

BECOMING CONSCIOUS OF THE SELF: SPATIAL DYNAMICS, CHARACTER PAIRS AND THE FEMINIST VISION IN AMMA DARKO'S BEYOND THE HORIZON

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Abstract

The relationship between spatial dynamics, character pairs and how this is constitutive of the feminist vision in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* has rarely been explored, despite the growing critical reception. The paper explores how Darko's women become awakened by the redemptive roles of their fellow women through the narrative's climatic journeys. Drawing on theories of spatiality and African feminisms, this paper argues that Darko's attempt at associating specific characters within particular geographical contexts helps us to rethink controversial and conventional discourses on the African woman – sisterhood solidarity, education, financial freedom and bodily integrity as routes to the total emancipation of the African woman. Thus, the study suggests a shift from the rather clichéd argument that the text is male-targeted.

Keywords: Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon*, character pairs, feminist vision, self-consciousness.

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Introduction

African feminist literature over the last two decades has undergone several changes. Currently, discourses on African feminisms suggest the need for contextual responses to the everyday experiences of woman in the African sub-region due to the plurality of the African experience. While this is important, African women writers continue to promote African women's emancipatory agenda by re-focusing subversive strategies for the efficient and effective mobilization of women's freedom. The commitment of Amma Darko's writings cannot be underestimated, despite their supposed indictment on the African society (Anyidoho, 2003; Adjei, 2010; Nutsukpo, 2019). A cursory look at the burgeoning critical commentary on Darko's debut, *Beyond the Horizon* indicates a tilted focus on transnational bodies and migratory subjectivities (Chasen, 2010; Asempasah & Sam, 2016; Ladele, 2016), sex, pornography, profanity and prostitution (Abeka, Marfo & Bonku, 2014; Frai, 2002), female battery, the danger of objectification, the social ills in contemporary Africa (Awitor, 2013; Oseghale & Ohwiwerei, 2019; Sam, 2021) and a careful attempt at subverting patriarchal narratives of the female character (Blay, 2014; Ugwanyi, 2017; Ngwaba, 2019; Sam, 2021).

Studies on Darko's presentation of character and how it divulges her feminist vision allude to the retaliatory and radical nature of her feminism and the fact that her women are unending victims of systemic oppressions (Adjei, 2001; Awitor, 2013). While the discourse of a painful and nightmarish female experience cannot be overlooked, Darko's feminist vision, as this paper argues, cannot be fully understood outside of her careful attempt at character pairing in specific locales. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how Darko's women become awakened by the redemptive roles of their fellow women through the narrative's climatic journeys as well as how her character-pairing technique of woman-to-woman, beyond the discourse of sisterhood solidarity, communicates her feminist vision in *Beyond the Horizon*. The paper is structured into three parts; the first part looks at the plot summary of the text, methods, and the theoretical fulcrum of the paper. In part two of this paper, I pay attention to Darko's characterization technique of character pairing within particular geographies and how the nature of her feminism can be derived thereof. Finally, the third section will summarize the major arguments in the paper and make recommendations for further research.

Plot Summary, Theory and Methods

The narrative in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* traces the development of naïve Mara from Ghana to Germany - chronicling the painful transitions of her debased life from daughter to wife and to mother and how the social system in Africa supports such subordinations. The novel also illuminates the abuses of the self and the African identity through a careful negation of third world fetish for Europe. The paper is rooted in the feminist qualitative research paradigm with the hope of elucidating the emancipatory vision in Darko's debut. The paper focusses on character and characterization and spatial dynamics. It provides a character analysis of four pairs of characters: Mara and her nameless mother in rural Ghana (Naka); Mara and Mama Kiosk in urban Ghana; Mara and Gitte in urban Germany; and Mara and Kaye in a German brothel. My aim in this analysis is to show how specific feminist commentary derives from the relationship between characterization and spatial forms. The analysis is guided by the African feminist framework and the concept of spatiality.

'African feminism(s)' is a cover term that serves as the domesticated version of the ideology of feminism. It emerged as a response to White feminism which ignored the liberation of women of colour. Thus, African feminisms pay attention to the historical realities of the African woman and how the plurality of experiences in the sub-region demand contextual responses as opposed to the universalized front spearheaded by the western framework. In other words, although African feminist activism cannot be seen as entirely separate from the larger context of oppression and exploitation of women, their feminism is primarily aimed at challenging personal, social and sexist conditions that dehumanize women in the African context. Thus, African feminists strive to reverse perceived injustices instituted against women (Amaefula, 2020) and advance the view of complementarity between men and women by stressing the male-female principle in a creative order (Fogg-Davies, 2005).

A major justification for drawing on African feminisms in this paper is that African feminists prioritize vulnerable groups by interrogating the patriarchal nature of socio-religious and cultural- political institutions with the view of stressing an equalist agenda without extreme radicalist tendencies (Stiftung, 2021).

The paper also relies on the role of spatialization in literary criticism. Spatial forms have become central to modern literary criticism. This is because spaces are treated as domains for

character development. This belief follows from the central argument within spatial theorizations that spaces are essential quality of being. (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1989; 1996, Foucault, 1986, Tally, 2014). In other words, key to our understanding of characters as ideological signifiers is the function of setting /space as marked influential domains. Foucault's analysis of heterotopia in particular gives an indication of the fact that spaces/setting are not independent of social and political markers. Thus, spaces/setting have socio-functional properties and goals that are symbolic. In this paper, I use space/setting as a construct. It consists of place, the activities going on in the place, and the roles and identities of the people in that given place. I am interested in how spaces redefine a character's social orientation as well as how key thematic issues derive from the relationship between spatial dynamics and character pairs.

Analysis

This section analyzes the relationship between setting, character, and theme. It will highlight Darko's feminist vision through an analysis of character foiling and the function of setting. In *Dualism in Amma Darko's Beyond the Horizon*, Quayson (2015) makes a modest observation when he claims that the function of setting in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* operates on a metaphorical level of ambition and progression. Although Quayson (2015) argues that Mara's and Akobi's realities become reflexive of the African migrant dream my argument in this paper is that beyond the metaphorical function of setting, what Amma Darko tries to do, as her character technique would show, is to locate her feminist vision within the conjunction of setting and character. In other words, setting is not simply denotative in *Beyond the Horizon*, as Quayson (2015) invites us to consider. It is a principal determining factor in Darko's emancipatory framework if we pay attention to discourses that derive from specific character pairs in particular locales.

First Pair - Undoing Patriarchal Conspiracies: Mara and Her Nameless Mother in Rural Naka

Life in rural Naka was hegemonic. It was a place where women had no chance of independence. Indeed, patriarchal power in Naka had become immortalized to an extent that

female subjugation and subordination are considered natural and acceptable. So right from the choice of a husband to the contraction of her marriage, Mara had no part to play since it was even rude to know the identity of her chosen husband before an official declaration from her father.

I remember the day clearly. I returned from the village well with my fourth bucket of water of the day when mother excitedly beckoned to me in all my wet ness and muddiness, dragged me into her hut breathlessly told me the ‘good news’. “Your father has found a husband for you” {...} “a good man”

“Who is he? I asked mother, “father’s choice for me?”

“Oh, my dear child.” Mother said, “you know your father would consider it rude if I disclosed him to you before he did.” (3-4).

Obviously, Naka was ruled by the opinions of the men. Decision-making was a male preserve with no opposition, and this possibly explains Mara’s obstinacy in matters affecting her own welfare. The bond between Mara and her mother had produced toxic narratives about the realities of womanhood – placing women into an uncomfortable category of subservience and docility. Such prejudices of cultural orientation are carefully overthrown by Darko through character naming and the precarity in essentialism. The treachery of essentialism is revealed through Mara’s constant presupposition that to be a woman is to be naturally inferior. She consciously admits that:

It was natural that after I had woken up first at dawn, and made the fire to warm up water for Akobi, and carried a bucket full of it with his sponge bag to the bathhouse for him and returned to wake him up to tell him his bath was ready.

It was natural that I also had to stand outside while he bathed just in case some soap suds should go into his eyes and her should need me

It was natural, too, that when he demanded it, I slept on the concrete floor on just my thin mat while he slept all alone on the large grass mattress (12-13) {Emboldened for my emphasis}

The semantics of natural lead us to re-open the discussions on histories of abuse of black women and how conventional oppressive hierarchies constrain the realities of femininity. What Darko tries to suggest through the narrator's emphasis on natural is to reject the idea that womanhood is a homogenous and tokenist framework. She stresses the fact that gender relations should be transformed in a manner that promotes equity and is rooted in the diversity and potential of life. It is important to recognize that the latter choices Mara makes as a self-decided prostitute in no way defeat Darko's vision. Rather, she appears to align with what Spivak calls 'strategic essentialism' as a temporary political strategy aimed at female emancipation. Darko appears to call attention to the necessity of unlearning such imperial categorization of the sexes and advocating that women transcend their designated places in society and she does so through Mara's nameless mother. Unlike Armah's nameless protagonist, The Man, who is undefined because his behaviour is unfamiliar to his immediate surroundings, Mara's nameless mother is Darko's style of rejecting and discontinuing black women's inferiority. Mara's mother is undefined because she is an archetype of false historical consciousness of being a woman. Darko's feminist vision, therefore, is to suggest that central to woman emancipation is the re-inscription of voice, agency, integrity and an overt acknowledgement of dynamism and plurality of feminine experiences particularly within the African geopolitical space. Hence, the signification of Mara's nameless mother is Darko's way of suggesting that Mara's mother's views are positional ambiguities that are informed by patriarchal conspiracies to silence the African woman. Thus, Darko's attempt at correcting this propaganda is by re-representing the ideal mother figure through the perspectives of Mama Kiosk.

Second Pair-Beseeching Feminine Integrity: Mara and Mama Kiosk in Urban Ghana

Darko's attempt at pairing Mara and Mama Kiosk in urban Ghana reveals three key concerns in her feminist agenda: that the African woman's total emancipation is intricately connected to economic independence; that education is central to female emancipation; and that emancipation begins and thrives on positive gender conditioning. These three parameters are profoundly emphasized in the corridors of the cityscape.

Coming to the city, Mara had no value for wifehood beyond self-denial, self-imprisonment, and essentialist assumptions of womanhood. Her socialization in Naka had stifled any possibility of benefits in any marital relationship, especially when her mother had been her only reference for modelling. Her encounter with Mama Kiosk was the beginning of a tough, 'rough journey towards self-awakening and a re-orientation of positive gender relations. Mara admits that:

But all these things that I considered to be normal, Mama Kiosk did not find it normal. 'Your husband is one of those men who have no respect for village people,' she said once. 'Tradition demands that the wife respects, obey and worship her husband but it demands, in return, care, good care of the wife. Your husband neglects you and yet demands respect and complete worship from you. 'That is not normal'. And the closer our relationship became, the more effort she made to let me see and understand that my husband was not treating me right. But I saw none of it, or maybe I simply lacked the ability to understand it enough to see. (13)

Mama Kiosk had cleverly noticed, as the extract reveals, that Akobi had no respect for Mara because of her rural childhood; 'you come from the village? Jonnie-just-come? Villager-in-town?' (10) and, therefore, realized that a re-education of gender dichotomies was a promising start to Mara's self-consciousness via the prospects of the city as a place of enlightenment. Mama Kiosk's approach is key for two reasons. First, she does not attempt to dismiss what Mara believes to be the constitution of womanhood. Second, she allows Mara an opportunity to assess privately and independently what she (Mama Kiosk) considers the unwritten code of womanhood. The calculation in this approach is the relief Mara derives from not feeling any burden of disobedience of the status quo. The approach also helps to debunk the fact that Darko's advocacy is radicalist or separatist (Adjei, 2010). What Darko tries to do is to gradually release her women from the confines of cultural and historical stereotypes and to raise awareness of what is normal.

Mama Kiosk's approach also makes it difficult for Mara to ignore the necessity to unlearn her 'greenhorn' tendencies and blind values and to embrace the qualities of feminine pride. Mara lacks understanding of what Mama Kiosk refers to as the 'law':

Mama Kiosk snapped, 'Men buy for themselves, Mara. There's no law that says they shouldn't. But they buy for their women too, Mara. And there is a law that says they must. (14)

The law that says they (men) must take care of their women, as the extract reveals, is premised on how practical female emancipation derives from an understanding of gender harmonies. Another important awareness that stems from the relationship between Mara and Mama Kiosk is encapsulated in the metaphor of economic independence that is located within the name, Mama Kiosk:

Mama Kiosk was what people called her because she owned a kiosk at the main lorry station in which she retailed cigarettes, sweets and water. Her home was not Alhaji's but her own. It wasn't all corrugated sheets but part blocks. (10)

Embedded in this charactonym is the argument that patriarchy intertwined with current economic models are conditions that contribute to and increase female vulnerability, and therefore qualitative emancipation of the African woman, as Darko tries to suggest, is incumbent on the improved economic conditions of women – particularly women in impoverished communities. Thus, African feminists consider economic independence as pivotal in the politics of liberation.

Juxtaposing Naka and the city, we would immediately realize that the topography of Naka, as a farming community, makes available to women no alternatives of livelihood beyond depending on the benevolence of the men. Hence, Mara could not see the capital in rubbish collection.

Are you going to the rubbish dump?

Yes, I replied. {...}

{...} Hey, she called surprised, 'You are truly a greenhorn', you know.

I stood staring at her.

Hey, do you work for free in the village? She asked derisively.

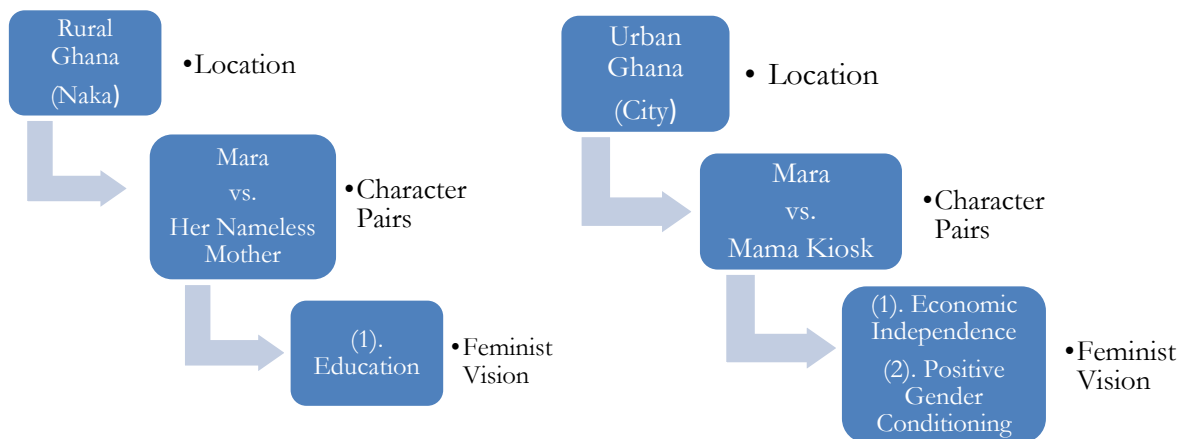
Bt I still could not get what she was hinting at and continued to stare at her.

You are in the city, she said emphatically, and in the city nothing is for free, you get me? (10)

The announcement that “this is the city” is a call to economic intelligence and perseverance in order that Mara may assume some level of financial responsibility that will help reduce the traditional stereotypes of men being breadwinners. The city, therefore, presents Mara with an opportunity of re-education, re-definition, and re-awakening.

Below is a pictorial description of Amma Darko’s Feminist Vision through Character Pairs and Setting (The Case of Ghana)

Figure 1: Character Pairs and the Consequent Feminist Vision (The Case of Ghana)



Third Pair - Negating the Fetish of Europe through Character: Mara and Gitte in Urban Germany

Life in Germany begins with shock and pretenses as Mara finds herself playing sister-in-law to her co-wife, Gitte. Coming to Germany, Mara is greeted with huge dissappointments particularly with the fetish of Europe as a place of promise and the realites of African migrants. Darko’s production of a counter discourse is seen through the relationship between Mara and

Gitte and through Akobi's marriage to Gitte. One of the key strategies Darko adopts in rethinking what is assumed to be an African complex is through careful substitutions and strategic reversals of what constitute white female superiority; thus, stressing the intersectional nature of female oppression.

To begin with, Darko tries to break the idea of white female superior self by placing Gitte in vulnerable acts and pushing her to the limits of a degraded position, beginning with her defamatory characterization of Gitte:

{...} And there she was: Gitte. And what a picture! Shoulder-length auburn hair and a short stubby fat body concealed in a grey woollen skirt, a dark green sweat shirt and black cowboy boots. So this was Gitte. Somehow I had always had in my mind the idea that all white women were tall, slim, long-legged and blonde with sparkling blue eyes {...} But this my husband Akobi's Gitte she was anything but this image. (95)

Gitte's characterization is an initial presupposition that there is no unusual aura of difference or peculiarity as regards the nature of White women. She is simply depicted as ordinary - a strategy that makes non-existent powerful female hierarchies, drawing attention to the politics of sameness of essence. In other words, the local and the global are not mutually exclusive. Koumagnon (2018) corroborates this assertion when he posits that 'Gitte's depiction correspond to a metaphoric transposition of the West's devouring of Africa's material resources. Right from start, Amma Darko uses defamatory characterisation to destroy the self-esteem or confidence of the female character (324).

It is also important to recognize how Darko exposes the contradictions in White feminist politics through a strategic negation of Gitte's intelligence in a bigamous union. Gitte is predisposed to familiar effects of patriarchal advances and subordinations that is geared towards identity reduction. In other words, Gitte's desperation to find love in the arms of a Negro may be read as a critique on White anxiety to possess and control African pride. This ideological communication is aptly reflected in Osey's admission:

These women, he began, still in our language, these women, they are very difficult people. And that is why many times, it is better not to tell them the

truth. They don't understand us. {...} they have their own images of us, very rude, rough, very low. We don't fight with them about these. We use that to our advantage. (98/102)

Darko tries to reduce the intensity of the vicious and offensive misrepresentations of the African by the West through the symbolic reparation Gitte makes with her failed love affair. Although Darko does not in any way justify the brutish greed and delusive masculine profile of Osey and Akobi, she tries to advance the complications in global sisterhood. Mara and Gitte's relationship thus reifies the problematics of the sameness/difference relation as intrinsically contextual, as Higgins (2006) rightly observes that "Darko's narrative suggests that the worlds of European and African women are indeed intertwined, yet white Northern women must first contemplate their privileges in order to build a transnational or transcultural sisterhood" (318).

Despite the foregoing, Darko tries to suggest the possibility of reconciliation of historical pain through Mara's constant hesitation to let Gitte in on the realities of their relationship. The painful emotion she experiences because of the compulsion to endure her co-wife and the fact that the thoughts of having to violate the African moral ethics of marriage in no way quickens in her the desire for retribution. Rather, Mara keeps denying any desire for getting back at her foreign co-work as she submits:

I took the ring and thanked Gitte with *a low bow*. But she unexpectedly grasped me by the shoulders and kissed me in a sisterly way on both cheeks. That moved me and *filled me with guilt*. How long could I go on cheating on her as her sister-in-law if she continued being so sisterly towards me? (97)

I smiled *guiltily*. How could Akobi tell such big lies.

Mara's feeling of guilt is a complex signification of both desolation and agency. While she develops a yearning for power and political redemption, she simultaneously shows minimal acceptability of her hostile circumstances, which is why she continues to hesitate in the face of options. This attitude can also be interpreted as Darko's way of suggesting the possibility of global female solidarity regardless of issues of speaking traumatic histories.

Thus, contrary to the stereotype that women are their own enemies, the relationship between Mara and Gitte suggests that female complicity in systemic subordination are characteristically unusual. Comfort lacks self-love and integrity, despite her apparent sophistication. She is the perfect traitor figure required by patriarchy to perpetuate its agenda, which is an affirmation of what Koumagnon (2018) observes. In other words, Comfort can best be described as the metaphorical representation of the insider dipping in a common sauce bowl with the colonizer.

Although Koumagnon (2018) again claims that Comfort's deportation is significant in terms of the presumed discontinuity of such betrayal, he surprisingly postulates that "Amma Darko urges readers to believe that the resolution to expel Comfort in Nigeria and not Ghana is at the same level with Mara's loss of faith to return one day to Ghana" (154).

What Darko rather intends, as this paper argues, shaming and collaborative responsibility. In other words, while Mara's loss of faith in to return to Ghana one day is simply an acknowledgement of personal guilt and the fact that she hopes not to be celebrated as a prodigal daughter, Comfort's deportation should be understood as a retributive act of paying for her betrayal.

Fourth Pair - Owing the Body is a We-for-She Affair: Mara and Kaye in the German Brothel

The relationship between Mara and Kaye is key for two reasons: that there is the need to de-objectify the female body through a strategic essentialist framework to reclaim dignity and, the fact, that sisterhood solidarity is pivotal in the politics of African women's emancipation.

Frias (2002) posits, "Darko powerfully condemns and unpardonably speaks out for the lives of black women who are traumatically silenced and sexually exploited in the brothels of the Western world" (p. 8). She concludes that women victims often find a way to reclaim their minds and bodies as well as control over financial gain. Frai's (2002) argument, as I observe, constitutes Darko's attempt at enhancing the possibility of a new bodily life for Mara. As Chasen (2010) rightly notes Darko constructs Mara's body as a marker for the transnational flow of capital from Europe to Africa and the fact that the movement of female bodies;

particularly with Mara's experience, is an intentional move by Darko to engender alternative survival approaches for displaced female bodies (10).

Moving from Hamburg to Munich, Mara becomes a glorified pawn and a sex slave to her lords. She becomes bereft of dignity due to her extreme familiarity with abuse and abusers. This choice she makes, that Odamtten (2007) assumes to be borne out of illicit desires, is rather a decided move to subversively assume independence and salvage the remnants of her self-regard.

Mara's redemption from the bonds of dehumanization is influenced by her association with Kaye. Kaye's approach to Mara's plight was restorative. With her expertise as a brothel queen, Kaye cautiously walks with Mara through alternative routes to liberation. Her devotion to Mara is underscored by her belief in the necessity of change and practical freedom. She counsels Mara on the need to de-objectify herself from male-gaze by re-commercializing her body as a subversive step to liberation. Her insistence on the fact that Mara ought to take advantage of her already defiled body is a symbolic inauguration of the advent of power and independence. As Butler (2011) rightly contends, "to matter means at once to materialize and to mean" (47). In other words, to assume bodily integrity, there is the need to self-materialize. By self-materializing, Butler refers to recasting the body as capital for power. Thus, the point in Kaye's reasoning is to ensure that Mara's body is no longer controlled by external regulators – signalling the beginning of a licentious reputation.

It is important to acknowledge that Mara's later tactics at revenge and subsequently grabbing hold of her bodily freedom is the result of sisterhood solidarity:

Down to the minutest detail, she said with a smile.

And what is the cut of my income, I asked?

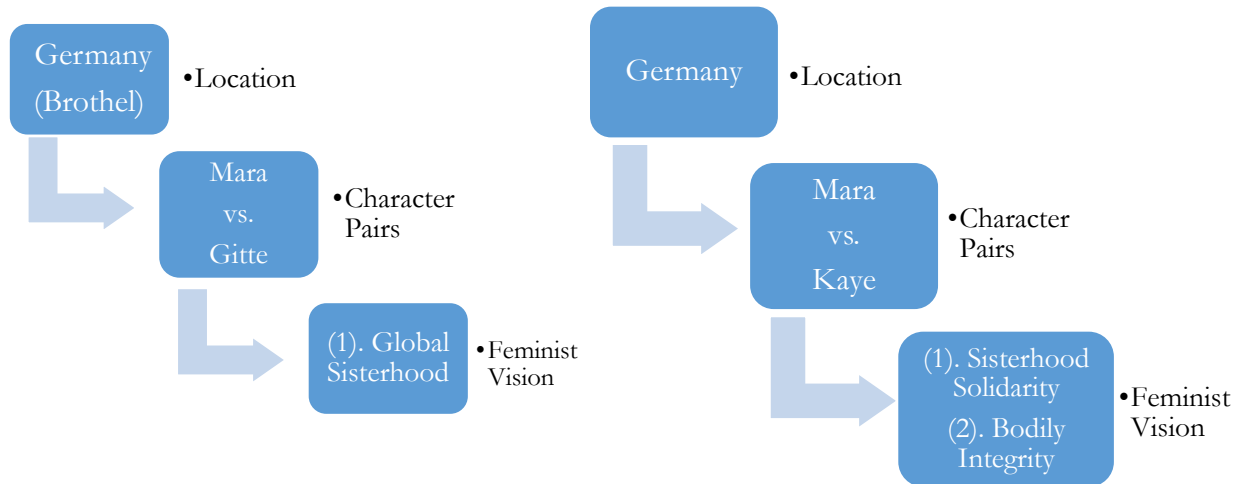
Oves, Thirty

And you?

Sisterhood solidarity, she replied. (135)

This point of sisterhood solidarity possibly explains Darko's overall technique of character foiling. Like many African feminists, Darko is committed to debunking stereotypes and patriarchal premises that blur women's communal vision.

Below is a pictorial description of Amma Darko’s Feminist Vision through Character Pairing and Setting (The Case of Germany).



Conclusion

Amma Darko’s criticism has journeyed a long way from the supposed antagonistic and male-bashing approach to advancing a new global feminist politics that seeks to re-unite women across borders. Although Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* has received widespread criticism on female subordination and the nature of her feminist postulations on the fast-degrading state of female bodies, my analysis has shown that Darko’s feminist vision in her first novel is hugely linked to her technique of character foiling in specific geographical contexts. It is this unique technique that makes her vision for the African woman overt and touching. My analysis also recognizes the centrality of anthroponomy to the overall politics that pervades the novel. While the African feminist framework opens up debates on essence and diversity, as my analysis has shown, the paper concludes that a new politics that stresses the value of education, economic independence, and global sisterhood promises to be a mature output for women in Africa and the Diaspora. Further research can pay attention to male-male relationships. This engagement promises to strengthen the debates on the nature of her feminism, particularly in *Beyond the Horizon*.

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