

DINA IN AMMA DARKO'S *FACELESS* AND *NOT WITHOUT FLOWERS* AS A POSTFEMINIST FIGURE

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ABSTRACT

This study posits that Amma Darko's characterisation of Dina sheds light on a postfeminist approach to African women's imaginative writing. It raises question to African feminism and cultural transformation in this 21st century. Indeed, the early female or feminist artistry in African literature is well known as a showcase of victimhood whereby female characters are overexploited and silenced by a powerful patriarchy. *A So Long Letter* by Mariama Bâ (1979) and *Efuru* by Flora Nwappa (1966) are some sample novels that can justify this writing policy of the first generation of female writers in Africa. This artistic approach has been refined by the second generation of African female writers such as Amma Darko whose writing piece embarks on cultural changes and female emancipation. Thereby, Darko's portrayal of Dina calls into question the victimised figure of the female while casting woman within a dynamic cultural outfits. From postfeminist lenses, the work consists in analysing Dina as a creative figure that reconciles gender discourse with cultural mutation in Africa. In other words, the present study reveals that Dina symbolises a paradigmatic shift in African women's writing and then as the fictionalised model of the emergent female protagonist.

Keywords: Postfeminism, Dina, characterisation, female, feminism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude postule que la caractérisation du personnage de Dina par Amma Darko justifie une approche postféministe de l'écriture des femmes africaines. Elle soulève la problématique du rapport entre le féminisme africain et les transformations sociales en ce 21^e siècle. En effet, les premières initiatives artistiques féminines/ féministes dans la littérature africaine se présentent comme une vitrine de victimisation à travers laquelle les personnages féminins sont surexploités et réduits au silence par un patriarcat dominant. Une si longue lettre de Mariama Bâ (1979) et Efuru de Flora Nwappa (1966) constituent un échantillon de romans qui justifient cette politique scripturale de la première génération d'écrivaines d'Afrique. Cette approche artistique a été réorientée par la deuxième génération d'écrivaines telle qu'Amma Darko dont l'écriture s'ouvre sur la problématique des mutations culturelles et la représentation de l'image de la femme. Ainsi la caractérisation de Dina par Amma Darko remet-elle en question l'image victimaire du féminin tout en la re-présentant dans un décor culturel dynamique. À la lumière du postféminisme, ce travail consistera à analyser le personnage de Dina comme une figure artistique qui réconcilie le discours du genre d'avec les mutations culturelles en Afrique. En d'autres termes, l'étude démontre que Dina symbolise un changement paradigmatique dans l'écriture féminine africaine avant de montrer qu'elle est de ce fait le modèle de la femme émergente dans la fiction féminine africaine.

Mots-clés : Postféminisme, Dina, caractérisation, féminin, féminisme.

INTRODUCTION

“Feminist thought and movements, as we have come to know them, are in fact, going through a permanent metamorphosis, adapting to the times”, acknowledges Laura Grunberg (2013:4). This acknowledgement is surely extended to imaginative writing which embodies cultures and female representation from first wave feminism to third wave feminism(s). The latter constitutes a stage of paramount importance whereby cultural trends and dynamics are generally well echoed in female writing and especially in African women’s imaginative works as remarkable in the Ghanaian Amma Darko’s. This author’s works reveal a creative dynamism geared by multiple cultural changes that underlie feminist thought within and without the African continent. From *Beyond the Horizon* to *Between Two Worlds*, female characters are thus portrayed as referential to times and cultural changes.

This double play of time and cultural mutation in Darko’s literary representation goes from victimised female characters to victimless female figures. One of these victimless figures is Dina successively portrayed in *Faceless* (2003) and *Not Without Flowers* (2007). The portrayal of Dina brings forth the idea of revising basic feminist claims in African society where women are supposed to be deeply earthed in gloomy parts of the social tissue despite the ongoing cultural changes. Such a revision stems from the issue of reshaping “women’s condition in an era of rapid social and technological transformation” as Patrick Oloko (2008: 9) put it. Less than overturning feminism in Africa, the portrayal of Dina in these two novels by Amma Darko uncurtains new reading perspective of feminist texts. This reading inscribes a paradigmatic shift carried out on the basis of the flourishing of popular cultures and female activism on the African continent. Indeed, what is the impact of popular culture and media trends on feminist writing in Africa? More precisely, how does the portrayal of Dina show that African women’s writing evolves around cultural transformation and challenges in this 21st century?

From the above questioning, this study aims at showing that the portrayal of Dina consents to mutational culture and new perspective in feminist approach. On behalf of postfeminist lenses, the analysis will be extended on two axes unravelling how Dina substantiates a paradigmatic shift in African women’s writing and then as the fictionalised figure of the emergent female protagonist. The claims articulated within the different axes take us to the use of postfeminist epistemology as framed by the prefix “post” which Ann Brooks (1997:1) thinks it “implies a process of ongoing transformation and changes”. With this approach, the reading is more oriented to uncovering an evolutionary female image “critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives [...]”. In short, using postfeminism as the methodological framework, this study intends to value imaginative writing that portrays woman beyond the feminist status quo.

1. THE STATUS OF DINA IN *FACELESS* AND *NOT WITHOUT FLOWERS* AS PARADIGMATIC SHIFT IN FEMINIST WRITING

After “wrap[ing] female characters in poor outfits” (K. P. Koffi, 2021:37) in *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and *The Housemaid* (1998), Amma Darko most probably puts a break to victimising feminine figure in her creative works. *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* come out as updated narratives that suggest new turn in Darko’s approach to imaginative writing. The merit of this statement derives from the casting of a strong female character empowered with necessary means for rescuing her lot. Yet, the two novels under study showcase traditional themes such as “polygamy, childlessness, old age, stereotyping” underscoring

the feminist voice in Darko's writing (J. D. Ofori, 2013:178). But, the treatment of these social illnesses differs from Darko's previous novels in which female characters such as Mara, Akua and her mates are thrown to bear mercilessly the brunt of cultural whims.

This change is viewed through the characterising policy which Darko's reader can observe in the female protagonist Dina. Indeed, Dina symbolises a paradigmatic shift to the extent that she is casted as a strong female figure who tries to provide sustainable solutions to her surroundings. First of all, it seems important to look into how the narrator presents Dina in the narrative piece:

Dina was a graduate of the University of Ghana. Her marriage to her campus boyfriend shortly after her graduation, ended in divorce after four turbulent years of childlessness. Finding herself with no child and no husband and plenty of time, she recollected her frustration during her final research work for her major essay when she found out that regular libraries did not stock the kind of information she was looking for. And with that recollection came an idea and the birth of the idea for MUTE. (A. Darko, *Faceless*, 2003:38)¹

The introduction of Dina calls Darko's reader's attention upon rehabilitating values around the feminine in women's literature. One element of paramount importance in this introduction is the criterion of literacy. The literacy trait in Dina stands out as a fundamental demiurge by which the Ghanaian female author "establishes the growth of her women" in Christabel A. Sam's words (2021:80). In addition to her literacy, Dina is invested with a strong psychological resistance against childlessness and singlehood. This mental state leads her to many initiatives in favour of women and the whole society.

As one can notice, the archetype of woman painted in Dina derives from a cultural predisposition to changes. In fact, these changes are well facilitated by media such as "newspapers, magazines, radio, television" that are mentioned in the narrative (A. Darko, *F*, 2003:38). The aforementioned institutions substantiate Darko's postfeminist portrayal of women. It means that the Ghanaian female writer abides by the irresistible influence of media upon culture and feminist perception of women that Sara Gramble (2013:36) traces back to 1980s on as follows: "The term 'postfeminism' itself originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context of joyous liberation from ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement". The notion of liberation from basic feminist claims coupled with the status given to Dina triggers a new perception of female literature.

This literature in which the woman is portrayed as a literate character upon socio-cultural mutations reflects the popular orientation of feminism that is propelled and celebrated by media. The promoted image of Dina crystallises the "new luminosity" (R. Gill, 2016:1) brought to women's issues in literary representation heretofore perceived as compatible to female weaknesses and victimhood in African literature. In other words, Amma Darko assumes cultural and media influences on artistic creation. In so doing, Darko embraces fashion and trendy feminine images as perceived on radio/television broadcastings through Ms. Kamame presented as specialist of gender issues on 'Good Morning, Ghana's Show at Harvest FM in *Faceless* (109). The presence of this radio (Harvest FM) broadcasting (Good Morning, Ghana's Show) suggests communication opportunities available and conducive to women visibility outside the private sphere.

1- From now on I will use abbreviation while quoting the two elements of the corpus. Thus, *Faceless* will become *F* and *Not Without Flowers*, *NWF*.

Women's public visibility as portrayed by Amma Darko reveals a critical stance to feminism utterly engrossed in women's social predicament in spite of cultural changes and social evolution on African continent. That is why to the literate character, she adds the image of entrepreneurship to Dina. In fact, Dina is the founder of the Non-Governmental Organisation called 'MUTE' prevailing at the core of the setting of *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*. MUTE is inserted into intellectual, social and humanitarian paradigm in search of holistic solutions to Ghanaian society as painted by Amma Darko. The fact of trusting the fate of a whole society upon a woman claims for the advent of a new era whereby women are deemed capable to be at the front of the society. Such an artistic orientation is opposed to an ongoing and boring portrayal of women through the prism of feminism. On the contrary, Dina's intrusion in Darko's works on the basis of skilled and emancipated woman illustrates the fact that there is a need to recognise the upturning female image in Africa.

This growing of women's image rests upon cultural dynamics that is perceptible in the character of Dina as presented in the narratives. It is all about strong personality traits embedded in the character of Dina. The first trait to point out is her psychological integrity that prevents her from collapsing regarding to lack of marital fulfilment. This psychological trait is revealed in *Not Without Flowers* when the creation of MUTE is also assigned to an unshakable woman whose steadfastness goes on gathering her lot around her project as narrated in the following passage: "The founder of MUTE, Dina, a divorcee with no child, worked with three other women namely, Kabria, who was married with three children; Vickie, who was still unmarried and Aggie, who was married with no child" (*NWF*, 2007:66-67).

A first glance at the above excerpt can easily lead Darko's reader to classify Dina among the routine female characters whose gendered status weigh them down. But with a deep look at it helps realise that the passage casts Dina as a strong character whose stubbornness to social events proclaims a new born woman. The relevancy of newness around the character of Dina is embedded in Darko's attempt to dismiss the victimised female figure. That is why despite her marital failure related to infertility, Dina is presented as careless to stereotyping issues about feminine identity. On the contrary, her profile fills into a postfeminist context where women and girls benefit from an "increasing cultural recognition" (S. Banet-Weise, 2018:153) as full citizen. By full citizenship, one should integrate the notion of full participation to social, economic and political advancement opposed to strict feminist perception of society.

This character policy in Darko's works embarks on a double shift that goes from collective to individual subjectivity and from strictly feminist politics to neoliberal capitalism that embrace Banet-Weise's perception of postfeminism (2018:154). As for the first shift, it is related to the fact that Dina's psychological stability shows her specificity compared to many other female characters destabilised under the same social threats such as childlessness and singlehood. That is the case of Aggie and Mena Penyin in *Not Without Flowers*. Drastically opposed to them, Dina overcomes these social vicissitudes by affirming her personality. This is done in finding her way in that neoliberal capitalist society where it seems to be better to act than to complain on one's fate. The second shift deals with new perception in women's social issues. This new perception expresses what is termed "backlash" against feminism. Dina's psychological attitude suits this shift to the extent that she does not comply with social status quo, but she stays positively oriented forward and ready to follow society in its dynamic move.

In addition to her psychology, Dina is also presented as professionally capable and morally adaptable to times. This profile can be substantiated through characters' relationship at work at MUTE. As the boss of that organisation whose objective is clearly stated in both *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* as alternative library building, Dina's professional image disrupts the routine. Indeed, the top managing position given to Dina shows the break that Amma Darko gives to the traditional female image in African literature where most of the female characters are constrained to petit jobs and household chores. This time, women are ranged among serious initiators whose imagination and works contribute to enhancing the whole society. Beyond the tremendous social commitment that is to serve through and through her community as mentioned in *Not Without Flowers* (*NWF*, 2007:66), Dina manages her institution with ethics and efficiency.

Primarily, she succeeds in establishing a good professional atmosphere among her workers and ethically based relationship between MUTE and outside institutions. Thus, where she may be expected to be impulsive, the narrator discloses Dina's mature state as follows:

'Diana. Hello. Good morning!' Kabria greeted her boss cheerfully. Dina did not respond. She took a long sullen look at her wristwatch and then at Kabria. The message hit Kabria loud and clear. She jumped to her own defence. 'It was creamy, Dian. It went off right in the front of children's school. Can you believe that?' Dian's frown cleared. 'If Creamy could talk, it would always be fighting you!' she hurled back. 'You push everything down its throat.' (*F*, 2003:38-9)

The passage transpires Dina's effort to set up a professional environment that rests upon ethical conducts. Her refusal to respond to Kabria's greeting suggests her attachment to settled working times. In other words, the boss of MUTE wants her colleague to integrate the professional mind-set that excludes lateness and many other useless gossips viewed as women's defaults. At the same time, Dina finally refuses to be severe to her co-workers because she knows that any change goes on progressively with times.

As for external relations of MUTE, Dina stands as an imposing public relation representative whose collaboration calls for mutual respect among collaborators. This statement can be justified by the solid partnership she maintains with media workers at Harvest FM (*NWF*, 2007:67). Such a solid relationship, one can notice, is based on civility and courtesy among collaborators at any time and circumstance as reported in the passage below:

Dina's telephone buzzed into her thoughts at exactly 11.23 am. She was slumped behind her table at the office. It was Sylv Po. 'Did you listen to me earlier?' he blurted as soon as Dina uttered hello. Dina brought home his discourtesy. 'And a very good morning to you too Sylv Po.' Sylv laughed. 'Oh dear! Forgive my primitiveness, Dina. Blame it on overexcitement. A very good morning to you too.' (*NWF*, 2007:67)

In addition to suggesting Dina's attachment to civility and sound professional collaboration, the passage sheds light on Dina's serenity and self-confidence while talking to Sylv Po. This attitude encapsulates a gender free mind-set that determines Dina's personality and relationship to men. That is to say the portrayal of Dina "bypasses feminism altogether" and fits into "postfeminist joys" (E. Chen, 2012:223) consisting in, to quote Banet-Weise (2018:154) "celebrating a kind of gendered freedom from both patriarchy and feminism".

As one can notice from the above analysis, the designing of Dina as the main female figure in both *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* discloses a new literary paradigm in women's writing. This paradigm echoes a postfeminist orientation to writing that celebrates cultural advancement thereby women's image is reconstructed beyond feminism routine. In that line, one can argue that Darko's writing forges a model of the emergent female figure in African women's literature that is going to be analysed through Dina in the following section of this study.

2. DINA AS THE FICTIONALISED FIGURE OF THE EMERGENT FEMALE PROTAGONIST

From the paradigm shift out of the presentation of Dina in *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*, Darko's reader comes across the emergent female protagonist in African women's literature. That time, the female protagonist is no more a "secondary role" player and "adjunct to the main male character" as defended by Emmanuel Ngara (1989:35). Also, the female protagonist is not resolutely enrolled on a "feminist consciousness" that made literature "an avenue to reveal and challenge all aspects of male domination and the subordination of women" (M. Nutsukpo, 2020:90). But, the female protagonist, as one can notice through Dina, reflects an emergent character "expressing current development in society and having wide implications for a view of women's social and material conditions as advancing" (P. Okolo, 2008:105).

The emergent female protagonist in Amma Darko's design goes beyond a mere "idealisation of female characters" that Monique Ekpong (2011:167) equates to "conferment of all female characters with only positive qualities to render them more admirable to the detriment of male characters". The character features of this emergent female protagonist subsume a progressing perception extended on different scales of life as seen in media culture. *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* make known these features as Dina externalises her vision of success, leadership and social commitment.

Dina's social awareness is presented as a vision that is not restricted to gender approaches. Then the failure of her marriage and her infertility, instead of growing into obstacles to her rising, are narrated as the starting block from which she conceives her vision. In other words, Dina is given the stamina to stand beyond the current devastating issues female characters go through in African women's literature. From *Faceless* to *Not Without Flowers*, Dina symbolises a specific character whose actions justify the presence of a new female protagonist in African women's literature.

Dina's presence emerges from and above many other female characters such as Maa Tsuru and her daughters (Baby T and Fofu), Kabria, Aggie, to name just a few. While the portrayal of these characters falls into the traditional line of female figure in African women's literature as gendered, marital pathologies, socially oppressed, excluded, and intellectually backward and poor, Dina's appears as the ideal and substitute character. It means that Amma Darko sways from feminist painting that sandwiches Maa Tsuru and her daughters into a social quandary and Kabria into a marital routine to a postfeminist vision that reinvents Dina onto an ungendered vision. Indeed, the Ghanaian writer seems discarding the complaining and passive female figure dissimulated on a tryptic identity as the wife, mother and worker such as Kabria in *Faceless*:

The mother, wife, worker and battered-car owner that she was, no day passed that Kabria didn't wonder how come the good Lord created a day to be made up of only twenty-four hours, because from dawn to dusk domestic schedules gobbled her up,

offices duties ate her alive; her three children devoured her with their sometimes realistic and many times very unrealistic demands; while the icing on the cake, their father, needed do n more than simply be her regular husband. (*F*, 2003:10)

While the above excerpt shows how feminist writing attaches misery to modern African woman from the private sphere (family) to the public one (professional), the following passage reinforces this pale image with single parenthood, the phenomenon of street children and poverty as female issues:

Maa Tsuru, Fofu's mother, was leaning by her charred door sill, her blank eyes, staring into nothingness, did notice Oderlay entering the compound. [...] In the midst of angry mothers and screaming children and bleating goats and sheep, Maa Tsuru looked like a soul drowned into torpidity. The baby in her arm didn't seem to even impact into her oblivion. And but for the sounds from the child's throat, her world was dead. Her life was one dissolved in absolute lethargy. Oderlay smiled sadly; then even that sad smile waned when she noticed the desperate scramble of one tiny hand to ferret for something almost non-existent in Maa Tsuru's bosom. The weak grab of the loose and hanging breast. The searching mouth in the tiny lean face, the voracious draw on the tired wrinkle nipple, the spurt of energy from the enervated body that was clearly the anger of a little hungry child, and Oderlay knew that the gurgling of Fofu's half-brother prospective soul into the devouring jaws of the street, a life brought forth for the sake of bringing forth, a hungry mouth created out of want. (*F*, 2003:18)

Read with juxtaposition to the above miseries and social turmoil in female characters as mirrored in the excerpts, Dina reveals Darko's approval of a mutational society where women are supposed to have grown advanced. This recognisance is perceptible in the way Dina is casted as a woman whose means render her immune to social vulnerability.

More importantly and beyond the gender-free portrayal of Dina, Darko turns her female protagonist into a self-made and self-pleasing woman with holistic approaches to social problems. Yet her employees are women, but the quest of MUTE is not strictly female-oriented. It is all about contributing to a fairer and more advanced society as respectively mentioned in both *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*. Thus, the protagonist's quest encompasses global issues such as Africa in the global and the responsibility of African people in the process of global development. Dina's actions match with intellectual, social and cultural contributions to progress and change that relate to human capital. As a consequence, Dina's figure encapsulates a prototype of leadership growing beyond gender gap.

As for leadership, H. Masumi and C. Ciarunji (2019:1) recall that "the question of leadership is at the heart of African literature. Then if it is valuable to argue that African feminists have been raising female consciousness in feminising leadership in writing, it is obvious to recognise that the character of Dina goes beyond feminist leadership. As painted in both *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*, Dina showcases a leadership that is enrolled on inclusive, collaborative and conciliatory approach to social commitment. That is to say Amma Darko's perception of leadership is no more strictly involved in feminism stricture, but it is opened to a flexible conception triggered by cultural mutation in society.

At the very beginning, that flexible leadership can be justified by the fact that Dina extends her actions to the whole society as mentioned in her objective through MUTE:

MUTE was a non-Governmental Organization that was committed to gathering and documenting fringe information about anything and everything, to build what they

had termed: an AL-ternative Library. MUTE was not an acronym. The founder chose that name to reflect the silence of society, which translated into the absence of a documentation culture. The loss of information about us, and the distortions about us that come from elsewhere to tell us about us, all a result of our dependence on oral tradition. A practice no longer feasible. The old folks in the villages are dying with all the knowledge about us stored in their heads. They are unable to hand them down because the recipients, who are the young ones, have all left for the cities. (*NWF*, 2007:66)

As read in the above excerpt, Dina's commitment calls for an inclusive leadership. The inclusiveness of that leadership relates to both men and women. Thinking about conducting actions that are beneficial to the whole society regardless to sex overshadows feminism discourse. It means Amma Darko promotes the postfeminist conception of female leadership intentionally blind and mute to descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes in gender as what is male or female and what s/he should/should not do regarding one's sex (J. Sorrentino, 2022:10). In so doing, the Ghanaian writer redirects female writing, which is heretofore focused on denouncing gender biases, to female relevancy in a modern and challenging world.

The female relevancy can be substantiated by Dina's leadership. Indeed, Dina's social commitment seems to remove "the highly contentious" perception of the term feminism in Africa (S. Dosekun, 2019: 4) since her leadership softens the relationship between men and women. From global issues to local ones, Dina is painted as both collaborative and conciliatory agent whose actions not only covers the gender gap, but it also triggers awareness to cultural advancement. That is the case of polygamy to which the MUTE women think it is no more fitting today's society crushing under HIV revealed by 5th Wife situation in *Not Without Flowers* (99).

The attempt to assess polygamy consists of matching this institution to cultural changes and new challenges that are related to human health and social dynamism. Unless the use of condom 5th Wife could have been HIV victim out of polygamy as her husband Pesewa as well as her co-wives. Thus, the trial of polygamy under Dina's leadership shows that Amma Darko extends her writing skills to current issues and their mutational dynamism. There is no need for Dina and her colleagues to argue that polygamy ranks women under men. On the contrary, they show that this marital institution endangers women as well as men in a changing world where everything is on perpetual change. Moreover, the fact of presenting Pesewa as the first victim from his own choice of polygamy by making him died after being contaminated (*NWF*, 2007:66) shows that females are not the sole partners risking their health within this institution. That is why Dina's leadership tries to cope with these issues while using a conciliatory method. Therefore, she presents herself as the model protagonist in female writing.

CONCLUSION

Female writing and characterisation is an issue at the centre of African women's literature. It raises the problem of female character dynamism in accordance with cultural advancement. The characterisation of Dina in *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* responds to this artistic issue while bringing forth a postfeminist argument in female writing. The analysis of the character of Dina in the aforementioned novels by the Ghanaian writer shows that African women's artistic creation takes into cultural and ideological move in feminism discourse toward a postfeminist prism of the feminine. As such, Amma Darko takes her reader to discovering the postfeminist figure that is embedded in abrogating

the traditional image of the female in writing. As a consequence, Dina comes into play as a paradigmatic shift in female writing and takes on the figure of the postfeminist character which shies down feminist propensities more or less constructed in victimisation process.

From this paradigm shift, the Ghanaian author triggers her reader to matching with a model female character that is involved in the construction of a new female leadership. The latter is viewed as the one which is less inclined to traditional feminism mind-set, but more oriented to showing women's relevancy in a dynamic world. The figure of Dina fits this leadership to the extent that she invests the society in search of solution that can ease all the component, being men or women.

From paradigm shift to the fictionalised figure of the emergent protagonist, the character of Dina in Darko's imaginative writing reveals the current impact of cultural mutation upon African feminism. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that African women's writing follows cultural dynamism.

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