

**AESTHETIC TREATMENT AND SYMBOLISM OF THE STREET IN AMMA
DARKO'S *FACELESS***

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ABSTRACT: *The problem of street children, as depicted by Amma Darko, is a growing phenomenon in African cities. As evidence, many nongovernmental organizations are concerned with abandoned children's living conditions, convinced that today's young girls and boys are the adults of tomorrow. Following in these charitable institutions' footsteps, Amma Darko in Faceless, looks into the phenomenon in all its aspects. In its form as well as in its content, the novel addresses the issue with a special focus on the word 'street' which receives the abandoned children. Basing on new criticism theory, the analyses reveal that, aesthetically, the street is given a special place in the novel. It appears approximately 85 times, that is a little less than half the entire number of pages of the novel (199 pages). It is used directly as parts of speech, sometimes personified, with different grammatical functions. Indirectly, it is presented in alternation with a conventional family the Kabrias, MUTE, an NGO caring for abandoned children and a radio station, Harvest FM. Seen from the point of view of symbolism and put in relation with the stakeholders of the phenomenon of street children, the street turns out to symbolize a space of escape, of survival, of a jungle, of destruction, of violence and crime and of a barracks.*

KEYWORDS: Street Children, Street Girls, Street, Aesthetics, Symbolism.

RESUME : *Le problème des enfants de la rue tel que dépeint à Accra par Amma Darko, est un phénomène grandissant dans les villes Africaines. Comme preuve, plusieurs organisations non gouvernementales se préoccupent des conditions de vie des enfants abandonnés, convaincues que les jeunes filles et les jeunes garçons sont des adultes de demain. Suivant les pas de ces institutions caritatives, Amma Darko dans Faceless, examine le phénomène dans tous ses aspects. Aussi bien dans la forme que dans le contenu, le roman aborde la question avec une focalisation spéciale sur le mot 'rue' qui reçoit les enfants abandonnés. Se fondant sur la théorie de la nouvelle critique, il ressort des analyses que sur le plan esthétique, une grande place est accordée à la rue dans le roman. Le mot rue apparaît approximativement 85 fois, soit un peu moins de la moitié des pages du roman (199 pages). Il est utilisé directement comme partie du discours. Parfois la rue est personifiée avec le mot jouant diverses fonctions grammaticales. Indirectement, elle est présentée en alternance à une famille conventionnelle, les Kabrias, l'ONG MUTE qui s'occupe des enfants abandonnés, et une station radio, Harvest FM. Vue d'un point de vue symbolique, et mise en relation avec les acteurs du phénomène des enfants de la rue, la rue se dégage comme un espace de fuite, de survie, d'une jungle, un espace de destruction, de violence et de crime, et d'une caserne.*

MOTS-CLES: Enfants De La Rue, Filles De La Rue, Rue, Esthétique, Symbolisme.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of street children is one of the biggest topical issues that are yet to find a solution in modern African urban areas. It has reached such a critical point that it seems difficult

to know where to start its resolution from. AmmaDarko in her novel *Faceless*¹ exposes the specific case of Accra which also can be found in other African metropolises. In the novel, the street plays an important role. As evidence the term 'street' is used more than 80 times in the novel. It turns out to be the most used word in the story. That is one of the reasons why we choose to focus our study on it so as to find out its aesthetic treatment and its symbolism in the novel. *Derived from the Greek word meaning 'perceptive', aesthetic describes the perception and appreciation of what is beautiful and is most used in the criticism of works of art (...) Form especially is considered to be of potential aesthetic value.*² By aesthetic treatment we mean the ways AmmaDarko represents the street with her words because no two novelists can represent the same narrative elements in the same way or with the similar aesthetics.

In a literary work, there is often a link between the aesthetics used by the author and the message of its content. *Le style est l'homme*, writes Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov quoting Leo Spitzer.³ What are the relations between the aesthetics used by Amma Darko and the symbolism of the street in *Faceless*?

Symbolism is defined as the *representation of ideas especially in literature and art by the use of symbol*⁴; and a symbol is a sign, whether visual or verbal which stands for something else⁵. In the light of the definitions above, the street can be considered as a symbol in literature. In dealing with the symbolism of the street through its aesthetic treatment, this study will have the support of new criticism which examines *autonomously and objectively a text as unified artefacts in their own intrinsic terms.*⁶ In that respect the article will be concerned with the aesthetic treatment of the street in the first part and the symbolic role it plays in the novel in the second part.

Aesthetic Treatment of the Street In *Faceless*

Aesthetics in literature is a tool, more, an arm in the hands of the author that he uses to reach a desired goal, in a discursive situation. Conscious that what counts for him is not only the ideas he shares with the reader but also the way he puts them choosing his literary devices. Thus, he chooses his words, the places he wants the characters to move in, his mode of persuading the reader, the dosage of description, narration, dialogue and discussion. The key word in the fiction and the narration of the novel is 'street'. It appears approximately eighty five times in the novel. Its representation is either direct or indirect. It is direct when 'street' is used as a signifier in a sentence. The indirect representation occurs when some other words are used to refer to the word 'street'.

In its direct representation, the word 'street' is seen as parts of speech in sentences and phrases. It is used as adjective, adverb and noun. It has the place of an adjective in the following example to characterize the persons it modifies: *a street girl*⁷, *street children*⁸. The modifier 'street' is used to designate this category of people although each of them has his or her own story that brings him or her to the street. As adverb 'street' modifies the verb that comes before it and specifies the place to which the verb refers: *children leaving home to live on the street*⁹. The nominal case use of 'street' shows it as direct object of the preposition: *there's a lot of pain and hopelessness out there on the streets*¹⁰, indirect object *I sold her to the street*¹¹ repeated three times in the same sentence, and as subject of the verb: *the streets had accelerated their growth*¹², to insist on its omnipresence and the roles it plays in the lives of the street children. As the receiver of the action of selling and as the subject of the verb 'had accelerated', the

street is personified in these parts of speech. In spite of its various uses in the novel, it has a contextual meaning.

In fact, the context of its use is not the one of a linear space of traffic like a road which starts from a point A to a destination B, but as the opposite of home. The children who live on the street spend their time in the most underprivileged areas of the city because they are deliberately or indirectly rejected by their families. They live in a different world from that of the protected children of a conventional home: *you don't just pick somebody from the streets into your home*¹³ Kabria replied to her daughter Ottu. *Omonita* in Yoruba is a child who lives outside his home. Therefore anywhere he sleeps overnight without his parents' permission is considered as the street. In that respect, Agbogloboshie market place and Sodom and Gomorrah are poles of the street world in the novel. Fofu spends the night at that market for some time to keep on going with *her newly acquired job of washing carrots at the vegetables wholesale market*¹⁴. Sodom and Gomorrah is both the residential area of the street children and where they spend most of their time doing the worst things ever imagined for children of their age. Agbogloboshie market place and Sodom and Gomorrah are indirect ways of representing the street.

Many other signs or situations refer to the street to point out the scene where the tragic phenomenon of street children takes place. Fofu's answer to the reporter from one of the private FM stations reveals the most precious of her dreams which is to find a home with a roof and toilet and the warmth of a parent *They craved for warmth all right; but of a kind that many with secure roofs over their heads and the assured love of a parent take for granted*¹⁵. Very often the street is presented in contrast to the characteristics of a home where a normal family lives.

At 2 a.m., Fofu is outside dreaming during her sleep at the market while her mother is at home cut off from the world and drowned in her worries. Fofu's dream of a quiet home during her sleep is in contrast with the realities of her world in the street. The contrast between the Kabria's and the MaaTsuru's reveals the happy and united families on the one hand and a fragmented and unhappy one on the other hand. Kabria's children, Essie, Obea and Ottu the only boy are taken care of and receive good education, whereas Fofu is conscious of being a dirty girl abandoned to the street. There is an anachrony between life in normal families and life of children on the street. Underground activities occur during the night when people are asleep after daily work *When the rest of Accra is sleeping, that is, when Sodom and Gomorrah and its real inhabitants wake up*¹⁶. That is when the 'nightlifers' are busy with their business that includes dancing and drinking in bars, transaction of all kinds, prostitution and defecating on heaps of refuse on queuing for bath taking.

The age and occupations of the girls living on the streets refer to the kind of damage the street can cause on them. The female studio guest of Sylv Po, the presenter of Harvest FM remarks: *For many of them rape was their first sexual experience. And I'm talking of girls as young as seven. Many were child prostitutes*¹⁷. The second main activity going on on the street on the part of the children is stealing. Indirectly, the street is accused of being the accomplice of poor responsible parents who consciously or unconsciously send their children to the street. *A flurry of excitement gripped the teeming crowd. "They have him!" someone yelled. "He's been caught," they dragged him back. Kabria remained rooted in awe. She was given back her*

purse. *The increasing crowd grew eager to make history of the boy*¹⁸. The thief in question is Fofu wearing boys' clothes as is the case of many other street girls.

With the growing poverty in Africa, the street receives more and more children to the point that the problem of street children involves many social groups, since the police representing the government admit to its failure in contributing to the resolution of the tragedy when called upon by MUTE, an NGO for street children. The answer the two MUTE agents, Vickie and Kabria obtained from the policeman on duty is cynical but telling of the dramatic resignation of the police and the government. The policeman leads them to notice that the phone is not functional and the yard is empty.

*“And now pick up the phone!” He ordered Vickie
She obeyed.
“It’s dead”, she said.
“Follow me,” he ordered them. Then he pointed
a finger into the yard and sneered “See?”
“What?” Kabria asked.
“But there is nothing there!” Vickie wailed.
“But what should you have seen?”
“A vehicle. You have no vehicle?
The Inspector’s cynical grin turned to a wry smile.
“No, we don’t.” (...)”¹⁹*

The street is always there, but the means of getting it rid of abandoned children are lacking. The phenomenon has reached such a point that the street is confounded with those children. Both terms appear abundantly in the talks of MUTE, Harvest FM and in Kabria's family.

From the angle of time of fiction and time of narration, the street with children's lives on it appears in a simultaneous narration. According to B. Valette in *Esthétique du roman moderne, La narration peut être simultanée, se déroulant théoriquement à un temps sensiblement identique à celui des événements*²⁰. The narration of night life in Agbogbloshie market and Sodom and Gomorrah by the omniscient narrator reflects what actually happens every night in that part of Accra. Besides, the narrative order of the novel shows that the street as a narrative element is dealt with in alternation with Kabria's household and the NGO MUTE. The narrative order allows the reader to make a comparison between Fofu's hazardous life and Kabria's children's protected lives on the one hand and to present the NGO as solution seeker to the phenomenon of street children.

The author's aesthetic treatment of the street by literary devices of his own choice is a proof of the important place it has and the role it plays in the narration. It turns out to be the backbone around which the story is built. As such it has a highly symbolic role in the novel.

The Symbolism of the Street In *Faceless*

As specified in the contextual meaning of the street above, it is the opposite of family home, which has nothing to do with its referential roles of transport infrastructure or a place of sale for peddlers, boys and girls like Eliza, the flower girl in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*²¹.

The symbolism of the street depends on how it is represented and particularly on the way it is put in relation with the characters and their actions.

The street is a space of escape for street children like Fofu. She runs away from the harsh realities of her family home to join the horde of other street girls and boys who set their home on the street. Together with Odarley, Baby T and others, they found another kind of family directed by different rules. In this street home, children behave like adults. They must struggle for what to eat through stealing or doing odd jobs for their daily needs and bring money to their mothers at home. *The time I used to go home to sleep, Mother used to take my money from me*²² Fofu said to Kabria during her interview. *For baby T taking charge of hunger means finding money for food through any means possible. Fair or foul. Begging? Stealing? Whatever*²³. Kabria's children go to school normally to be educated and become good citizens. But in the street home there is another type of school. There, the children learn how to steal, become a prostitute or a criminal and also how to survive. London streets offered the same scene as far back as in the nineteenth century with Oliver Twist, Bill Sikes, Artful Dodger, Old Sally and others under the leadership of Fagin, the head of the gang and the guidance of Artful Dodger in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*²⁴. Fofu admits that she has been taught the art of stealing by Baby T. *I learnt the art of pick pocketing from her. She was a very good teacher*²⁵.

The street is for Fofu and her peers a place of survival. It is better to be on the street than be at home with the parents because out there they cannot die of hunger. From the time she has parted from MaamiBroni, the matron of the street girls who also hires them to mend for money, she feels more responsible for herself. Not only does she struggle to find money, she also learns how to manage it, how to spend it according to her needs. What matters is to stay alive. In his introduction to the novel *Faceless*, Kofi Anyidoho remarks: *For many of these children thinking, talking, and indeed acting 'grown up' is a necessary skill for survival in a ruthless world*²⁶. This ruthless world of the street is a symbol of jungle for the street children. The weakest persons are bullied by the strongest. Macho, one of the street lords take away Fofu's money under her nose and in front of all the other children around. He steals their money anytime the occasion arises:

You've left your plastic bag! Odarley screamed.

"Look! He has taken it!"

Fofu turned. She has completely forgotten the bag.

"He's got all of my money from last week," Fofu whined.

"All of it?"

*"All of it," and broke down in tears*²⁷.

Living outside the family home is already a danger for street children. But street girls are particularly exposed to all kinds of dangers. If Fofu cannot afford two hundred cedis a day to the owner of a wooden shack, she will not have where to sleep. Inside the shack, they sleep by dozens together without windows but only with a door always open. *Boys and girls slept together, stripped together and did things with each other, many times under the influence of alcohol, wholly and conscious of what they were doing or with whom. Such was the evil of life on the street*²⁸. Such bad conditions of sleeping involve insecurity, lack of cleanliness, alcohol and drug addiction, sexual deprivation and risks of catching diseases. This dangerous way of sleeping is the only alternative left to street children like Fofu who has moved from the tutorship of MaamiBroni. If they don't have money to sleep in the wooden shack, they will

sleep in the open and be more exposed to visible and invisible dangers of the night. They grip to the street because their families and the government have nothing better to offer them. At least living on the street gives opportunity to survive. But it is a hopeless survival because the street also symbolizes a place of destruction.

The street children destroy themselves with *a kpeteshie*, the local alcoholic drink. They are prematurely sexually active. Added to their poor diet, these living conditions can only lead them to premature death. These are children useless to themselves, to their families and their nation. The words of the studio guest received by Sylv Po of Harvest FM points to the degree of destruction caused by the street life of young girls:

During a recent survey we conducted for a programme, all the girls we talked to out there were already very sexually active. Many were child prostitutes. They had no idea at all about the extent of self-damage. Sex to them, was just a convenient means of survival. Many were roaming about, oblivious to whether or not they were HIV positive²⁹.

The street children are unconscious of the risks they incur, but their conscious behavior is determined by their disadvantaged living conditions. Apart from making them unconscious, the street, symbol of violence and crime also exposes them to death.

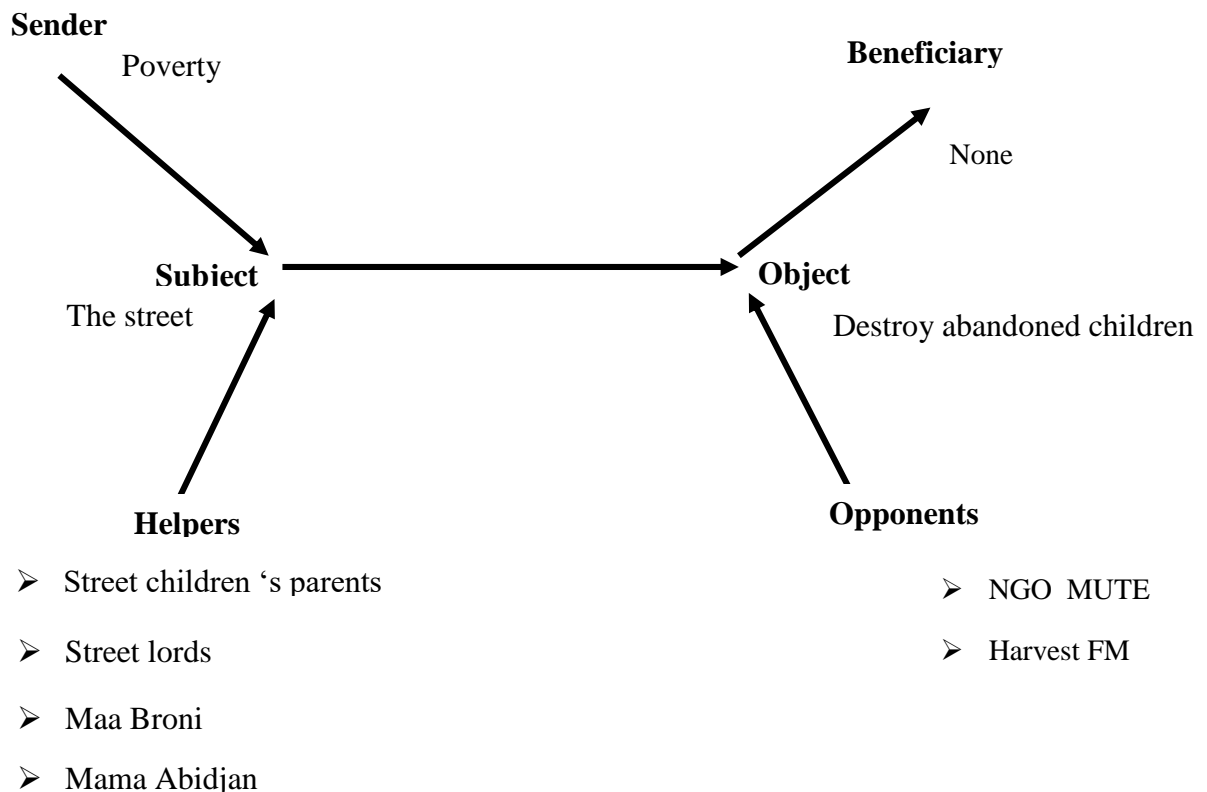
Children who came to the streets are anonymous. Those with whom they live do not know their origin, since no one among them carries an identity card. Therefore anything can happen to them and nobody will care. They live anonymously with other children and adults. What unites them is the same territory they share, the street. If nobody comes to their rescue, they die or are killed and buried as anonymous human beings, without funerals.

Kabria understands the absurdity of the street life when she comes across the corpse of Baby T near a kiosk at Agbogloboshie market: *the people who die here at Agbogloboshie and whose bodies are never claimed end up buried in mass graves at Mile Eleven³⁰*. Street boys and girls are invisible children of the society. They are invisible like the black man at the apex of racial segregation in the United States of America in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man³¹*. As the title of the novel puts it, street children are faceless; they are invisible in the society because nobody gives them any consideration. They are visible only when they are involved in crimes.

Crimes are very common in Sodom and Gomorrah. Death of street inhabitants occurs as an ordinary event because they are all faceless. Fofu's reaction to the news given to her by her mother about a body that was found the previous week behind a blue rasta hairdressing kiosk salon at Agbogloboshie is just to say: *Aren't bodies always being found there like the aborted fetuses at Sodom and Gomorrah? Is that news? Well, maybe for people like you living in proper homes like here³²*. Ironically Fofu realized that the body was her sister's, Baby T. The corpse of the murdered girl is dumped at the market after she has been raped and killed by Poison, a 'street lord.' Poison attempts to rape Fofu also without success. Since she knows the murderer of her sister, she becomes an object of blackmail on the part of Poison. She is threatened to be killed if she ever reveals the secret: *they beat me up and sent me to him. He gave me one vicious slap and warned me to never utter a word to anyone that I knew the dead girl, let alone that she was my sister³³*. MaaTsuru receives the bad news about Baby T from Maami Broni, the

woman to whom she has entrusted the girl. All the bad things that happen on the streets have a negative effect on the parents at home. Baby T's death is another dagger's blow added to her daily sorrows. Her grief is so deep that she locks herself in her room day and night. Her companions are sorrows, shame and guilt caused by the kind of life her girls are obliged to live on the street. NaaYomo, the old lady in her compound knocks at her door to inform her about a coming visit of two ladies working for an organization caring for Fofo, and asks her: *Do you think shutting yourself up this way is what will solve your problem? I am returning to my stool. I want to talk to you*³⁴.

An actantial diagramme with the street as subject personified shows that the object of the street is to destroy abandoned children. The opponents to this goal are the NGO MUTE and Harvest FM. The helpers are the parents of the children, Macho and Poison who call themselves street lords, MaaBroni and Mama Abidjan, the street mothers of the children. The sender of the quest is poverty considered as an acting force in the novel. But there is no beneficiary of the destruction of the children. The destruction is a loss for their families and the nation:



Actantial diagramme with the street as acting force and subject

As acting forces Poison and Macho help the street to reach its goal of destruction on abandoned children. They have grown up on the street since the day they landed on it as street children at a tender age. Today they manage the street as a barrack. With time they feel more confident in controlling it. Poison, a name connoting a dangerous thing is a real poison in the lives of the street girls he has recruited in his gang and whom he beats and rapes as he pleases. He has many men working for him. He has promoted one of them lieutenant: *The gang member to his*

*immediate right has been promoted lieutenant just the previous day*³⁵. His gang members are his operational arm and he himself acts as the captain of the camp. They are the ones who bring him the girls he wants to punish. Poison is one of the street lords who buy village young girls from women of bad morality under the pretext of finding them a job in Accra city:

*The agency and their “sources” know the woman who had wanted to sell Afi to the street lords. The woman therefore must have been in connivance with the street lords and Accra street lords now each other. They were not necessarily friends, but they took cognizance of each other in order to, as much as possible avoid stepping on one another’s toes*³⁶.

On the streets, each gang has its territory under the control of a street lord.

Symbol of escape, survival, jungle, destruction, violence and crime, and barracks, the street is at the centre of the predicament of street girls. Baby T’s death is given importance thanks to the investigation of MUTE, an NGO that investigate on the growing phenomenon of street children and eventually cares for them through a rehabilitation process. The street that welcomes young girls and boys is also at the origin of the sorrows Fofu and Baby T’s mother and many other parents.

To conclude, the phenomenon of street children is not dealt with to this extent in African literature. In the form and in the content, the street plays an important role in the novel. Aesthetically, it is used as parts of speech with different functions directly. It also appears indirectly in situations of communication and in alternation with a conventional family, the Kabria’s, MUTE, an NGO caring for children and Harvest FM which raises awareness on the misfortune of street children thereby arousing the general public’s pity and involvement in redressing the situation. The street also recalls, its suppliers of street girls and boys like the irresponsible poor parents, street lords such as Poison and Macho and street mothers like MaaBroni and Mama Abidjan should be severely reprimanded. As a matter of fact, we cannot say that we are not concerned with the problem of the street children. As MsKamame said to Sylv Po of Harvest FM, *The question we should ask ourselves is: are these the kind of beings we want to share our society with? So you see, it is not their problem alone. It is our problem too. All of us.*³⁷

ENDNOTES

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9. Ibid. ,p.66
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11. Ibid., ,26
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14. Ibid. , p.1
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29. Ibid., p.32
30. *Faceless. Op. cit. , p.44*
31. *Ralph Ellison. Invisible Man*. New York : Random House. 1952.
32. *Faceless. Op. cit. , p.23*
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