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Dysfunctional Parenting as a Threat to the Sustenance of Human Dignity in the 21st Century: A Study of Darko's *Faceless*

Udogu, Christiana Obiageli

Department of English and Literary Studies,
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe
Anambra State, Nigeria

Phone Number: +2348035488988

Email: christieobiageli@gmail.com

Abstract

Many modern families are dysfunctional with either parent leaving the home and children uncared for. It is expected that the job of parenting is for both parents who ought to live together to perform this duty. On the contrary, however, many parents hardly can live together in harmony to nurture their children. In a majority of cases, when this type of situation arises, children grow wild and take to the streets to fend for themselves. This is why one of the problems of the 21st century is the danger posed by the ever-increasing number of street children in the major cities and urban centres. It is against this backdrop that this paper studied Amma Darko's *Faceless* to determine the extent to which dysfunctional parenting led to the menace of street children, and what could be done to forestall the phenomenon. This work was hinged on Cultural theory. It was discovered at the end of the research that several factors, chief among which is parental neglect, were responsible for street children menace in the novel. Suggestions were, therefore, made for curbing this social danger that tramples upon human dignity in the 21st century.

Introduction

Parenting is a divine calling. It involves not just bringing a child into the world but being involved in promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of the child from infancy to adulthood (Bulus, 2013). Being a parent therefore demands making provision for the child's safety, shelter, nourishment, protection and physical development. This simply means that, where it is possible, parents ought to be there always for the child to provide for him and ensure he receives all-round training that will enable him survive and be useful to the society.

Surprisingly, some parents hardly live together to perform this important task of nurturing and raising their children. Factors like poverty, illiteracy, communication problem, drug abuse, alcoholism, culture, other abuses of any kind, among others, have been found to be responsible for family break-up. Unfortunately, when couples divorce or marriages break up, the children already born into the family become the victims. Where either of the parents abandons the family, the other parent, in most cases, finds it difficult to cope with the demands of parenting. In some cases, the parent may not be rich enough to provide the physical and emotional needs of the children. The children, in an attempt to fend for themselves either through begging, stealing or even prostitution, storm the streets and become what is these days termed “street children”, a twenty-first century menace.

The issue of street children is a matter of great concern to any well-meaning and right thinking individual. Apart from the vulnerability of being a street child, the child’s rights are trampled upon. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) according to Wikipedia (2017) asserts that “State parties recognize the rights of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”. No child in the street, no matter how hard he works, can boast of being accorded his fundamental human rights.

Apart from that, the society is at risk because the street child may later graduate to become a street lord, pimp, high class prostitute, child trafficker, terrorist, or even an armed robber. Darko (2003, p 112) puts it more succinctly when she writes that “the street child of today is being bred to become the kind of future adult with a psyche that has little or no comprehension of basic respect for human life”. Apart from these, the society stands the risk of not having reliable and hardworking men and women that would replace the aging generation. In fact, without children, nations will go into extinction. For children to really be what the society expects of them, they must be taken good care of by providing them with the basic necessities of life which are food, shelter, love, and clothing among others. Children need to be nurtured, trained and directed by adult members of the society.

It is surprising, however, that some children in the world today are found in the streets rather than their homes. This is a social menace that calls for the urgent attention of the government and private individuals as well as other concerned organizations. Humanium reports that “There are estimated to be 120 million children living on the streets in the world (30 million in Africa, 30 million in Asia and 60 million in South America). Worst still, street children are often victims of all kinds of abuses such as rape, brutality, human trafficking, stealing, begging, untimely and brutal death, and so on. Street children’s fundamental human rights are constantly trampled upon to the extent that they are reduced to the status of animals. Notwithstanding these, the street remains attractive to the street child. Fofu says: “On the streets, I was under nobody’s control. It was fun... I went to sleep when I wanted. I watched any film I wanted at the public video centre. Whatever money I made on the street, I kept for myself...” (p. 102).

Amma Darko as a novelist is a social observer. She, through her searchlight, records the social ill that many of us overlook. Achebe, according to Chima-Udeh (2007, p. 159), sees the African writer as one that functions in the African society as “The record of the lores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time”. It is by close observation that Darko is able to capture the problems of Fofu, Baby T, Odarley, Poison and other street children as recorded in *Faceless*. The novel is the story of children plunged into the streets by parental neglect and the resultant poverty and hunger they face.

Operational Definition of Terms

For easier understanding of this paper, the operational terms are defined. They are:

Parenting

Parenting as used in this paper is a derivation from the noun “parent”, meaning the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social, financial, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. The Cambridge English Dictionary Online defines parent as “A mother or father of a person or an animal”. The term “parent” as far as this paper is concerned refers to an individual’s biological father or mother. The dictionary further states that an individual’s biological parents are “those persons from whom the individual inherits his or her genes”. A mother is the female who conceives and gives birth to a person while a father is the male parent who produces the biological material, the sperm, which results to pregnancy and birth of the child. Dysfunctional parenting arises, as is the case in Darko’s *Faceless*, where one parent of a child lives apart from the other parent and the child and does not participate in the provision of care and nurture of the child.

Street Children

Street children are children who work or live on the streets. They may live permanently on the streets with or without their families because they have no home. Some are children who work on the streets by hawking items or running errands for people. Some of the street children have no homes but the streets and no family support. They therefore move about in the streets, living in shelters and abandoned and uncompleted buildings. This is why Abdefatah quoting an inter-NGO Programme cited in UNCHS (2000 p. 73) describes street children as “Any girl or boy ... for whom the street (in the wildest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc) has become his or her habitual abode and/ or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults”. A look at our society today indicates the presence of such children around every city in the world. They are involved in begging, stealing, or hawking in the streets to earn a living. Such homelessness denies children their rights.

Human Dignity

Human dignity, according to Neal (2015), is taken from the Latin word “dignitas” meaning “worthiness”. The Catholic Church, as stipulated in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision of society. Catholic Social Teaching also states that “each and every person has value, are worthy of great respect and must be free from slavery, manipulation and exploitation”. Furthermore, Dehaime’s Law Dictionary states that human dignity is “an individual’s or group’s sense of self-respect and self-worth, physical and psychological integrity and empowerment”. From these definitions, we may conclude that human dignity implies that each person should be accorded some respect and honour for who he or she is, not just for what he/she can do. It is a gift from God that should not be taken away from any person irrespective of age, gender or class.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theory of Cultural studies which is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the role of social institutions in the shaping of culture (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The theory emerged in Britain in the 1950s and later spread to other countries, especially the United States and Australia. Habib (2011, p. 276) described cultural criticism as being marked by its definition of literature as “Including not just the conventional genres of poetry, drama and fiction but also popular fiction such as thrillers and romances, television and mass media, cinema, magazines, and music”. The proponents of this theory are scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. Others include Meagham Morris, Tony Bennette and Simon During.

As a scholarly field that seeks to understand, critique, and transform cultural practice, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences online describes cultural studies as an innovative, interdisciplinary

field of research and teaching. According to UNC (2018), it investigates the way in which culture creates and transforms individual experiences, everyday life, social relations and power. In terms of analysis SHMOOP PREMIUM states that cultural studies are not just about author or the structure of the text, but how people consume texts and how texts engage with real life. For the above reason, identification and representation are its key target in addition to gender, sexuality, race, class and other areas of cultural knowledge. The topic of this paper is related to the theory of cultural studies because it deals with family life and the dangers of street children which result from broken homes.

Dysfunctional Parenting in Darko's *Faceless*

A record of the families in the novel, *Faceless*, shows that the parents live together for a while, have children and separate, leaving the children in the care of their mothers. This method of parenting becomes dangerous as it affects the physical and psychological development of the children. Fofo, the protagonist of this novel, has a confusing emotion about her mother. She holds Maa Tsuru, her mother; responsible for dumping her into the world and so feels a kind of hatred for her (p. 20). Geoff according to Vann stated categorically that “what every child needs is a loving, caring adult who is passionately, wildly committed to the child. Some of these parents could not love their children due to the presence of another husband and poverty that distract them.

Five families that bred street children are prominent in this novel. The first is the family of Maa Tsuru and Kwei. At age sixteen, Kwei impregnated Maa Tsuru to his mother's displeasure. He, however, takes a bottle of schnapps to Tsuru's family and announces that he had come to show his face (p. 119). They live together and were blessed with four children - two boys and two girls. However, after the first two sons, Kwei seemed not to want a child from his mating with Maa Tsuru. He beat up Maa Tsuru while she was pregnant for Baby T, their third child, in a failed attempt to abort the foetus. Before the baby was born, Kwei disappeared only to resurface after months of the baby's delivery. He did not name the child and this was why she answers Baby Tsuru and later Baby T. He later lured Maa Tsuru into accepting him once again as a husband and the pregnancy for Fofo resulted. Kwei abandoned Maa Tsuru again never to be reunited with her and their four children. Maa Tsuru, as the novel shows, has no skill. She is not educated either and hardly could provide for the needs of her children.

Unfortunately, Maa Tsuru gets engaged to another lazy and uncaring man, Kpakpo. He gradually packed in to live with Maa Tsuru and her four children in the same room. He lied to Maa Tsuru that he worked in an aluminium factory in Tema. He gradually began to sleep in Maa Tsuru's room. After the first night, Maa Tsuru's two sons aged about 12 and 13 years disappeared from the family. Reacting to the boys' disappearance, Maa Tsuru recalled that

She had noticed them toss and turn on the mats the whole night through. They saw it all. For how long could they go on? Better let them go. They were no longer kids. The streets had accelerated their growth. It was time to be on their own (p. 131).

Kpakpo was a drunk. Every night, he returned late from town reeking of the worst kind of “Akpeteshie” (locally brewed gin). Maa Tsuru became pregnant for him. When she was detained in the hospital for premature labour, Kpakpo defiled Baby T. However, after fathering two sons for Maa Tsuru, Kpakpo left Maa Tsuru and became a full time drunk, sometimes sleeping beside dirty gutters in front of a kiosk.

Another parent that needs writing about here is Onko. Onko lived in the same compound as Maa Tsuru. He did welding business and had a flourishing workshop with some apprentices. Onko pretended to love children and so allowed them into his room to watch television. He raped Baby T when she was twelve years old and bribed her mother with some money so as not to pursue the case.

Onko had two sons from two different women. Each woman lived with her son although he provided for them.

Again, there was Poison's mother and stepfather. He lived with Poison and his mother. Poison ran to the street to live and be free of his stepfather's bullying.

There are also Odarley's parents. Her father abandoned her mother and child to their fate. From then, Odarley's mother, "just didn't want Odarley around after Odarley's father left her for another woman and she too found another man" (p. 103).

Lastly, the street boy interviewed by the Private FM Station lamented about his mother's husband saying, "He hates to see my face. I often wonder what it is I remind him of so much" (p. 2). This shows that he had a stepfather. He loved his mother but ran away from home because of his stepfather and hunger. One may then ask where this boy's own father had gone.

The conclusion one may draw from the events in the different families studied above is that parents live apart and so are not able to do the work of parenting for their children. Again, the parents are not properly married according to law and tradition. They only cohabited and had children, and so could part ways with ease. The importance of parents in the lives of children need not be over emphasized. The upbringing of a child is the direct responsibility of the parents. Awolugutu (2016) believes that "child upbringing is the most formidable task a parent will ever take on in life". To raise children well, parents should show them unconditional love; help them imbibe good morals like honesty, hard work, love for others, respect for others, discipline, etc. Parents must provide for the needs of the family and show good examples as role models.

Bulus (2013) equally affirmed that "parenting involves promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood". He went further to postulate that parenting involves making provisions for and ensuring the child's safety, shelter, nourishment, protection and physical development. Parents owe it as a duty to bring up their children in a peaceful atmosphere and an environment free from fear, threat and abuse. They are also responsible for sending their children to school and catering for their needs in the school. They teach their children skills, ethical values with social norms that contribute to the children's beliefs, culture and customs.

Parents also protect their children's emotional psyche by providing a safe environment which guarantees love and acceptance. They also give their children encouragement and help them develop positive behaviour. Most importantly, parental care influences the emotional development of the child. Moges and Weber (2014) believed that parents have a significant influence on how a child turns out including their personality, emotional development, behavioural habits and a host of other factors. Parenting is important for the overall development of children. Parents should be present enough to give children the support which fosters confidence and growth in many areas.

In almost all the families presented in *Faceless*, the parents do not live together to love and care for their children. Kwei abandoned Maa Tsuru and their four children. Kpakpo on his own part left too. When Fofu asks her mother, "where is he, mother?" her reply was simply, "He left" (p. 21). There was no reason she could give Fofu for his leaving. Fofu blaming her mother for her actions said, "After all that he did to Baby T? To us all? He left? And you stood by and allowed this smallish man to leave? Just like that?" (p. 21). Again, Onko simply did not live with his children. He had two sons from two different women. Where could the father's affection for his children come from? He just "dumped" the children without caring to provide emotional affection even if he provides for them financially. At the same time, Poison's stepfather bullied him probably to scare him into the streets, which he succeeded in doing. He also implanted terrorist trait in Poison. For as far as that novel is

concerned, “thoughts of little him quivering before his grinning stepfather who was about to enjoy his hobby of inflicting pain on the little helpless boy”, never left Poison (p. 195). He grew up to inflict pain on other people. He brutally murdered Baby T. for refusing to serve Onko as a child prostitute.

Odarley’s father abandoned her mother for another woman while her mother found herself another man. She sacked Odarley from home like a fowl (p. 103). Fofu described her as a bad mother. Of all the other children, their mothers at least cared for them to some extent except Odarley’s. She just didn’t want Odarley around her.

In the same way, the boy that granted the Private FM station an interview makes us understand that both his mother and stepfather do not want him around them. He however, exonerates his mother who he said wants him to go away because the food in the house would not be enough for her, her two children and himself.

The nagging question at this point is why don’t these parents live together to nurture their children? Some reasons why marriages fail include: problems of abuse, expectation problems, addiction problems, sex problems, friends’ problems, financial problems, communication problems and so on. The overall implication is that whenever parents fail to live together to raise their children, many of the consequences of child neglect manifest in such families, chief among which is street children.

Consequences of Dysfunctional Parenting in Darko’s *Faceless*

Dysfunctional parenting as showcased in the novel results to child neglect. The effect of child neglect can be far reaching depending on the age of the child, the length of time and the types of neglect that the child was exposed to. However, the neglected children in *Faceless* seem to experience similar types of problems among which are: bullying, homelessness, rape, abuse, brutal death, hunger, lack of safety, lack of love, lack of education, lack of good medicare, and so on. Awolugutu (2016) cautioned that “The raising of children should start in the home. It is here that the foundations of successful life can be laid and built upon”. Of course when a child’s personal foundations are strong, he would be able to live responsibly and contribute his quota to the development of his community, nation as well as humanity in general.

Fofu and the other children, as the novel reveals, suffer more from lack of shelter. This is why they, while in Sodom and Gomorrah, sleep in old cardboard laid out in front of the provision store at the Agbogloboshie market place, or at the squatter’s enclave of Sodom and Gomorrah. While there, boys and girls sleep together, stripped together and did things with each other, many times under the influence of alcohol, wholly unconscious of what they are doing or with whom (p. 5). No wonder in Fofu’s dream, she dreamt of living in a home with a roof and a toilet with a roof (p. 2-3). While asleep, these children were not protected in anyway. Fofu’s attempted abuse by Poison is as a result of her exposure to the streets. That day, she was alone and Poison came to rape her but she succeeded in evading the molestation. Odarley and other girls experienced this type of abuse from time to time with no one to complain to.

Apart from sexual abuse, street children are molested by the bullies, mostly the older and more seasoned street boys and their leader, Macho. At the opening of the novel, Macho takes away all Fofu’s earnings for one week which she has in a plastic bag as she and Odarley were at the dump “to do it” (p. 6).

Drug and alcohol abuses are also problems street children encounter in the novel. As young as age ten or even less, street children have started taking alcohol and watching adult films. The novel tells us that street children drink directly from bottles of “akpeteshie”, or at best, some slightly milder locally produced gin (p.1). They wake up every morning naked, hazy and disconcerted, and oblivious to what time during the night they had been stripped off their clothes and what exactly they had done

with their nakedness (p.1). Street children suffer from hunger, lack of love and protection. Fofu says she saw poverty, knew it head to toe, and its face, its ugly square head; its big fat toes... (p. 27). Fofu further confessed that hunger drove her into the streets. According to her “when there is no food, you don’t wait to be asked by anyone to go out and beg. Hunger is a foe and it is overpowering. When it pushes you, you go (p. 100). Hunger causes them to steal. Fofu disguised as a boy, stole Kabria’s purse without her knowing it. It took the vigilance of other people around to notice her action.

Street children lack love. The street girl interviewed by the Private FM Station says her dream “is to be hugged even if she smells of the streets” (p. 2). From her dream too, we know she needed food to fill her stomach and be assured that the food is there for her when she becomes hungry again. Her male counterpart says his dream, “is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy on her face at the sight of me” (p. 2). Odarley’s mother never wanted her around, so are many other parents of those street children. If their parents showed them love, they would at least go home at night after operating in the streets during the day.

Street life exposes street children to prostitution, whether as street worker, or child prostitute, or day worker, or madamme, or full time prostitute. Like in the case of Baby T, she is a child prostitute operating under a madam, Maami Broni and a pimp, Poison. Other prostitutes operate either as day or night workers. To these girls, prostitution is no crime for after all, they have sex indiscriminately without attachment to their sex mates. If being a prostitute can fetch them their daily bread, they would willingly go for it. However, a prostitute or anybody who engages in illicit sex is likely to contract any of the sexually transmitted diseases and even HIV/AIDS.

Worst still, street children do not have access to education. Fofu dropped out of school in class two and so did her sister Baby T. Being pushed by hunger and other needs, the street child can mature from small theft to armed robbery and even terrorism. With such type of children on the high side in any society, such society is likely to go into extinction by the time the ageing population phases out.

Most importantly, a street child is not protected and so may be a target for murder; Baby T was murdered by Poison in cold blood. Apart from that, her body is mutilated to disguise her identity so as to cover the murderer. All sorts of stories were peddled about the dead body of a young girl at Agbogbloshie market. Thanks to MUTE who through her committed workers namely Kabria, Dina, Aggie and the help of Sylv Po and other staff of Harvest FM Radio Station who took it upon themselves to dig up the story, investigated and discovered that Poison was responsible for that murder. If parents must abandon their children to the streets, the likes of Poison will continue to terrorize innocent people. Dysfunctional parenting and its attendant child neglect is a time bomb that must explode some day. Writing on street children, Dansley and Joss state categorically that they represent a rapidly growing socio-educational challenge affecting both the developing and industrialised nations of the world.

Looking at the enumerated consequences of child neglect in Darko’s *Faceless*, it becomes clear that each of them is a threat to human dignity which involves, both the way we view ourselves and the way others deal with us. Every individual has the right to the dignity of the human person. Child neglect reduces some children to animals while others are treated with respect. If one looks at the characters in the novel who are categorised as street children, none of the human rights which according to Maise (2003) are right to justice, tolerance, mutual respect and human dignity in all activities, is accorded them. Maise goes further to postulate that “to protect human rights is to ensure that people receive some degree of decent human treatment. To violate the most basic rights is to deny individuals their fundamental moral entitlement. It is in a sense to treat them as if they are less than human and undeserving of respect and dignity.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the problems that arise in society as a result of dysfunctional parenting. It has been discovered that parental neglect leads to the phenomenon of street children. Such children are at risk of physical, social, emotional and cognitive violations. They are in need of help, wherever it comes from and the society needs to operate under a peaceful atmosphere in order to progress. The text *Faceless*, this paper reveals a detailed presentation of the sociological issue of children neglected in the world today. Darko, therefore, notifies parents and the society at large of the vulnerability of the children in the streets and calls for a rethink by every parent who does not live up to their responsibility in the family. Poison, Macho, Fofu, Baby T, Odarley and the rest of them are victims of dysfunctional parenting. These are able bodied young boys and girls who ought to grow and become useful members of the society. Their energy and talents are being wasted in the streets, performing activities that benefit neither them nor the society. It was J.F. Kennedy who according to Darko (2003, p.75) stated that “the future promise of any nation can be directly measured by the present prospects of its youth”. Where do we go from here?

Recommendations

- This study serves as an eye opener to any well-meaning individual of the twenty-first century. The following recommendations can help any society avert the danger that trails dysfunctional parenting.
- Parents should not bring children into the world if they do not have adequate means of taking care of them.
- Every prospective couple must have reasonable means of livelihood before they would be allowed to get married.
- The government, through appropriate agencies, should ensure no child lives on the streets of any town or city.
- Parents who abandon their children should be made to serve some kind of punishment in addition to being forced to train and care for such children.
- Individuals and groups should carry out campaigns against dysfunctional parenting and child neglect to the grassroots so as to enlighten the masses.

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