Africa* 64: 1–2, 2021.

[3] On vaccine nationalism and apartheid, see Dwaipayan Banerjee "From Internationalism to Nationalism: A New vaccine Apartheid." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41.3 (2021): 312–317

[4] Of course, the search for greener pastures in Euro-America does not always end in tragedy.

[5] On postcolonial shame see, among others,

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[6] "Tedros: The face of the globe response to coronavirus pandemic". Al Jazeera. 17 March, 2020. Retrieved 10 April, 2022.

[7] For elaborations on Lacan's "Mirror Stage" and the Ideal *I,* see Peter Hobbs "The Image Before Me." *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 7, 2004 (n.p). **https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu**. Retrieved April January 12, 2021; Paulina Fugellie Aroch, "The Place of Metaphor in a Metonymic World of Homi Bhabha's De-realizing Politics and Other Academic Events." *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Editors Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro. New York: Rodopi, 2011. 343–388.

Notes on contributor
Rogers Asempasah is a senior lecturer in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, where he teaches literatures in English.

ORCID
Rogers Asempasah **http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1272-1211**

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