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**Resistance in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika
Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street***

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Abstract

Louis Althusser's critique of ideology reveals that a subject can hardly ever escape ideology. This paper therefore examines the issue of resistance in the novels of two female African authors: Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). Both writers interrogate female autonomy against the backdrop of established traditional and modern socio-cultural formations. The paper highlights the actions of the female characters as rooted in the material practices of ideology, therefore making it rather impossible for them to reconstitute their agency, especially against the prevailing phallogocentric African culture in which they find themselves.

Key words: ideology, subjectivity, sexuality, resistance, objectification

Introduction

The 21st century has seen a lot of African writers plumbing new directions and aesthetics. These writers are engaging with issues that appear marginal – issues that for the most part border on identity, subjectivity, sexuality, hybridity, and transnationality. It is this emerging trend, according to Adeline Koh, that critics such as Erik Falk and Evan Mwangi have elucidated in their respective books: *Subject and*

History in Selected Works by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera and David Dabydeen (2007) and *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (2009). Falk and Mwangi argue that the current generation of African writers is more interested in articulating issues and problems in the local culture and politics than in “writing back” to the imagined western centre (Koh 2). Accordingly, they identify the heightened sense of self-referentiality and the conflictual layers of subjectivity that characterise a good number of contemporary African fictions.

What could account for such paradigm shift? Is it as a result of the prevalent influence of globalisation in Africa? Perhaps the shift is a reply to the question of what should be “the concerns of African literature in the 21st century” (xii) posed by Ernest Emenyonu in his editorial article on new directions in African literature. In that article, Emenyonu raised some challenging questions which he expected African writers of the 21st century to explore and invest their attention in, with a view to moving African literature forward. In “Introduction: Perspectives on the African Novel”, Abiola Irele outlines the beginnings and transitions of the novel as a literary genre in Africa from pre-colonial, colonial and to post-independence period. Part of his argument is that the thematic concerns in recent African fiction are generated by the “new discourse of dissidence in the African novel” (10). Apparently, literary writers within this generational set are no more concerned with issues of cultural education and re-affirmation than they are with *Beowulf*. Of course, this paradigm shift in thematic focus is not total, but surfaces merely as a sort of dialectic, in view of the fact that no writer can simply divest his writing of the complex influences of society. What is most important, however, is that this trend should contribute richly to the discourse and studies in African literature.

Contemporary Female Writing in Africa

It is against this background that this paper attempts a comparative analysis of the theme of resistance in contemporary African fiction, by examining the works of two female novelists: Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

Amma Darko and Chika Unigwe are writers whose narratives confront patriarchal oppression and demonstrate quite evidently through their female characters a resounding feminist position in how women must reconstitute their subjectivity from subaltern positions; positions of disadvantage and subjection. Although both texts reflect the imagined actualities of two discrete periods (1995 and 2009), each of them participates in what Mary Ellen Higgins, citing Odile Cazenave, has recognised as a discourse of the motif of the African woman who prostitutes her body in order to provide materially for her family (Higgins 62). Distinct as the two novelists are in their own right, they both advocate strong perspectives that critique the ways women are commodified for economic exchange through the various socio-

cultural formations of their respective societies (Ghana and Nigeria respectively). Both novelists equally emphasise the necessity for reconstituting female agency, in order to survive the physical and psychological oppression engendered by male power.

By analysing both texts, this study aims to illuminate how the prevailing phallogocentric culture not only exploits gender difference in society to foster an environment in which men reduce women to objects of use and abuse, but also how it undermines, and in some cases, obliterates, the agency of any "oppressed" female seeking to resist its stranglehold on the traditional structures of family and marriage.

Althusser's Analysis of Ideology

Althusser's analysis of ideology seems to draw from Antonio Gramsci's. Gramsci explains ideology by developing the concept of hegemony, which signifies a mix of coercion and non-coercion (i.e. consent). Hegemony recognises the existence of a ruling class; however, it presupposes that this class does not only employ force in imposing its ideas and extracting compliance from the majority of its citizenry but also explores ways of eliciting their consent and obedience to the ideology that subordinates them. Because ideology contains elements of resistance and instability within its form, Gramsci sums up "ideology as struggle" (Fiske 7).

M.H. Abrahms and Geoffrey Galt Harpham elaborate the Gramscian concept of hegemony as the way:

a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological views so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression. (185)

The tropes of coercion/force and consent/submission implicit in Gramsci's interpretation of ideology are embodied in the Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses originated by Althusser. In his discussion of ideology, Althusser distinguishes the RSA from the ISA as follows: Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). RSA includes the government, administration, army, police, courts and prisons, all working individually and collectively in favour of the hegemonic class while at the same time repressing the minority class, primarily through force or the threat of force. The RSA operates within the public sphere. In contrast, the ISAs operate within the various sources in the private sector and include forms of organised religion, the educational system, family unit, legal system, political parties, trade unions, communications (media and arts), and the cultural. As a matter of fact, the RSA functions by "violence", that is, predominantly by repression (including physical repression), whereas the ISAs principally by "ideology" (143-44).

Thus, the concept will be useful in explaining the way ideology operates in providing important insight into how subjectivities are produced and reproduced within patriarchal structures and institutions (i.e. marriage). Althusser's theory will also be applied to the family, which may be conceptualised as a medium of hegemonic discourse in consolidating power, or as an ISA in itself, with its own hegemonic agenda. Through the process of hailing, the family interpellates the individuals into particular identities (i.e. father, mother, son, and daughter) of the dominant patriarchal ideology. The family's influence in recruiting its members as subjects is in no doubt; thus, its members may never realise they are subject to ideology, and the family will keep on reproducing ideology in a dynamic repetitive process.

The significance of Althusser's theory of ideology in this paper is that it enables us to understand how the traditional structures of patriarchy and marriage (ISAs) work in tandem to ensure their members' subordination to ideology. It also helps us to appreciate how the ideological state apparatuses by controlling knowledge, makes "certain assumptions seem natural and others unthinkable" (Brydon 90).

Review of Darko's and Unigwe's Texts

In reviewing the fiction of Amma Darko and Chika Unigwe it may be pertinent to recall Ato Quayson's statement that in Africa "women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedoms without severe sacrifices or compromises" (585). This context makes us appreciate how both writers interrogate female subjectivity and autonomy against the backdrop of established traditional and modern socio-cultural formations and practices.

Amma Darko's fiction essentially tackles the (tragic) experiences and fate of African women caught in the stranglehold of patriarchal structures and how these women strive to achieve agency in such debilitating conditions. In his "Introduction" to *Broadening the Horizon: Critical Introductions to Amma Darko*, Ghanaian poet and critic Vincent O. Odamtten observes that Darko's writing has "elicited sophisticated readings that represent a variety of ideological perspectives and to some extent, divergent positions in feminist, deconstructive and post-colonial criticisms" (9).

A number of scholars have examined Darko's texts from different perspectives (Chasen 2010; Martinek 2003; Adjei 2009; Zak 2007; Connell and Odamtten 2007; Higgins 2007; Odamtten 2007), although none has explored the issue of resistance in her writings.

However, unlike Amma Darko, Chika Unigwe's writing has yet to attract the kind of critical literature deserving of her storytelling talent. Much of the review of her fiction has been more literary and journalistic than scholarly and critical (Loeckx 2012; Codling 2012; Crackwell 2012; Eberstadt 2012; Evaristo 2012; Gelt 2012; Ivara 2012; Nadaswaran 2012; Tunca 2012; Otas 2012; Onuteche 2012).

Overview of Darko's and Unigwe's Texts

Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* tells the dark yet sobering story of a naive Ghanaian girl who leaves the rustic familiarity of her village home, marries a brute of a husband, Akobi, and finally ends up as a hardened prostitute in the cold bitter confines of Europe. Mara's story reveals the travails she suffered at the hands of Akobi, her abandonment, her oppression and exploitation, and the series of sexual abuse and violence to which her husband subjected her. Domestic violence is a recurrent theme in the novel, which comprises fifteen chapters with a narrative structure modelled on the first-person narrative situation. The events are related by Mara who functions as the "narrating I". In addition, Mara takes part as a character or as the "experiencing I" in the action in the fictional world. Mara acts as the homodiegetic voice. As the homodiegetic voice, she is both the narrator and also the protagonist. Further, by participating in the action she presents to the reader the different perspectives implicit in the action she is presenting.

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* relates the harrowing experiences of four African sex workers who share an apartment in Belgium. Three of the girls – Sisi, Efe and Ama – are Nigerians, while Joyce, the fourth girl, is a Sudanese. Although the novel opens with Sisi, the leading female character, relishing thoughts of new beginnings, the reader realises before long that she has been jobless for many years, even after having graduated from a renowned university. Efe, nicknamed the 'Imelda Marcos of wigs' because of her passion for high-heeled shoes and wig, is abandoned by her old lover soon after she got pregnant for him. Sexually abused night after night by her stepfather, Ama is forced to leave Enugu for Lagos, where she is taken in by an aunt who runs a canteen. And Joyce, having been gang-raped by militias in Sudan, has her heart crushed completely, when her Nigerian army boyfriend dumps her because he is not brave enough to fight off ethnic sentiments. In a bid to escape their personal tragedies in Nigeria, the four girls, with the help of a loud-mouthed pimp, relocate to Belgium separately, where they believe they could start a new life altogether. The pimp's help, however, turns out to be the 'devil's gift', which entails grim consequences and proves fatal for one of the girls.

Comparative Assessment of the Writings of Darko and Unigwe

Althusser's ideology shows that our consciousness is not class-based, or economically (over)determined by the society we have been born into (Fiske 5).

Ideology is a social practice which implies that our consciousness is defined – and perhaps configured – by our participation in the signifying practices of ideology. In other words, our subjectivity is constituted by and unavoidably inscribed within ideological practices. Implicit in this thinking is that ideology is inescapable.

Therefore, two questions will frame much of our assessment. The first question is: can the subject escape ideology? Secondly, what are the implications of breaking with ideology? In analysing these questions, we will focus specifically on Sisi in *On Black Sisters' Street* and Mara in *Beyond the Horizon*. The aim is to examine how Unigwe and Darko interpose the issues of resistance in their texts and to what extent is resistance to ideology successful.

Implication of Ideological Resistance

In each of the novels by Darko and Unigwe, female characters are interpellated into fulfilling the pre-established roles of sex objects within the patriarchal practice of prostitution. Their sexuality is defined by male sexuality and subjected accordingly to it. Male sexuality constructs, as Catharine MacKinnon explains, “what [female] sexuality as such means, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced” (317). Both Darko and Unigwe’s texts parallel Mackinnon’s view, and reveal that the female characters are always-already subjects “waiting to be used and abused” (Darko 1) by the dominant male sexuality.

Onyemaechi Udumukwu attributes this to the conditions created by patriarchal structures so that man is privileged to openly express his sexuality, while a woman’s sexuality is policed and suppressed (2007:171). This, incidentally, engenders an oppositional relationship, male dominance, on the one hand, and female submission, on the other; men become the superior subject and women the object or objectified; of course, contradictions, or tensions, tend to emerge in such asymmetrical relationship. It is within this highly conflictual space that Darko and Unigwe locate their female characters’ resistance.

In Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara’s realisation to resist ideology is animated by her recognition of her loss of dignity. She realises that she is left with nothing, has lost virtually every form of meaning in her life, her relationship with her family, mother and her two children. Worse still, Akobi the husband whom she has tried so much to please and serve has robbed her of this dignity. It is at this point that Mara asks herself, ‘Why couldn’t I take control of my life?’ (118) This question awakens her to act(ion). Her awakening is acknowledged even by Kaye, an older prostitute who watches over her at the brothel. Kaye puts it this way: ‘At last, Mara! You have woken up’ (119). In order to reverse her subjection in ideology, it is Kaye whom Mara engages. With the cunning, experience and assistance of this prostitute,

Mara is able to contrive a scheme aimed ultimately at liberating her from the control of Akobi.

Mara demonstrates her first act of resistance when she hoodwinks her pimp Pompey into believing that “her capital is completely destroyed” by one of her customers while she was having sexual intercourse with him (119). So instead of sleeping with three men daily as is her quota, she appeals to her pimp to let her take on one man only for the next one month, until she is whole and restored again. Pompey is a “rigidly disciplined businessman” who will never go back on his contracts with Akobi. So instead of Mara reducing her quota of customers to one actually, she stealthily increases her count to seven men per day, just so she can make enough money to contract a marriage with a German man, obtain a five-year’s resident visa, and buy herself out of “subjugation”(120).

Mara’s second act of resistance occurs when she hires the service of a private detective to extract information on Akobi’s “financial deals, private arrangements, properties acquired, if any. Every deal and activity that you are capable of finding out about, I want to know” (133). Armed with this incriminating information she resolves to expose her estranged husband and split his liaison with Comfort. She pulls this off successfully, and Comfort is deported to Nigeria. According to Mara,

Akobi is in jail here in Germany. He attempted to sneak out while still owing money to the bank and a couple of mail order houses and was caught. I am sure that he was wanting to follow Comfort when she got deported. Everything he and Gitte owned has been taken by the bank. Gitte has divorced him and returned to her family. (138-39)

Mara achieves all she set out to do and regains her “subjectivity”, yet it turns out that she is trapped in the dominant patriarchal practices of sexual objectification, as her determination to “do the [porn] films and the stage shows and all there is to it” (131) demonstrates. Although she is freed from the pimp Pompey she ends up being stuck with another pimp Oves for the rest of her life (139). Her “new” brothel-situation implicates her acknowledgement of and resignation to her subjection in ideology. According to her, “I have plunged into my profession down to the marrow in my bones. There is no turning back for me now” (139). Implicit in her statements is that although she has for the most part resisted the dominant subject personified by Akobi and his crony Osey, she has become re-constituted by ideology to be subjected once again to a seemingly different dominant subject, in the person of Oves. At the end of Darko’s narrative, what is left of Mara’s resistance to ideology is a wasted, debilitated, ravaged subjectivity, addicted to hard drugs; that is “fast sinking into a place hotter than hell” (139). As a result, she remains a subject, powerless in her subjection by ideology.

Sisi, on the other hand, is the leading female character in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Her first act of resistance figures in her decision to give up her job as a sex worker and start a new life with Luc, her Belgian lover (269-70). In her words, '[t]hey would marry and in a few years she would be a bona fide Belgian. She would have her own children. A different life' (271). This decision actuates within her a sense of rebelliousness, so that when Madam the owner of the brothel visits to demand from her why she has not yet gone to work at her booth in the Vingerlingstraat, Sisi tells her she is on her period (272). The dialogue goes thus:

'How come?' Madam said, her eyebrows joining together to form a long wavy line of suspicion. 'I'm sure I gave you a period break less than a month ago.'

'But I am. I can't explain it. You want me to show you?'

Madam shook a hasty 'No' with her head, let out an annoyed hiss and walked out of the room. (272)

The above dramatises her defiance and, after Madam has left the room Sisi raises a fist in the air in triumph, having upturned in the interim her ideological subjection in sexual objectification. Having then recorded this triumph she sets out to resist Dele the pimp by defaulting in her payment. This marks her next act of resistance to ideology. Prior to this rebellious decision, Sisi has 'never defaulted in her payment. And she always paid more than the minimum because she wanted to be done with it in the shortest possible time. That meant that what she saved was minimal' (42, 274). Unlike Mara who continues remitting her whoring profits to her pimp, Sisi decides to stop remitting hers to Dele. This breach of contract constitutes a definite act of resistance, particularly when her pimp has warned her not to, ever, double-cross him (271). To escape whatever wrath Dele is capable of wreaking on her person, Sisi secretly flees the house on Zwartzusterstraat for Luc's place in Edegem (277). Her flight represents yet another act of resistance by her, and leads her into living with her Belgian boyfriend. Sisi is aware that she has crossed the point of no turning back, but she 'was ready to deal with whatever the consequences might be' (286).

These consequences turn out more terribly than she might ever have conceived; they came to her "as a shock" (239). As Sisi would find out seconds before her death any attempts to resist ideology often invoke consequences beyond one's comprehension. In this instance, Sisi may be deemed, in Althusserian view, as one of the "'bad subjects', who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) state apparatus" (181). In Sisi's case, Segun the carpenter personifies the RSA.

The consequences that befell Mara and Sisi are visibly in line with John Fiske's assertion that

there is no way of escaping ideology, for although our material social experience may contradict it, the only means we have of making sense of that experience are always ideologically loaded; so the only sense we can make of ourselves, our social relations, and our social experience is one that is a practice of the dominant ideology (8)

Finally, in analysing the issues of resistance to ideology and the implication, we observed that it is in and through the social practice of prostitution that Mara and Sisi attempted to regain their subjectivities, in order to resist subjection to ideology. While Mara re-establishes agency through the use of her repeatedly abused body, Sisi uses her self-awareness to acquire agency. In resisting the ideological practices of sexual objectification however, both characters realise (rather too late) that every form of resistance to ideology is fraught with terrible implication. This goes on to reaffirm Althusser's (170) assertion that "there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects", so in effect a subject cannot actually break with ideology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have attempted to examine the notion of resistance to ideology in Darko's and Unigwe's texts, in order to show that resistant subjectivity may be produced from within the existing ideological relationships amongst the subjects. We also noted that interpellation was actualised in the female characters' recognition of their positions as well as their resultant participation in the material practices of ideology. Our analysis showed that internal struggle within a character could induce self-knowledge; this knowledge could in turn incite the character to contest her subjection. However, even when the character refuses to go along with the social practices governed by the ritual of ideology, the outcome usually turns adverse and in some cases life-destroying. Therefore, a subject simply cannot escape ideology.

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