Why Can’t All Women Be Mothers? A Critical Look at Maternal Cruelty of the Girl Child in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* and Amma Darko’s *Faceless*

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**Abstract**

Most women all over the world have had to deal with issues ranging from abuse, violence, rape, marginalization, victimization, slut shaming, and bullying. They go through these predicaments not only in the hands of men but also their fellow gender. It becomes more catastrophic when people of the same gender cannot protect one another, when women cannot look after their fellow folks. The resultant consequences and psychological effects of these acts lead to disastrous results as can be seen in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street and Amma Darko’s Faceless*. The powerlessness of the women in these two novels comes under scrutiny as within them is the capacity to exhibit inner strength which they refuse to utilize. Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* and Amma Darko’s *Faceless* also portray young girls who were raped physically, emotionally and psychologically. They also reveal women that could not rise to their expectations and dreams and had to resort to other alternative means. But most importantly is the portrayal of mothers who otherwise should be protectors, nurturers and guardians as abusers, bullies and villains.This paper therefore, wishes to take a look at maternal cruelty and its consequences on the girl child in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* and Amma Darko’s *Faceless.*

***Keywords:*** Motherism, Mother, Maternal Cruelty.

**Introduction**

Motherism is a branch of feminism coined by Catherine Acholonu. She presents motherism as an African alternative term to western feminism. Motherism aims at bringing out core values that informs the African way of life. Acholonu dismisses the terms “patriarchy” and “matriarchy” which she considers Eurocentric and opts for *patrifocality* and *matrifocality* because, to her, men and women are complementary opposites in traditional African society, such that no gender dominates the totality of the social life of the people. Men are dominant in socio-political spheres of life while women have the upper hand in spiritual and metaphysical segments. As economic power is the source of social influence in society any person wielding it can command a lot of respect; and this person is not restricted to any gender. Acholonu articulates the point,

Patriarchy, the system that places men on top of the social and political ladder seems to be an inappropriate term for describing the organization of the social systems of the African peoples. This is because several African societies reflect systems with ranging degrees of dual-sex hierarchies in which men and women exist in parallel and complementary positions and roles within the society (233).

She perceives a motherist as a model of human love, peace and fruitful interaction with the environment. Motherism representation of feminism sees women as mothers who are committed to the well being of their children against all odds. It is hinged on the fact that mothers play huge roles in the family ranging from protecting, to caring and attending to the needs of their children. This task toughens most mothers up as they, with wary eyes, watch over their children against external forces seeking to disseminate them.

It is however, disappointing, that some African mothers fail in their duties as mothers. They join the bandwagons in watching their children fall into traps. Their children get violated, raped, abused and sold into prostitution before their very eyes and they do nothing, some other times they take the lead in condemning and blaming their female children for their woes. A culture of silence on the part of a mother so trusted aggravates this problem greatly, and most often plunges the girl child further into a life of hopelessness and sometimes leads to death as it happened to Baby T in Amma Darko’s *Faceless.* From humiliation and intimidation of victims by men and women as well as ostracization by the community, the violated victims suffer more and die in silence. Hutton, Omidian and Miller (2006) describe this situation to include being ostracized by those who consider rape as bringing shame to a woman's family and community. This culture of silence reinforces the stigma already attached to the victim rather than to the perpetrator, as the dominant view by the people they trusted is that women raped have generally inflamed the abuser to attack them.

Ndinda highlights the plight of women in the hands of their fellow women who otherwise could have showed understanding and compassion, thus: “Indeed, it is a sad indictment of our society that women can come out in public and contemptuously intimidate a fellow woman traumatized by rape, while singing praises in support of the alleged perpetrator” (Ndinda 2006:328). Probably the rising number of rape and violence victims might have reduced if women stick together with a unity of purpose to fight these problems.

Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo specifies women bonding as one of the ways to combat problems faced by women. According to her women bonding is used to describe ties of friendship and love that exist between individual women or groups which enable them to support one another or work together for common group (Ezeigbo 1996: 57). She highlights further:

In Africa even in the pre-colonial times, women formed close ties which helped to strengthen their position. In this way, they were able to take decisions and uphold them in matters that concern their welfares. They were able to influence affairs in their communities. But sometimes they enforced decisions that were not palatable to their menfolk. (Ezeigbo 1996: 57).

The Umuada association in Igbo land is a typical example of such women bonding but it is rather dismaying that most Umuada associations are not used to support women but rather used to intimidate them. This can be seen during burial ceremonies, when the Umuadas congregate and shave off the hair of the bereaved woman and subject her to all kinds of predicaments.

In Ikot Ekpene, as examined by Ugwueze, the very moment a husband dies, his wife is immediately summoned by a group of old women who would confine her to a room where she is forced to sit on a floor for as long as the dead is not buried. She is not to wear shoes, sandals or slippers. Nor is she allowed to cut her nails or change her dresses as she would have wished. Above all, she is not allowed to have her bath no matter how long she is under confinement after the remains had been buried. The same old women may now permit her to change her dresses. The new dress must however be black. This is followed by a second shaving and cutting of her nails signaling a complete separation with the dead. The next stage is to choose a husband for her from within the confines of the extended family of the dead husband. Having made the choice, she is mandated to offer the old women some specified keg of palm wine, fowl and any other items as demanded by them. These items are then presented to the men of the family who will now approach the selected new husband. Some of these things are no longer in practice in some areas however some are still being practiced.

Most societal laws that deprive women of their rights are enforced most times by women associations. When a woman is accused of adultery, it is the women that stick together and throw the woman out without asking questions or digging deeper to discover the root of the problem. Women bonding now become an avenue for victimizing other women.

The researcher has often noticed with dismay how rare it is for a woman to give another woman lift. The men folk are the ones that offer lifts when they are flagged down on the road. Out of thirty times the researcher asked for lifts from women, it is saddening to note that no woman gave help. This is just the tip of the iceberg of the cruel treatment women undergo in the hands of their fellow women.

The popular saying, that women are the weaker sex has been refuted by both male and female scholars. These scholars believe that women are not powerless as they are stereotyped to be. In Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease* (1963), Obi Okwonkwo yield to the implacable force of maternal power when choosing between his mother who threatened to kill herself if he (Obi) marries an outcast or Osu. Chinweizu, the author of the *Anatomy of Female Power*, sees the influence and power of women on men. To him a woman knows when and how to manipulate a man, no matter how strong he may think he is. A woman knows her man’s weakest point and she acts on this to get him down without wasting time. He states that:

*Female power exists, it lungs over every Man like a ubiquitous shadow indeed the life circle of a man from cradle to grave may be divided into three phases, each of which is defined by the form of female power which dominates him: mother power, bride power or wife power.*

He believes that in each phase, the woman exercises influence over the man because of his peculiar weakness which he manifest, rather unconsciously at each of the stages. He also states that ‘everyday of a life, he is subject to the dictates of the womb, kitchen and cradle.’

Chinweizu goes further to say that no matter how ‘coolheaded’ or strong a man may be, he cannot outwit his woman’s power. For a man to be, he must pass through the womb thus he is subject to his mother at this stage. This man will crave for a wife, who can take care of his belly and this makes man a subject to his wife through his food. Women therefore should learn to use their power in the positive light by nurturing, protecting, supporting- and caring for the girl-child. It is clear that Chinweizu is of the opinion that a man does not have a mind of his own. This position is misleading as there are men who don’t necessarily do what their women ask them to do. There is however a possibility that mothers wield a degree of power on their children. They need to use this authority for the betterment of our society.

**Who is a Mother?**

A mother according to Acholonu, denotes the woman committed to the survival of mother earth as a hologrammatic entity. The weapon mothers should use according to her is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes. A mother is someone who loves, nutures and cares unconditionally and places the needs of her children not just her biological children but the children within her society above her own on a personal level, and not only with words but with actions. The terms Mother Nature and mother earth have also been embodied as mother because it focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature. A mother is the heroine that protects her society from invaders, rapist, abusers and marauders that seek to destroy it. A person who raises a child is a mother; a person who protects a child from harm is a mother. The roles of mothers in the society are too numerous to mention. These roles can be understood in the light of the fact that most children are attached to their mothers more than their fathers.

This attachment helps the child in growing up and building of self worth. A theory, attachment theory, was propounded by Bowlby in 1969. This theory proposes how a healthy parent-child attachment translates into healthy adult relationships (Main, 1996). The major part of this research has been applied on the observation of mother-child relationship. The conclusion derived from this research shows that when maternal attachment is disrupted, it becomes traumatic to the child and impacts his or her development neurologically, emotionally and socially which in turns results to long term issues throughout the child’s life (Schore, 2001).

**Maternal Cruelty**

Maternal cruelty involves all levels of brutality, spitefulness, abuse, carelessness, ruthlessness, harshness, violence and spite exhibited by a mother against the girl child. Women of all ages are included in the term ‘girl child’ but special attention will be paid to young girls of seven to sixteen.

**Brief Synopsis of *On Black Sisters Street***

*On Black Sisters Street* tells the compelling story of the lives of four women, all immigrants from different parts of Africa, in Antwerp's Red Light District. They came from different African backgrounds but are bound together by one profession and one master- Dele, a pimp who arranges illegal entry into Europe for young women in return for a large percentage of their earnings which they must pay weekly for many years. Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce spend their nights posing in windows, bringing men's fantasies to life, slaving their bodies but not their hearts. These women's histories are locked within, and they trust no one with their dreams, not even each other. Suddenly in a twist of fate, a brutal murder takes the life of one of their own and they realize that the more they talk and share with each other, the better off they are in finding the killer and remaining alive themselves. Their stories reveal so much about their pasts and how each of their individual stories is familiar to the other. The women discover that it may not be too late to realize their dreams.

**Maternal Cruelty in the Novel**

Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce were young girls who were thrown into the world early without any support. Sisi’s mother, a woman that was satisfied at staying behind the curtains and praying heavens down, rejoiced when she heard that her daughter will be going abroad. She did not investigate what Chisom (Sisi) was going to do abroad, she preferred being ignorant of the nature of job that her daughter was going to do in Antwerp. Unigwe captures her in the following paragraph:

That night her mother thanked God in a voice that brought in the neighbours from both sides. And the white-wearing church going couple did a dance around the room, clapping and calling on God by twenty-nine different names to let the blessings that had fallen on Chisom fall on them, too… And even though her parents sat in the sitting room, welcoming their guests and shouting a fierce “Amen” at the end of each prayer and singing and dancing, Chisom caught them looking at each other with defeated eyes as if they had let down their only daughter (*On Black Sisters Street [OBSS], 41-42).*

From the foregoing, it is clear that they suspected that their daughter was going abroad to prostitute her body yet they did nothing. Charles Nnolim in support of Acholonu’s Motherism adds that “motherism further advocates love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation” as well as “protection and defence of family values.” The family values of Africans abhor prostitution. Africans see it as a taboo. It will be over the dead body of a good African mother that her daughter will be a prostitute. A mother according to Acholonu should nurture and train her children well. However, Chisom’s mother fails to demonstrate this ability rather it is the young Chisom who mothers her. While Chisom was sending little gifts and money to her, she never questioned her source of wealth. She failed in her role as a mother and contributed to the death of her daughter through her failure.

Efe lost her mother while she was a teenager. She died after making promises to Efe that she will not leave her children. Efe was so devastated by her death and because of the hardship that followed her family after her mother’s death, she became a mother to her siblings trying to make ends meet to support them. In looking for alternative means for livelihood, she meets Titus, a married man, who promises her heaven on earth, takes her virginity, makes her pregnant and abandons her. The other mother figure who could have helped her, threw her out to the streets, a street enclosed in a society, where a young girl who is pregnant, is scorned and treated like dirt especially by mothers. This is well enunciated by Unigwe in the following:

If his daughter’s growing stomach was indeed invisible to him, it was not to the neighbors, the women especially, who pointed at Efe and laughed out loud whenever they passed her, clapping their hands and baring their mocking teeth. Their daughters, girls who had played with Efe or gone to school with her, either avoided her or were called away as soon as they stopped to talk to her (*OBSS,* 57).

These acts make Efe complain to her sister:

“People look at me as if I am dirt.”

Don’t mind them, Efe, her sister consoled, “Once the baby is out and the father starts taking care of him, they will know that you’re not one of those useless girls who just sleep around with any man.” (*OBSS*, 57)

Unfortunately, this was not to be as Titus’ wife, the other mother figure in Efe’s life, lashed at her and threw her out into the streets.

Ama’s case is probably one of the worst. Her mother’s betrayal was the major reason that left her shattered. She was raped, battered and abused many times by the man she thought was her father under her mother’s nose:

Every night her father came, and as time passed she came to expect it, her palms clammy and her mouth dry. Sometimes she tried to get out of it. She told her mother she did not want to sleep alone, she was afraid of the darkness, but her mother would always tell her not to be silly, she was eight years old, old enough to sleep alone, and did she not know how lucky she was to have her own room?

…When Ama got older and wiser, she would think that her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness…(*OBSS,* 114).

When she summoned courage after being provoked by the man and reported to her mother, her mother chose not to believe her and sided with her husband. It was her mother who finally drove her away and indirectly drove her into prostitution. Unigwe depicts a careless and weak mother who could not stand and defend her daughter in the face of danger and a daughter who is betrayed by a mother loved dearly:

“*Mba.* No. I will not shut up. Mama, do you know what he did to me when I was little? He raped me. Night after night. He would come into my room and force me to spread my legs for him. Remember when you always thought I had Apollo?”

Ama’s mother lifted a hand and slapped her on her mouth. “How dare you talk about your father like that? What has taken possession of you?” (*OBSS*, 125)

Ama’s mother preferred the status of being married to a rapist than being a mother to her only child. She had misplaced gratitude for the pastor who according to her saved her from a fate worse than death. Her daughter according to her was a mistake, she tells Ama:

“I made a mistake. One mistake that could have destroyed me completely. Yet Brother Cyril took me in and married me. He saved me from a terrible life. How many men would marry a woman who was carrying a child for another man? Tell me, Ama, tell me. And you throw all that in his face. What have I done to deserve this? Tell me, Ama, what have I done to deserve this? He could have sent both of us out tonight. Many men would. You know that. Yet, out of the goodness of his heart, he didn’t.” Ama tried to tell her mother about the year she was eight. On the tip of her tongue, she tasted fear of the nights he came into her room and yearned to spit it out. She started, but her mother cut her short. “Just shut up. Shut up, Ama, before I am thrown out of my husband’s house because of you…Just pack your things. First thing tomorrow morning, *ututu echi*, you shall be on the bus to Lagos…”(*OBSS*, 127-28)

Ama’s mother fails to meet up the definition of a true mother, her actions and inactions directly and indirectly drove her daughter to despair and seek the wrong part for her life.

**Brief Synopsis of Faceless**

*Faceless* is the tragic story of street children in Accra, Ghana told through a chaotic urban fabric where pressing social issues like the gap between the rich and poor, HIV/AIDS, broken families and the role of women in society are all pervasive. The story is an investigation of the death of Baby T, a child prostitute whose body is found dumped behind a market place, naked, beaten and badly mutilated. Baby T’s history was revealed by her younger sister, Fofo, a street child also who comes in contact with a group of women who run an NGO called MUTE.

Baby T is the third child of Maa Tsuru, born after a brutal beating intended to fulfil the ambitions of abortion of Kwei, the father. After the disappearance of Kwei, Maa Tsuru takes in a lover, Kpakpo, who makes a living through dubious means. This brings tragedy to the already frail family and the first two sons disappear leaving their sisters at the mercy of a scrupulous, abusive Kpakpo and a careless mother. Kpakpo abuses Baby T sexually. Hurt and confused, she confides in a family friend, Onko, who is like an uncle but Onko rapes her brutally and her mother being aware of it is unable to do anything but take money from Onko. Kpakpo then suggests that Baby T be sent away to a distant relative out of the reach of the randy Onko and Maa Tsuru agrees but unknown to her, Baby T is sold into prostitution. Though she later found out what Kpakpo did but could not do anything and she ended up collecting money from the madam who was in charge of the brothel where Baby T worked. Unfortunately, Onko strikes again when he was told by a native priest that his dwindling fortune was as a result of the rape incident. He seeks Baby T out and in the bid to get the hair from her private part as was demanded by the native doctor, brutally kills her.

**Maternal Cruelty in *Faceless***

Maa Tsuru fails in her duty to look after her children. Her female children suffered the most as she constantly neglects them. After her live-in lover, Kpakpo, abused her daughter, Baby T, she did not even scold him neither did she send him away, rather it is Baby T that suffers by being sold into prostitution. At first she did not know what her daughter was forced to do because the same Kpakpo made her to believe that her daughter was learning a trade but when she found out her daughter’s occupation, she did not do anything and like the biblical Esau, she kept on eating the porridge by accepting the money Mammi Broni, Baby T’s madam, was bringing on monthly basis to her.

Maa Tsuru’s weakness made Kofo run away from home and embrace street life as an alternative means of living. A mother’s actions brings her children to her love, bosom and embrace not plunge them into darkness, oblivion and a place of no return.

Throughout the novel, Kofo exhibited hatred for her mother and her decisions. Towards the end of the novel she says to her:

“So you will do it again, won’t you?” she wailed at her mother, “if he returned today you would let him in and probably get yourself pregnant by him again, won’t you? Why? Mother, why? What life have you been able to give those of us you already have? Look at the boys here. Look at me. We have no idea where the two older boys are. Are they dead? I often wonder. Are they alife? Are they in prison? Are they killing people to survive? You don’t even know. And Baby T? You offered us all generously to the streets, mother. You made the streets claim and own us… (*Faceless*, 159)

Fourteen year old Fofo becomes a voice of reason and a mother to her own mother. She became an adult suddenly and began fending for herself and her little brothers at a young age. The streets claimed her and her sister Baby T before the very eyes of their mother.

Naa Yomo is another mother figure in the story; she can be referred to as the matriarch of the compound. She had all the power and respect but she did not make use of it except for the occasional insults she rained on Onko and other members of the compound. A reader is made to see that she had all the means to help Fofo and Baby T but she turned a blind eye and allowed things to get out of hand. One would have expected that her position as the matriarch of the compound would have been put to judicious use but this was not to be so. She allowed things to fall apart and by the time she decided to step in it was just too late.

**Conclusion**

A girl-child grows in grace, happiness and decency with the help of the mothers around her. She learns by watching them. Her life is meaningful when she is well taken care of and nurtured. These two books mirror what happens in our African society when there is a lack of mother’s care, love and direction.

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