



Gender in the Dock: An Analysis of Moral Decadence in Amma Darko's Faceless (2003) and Not Without Flowers (2007)



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Abstract

It happens sometimes that culture or the tradition to which we belong weighs heavy on our shoulders, and distresses us to an extent that we lose all sense of morals and drift into decadence. The phrase moral decadence is used to describe a behavior that shows a lack of ethics and a penchant for ethical laxity in society. There are ethics wherein a person will not cross a certain line because it will be considered immoral or wrong. About literature, the term designates a corrosive process or situation of deterioration and decline in society's ethical codes and sexual morality. In her perspective to dismantle the patriarchal culture, Amma Darko chooses to expose the moral decline to which her society is prey and points an accusing finger at the gender-oriented system. The purpose of this article is to examine how gender and the standards that go with it can influence social depravity and the mounting loss of moral values among individuals. Stressing the writer's objectivity and her catharsis-based approach as therapy, this analysis of Amma Darko's Faceless and Not Without Flowers allows us to have an off-screen look at the hideous consequences of gender prejudice. As they want or fail to meet the demands of the sexist ideology, both male and female, central and secondary characters are revealed to find solace in illicit deeds and amorality.

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1 Introduction

Literature draws its value from its basic functions in a given society. African literature, and more properly the female African novel, has always functioned as a “socially conscious art” (Achebe, 1975) which seeks to instruct and redress the society to which it is directed.

As a woman and writer, Amma Darko has never lost sight of the constructive part that art can take in society. Ever since she came into the literary scene, the Ghanaian writer has made her own this socio-didactic purpose of literature as she performs the prime role of pathfinder to direct and/or redirect her people towards the ideal society she thinks we should be aiming to construct. Despite her strong opposition to the patriarchal tenets, Darko is of the view that the radical, dualistic confrontation of the Western feminist stance “does not prevail here [in Africa]” (2003). In setting her works in the trend of the African female novel of gender denunciation, she allows herself to shift from the sterile superiority-inferiority perspective, which often colors gender-oriented fiction, to plunge the reader into the social downsides of gender policy. In the novels under study, her approach to gender calls in eclectic sociological theories such as the Durkheimian anomie. This thesis, as Durkheim postulates in his seminal works, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897), attempts to explain how fundamental aspects of societal structures contribute to the creation of social vices and deviant behaviors, which seem to wreak and undermine the moral fibers in society. *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* offer similar insight into how the patriarchal culture and the gender-based conceptions create sliding avenues of permissiveness and moral decadence in the psyche of her characters. Due to the burden of the cultural patterns, the world in which her characters move and interact is prey to all forms of immorality with issues like adultery, family abandonment, prostitution, alcohol and drug consumption and suicide, among other villainies (Budden et al., 2008; Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000).

This current paper sets out to visualize how Amma Darko’s characters, sometimes primarily viewed as virtuous, happen to fall into moral deviance. In the following sections, emphasis is laid on the sources of moral transgression through marriage and sexual duplicity, sexual commerce, and finally, a study of the characters’ guilty conscience will make the focus in the last section.

2 The ins and Outs of Adultery

A recurrent theme in the novels, adultery or conjugal infidelity is put forward as an outflow of a social malaise stemming from the chauvinist doctrines. Counter to fornication which denotes sex between two unmarried persons, adultery refers to voluntary or consensual sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person’s legal spouse or partner. Though both are considered as aberrant turpitude, adultery is mostly censured in almost all religions and societies as it infers a violation of the basic sanctity of marital covenant. Given its degree of ignobility, Allah warns in the Quran “And do not approach *zinā*. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way” (17: 32). Besides, strict punishment is promised to the adulterer both in the here bellow and the hereafter. In Africa, long before the emergence of Islam and Christianity, traditional views of societies referred to adultery not just as an individual’s sexual transgression, but as “a serious [sacrilege] that can destroy peace and social life of the community, as well as peace between God, gods, ancestors and humans” (Odey & Akpashila, 2016).

Among other mitigating factors accounting for adultery, the novelist pinpoints the issue of childlessness and the trauma it spawns in the spirit of the victims. Given they are continuously stigmatized and defamed in society, victims are ready to move heaven and earth to meet this social need. Appropriate as the sterile female being must have always seemed in this context, the Ghanaian writer has surprisingly spared her womankind and opened a lens field on the male folk. As a woman and writer, Amma Darko knows well that women who are confronted with this ordeal may desperately be tempted to go on adulterous relationships to save their marriage, as men are often egoistically reluctant to share the responsibility and have as well a medical infertility test. The novelist affirms, however, that even if culture and society may find escapist ways for the male folk, men are not so safe from the trauma of barrenness. Once conquered by the spectre of masculine sterility, men are more inclined to adulterously test themselves to prove their manhood to the community (Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990).

Due to his male ego, Idan, in *Not Without Flowers*, discards her wife’s suggestion to submit himself to an infertility test or therapy and chooses to assess his male potency in illicit sex. When we first meet him in the novel, Aggie’s husband is described as a settled intellectual, a senior executive who is full of moral values, and a man who loves his wife and expects to be attached to her till death set them apart. From his station, he could not understand

and would criticize men who verse in the debauched activity of extramarital relationship. He wonders about “The many irresponsible men doing it with any foolish woman willing to cooperate with them to produce babies they neither wanted to cater for. The hell if he was going to...” (41). “These cheating husbands, why can’t they just be faithful and stick to their wives?” (289), he would ask himself.

Soon in the novel, as the gossip of their couple’s infertility flourishes and public suspicion shifts onto him, Aggie’s husband goes out of his comfort zone. “The fear to be found out to be the guilty one” and “to be seen as an incomplete man” (40) makes him strip off his moral armour and slide into unfaithfulness. He needs alternative “sex to nurture his sense of adequacy when it fell short, as a result of a vivid reminder of his possible role in their inability to conceive” (110). Despite Randa’s age, “young enough to be his daughter” (107), and “the terrible shame” he feels over it, Idan strains to convince himself of the need to carry no guilt in dating and mating with the fledgling lassie because his wife’s defective womb and the family’s suspicion have pushed him into it. From the mere tricks of his mistress, he hurriedly and enthusiastically publicizes an inexistent pregnancy he hopes to be the author of. “Sisi”, he announces to his mother, “I have gotten a woman pregnant. I have made someone pregnant, and she is not my wife” (205). The words he uses, “a woman”, “someone”, and “she is not my wife”, pronounced in between deep breaths, are testimony to his inner desire to show evidence of his maleness, at least to his family. Interesting here is Idan’s mother’s reaction. The way she greets the news showcases how the patriarchal culture legitimizes the immoral act of adultery in a similar context. Sisi sees it as a divine deliverance and backs her son’s “prospective joys of fatherhood” (209).

My prayers must have reached God’s ears. Did I ever tell you that I did some serious fasting and praying about [your] failure to give me a grandchild? You know that first time years ago, when you came and informed me that your wife’s doctor wanted you to also have some tests done on you to determine if you were the cause of her inability to conceive, my soul mourned. Whatever! The important thing is that you have successfully impregnated a woman. (208-209)

Sisi’s sponsoring of Idan’s adulterous deeds is to be understood from her motherly position and her cultural share of responsibility in her son’s sad situation. As a mother, if her son’s infertility is attested by a retardation of child or pregnancy that would also put her in inconvenience as it would dent her self-esteem and pride as an accomplished woman in her community. According to Darko’s omniscient narrator, this explains in part Sisi’s rebuttal of the gynaecologist’s idea for her son to take an infertility test in the same way as his wife.

The greater part of it was his mother [...] the fear and sadness of being seen as the mother of an incomplete man, a man whose ability to inseminate his wife was being called into question;] an insult to his manhood and to the womb that carried him for nine months. (41)

Next to the issue of childlessness, polygamy is another factor favoring immorality and adultery. Men’s partiality the minute they engage in this matrimonial regime can wreak the greatest havoc on moral virtues in marital bonds. Often rejected or forced to go into sexual weaning by a selfish husband who lustfully manifests his preference to his newlywed, the female victim is at times drawn to embark into a clandestine extramarital love liaison, to meet her unfulfilled sexual expectations. Far from endorsing women’s moral permissiveness, Amma Darko stands up for the case of her female gender and sustains without taboo that women, in the same way as their polygynous men, are also in need of a good sexual life. This position comes up first in her second novel, *The Housemaid* when the middle-aged Sekyiwa let out these derisive words: “Enjoy what life? What life is there to enjoy with a dead penis?” (1998: 13). In *Not Without Flowers*, the query is resuscitated by Darko’s third person narrator when he probes: “And don’t [women] suffer from these conditions sometimes?” (276).

Pesewa’s egoistic subjectivity in the way he treats his five wives is described as the main source of women’s moral dissolution. Darko’s authorial stand is that it is not all women who do have the strong moral stamina to endure in dignity a husband’s “emotional detachment” (110), let alone brusque sexual weaning. At some point in the novel, with the arrival of their husband’s third wife, the Second wife comes to be aware that her continual crying and the loathing she harbours for her immediate rival will not change Pesewa’s egocentrism and his pull towards the new. Wherein the First Wife tries to find solace in “her Bible and night prayers, to expand her vessel of endurance” (271), the Second Wife sinfully cuts her way to satiate this carnal desire. In her approach, we note a clear reversal of roles in the sense that “the received view – i.e., it is men who pay for sex on the streets – is radically challenged” (Abeka et al., 2014). Against all expectations, we discover a woman who not only pays a chap to provide her need for sexual

gratification but much more shockingly one who does it with a man much younger than her. The narrator describes him as

Sinfully good-looking and yet to strike thirty. As the service provider, his was to make excellent and satisfactory deliveries. And for the poor starved middle-aged woman, there was to pay well (274).

Except for the Second wife, Darko does not divulge any immoral attitude regarding Pesewa's other wives but let's know that the "temptation" (273) to which the former has surrendered might well rear its head in the mind of the first, the third and the fourth wife. Having all suffered in turn from Pesewa's blatant ignorance of their sleeping beds, the narrator signals a possibility for these women to give in to the same lure as the Second wife does outside the marital circle. He asks:

How many sugar mummies did her lover have? And among the wives, was she [Second wife] the only one having paid for sex outside the marriage? How about the third and the fourth wives? Hell! Why not even First wife, Bible faith and all? She did suffer some bouts of persistent feverish pains and headaches, but who doesn't? (276)

No answer is given to the foregoing queries in the novel. But to all intent and purposes, what comes up here is that men's sexual bigotry in polygyny can well give way to the immoral attitude toward sex outside marriage.

More than polygamy, the traditional practice of forced marriage is another slipping ground for women to fall prey to marital unfaithfulness. For Amma Darko, the motivating factor is twofold. First, as the cultural practice entails, in terms of love and affection, girls who are forced into this type of matrimony hold not one tender feeling for the man they get hitched to. Second, age asymmetry is more often than not a key ground which precipitates such moral deviance. At times too old for his young wife, it happens a lot that the husband suffers from an inability to fulfil properly his sexual roles. The novelist problematizes this in *The Housemaid* (1998) when Sekyiwa dumps her ageing husband at home to seek sexual gratification outside her connubial bed. As in the case of Second Wife in *Not Without Flowers*, Darko's female protagonist fixes her choice on "young, good-looking male diggers" (1998, 13) to quench a sexual lust that her elderly husband can barely satisfy. In the following lines, the Ghanaian writer sums up the reason standing behind the woman's sexual disloyalty: "Her husband's libido was waning away so she gives in. She gave them good money; they gave her good sex. Life's satisfaction shone in her eyes" (1998, 13).

In *Faceless*, Fati's tragic story seems to maintain the same fable of sexual duplicity. Forced to join in marriage with a seasoned man who happens to be her own father's friend, Fati is callously killed for reasons which might be linked with adultery and jealousy. True, Darko has given no clear details on the factual motives surrounding the death of the young girl, but everything in the chronicle works in favour of suspicion on the part of an old husband who cannot accept being deceived by a young girl whom "her father had her betrothed to him just a few days after she was born" (76). The narrator recounts that "Her death was a punishment for something she had done". He adds further that "she deserted her husband; an old man and a friend to her father" (76).

In talking about the issue of sexual disloyalty, Amma Darko also scrutinizes other debase attitudes which are concomitantly attached to it, and which gangrene her society. An issue at stake is the spreading of body merchandising or sexual commerce.

3. Sex as a Means for Survival and Self-fulfilment

What stratagems does a woman deploy to survive in a "thoroughly exploitative and gender-oppressive society?" Immoral as the use of body merchandising may seem to be, [Dako et al. \(2006\)](#), cautions that it will arrive at a moment when the social paradigms precipitate "the woman's use of the interwoven survival strategies of sex, subservience and exploitation". In her novels, Amma Darko is sad to showcase this plague of her Ghanaian society, where sexual commerce is viewed as a means for survival and self-fulfilment. While it is true that women's sexual degeneracy can be seen as a seepage of the extreme poverty which strikes contemporary African countries, the Ghanaian writer spots the sexist system as a chief driving force which turns the woman's sight to the sex market. Concerning women's social conditions, relevant issues such as women's sexual objectification, exploitation and family abandonment contribute ominously to the spreading of such phenomena ([Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998](#); [Shannon et al., 2019](#)).

In *Faceless*, Darko comes back to the theme of women's sexual exploitation and the forced victims of prostitution, which made the focus of her debut novel, *Beyond the Horizon*. But contrary to Mara who is blackmailed into the trade by a masochist and exploitative husband, Baby T, in *Faceless*, is made to be seen by her mother as the convenient commodity to be retailed to palliate their father's repudiation of the family and knockback in parental care. Beyond the economic conditions which propel Maa Tsuru to let go her young daughters on the streets and brothels, the novelist casts a critical emphasis on the discriminatory superstitious belief of curse which drives Maa Tsuru's husband, Kwei, to abandon the family, letting his children and their mother fend for themselves. According to tradition, when a woman carries a curse, it is recognized through the different ordeals she and her husband go into. This includes "continual financial problems", "continual poverty", and "repetitive business failures" (Hachalinga, 2017) which strike Maa Tsuru's husband, Kwei, in *Faceless*.

Crucial in Darko's analysis is the dilemma that the abandoned mother faces when she has to take on the dual role of the absentee father and hers as regards the bed and board. In the following dialogue, which takes place during the 'Good Morning Ghana' radio program, Ms. Kamame raises the issue and draws Sylv Po's attention to the sad reality:

"It is bad enough for a mother to have to perform the double role. For, if you are carrying a load and you begin to feel the first cracks of tension in the neck, what first thought comes to your mind?"

"Unload!" Sylv Po replied.

"Exactly. Which is what many mothers in that situation do. They unload at the first sign of any crack. The load here unfortunately being the child" (138)

In *Faceless*, Maa Tsuru's vital need "to unload the burden" shows its premises when Baby T is brutally raped by Onko, her old and next-door neighbour whom she would trust and consider to be an uncle for her young progenies. For some even, Baby T's forced stepping into the depraved transaction of sex for money or money for sex sets off the very day that her paedophile of an uncle steals without scruple her virginity. Following his cruel act on the teenage girl, Onko sets himself into open bargaining with Baby T's mother and succeeds without much trouble to buy the quietness of the *curse* woman. The narrator recounts:

Maa Tsuru stared long at the thick wad of notes [that Onko placed] in her hand. There was a look of worry and hopelessness in her eyes and another not so easily discernible. Maa Tsuru sighed heavily. Never once in her entire life till then had she held so much money in her hand. Onko read her thoughts. Strike while it's hot, he thought.

"Does that mean you won't take the money?" he frowned. "[...] let me assure you that it is not my last present to you. I told you that already?"

Maa Tsuru looked him directly in the face. She said nothing.

"I will pay for her treatment too!" he went on hurriedly. "Trust me, Maa Tsuru. It is the best way out. Allow me to show you how generous I can be. Just drop the matter. Forget it ever happened and spare us all the trouble."

Maa Tsuru rose. Then the corners of his lips stretched into a smile as Maa Tsuru untied her cover cloth around her waist; placed the wad of notes in one corner of it and proceeded to slowly tied it up. (167-168)

Maa Tsuru's dejection in the above excerpt can be perceived in the uncomfortable silence, which translates to an "anomic situation" and "an ethical judgment of the undesirability of her condition" (Deflem, 2015). As a woman and mother, she is well in the know that this wad of notes by Onko can never compensate for the physical pains and humiliation that her female infant has gone through. Yet, her family ostracism by "the social deprecating curse belief", "poverty and the non-existent of her male support" (140), confine her in a chronic "hopelessness", which makes her "grow too used to living off the sweat of her children, especially Baby T" (188).

It is with similar resignation that she will let Baby T work with Maami Broni and Mama Abidjan, the seasoned and retired prostitutes who now make a fortune in sex procuring with young novices they recruit and harbour in their "six-room compound brothel" (219). Despite Kpakpo's influence on her, the narrator let know that Maa Tsuru had a clear idea not only on the type of women Mama Abidjan and Maami Broni were, but then on the type of job they propose to young girls. As it can be read here, "Maa Tsuru didn't like the name of the middle-aged woman right from the onset. Mama Abidjan? Didn't that make who she was, or what she had been doing too obvious?" (169). But as in the former case with Onko, she loses her nurturing onus and ordered Baby T "to pack her things ready and leave with Maami Broni who came and picked her up from the house to her new unknown life" (171).

Additional to her need for money for the family's daily upkeep, two reasons might prompt Maa Tsuru's agreement to entrust her young daughter with "old graduates" prostitutes like Mama Abidjan and Maami Broni. First, Baby T is already defiled and sexually active. Second, if she keeps her at home, both Onko and Kpakpo will

freely continue to sexually abuse the girl without her mother knowing. “Then, why not put her in the business and make it profitable for everyone” (219).

Parallel to this forced enrolment is a willing but disguised form of trading one’s body and sex, not in “professional brothels”, but in secure hotels and private lodgings, afar from “the red lights streets of Accra and the Nkrumah circle” (286-287), which make the greatest market of this sex industry. These are young females who mature to re-appropriate society’s sexual objectification of their gender as an asset for empowerment and self-fulfillment. In *Not Without Flowers*, the description of Flower’s mind-set epitomizes this view.

SHE HAD LOOKS that pleased the senses, she who came to take charge and control of his emotions; she who came to own and possess him and who came to be his fetish and obsession.

She grew up under the influence of society’s salient acceptance of the culture of the objectification of the female body. While some complained and fought against that culture, she employed it to her advantage. The influence created a certain mentality in her mind, that her good looks were a means of survival and a form of security. With the added advantage of her youth, she became an effective system of cash and finance in her own right. She operated by her own rules and regulations. (325)

Darko’s hyperbolic depiction of Flower’s assurance – SHE HAD LOOKS – tells volumes about a clear-cut difference in the modus operandi of the two groups. At variance with the former group who are, most of the time, subject to atrocious violence and sexual brutality from their contractors who look upon them as their “tools for pleasure” (286) to use and abuse at their convenience, these are free sex traders who function by their own will and uphold a certain domination over their male partners. In African literature, the term “Bottom / Sexual Power” is most often used to label such voluptuous mechanisms of the female, when she deviously sees her sexuality as an asset to be used to have men under her thumb. It is in this vein that Amanka’s mother in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1981) perceives “female sexuality as a real power” that her daughter should exploit if she is “to get what she wants in a male-dominated society” (1981: 23). Darko revivifies the phrase in her novel when she writes that “she [Flower] created the ultimate equation of sexual power and control over men ... who became entangled into her web” (326). Connected to it, is the phenomenon of trans-generational sex, which she describes under the derogatory tags of “sugar daddies” and “chicken soups” relationships. In its broadest sense, a “sugar daddy” is an older man, a would-be daddy who generally dumps his wife to give in to the whims and financial needs of a young girl, then “chicken soup”, in exchange for lustful fantasies and sexual pleasures.

In *Not Without Flowers*, Flower and Randa symbolize at best the strength of the “bottom power” and “chicken soup” syndrome, which seems to kill all sense of morals and the aging code of old men like Pa and Idan. Darko’s warning about the unsteadiness it breeds in the conduct of the man is vibrantly expressed in the following passage.

Sex is a strong emotionally addictive enticement [...] We all know about the power of sex to enslave, and when a younger woman’s sex enslaves an older man and gains absolute ownership of his emotions, it punches holes the size of valleys, into his rationale which consumes his conscience. (79-80)

This male bondage is first sensed in the metaphorical title of the book, *Not Without Flowers*, which informs on the degrading buzzing of these old male bees as an edict from their young intoxicating flowers. Definitely, in their liaisons with these young lassies, the “sugar daddies” must accept like lambs, and be ready to worship every demand and command from their venerable “chicken soups”. It is in this frame that Idan is all set to “remove his marriage band”, as he sees it to be part of Randa’s long list of conditions (112). Further, because it is always the girl who dictates whether or not, when and where they must meet, the “chicken soup” man has always to be on the starting block to arrive on time at the indicated place. As such, “When Randa called, Idan went running” (115). In the same stream, Pa and Flower’s pairing is marked by a cruel loss of character and dignity on the part of the sugar daddy. He too is obliged “to wake up in the middle of the night” and “whispering on the telephone and crying” (121) as he vainly expects a call from her. The narrator adds further: “He had ceded control to Flower and had to bear it. Flower was the boss. If he wanted her and she didn’t want him, he didn’t get her. It was as simple as that. [...] Pa the puppet being pulled and controlled by Flower.” (341-342)

Given cash and offers are at the core of this type of romance, men are also expected to display promptness in finance; and often, an ultimatum is issued for them to meet the excessive demands on time. Aside from the age asymmetry and the shameful sexual transaction, Darko’s object lesson is conveyed through the forgetful conduct of the sugar daddy concerning his own family. Once embarked on this lust and money-guided adventure, some may

allow themselves to fulfil all the financial demands of these pastime girls while neglecting that of their wives and children at home. A case in point is when Pa puts forward Flower's exorbitant needs as priorities, while "a whole lot of bills unpaid and other expenses" are left pending "at home" (48). Because of Flower, he thoughtlessly drives himself into complete bankruptcy before being flung by the girl. In addition to his monthly salary, and the multiple loans he has contracted at the bank, the old man has gone to the extent to sell his "personal and valuable items" to "raise cash for her" (323). A scene which has captured the reader's attention is when he decides to offer his "twenty-two-carat gold wristwatch" for sale, in view to satisfy the chicken soup's longings. Having to trade this cherished accessory for Flower is quite heartbreaking for him. Yet, the urge and pressure to please the young girl is more commanding than his self-regard and love for his items.

He caught his face in both hands and cried out loud. Tears of shame, not only for the other degradation he had had to endure and the pain of parting with personal items he loved and valued, but also for the compulsion of having to do what he was doing. And for whom he had to do it. She was not his wife. She was young enough to be his daughter. But she had become his obsession and he had allowed her merciless claws to dig deep into every part of him. (323-324)

The unseen force which dictates the sale-for-cash commerce resides in the attitude of the girl when her demands are not fulfilled. When the stream of money and offerings dwindles, the chicken soup girl not only fades in endearments but most roguishly, threads her way out of the chess-like game. As seen in the case of Idan, he is dumped like a pest by Randa when she senses his financial insolvency.

"For the umpteenth time", Randa yelled on, Get it inside your head Idan. And let me repeat it to you for the very last time. I am not your girlfriend. It was a little game I played with you. And the game is over. Finished. So leave me alone!" (289)

The pain, the shame, and the baseness that go along with such a corrupt game have further dreadful effects on the individual who, while he regrets and finds himself guilty, slides into additional moral overindulgence as he strives to escape his conscience's moral judgment.

4. The Bites of a Guilty Conscience

Guilt is defined as a reproving feeling of distress, pursuing our consciousness, which stems from a violation of personal and/or societal morals. Psychological and behavioral studies often inform on the negative upshots of such conditions as it sometimes leads to greater villainies, including self-destruction. Along this line, [Etxebarria \(2000\)](#), talks about the "need of self-punishment" for the individual to dodge the pervading troubles of guilt and self-recrimination.

In breaking the moral code of society and its principles, Darko's protagonists have no way to escape from the moral condemnation of their court, that of a guilty conscience which hunts their inner peace and quietude. Despite his fake self-consolation, Idan, in *Not without Flowers*, suffers from a terrible "feeling of guilt, which wasn't comfortable at all" (111). In mating with young Randa, Aggie's husband feels to have scoffed at the basics of his human dignity and honour in the eyes of his legitimate wife. So far loyal and a righteous man, Idan is first shamefaced and afflicted by the white lies he repeatedly tells Aggie to honour his voluptuous appointments with the girl. On several occasions, "the lie he had told his wife haunted him the entire drive home" (84) as he keeps on wondering "Why did he lie so spontaneously to his wife?" (84). Along with this adulterous escapade, the age asymmetry and the derisive ascendancy of the girl over him, the terrible feeling of humiliation and guilt drives him into hefty alcohol consumption as a way to suppress the thought from his debase spirit ([Suter & Hertwig, 2011](#); [Greene & Haidt, 2002](#)). One notes this steep slope into a lifestyle of moral depravity when he begins to come home in a state of drunkenness and allows himself to sleep naked next to his wife who is full of revulsion. In the following scene, the scent of alcohol makes Aggie feel giddy and vomit while her husband's nudeness and fast snoring get her annoyed.

Then Idan had come home one night. Having had a good fill of sex and food and alcohol, he had fallen comfortably asleep the moment he had hit the bed. The revulsion she had felt for him was so severe that she hadn't even noticed when the contents of her stomach began to climb. She had thrown up violently on herself. It

had happened just like that. So she had got up slowly to go the bathroom, had removed her nightdress, had cleaned the mess and had returned to the bedroom. Idan had still been fast asleep, naked, with his legs sprawled widely like he knew no bars. He was snoring soundly. Dripping with pain and repulsion, she clicked on the light and yelled: "Look at me Idan!"

"Take a cloth! And now cover up your stupid cheap philandering nakedness!"

Idan was so shocked and overwhelmed and dumbfounded that he just stared at her (283).

Ma's husband in the novel walks into the same doom along with his adulterous romance with young Flower. Darko takes it as the boomerang effects of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche terms "the hard cage of masculinity" or "men's very fragile ego" (2013), which precipitates their fall into absurdity and moral deviance. This happens just a span after the birth of their third child, Randa, when Pa sees the short hiatus Ma has drawn into their bedroom, attending to the baby, as an insult to his manhood and a violation of her sexual roles (Wiesenfeld-Hallin, 2005; Fischer et al., 1993). But in aiming to punish his wife for that *fault*, Pa undergoes the worst self-retribution and mental torture on the path of sexual perfidy. At the point in his remorseful purgatory, *Oldie*, as Flower would derogatively name him, begins to realize that "his heavy alcohol intake" would not "numb the aches in his chest" (341) as he allows her to "pack his reputation and dignity and common sense into the garbage bin" (339). In his last appearance in the novel, the reader sees a hopeless depressed man who is caught up in his wrongs and sorrows, "sinking into the dungeons of helplessness" (Abeka et al., 2014). Tired of being "the puppet being pulled and controlled by Flower" (342), and impotent to come back from that "sinful and ferocious passion" (339), he tragically resolves to put an end to his life as a way to end the dirty game that Flower made him play. With much pain and regret, the narrator describes his harrowing death:

The game darkened. It darkened his disposition. [...] Pa stared down at himself. His other self-stared down at the other and relented. Pa's soul at that instant, evicted itself viciously. Pa's body hung lifeless from the mango tree, suspended on a rope placed around his neck by his own hands.

End of game. Pa's game. (358)

In *Faceless*, the novelist comes back to a similar heartbreaking demise to self-recrimination, arising from moral trespassing and gender relations. Onko's sequential molestation of Mma Tsuru's daughter has driven him into abysmal ordeals and he ends up "hanging himself on a tree" (209). Under the grip of social superstitions and male bigotry, his irrational quest for Baby T's genital hair, to magically lift his commerce, is described as a non-return point for Onko, succeeding his earlier defilement and brutal rape of the young girl. A young prostitute forced into the job, her refusal to serve this special client turns into a real tragedy. To punish her for her act, Baby T is callously beaten to death by her corrupt master who then proceeds to shave her pelvic hair and hands it out to Onko. Witnessing Baby T's murder and body profanation for his selfish enterprise and looking back to his aberrant sexual oppression and exploitation of the innocent girl, Darko's male protagonist never get recovered from his guilty mind.

Beyond the psychological trauma of guilt, the novelist pinpoints the flimsiness of traditional gender canons, which open sliding avenues for discrimination but then moral decadence. As shown earlier, Mma Tsuru's social ostracism through the degrading curse belief, leading to her husband's abandonment of her and her children, has created a fat situation for male wolves like Onko to defile, rape and bargain without scruple Baby T's sexuality (Rekart, 2005). Moreover, the biases observed in the social policy of gender, in terms of selective stereotypes defining women's treatment, contribute to the reinforcement of male chauvinism and further deteriorate the moral fabric of society. In the novels under study, the recurrence of such villainous tragedies is articulated to highlight the tribulations of the sexist trend as regards the morality of both male and female gender.

If Pa and Onko had to carry the cross of their sexual roving, Pesewa's tragic fate in *Not Without Flowers* is to be accredited to his uncaring flouting of the polygamous rules, causing the Second wife's adulterous odyssey outside the marital home. When he contracts AIDS from his cheating spouse, the old man does not wait for his doom to come. He commits suicide not only as a way to hasten his inevitable death but more sadly, as a way to punish himself for a failure he hopes to have shown to Fith's wife, his young and favorite. Through his death, Darko brings to the surface men's sexual bigotry in polygamy, but also the perils of a culture which stipulates that "a man is never old [to get married]" (Emecheta, 1979). Pesewa does not regret his blatant neglect of his other wives but feels guilty only about his aging status, which, he believes, prevents him from bringing sexual satisfaction to his young wife. In the letter he left behind, he appears to be apologetic before the preferred woman and admits responsibility for his wife's sexual infidelity.

“... I am sorry I cannot be with you when your time comes. Don’t take the same path I took. For me it was a necessity, but it is not the best. Live to the final moment ordained for you. I have bequeath you with enough resources. Your sister should be able to take good care of you till you join me. I will be waiting. I am sorry I pushed you into it. In a way, I am the cause. I was too old to make you adequately happy ...” (63)

In exposing the wrath of guilty conscience upon the characters, and the sad toll it makes among the male folks, one may think that Darko has spared her female gender (Gbaguidi & Allagbe, 2018). Such a reading of the novels might occult the writer’s objectivity and her holistic approach in her commitment to correct the moral ills of her society. In each novel, the suspense she let open among the women bodes serious psychological trauma that can lead to the same tragedy as those seen above. Maami Broni, the child sex procurer and no less Baby T’s lewd business exploiter, in *Faceless*, becomes depressive and is haunted by the young girl’s body, whereas Second Wife is distressed by the Damocles sword that her HIV infection has placed upon her head, always reminding her of impending death and her kinsmen’s snub of her.

5 Conclusion

Given the general good of society, Amma Darko’s approach in *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers* has helped to go out of the beaten tracks of mainstream gender-oriented fiction, to turn our sight onto the bottom of gender prejudice. With poignant descriptions, Darko’s novels illuminate our consciousness of this capacity of the gender canons to turn the most upright man into a loose moral deviant. In a world where the male is expected to prove his manhood and the female her womanhood, the dividing line between morals and immorality becomes just so porous. As reflected in the novels, though essentially male-oriented, the silent suffering and emotional torture that are intrinsic to the principles of the chauvinist culture do not spare any of the two sexes. Both men and women suffer from gender-based structures, conceptions, and practices.

For Amma Darko, more than the tormenting nature of the patriarchal tenets, the acute and forward dissolution of the moral values that are attached to them should be a striking signal for a reassessment of the gender tenets. If we are to live in a balanced and virtuous society, a deconstruction of our community gender perceptions is fundamental to come up to this end. For the benefit of both sexes and the entire community, the term female should be given equal significance and value as the word male; and society should work to help this human pair rid themselves of the myriad clichés and complexes, which lock them into a dichotomous and prejudicial circle of discrimination, letting the path open oppression and moral decadence.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declared that she has no competing interests.

Statement of authorship

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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