

Objectification in Amma Darko's *Beyond The Horizon*

by

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Abstract

We live in a world which has grown insuppressibly more sexualised than ever before; a hyper-sexualised world where eroticised codes, symbols, messages, images, artefacts and acts saturate our sight, senses and space, making it so normal for women to be constituted as sex objects in popular cultural forms. This paper aims to examine the representations of sexual objectification in Amma Darko's novel *Beyond the Horizon*, and the various ideological processes her female character is centred in the sexual practices of objectification. Thus, Louis Althusser's theory of ideology is used to analyse the constitution of the major female character as a subject through a constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, and thereby recognizing themselves as subjects (interpellation). The paper concludes that the process of interpellation becomes the basis of understanding the immanent objectification in Darko's novel.

Key words: objectification, sexuality, prostitution, interpellation, subjectivity.

Introduction

One critical concern which is increasingly being recognised in contemporary African fiction is the issue of sex and sexuality. Sex plays a determining role in human life, drives human reproduction and nature, manifests in various forms of identity, culture, gender, and race, etc., and in other forms such as pornography, prostitution, and trafficking. Its phenomenon has been theorised, critiqued and researched upon by a host of scholars from several interdisciplinary positions. As a literary theme that is common, the issue of sex(uality) has engaged the attention of authors across various genres and still presents itself amenably to whatever figurative or literal technique that is desired (or designed) by the writer. Indeed, we cannot discount the significance of sex in understanding humanity and civilisation.

More so, we live in a world which has grown insuppressibly more sexualised than ever before; a hyper-sexualised world, as it were, where eroticised codes, symbols, messages, images, artefacts and acts saturate our sight, senses and space, making it so normal for women to be constituted as sex objects in popular cultural forms. R.M. Groothius describes it eloquently, “a woman is...a sex object whose use is dictated by the male rules of the sexual game” (qtd. in Baloyi n.pag.). This statement echoes Immanuel Kant's views on sexual objectification, wherein he claimed that a woman is desired only because her sex is the object of a man's desires (Shrage 46).

Overview of the Action in *Beyond the Horizon*

Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* tells the harrowing yet sobering story of a naive Ghanaian girl who leaves the familiarity of her village home, marries a brute of a husband, and finally ends up as a hardened prostitute in the cold bitter confines of Europe. The novel comprises fifteen chapters and its narrative structure is modelled on the "first-person narrative situation". The events are related by Mara who functions as the "narrating I". In addition, she takes part as a character or as the "experiencing I" in the action in the fictional world. Mara acts as the homodiegetic voice (Udumukwu 153). 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. The significance of this, according to Onyemaechi Udumukwu, is that “[b]y mediating between presentation and perspective, [Mara] acquires the advantage of empathy and distance” (153). Udumukwu reasons that “empathy” enables Mara to be involved in the action, while “distance” enables her to become cynical of, and therefore, reveal the ironical situation in what she sees.

As the novel opens we see Mara sitting before her large oval mirror and painfully staring at what is left of what once used to be her body. Reflecting on her incredible transformation from a greenhorn into a whore in a German brothel, she draws our attention to the scars and damage wrought on her body by some of her ruthless clients. She informs us that she now has a new lord, master and pimp, and she is “his pawn, his slave and his property” (3). From her recollection we are able to discern that she used to be the property of another lord. It is at this point that she recounts through flashback how she was given away in marriage by her own avaricious father.

Thus, Mara is bought off very handsomely by the village undertaker for his son, who in turn takes her to the city as his wife and “property” (7). In the city, Mara following her mother's instruction to “obey and worship your husband” (13), tries to please and satisfy her husband as best she could, but Akobi refuses to reciprocate or take ample care of her, as is expected of a husband. Instead, he subjects her to various forms of ill treatment and emotional anguish; meanwhile, he is a poorly-paid clerk in a government office.

We see an instance of this when Mara informs him that she is pregnant with his child and rather than express delight he retorts: “And why did you get pregnant?”, and her attempts to answer him earn her a couple of slaps (17). A few days later, he compels her to look for work, however she can. In spite of her delicate condition, Mara suffers more beatings from Akobi; it is either he gives her a nasty kick in the knee or he hits her in the face. At times she receives a knock on the head and other times he wrenches her ear hard. Couples ordinarily are expected to lie down together; not so in Mara’s case. As a rule, Akobi sleeps alone on the mattress while Mara sleeps on the mat.

Throughout much of Mara’s travails in the hands of Akobi, Mara finds a friend and confidante in Mama Kiosk, an older woman who comforts and consoles her most of the time. When Akobi notices the closeness between the two women, he forbids his wife from associating with Mama Kiosk. However, Mara and Mama Kiosk contrive a plan to “meet daily at the station” (24). When Mara senses that it is time for her to give birth, she drugs Akobi and runs off to the village where she is delivered of a baby boy. After nearly a year of living in the village with her child and no support at all from her husband, Mara returns to the city, though without her child. She thought it wise to leave him behind with her mother. But when she goes back to Accra she finds out that her husband is on the verge of migrating to Europe. The gullible and trusting woman that she is, Mara is smooth-talked by Akobi into believing in his plans to travel out. As Mara states,

There was nothing Akobi would have said at that moment that I wouldn’t have done...If Akobi had suddenly suggested that I allowed myself to be beheaded, that cutting my head off at that moment was the right thing to do, I would readily and gladly have given in and still gone hopping headless, singing hallelujah unto him. So taken in was I by him. (36)

The above scene projects a bleak picture of Mara’s ideological interpellation wherein she acknowledges and responds to ideologies, and thereby recognizing herself as a subject.

In this instance, one cannot help but notice the erasure of her individuality, because she seems to have been successfully positioned (by ideology) not to actuate her own desires but rather those of her husband, even though she knows full well Akobi is undeserving of any affection. Her constitution as a subject in ideology is total at this point. However, Mara would later recognise her subjugation by both Akobi and the instruments of ideology, and later attempt to reassert her individuality. By this singular act she would be taking on the position of a “bad” subject and possibly provoking the “intervention of one of the detachments of the repressive state apparatus” (Althusser 181).

In the meantime, Akobi finally travels to Europe and Mara does not hear from him until it is almost two years of waiting on him. When at last she receives a mail from him she is stunned and elated to note that he wants her to join him abroad. What she does not know at that point is that she has been tricked by her husband into coming to Germany, to further his terrible selfish ends. In Germany, Mara discovers to her shock that her husband has a new name. To compound her shock, she also discovers that Akobi aka Cobby has not only got himself a German wife, whom he has also successfully tricked into believing that Mara is his sister (and not his wife), but has also pawned her to a German pimp. Mara, as it were, would not have willingly consented to taking part in such a degrading bargain, but Akobi has already perfected a setup where she is to be gang-raped by strangers of different colours at a remote bungalow. He captures a video film of her “completely naked, with men’s hands moving all over her body” (115), taking turns upon her. Then he blackmails her with the video film. Left with no choice, Mara is therefore coerced into prostituting herself away at a sex nightclub.

It turns out, however, that the club owner’s wife sympathises with Mara’s plight, because she has been in such an ill-fated situation herself. Realising that the older prostitute is experienced and bighearted enough, Mara elicits support from her in order to plot a fitting act of vengeance on Akobi, which she enacts successfully. Consequently, Akobi is divorced by his German wife and is jailed in Germany; his secret lovebird is deported. But her victory, as we infer from her account, does not much compensate for all the degradation and exploitation she suffered in the hands of her vile husband.

For Mara, the only consolation, is that though she can never go back to Ghana because “the rot has gone too deep for me to return” (131), she is content at least to still be of use to her mother, her brothers, and more importantly, her two children, even though she has become hooked on hard drug. The story ends with Mara resigning herself to her debilitating condition, as she concludes, “Material things are all I can offer them. As for myself, there’s nothing dignified and decent left of me to give them” (140). It is worth mentioning that Darko effectively depicts Mara’s progress from naivety to self-knowledge – but this self-knowledge instead of liberating her, especially considering that she has been manacled the whole time in her marriage, still keeps her captive. Nonetheless, like Unigwe, Darko has painted a realistic and haunting portrait of African women immigrant’s experience in Europe and the sexual exploitation, degradation and domination they have to go through in a male-driven society.

Mara: Constructing the Subject through Marriage

‘I only know that a girl grows up, is given to a man by her parents and she has to please the man, serve him and obey him and bear him plenty children...’ Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon* (86)

The above quotation underscores the hegemonic ideology of many African societies, and the way a woman is constituted as a subject through the process of interpellation. According to Althusser, it is through interpellation that an individual is constituted as a subject. Interpellation is successful only when that individual recognises and adopts the practices embodied in that ideology, thus believing her actions are predicated upon her *own* ideas, which of course, unknown to her, are subsumed in ideology (168).

In Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara is the protagonist and the homodiegetic narrator; though the narration is told from a first-person point of view, we still get to see how her subjectivity emerges through the various interpellations of marriage. The initial narration is presented through a flashback at the opening of the novel, where Mara is sitting in front of a large oval mirror and reflecting on what is left of her life (1-2). In the flashback, Mara briefly foreshadows her sexual objectification when she intimates the reader that she is a pawn, slave, and property of a pimp (3).

This flashback takes us back to the scene where Mara is returning from the village well, only to be met by her mother with "good news." This domestic meeting sets off her interpellation as a subject. From Mara's reaction, we can tell, she recognises this hailing, because her father appears to be good at "choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters" (4). It turns out that her father has just found a husband for her. Mara is denied any choice in the matter, as shown in her reply to her mother: 'Who is he?' I asked mother. 'Father's choice for *me*?' (4, emphasis added). A hint of disbelief marks her statement as though she is quite unsure if she is the one being addressed by her mother, yet her statement is rhetorical.

In his seminal essay entitled "Ideology and Meanings", John Fiske stresses the significance of communication as interpellation (7). In his view, all communication "interpellates or hails us in some way." And because communication is usually a two-way traffic, it places the addresser and the addressee in a social relationship. Thus, implicit in Mara's reply is her recognition of herself as the addressee; in so doing she adopts the subject position in this ideological construction. Mara could have resisted her interpellation but she does not. Instead, she lets herself to be constituted as a subject in the practice of arranged marriage. Her subjectivity makes her naturalise this practice, just like her mother, whose elation over her daughter's forthcoming marriage reflects her own subjection to the dominant practice of marriage; and by her hailing Mara with this good news she becomes, unwittingly, the familial ideological apparatus through which her daughter is finally constituted. Already interpellated, Mara, as a matter of "common sense" accepts the dominant ideological marital norms. Her "ideas" of marriage thus establish her subjectivity in patriarchy such that the anomalies in marriage appear normal to her. For instance, Mara says that,

...many things that happened in my marriage appeared to me to be matter-of-course things that happened in all marriages and to all wives. I didn't see much difference from my parents' marriage either, so why should I think differently because I was living in the city? (12)

The above sentence reflects her strong interpellation as a wife, as well as links her "consciousness" to the practices inherent within the hegemonic ideology. Mara becomes a subject that reproduces the ruling ideas and practices as her statement here shows, "...after all, mother had taught me [Mara] that a wife was there for a man for one thing, and that was to ensure his well-being" (13). This statement brings into focus Laretta Ngcobo's thesis on the ideological position marriage takes on in many African societies. "A little girl is born to fulfill this role," Ngcobo argues, because "she has been prepared from the earliest age possible for the role of motherhood that she will play elsewhere, away from the family home" (534). Mara incarnates this role, her interpellation into the marital ideological practices appears so successful she begins to rationalise every misdeed of her husband, even when she is quite informed that he is "a bad husband" (17).

To shed more light on Mara's subjectivity, she counters Mama Kiosk when the older woman mentions that her husband is meant to buy something for her, as is legally expected of every husband. But Mara opposes her and insists that her husband does not need to, after all he is the man (13). Notice the article "the", and not "a" man; this goes to show how deeply her subjectivity has taken root in patriarchal ideology. Her husband is not *any* man, but *the* man, the dominant subject to which she must submit. Consequently, Mara's subjection turns her into the property of her husband. Her consciousness as "property" is manifest in her recognition of the culture of submission in which she has to operate, although this contradicts Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's argument that "a woman's body is her inherent property" (547). Through Mara, we witness how this culture of submission can have an insidious hold on the consciousness of a subject, from the way she validates her position to herself that since her mother worships her father on a daily basis (14), it would make no sense for her to deviate from this dominant norm. She goes on to justify her position: 'I did see all these things as normal...For me, not obeying and worshipping Akobi would make me less of a wife' (16), and no doubt, less of a concrete individual. Invariably, her essence is subjected to how well she can play her role as a subject to a dominant subject, that is, her husband. Mara signifies the image of the "ideal wife", which Ngcobo discussed in her essay, entitled "African Motherhood – Myth and Reality". The ideal wife, because she is defined through her relationship with her husband, her "commitment entails [even] the sacrifice of her own interests" (538). In Mara, we find this archetype. Althusser has reasoned that in ideology men do not represent to themselves their real conditions of existence but rather their imaginary relation to those conditions of existence which are represented to them there (164).

It is within this imaginary consciousness that Mara is wont to believe that her pregnancy would herald something of worth in her marriage, to a subject who obviously means ill for her. So when she tells Akobi that she is pregnant, all hell is let loose, and he boils over and deals her a series of slaps (17).

Had Mara not been a subject caught up in patriarchal ideology she would have seen it coming, expected such a raw display of abuse from him, because it is clear to every other character but her. Mama Kiosk, her confidante, has often tried to forewarn her about Akobi, that he is “a bad man” (17), but Mara prefers to disregard this warning, simply because she is not ready to let anyone, not even Mama Kiosk, ruin her marriage (14). Ideology so shaped her subjectivity that she couldn’t see her husband for who he really is; a brute. Yet it is this desire to cling to her marriage at all cost – when textual evidence shows otherwise, that the marriage is a sham, a scam, from the onset – which further motivates Mara into accepting and expecting the beatings every day (20-21). In this way the ideological mechanism of physical abuse has made Mara to “conform to the behaviour patterns that are acceptable” (Cousins 106) to her husband.

Mara’s explanation for her husband’s infidelity further reveals she has so internalised the subjectivity of the familial ideological apparatus, she sees nothing wrong in her husband’s unfaithfulness, mainly because she has been brought up (by patriarchal ideology that pervades the familial space) to tolerate polygamy (41). As a matter of fact, ideology functions in the family to imbue members with subjectivities that represent and reproduce the dominant ideological rituals and practices within the household – more so the family is foundational in the naturalisation of society building norms. Besides, the familial ideological configuration is unique and highly-structured, wherein “the subject to-be will have to ‘find’ ‘its place, i.e. ‘become’ the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance” (Althusser 176). As a result, the family ISA “always-already” pre-appoints its members as subjects to whatever ideology is prevalent at that specific time. It is apparently against this background that Mara starts to grieve over her husband’s immigration to Europe, having already been inserted into the familial norms and rituals of a house-wife. In her words, she “had grown wholly attached to [Akobi’s] unfairness, to his bullying, to the strength he possessed over me” (44). Likewise, her acknowledgement that she “just was so used to being the servant” (44) exemplifies her inertness in the marriage ideology, even though she could have well resisted being subjected to Akobi. Her whole subjectivity is definitely sutured in this position of servitude; she just could not see that his acts of infidelity (even when they are pointed out by Mama Kiosk) constitute outright betrayal (45).

Ideologically positioned in servitude, Mara indulges herself in a false consciousness thinking that if she sets about transforming her appearance her husband would treat her less brutally; it is this false consciousness that makes her swear an oath to herself that, “I would transform myself so much that even Akobi wouldn’t be able to recognise me on return until I told him: Behold! here is your Mara who stands before you!!” (46). So Mara transforms herself into a modern woman for Akobi (47).

One function of ideology is to instill an illusory consciousness in the subject, which is why the subject would naturally perceive herself as a free agent and participate *freely* in the social practices of society (Althusser 168). In Mara's case her transformation correlates her desire to surpass her husband's lover in looks and style. She starts wearing dresses instead of clothes, even querying herself for having not done that earlier (49). Fiske illustrates this statement better. In explicating the presence of ideology in everyday practice, he uses a pair of high-heel shoes to describe how it interpellates women as subjects:

...wearing [a pair of high-heel shoes] is an ideological practice of patriarchy in which women participate, possibly even more than the ideology would require. Wearing them accentuates the parts of the female body that patriarchy has trained us into thinking of as attractive to men – the buttocks, thighs, and breasts.

The woman thus participates in constructing herself as an attractive object for the male look, and therefore puts herself under the male power (of granting or withholding approval). Wearing them also limits her physical activity and strength – they hobble her and make her move precariously; so wearing them is practicing the subordination of women in patriarchy. A woman in high heels is active in producing and recirculating the patriarchal meanings of gender that propose masculinity as stronger and more active, and femininity as weaker and more passive. (6-7)

We have taken the liberty of quoting this long excerpt so as to foreground our examination of Mara's subjectivity. By successfully actualising her "imaginary" model, that is, the kind of glittering woman she imagines her husband would adore, she is able to reconstitute her subjectivity, but she only succeeds in re-positioning, or, more precisely, rearranging herself within the ideological patriarchal system; that is, from a site of inaction to a vantage point of agency. Yet her reconstitution and agency all take place within ideology, since all practices are constituted within ideology (Althusser 169).

Believing herself to be a free agent now, Mara begins to participate in the social practices of ideology. Instead of putting her feet down as a wife in the home of her husband's new wife, she decides to play along with him, taking on the role of a sister-in-law (97-103). Mara is not a stranger to tolerating her husband's philandering. Her philosophy in this regard is encapsulated in her avowal: "I would be Akobi's hidden wife, so that harmony would prevail in the marriage, something I saw as my duty and responsibility as the wife to ensure" (26). By taking up this role, she becomes complicit in her own subjection and, worse still, opens herself to further marital subjugation, as is enacted in the scene where she is "ordered" to do all the household washing henceforth by hands, instead of her insisting to use the laundry machine (108).

Besides, she could very well have exposed Akobi's duplicity. But she has these "ideas" – predetermined already by ideology – that by playing along things would sort themselves out naturally, and she would win her husband back. This sentiment by Mara represents what Althusser meant about "absolute guarantee", whereby everything will be all right provided that the subject recognises what she is and behaves accordingly (Resch 210). These ideas also actuate her willingness to sustain this lie, see this charade through, with the belief that in helping him she is equally helping herself, to keep her marriage going (104-5). Someone who is not already hailed successfully by the marriage ideological apparatus would not play such a role convincingly; neither would she withhold from her husband's "second" wife her true identity, when it seems the right thing to do.

Not unexpectedly, her subjection in ideology positions her for the practices of sexual objectification. It is ideology that actually lays out the groundwork for her interpellation into this practice, and her first experience of it is in the scene where Akobi, after failing to assault her, motions for her to lie down next to him; although Mara has given us a hint of the practices of sexual objectification in the beginning of the text, when she tells us about pretty women "waiting to be used and abused by strange men" (1). However, Mara explains her first experience this way: "Wordlessly, he stripped off my clothes, he stripped off his trousers, turned my back to him and entered me. Then he ordered me off the mattress to go and lay out my mat because he wanted to sleep alone (22).

The above passage represents Mara being sexually objectified. The "wordlessly" denotes absence of rapport, just as the whole love-making portrays Mara as essentially an instrument for the objectifier's purposes. As it were, she is not "human" enough to be offered any form of intimacy, not fit enough to be cuddled after lovemaking. In fact, she is good enough only for the fulfilment of male pleasure; she is nothing more than a sex object. This subjection of Mara calls to mind Groothius's comments about a woman being a pawn in a man's world, a sex object to be used accordingly to masculine dictates (qtd. in Baloyi n.pag.). Even in this context, Mara is constructed as the subject, while her husband personifies the dominant subject. Mara's ideological positioning is that of the "subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting [her] submission" (Easthope and McGowan 57). Another instance of Mara being sexually objectified is on the train when Osey, her husband's best friend, tells her that she is "not a bad-looking chicken" (66). Before then we see Osey take Mara to a cinema in town; there, she is "tricked" to watch a pornographic film, an exact reproduction of sexual objectification ideology in material form (61). Mara's experiences of sexual objectification are much more pronounced in Europe, where both her husband and his friends objectify her severally.

Over there, she is confronted by a poster of a ravishingly beautiful white woman, a cultural artefact of sexual objectification. Mara describes this woman as:

...a blond, *in a slip*, sitting on a stool with *legs wide apart*, eyes cunningly slanted, *tongue calculatingly out* and the *tip upturned* between snow-white teeth, just *touching the upper scarlet lip seductively*. Further down, the *forefinger just grazed her genitals*. (68, emphasis added)

Reading the poster through Althusser's ideological framework we can perceive that the poster is laden with highly suggestive sexual undertones. We can also sense the presence of ideological "meanings", which are meant to hail the viewer, who in turn responds accordingly and positions him- or herself within the social construction of sexual objectification. "Interpellation," as Fiske explains, "can position us in an ideological category that may differ from our actual social one" (7). Although Mara is repulsed by the poster at that point, it is ironic and rather telling to note that she is eventually inserted into sexual objectification practices and she becomes much like the "ravishing woman" in the poster. Recall her own imagery in the beginning of the text when she says she is dressed "just in brief silky red underpants" (1). Furthermore, there is a scene in which Mara is objectified by her husband's friend when he takes her to his wife's flat and introduces her: "This here is Akobi's bundle" (71). Her objectification by Osey's statement is not implied, but overt and significant, for it equates Mara with something inanimate, thus consigning her to a state of "fungibility", that is, the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects (Papadaki n.pag.). Of course, Osey could have said, "*This is Akobi's wife*", or "*This is Akobi's woman*," – although the latter statement hints at illicit relationship whereas the former embodies Mara's status as a wife. His statement clearly objectifies Mara. Akobi, on the other hand, is used to objectifying her. An instance of this is in the scene where he rapes her. Prior to this brutal act, Mara pictures herself as a cheap whore (83). The scene is depicted below:

Then, very rigidly and businesslike, [he] ordered as loud as the loud music would allow, "Remove it quick quick," pointing to my trousers....Emanating an aura of no-nonsense and time-is-too-precious-to-waste-on-you, he signalled with his right forefinger that I should kneel; which I did, still in my sweatshirt. (83-4)

From these examples above we can see that Mara is constructed as a subject through various processes of interpellation; we can also see the role of social institutions which help to facilitate her subjection to the ruling patriarchal ideology. And because she is subjected to a dominant subject (man), it comes as no surprise then that she sees herself as Akobi's property (7), and internalises the notion that a girl is brought up to please and serve a man (86).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to examine how Mara's subjectivity is formed and transformed through societal ideological practices, starting from her hailing by the "domestic ideology" (Udumukwu 160), and through her subjection to these practices and institutions. We have observed that Mara is interpellated as a subject (and sexually objectified) through a variety of relationships in the society, and that marriage as a major family is constituted to reproduce patriarchal ideology.

Based on the analysis of the text so far, it may be appropriate to state that marriage mostly reinforces the ideology of sexual objectification of African women within the institutional structures of society. We may also state that Amma Darko has effectively constructed Mara as a subject who not only acts according to the dictates of society, but also fulfils the female roles as a daughter, a wife and a mother (Angsotinge et al. 87).

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