

Social, Cultural and Ideological Representations in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 5 | 2026 | Article Number: 069

Accepted: 02 October 2026 | Published: 10 October 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-6F4GL2CS>



Uka Nkemdirim Carol¹, Prof. Gloria Eme Worugji¹, Dr. Adagogo C Brown¹

¹Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Nigeria

Correspondence: Uka Nkemdirim Carol, Nkembryan@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This study analyses the social, cultural, and ideological representations of women in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, focusing on Mara's experiences as she migrates from Ghana to Germany in pursuit of improved living conditions. It investigates the interplay of patriarchy, cultural expectations, migration, economic dependence, and sexual exploitation in shaping women's circumstances within the novel. The analysis contends that Darko depicts female oppression as rooted not only in individual male actions but also in broader social, cultural, economic, and ideological structures that reinforce women's obedience and dependence. Mara's marriage to Akobi exemplifies the unequal power dynamics inherent in patriarchal unions, while her migration to Europe demonstrates that relocation does not inherently provide freedom or economic progress. Rather, her vulnerability is exacerbated by deception, isolation, financial abuse, and coerced prostitution. The study employs Womanism as its theoretical framework, emphasising its focus on the dignity, survival, economic empowerment, and self-determination of African women, as well as its advocacy for cooperation and mutual respect between genders. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how Darko critiques the commodification of women's bodies and labour and challenges cultural and ideological systems that legitimise male dominance. The findings suggest that authentic female liberation necessitates economic independence, personal autonomy, social recognition, and the transformation of unequal gender relations.

Keywords: Womanism, Patriarchy, Migration, Gender Inequality, Economic Exploitation, Commodification, Amma Darko, *Beyond The Horizon*

Introduction

African literature serves as a significant medium for examining the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that shaped individual and collective experiences. A central concern within this body of work is the position of women in societies formed by patriarchal traditions and unequal gender relations. African women writers have specifically explored how women navigate marriage, family expectations, economic hardship, migration, sexuality, and cultural restrictions. Through their fictional characters, these writers reveal systems that constrain female autonomy and simultaneously depict women's efforts to achieve dignity, survival, and self-determination.

Amma Darko holds a prominent place in contemporary African women's literature due to her sustained engagement with gender relations and the socio-economic realities affecting women. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Darko depicts the experiences of Mara, a Ghanaian woman whose life is strongly influenced by patriarchal marriage, economic dependence, and migration. Mara initially enters marriage with expectations of companionship and personal advancement; however, her relationship with Akobi becomes characterized by domination, exploitation, and emotional neglect. Akobi asserts authority over Mara's decisions, labor, and economic resources, transforming marriage from a partnership of mutual responsibility into an instrument of control.

Mara's circumstances become increasingly complex with the introduction of migration. Europe is initially perceived as a symbol of prosperity, freedom, and the potential for a better future. However, Mara's relocation to Germany does not alleviate her oppression; rather, it exposes her to new forms of exploitation, including isolation, deception, sexual abuse, and prostitution. Darko challenges the assumption that migration inherently leads to liberation or social advancement. Mara's experiences illustrate that patriarchal domination transcends national boundaries and adapts to new economic and social contexts. The existing literature review similarly identifies migration, economic dependence, class, and gender as interconnected factors contributing to Mara's vulnerability.

The novel further demonstrates that women's oppression is perpetuated not only through direct violence but also through cultural beliefs and ideological assumptions that normalize obedience, sacrifice, and dependence as inherent aspects of femininity. Mara is socialized to endure suffering and to perceive service to her husband as a marital obligation. Concurrently, her economic dependence enables Akobi to control both her labor and the material benefits it generates. Ultimately, Mara's body becomes a source of financial profit, highlighting the relationship between patriarchal authority and economic exploitation. In this context, Darko represents the female body as a contested site where gender, culture, economics, sexuality, and power converge. The analysis in this study identifies marital domination, migration, financial abuse, commodification, and poverty as primary forces shaping Mara's experience.

Within this context, the present study analyzes the social, cultural, and ideological representations in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. It explores how social institutions such as marriage and migration impact women, how cultural expectations reinforce female obedience, and how patriarchal and capitalist ideologies facilitate the exploitation of women's bodies and labor. The study pays particular attention to Mara's transformation from a predominantly submissive and economically dependent individual to one who increasingly recognizes the structures underpinning her oppression. It contends that Darko's novel extends beyond depicting the suffering of a single woman; it reveals the interconnected social, cultural, and economic systems that enable such exploitation, while underscoring the significance of female consciousness, dignity, economic empowerment, and personal autonomy.

Literature Review

In *Beyond the Horizon*, Darko extends her investigation into gender inequality by connecting patriarchy

with migration, economic desperation, sexual exploitation, and the transnational commodification of women. This novel explores how women are silenced, abused, and relegated to the background. It illustrates how aspirations regarding migration and economic improvement can turn into new ways of exploiting vulnerable women. Research on Darko's fiction points to migration as a major element of gendered vulnerability, since women who are looking for freedom or economic security may encounter new kinds of domination after they have migrated. The fact that Mensah claims that "economic dependence, migration, and class intersect with gender in Darko's fiction" is particularly pertinent to *Beyond the Horizon* (91).

Darko's treatment of migration contradicts the simple idea that geographical mobility necessarily leads to liberation; on the contrary, the woman migrant might end up in another form of oppression. Because of economic desperation a woman's susceptibility to manipulation increases, and patriarchal control can continue even when she is outside her original cultural setting, thus showing that patriarchal domination can function at the same time through intimate relationships and via the capitalist economic system. The female body thus becomes a site where economic exchange, male authority, and female resistance are all in conflict.

MaryEllen Higgins deals with the novel from the perspective of transnational and transcultural feminism; she maintains that Darko reveals the gender inequalities existing in Ghana as well as bringing to light domestic violence, international violence, the exploitation of women in the transnational sex trade and neocolonial inequalities (307-08). Moreover, Higgins questions the idea that Western feminist organisations naturally have the answers to the problems of African women and instead points out both successful and unsuccessful examples of solidarity across racial, cultural and socioeconomic divisions (318-21).

Theresah Patrine Ennin similarly connects migration to toxic masculinity. She maintains that the migrant experience creates new opportunities through which exploitative masculinities can operate and through which women become exposed to gender-based violence and exploitation (5-6). Migration in the novel, therefore, does not automatically liberate Mara from patriarchal restrictions. Christabel Aba Sam directs her focus to female consciousness. By examining the characters' spatial movements and their interactions, Sam claims that Mara's shifts in environment and her encounters with other women lead to increasing self-consciousness and awareness of the oppressive conditions governing her life (22-24). The importance of this interpretation lies in the fact that it goes beyond seeing Mara merely as a passive victim and instead emphasises her growing ability to recognise situations and make decisions.

Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur comparatively examines sexuality in *Beyond the Horizon* and *Woman at Point Zero*. She argues that both Darko and El Saadawi expose sexuality as a culturally regulated and frequently silenced discourse while presenting characters who pursue sexual freedom and power within restrictive social systems (61-62). Such a comparison establishes important connections between Mara and Firdaus, especially regarding prostitution. *Beyond the Horizon* therefore has importance for this study in the sense that it extends women's encroachment beyond local patriarchal practices. It is shown by Darko that *Beyond the Horizon* is important because it extends the idea of women's encroachment beyond local patriarchal practices. Darko points out that exploitation is capable of crossing national boundaries and of adapting to changing social and economic conditions. Although migration may change a woman's place of residence it does not necessarily modify the gendered power structures she encounters. Our vulnerability, migration, and sexual exploitation operate in conjunction with patriarchy, which shows that female subordination cannot be fully explained by gender alone. aling that female subordination cannot adequately be explained through gender alone.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts womanism as its theoretical framework for examining the experiences of women in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker associates womanism with women's strength, self-affirmation and commitment to the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). This perspective enables the study to foreground women's dignity, wellbeing and autonomy while considering the importance of mutual respect and cooperation within families and communities.

This orientation connects directly with Okachukwu Onuah Wosu's position on women's liberation, particularly as articulated in his co-authored study with Nkemdirim Carol Uka on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. They adopt womanism as an African feminist approach and maintain that "the woman must be recognized and respected as such" (Uka and Wosu 34885). Their formulation nevertheless retains male family headship. The present study therefore draws specifically on their insistence on women's recognition and respect, without treating male authority as a justification for female subordination.

Applied to *Beyond the Horizon*, this emphasis on recognition provides a basis for interpreting Mara's unequal marriage to Akobi as a denial of her dignity and independent personhood. This study reads her marital experiences, migration and sexual exploitation as interconnected conditions through which her choices become restricted. Akobi's deception and exploitation demonstrate the distance between a relationship grounded in mutual respect and one organised around the use of a woman for another person's benefit. Consequently, the framework examines not merely whether Mara earns money, but whether she exercises meaningful control over her labour, resources and body. This distinction allows economic empowerment to be understood as control over one's circumstances rather than financial earnings alone.

Wosu's article, "Hegemony and Female Objectification: An Ideological Positioning of the Woman in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*," offers a complementary argument. He maintains that oppressive relations can be challenged when dominated individuals acquire critical knowledge and assert themselves. Although his analysis concerns Achebe's novel rather than Darko's, the argument provides a comparative basis for examining Mara's developing consciousness. From this perspective, her increasing recognition of the forces responsible for her oppression becomes significant to the study's examination of resistance and the pursuit of autonomy. The connection lies in the relationship between recognising oppression and developing the capacity to challenge it, rather than in a claim that Wosu directly analyses Mara.

Womanism thus enables this study to interpret Darko's criticism of oppressive gender practices without presenting that criticism as a rejection of African culture as a whole. Drawing on Walker's concern for collective wellbeing and Wosu's emphasis on critical awareness, the study examines the possibilities of gender relations founded on dignity, shared responsibility and mutual respect. However, Mara's growing awareness should not automatically be equated with complete liberation: the novel's portrayal of her entrapment makes it necessary to distinguish survival from freedom. The framework therefore investigates both her pursuit of self-determination and the social and economic conditions that continue to constrain it.

Social, Cultural and Ideological Representations in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

The unequal relationship between men and women in marriage is one of the main social issues shown in *Beyond the Horizon*. Mara's marriage to Akobi does not include mutual respect, companionship, or joint decision-making; on the contrary, Akobi takes full authority and sees Mara as a subordinate whose main duty is to serve his own interests. The way the marriage is exploitative is shown by the statement, "He had married her because he needed someone who would serve his interests" (18). This quote proves that Mara

is not considered an equal partner and that her value lies in her usefulness to Akobi. As a result, marriage becomes a social institution by means of which male dominance and female submission are kept.

The book also examines the process by which women are taught to be obedient and tolerant. In this work, we see the language of silence. The female characters in this novel have been built, programmed and oriented with weakness, zero authority and playing second fiddle to their male counterparts. It has depicted the various instances of women's subjugation, subordination, submission, and compliance, amongst other things, in male dominated traditional societies. It also has demonstrated that silence is a marker for empty speech, the unsaid, or keeping something to self. Mara slowly comes to see suffering as a natural part of being a woman, since she has been brought up to think that a wife ought to obey her husband and make sacrifices for the family. As a result, her exploitation becomes so commonplace that it becomes hard for her to resist. This absence of control is shown in the statement, "Her life had become something others used for their own purposes" (44). This quote shows how Mara's own desires and identity are replaced by the interests of other people, causing her to be treated merely as a tool rather than as a separate, independent person.

Migration is also a major social factor. Mara goes to Germany in order to have a better life, but she ends up experiencing isolation, deception, and exploitation. Since she is unfamiliar with the new environment, her reliance on Akobi increases and this prevents her from asking for help or standing up against oppression. The disillusionment caused by the migration is expressed in the statement, "She had crossed continents in search of happiness, only to find misery" (62). The contrast between "happiness" and "misery" highlights the gap between the idealised view of Europe and the difficult reality that vulnerable African women face abroad. The novel likewise treats prostitution as a social problem stemming from coercion, poverty, and male exploitation. Mara's engagement in prostitution is shown not as a free and independent decision, but as the outcome of manipulation and coercion for the financial advantage of other people.

Cultural Factors

Patriarchal culture is a major influence on Mara's experiences, with men in it seen as the heads of the household and women expected to obey, serve and support them. Since society considers it natural for men to have control over their wives, Akobi's authority is not challenged. The idea that a woman's main role is to serve men is shown by the statement, "He had married her because he needed someone who would serve his interests" (18). This attitude shows a cultural system which defines women in terms of their domestic, emotional and economic usefulness. The novel also points out the cultural belief that a woman's work is an obligation and not something that is valued. The domestic tasks Mara does, the emotional support she provides and the sacrifices she makes are taken for granted and she is expected to keep on giving without asking for equal recognition or reward. The unequal exchange is summed up in the comment, "Everything she gave was expected, yet nothing she received was guaranteed" (101). This quotation reveals a cultural double standard in which women's sacrifices are seen as something that must be made, while men are not held to a similar standard of responsibility.

Traditional views of what it means to be a man also play a part in Mara's being oppressed. Akobi links masculinity with domination, ownership, economic control, and social advancement; instead of showing empathy and taking responsibility towards his wife, he uses her to further his own ambitions. Amma Darko shows the harmful effects of such cultural beliefs. The novel states that African cultural values should encourage cooperation, complementarity, and mutual respect rather than male domination and female subordination.

Economic Factors

Economic subjugation plays a central role in *Beyond the Horizon*, since Mara's dependence on Akobi

enables him to control her decisions, her movements and her future. As she has no independent access to money or resources, she is in a weak position and is therefore forced to accept exploitation. The fact that Akobi had complete control over economic resources is illustrated by the statement: "He controlled everything, including the rewards of her suffering" (92). This quote demonstrates that Akobi does not only gain advantage from Mara's labour and suffering but also has control over the material rewards that result from her efforts. It is thus through economic power that he is able to control her whole life.

The book also shows the gap between labour and ownership. Even though Mara works and makes sacrifices, she neither owns nor has control over the wealth which results from her labour; her hard work benefits others while she stays economically powerless. This injustice is illustrated by the statement, "She worked, but ownership belonged to someone else" (96). This quote brings out the way in which women's labour is exploited in both patriarchal and capitalist systems. Despite the fact that Mara makes a contribution to the economy, she is not given the rights and benefits that go with ownership.

Another economic factor is the commodification of the female body, since Akobi makes Mara a source of income by forcing her into prostitution and treats her body as a commercial product which can be exchanged for money. The cruelty involved in this commodification is shown in the statement, "He had found a market for her body" (68), the use of the word "market" reducing Mara's humanity to her economic value and showing how patriarchy and capitalism work in conjunction to turn women into commodities for male profit.

Financial abuse is presented as a means of exercising domination, and Akobi's control of financial resources makes Mara dependent and prevents her from being able to get away. The connection between economic power and personal control is shown through the metaphor: "Money was his weapon, and dependence was her prison" (106). The reference to a "weapon" shows how money is used aggressively to control Mara, while the idea of a "prison" indicates the loss of freedom that comes about because of economic dependence.

Poverty also maintains Mara's state of obedience; since she has few resources her options are limited and this reinforces her helplessness: "Poverty kept her obedient, and obedience kept her powerless" (117). This quote shows that there is a vicious cycle involved. Poverty causes dependence, that dependence in turn promotes obedience, and obedience stops Mara from challenging the systems which are responsible for her oppression.

Ideological Factors

The novel reflects the idea of patriarchy, depicting male authority as something natural and instructing women to see obedience, sacrifice, and dependence as necessary parts of being female. The way Akobi behaves is based on an ideology which gives men control over women's labour, their bodies and their economic resources. The statement "Her life had become something others used for their own purposes" (44) illustrates how patriarchal ideology takes away women's subjectivity. Mara is not given the right to determine the purpose and the course of her own existence.

The idea of commodification is also significant. In the novel, human relationships are ruined by the desire for money and material progress. Akobi no longer regards Mara as a wife who should be treated with affection and protection; instead he views her as a source of profit. This attitude is shown in the statement: "He had found a market for her body" (68). This quote illustrates the capitalist belief that anything, including the female body, can be given a market value and then exploited for profit.

The book also questions the idea that migrating automatically leads to success. At first, Mara thinks that Europe stands for opportunity, prosperity, and happiness. Her own experience, though, shows that

migration can reinforce and even increase existing gender inequalities. The clash between what was expected and what actually happened is put this way: "She had crossed continents in search of happiness, only to find misery" (62). By means of Mara's experience, Darko undermines the belief that simply changing one's geographical location can result in liberation. If women do not have economic independence, social protection, and personal autonomy, migration might leave them open to greater exploitation.

A further ideological belief is the idea that women's labour is naturally available to men. Mara is expected to work, to make sacrifices and to suffer, yet she is not granted ownership or recognition: "She worked, but ownership belonged to someone else" (96). This statement points out an ideology which keeps women separated from the benefits of their labour and which keeps economic power in the hands of men. The novel also advances womanist ideas. Womanism advocates cooperation and complementarity between men and women, but opposes domination, exploitation, and ownership. By showing Mara's suffering, Darko contends that women should be seen as full-human beings with rights, aspirations and personal dignity.

Womanism also stresses the importance of economic empowerment, holding that women can never attain true liberation so long as they remain financially dependent on men. The novel thus supports equal access to resources, acknowledges women's labour, and promotes relationships based on mutual respect. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Amma Darko looks at the social, cultural, economic, and ideological factors which lead to the exploitation and subordination of women; socially, Mara suffers from marital domination, is isolated as a result of migration, is subjected to coercion and is forced into prostitution; culturally, she is made to obey her husband, to accept suffering and to see sacrifice as a necessary duty of womanhood.

In terms of economics, her labour and body are exploited while Akobi holds control over the benefits; ideologically, it is patriarchy, capitalism, male entitlement and the myth of European prosperity that continue to keep her in a state of oppression. Darko shows the close link between economic dependence and psychological, social and gender oppression through quotes such as "Money was his weapon, and dependence was her prison" (106) and "Poverty kept her obedient, and obedience kept her powerless" (117). The novel finally promotes the idea that women should be recognised as human beings, should achieve economic independence, should have autonomy and should have the right to decide for themselves about their own lives.

Conclusion

Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* presents a powerful representation of the social, cultural, economic and ideological forces that contribute to the exploitation of women. Through Mara's experiences, the novel demonstrates that female oppression cannot be attributed to one factor alone. Patriarchal marriage, cultural expectations of obedience, economic dependence, migration, sexual exploitation and capitalist commodification operate together to restrict women's autonomy. Mara's relationship with Akobi particularly illustrates how male authority can be reinforced through control of marriage, money, labour and sexuality.

The novel further challenges the belief that migration automatically produces freedom and prosperity. Mara's movement from Ghana to Germany changes her geographical environment but does not immediately alter the gendered structures controlling her existence. Rather, her isolation and economic vulnerability create opportunities for further exploitation. Her body and labour become commodities from which others benefit, thereby revealing the relationship between patriarchy and economic power. Darko consequently demonstrates that liberation requires more than geographical mobility; it requires access to resources, protection from exploitation, self-awareness and the ability to make independent decisions. These social, cultural, economic and ideological dimensions are central to the manuscript's analysis of

Mara's experiences.

Viewed through the lens of Womanism, *Beyond the Horizon* becomes not only a critique of female oppression but also an argument for the restoration of women's dignity and agency. Womanism makes it possible to understand Darko's demand for gender relations founded on cooperation and mutual respect rather than domination. Mara's experiences expose the destructive consequences of systems that treat women as dependents, servants or commodities. At the same time, her growing consciousness points toward the possibility of resistance and self-definition.

Ultimately, Darko suggests that meaningful social transformation depends on recognising women as complete human beings with legitimate aspirations, economic rights and authority over their own lives. The liberation of women therefore requires the dismantling of cultural and ideological beliefs that normalise subordination, the recognition and proper reward of women's labour, greater economic independence and relationships in which men and women participate as equal human subjects. *Beyond the Horizon* thus remains a significant literary critique of patriarchal and economic exploitation and an important statement on women's struggle for dignity, autonomy and survival.

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