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LITTERATURE

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Commodification of Women in Traditional African Marriage in Selected African Novels

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Résumé

Ce travail de recherche examine la marchandisation du mariage traditionnel en Afrique dans les œuvres romanesques *Beyond the Horizon* de Amma Darko et *Things Fall Apart* de Chinua Achebe en faisant remarquer que la dimension culturelle du paiement de la dot dans le processus du mariage traditionnel en Afrique a été déformée et a subi de changements profonds du fait de la colonisation. Cet abus des prescriptions culturelles relatives au mariage traditionnel conduit assurément à l'instabilité conjugale dans les romans postcoloniaux. A travers les lentilles de la théorie de la réponse du lecteur et le post-colonialisme, cet article étudie le mécanisme par lequel Amma Darko et Chinua Achebe lèvent le voile sur la marchandisation du mariage traditionnel dans certaines sociétés africaines.

Mots clés : mariage traditionnel, déformation, culture, marchandisation, instabilité

Abstract

This research paper examines the commodification of the traditional African marriage in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.* The article points out that the cultural dimension of the payment of bride price, in the traditional marriage process in Africa, has been distorted and has undergone drastic changes due to colonization. The abuse of the cultural prescriptions regarding traditional marriage surely leads to marital instability in post-colonial novels. Through the lenses of the reader-response theory and post-colonialism, this paper investigates the mechanics through which Amma Darko and Chinua Achebe lift the veil from the ongoing commodification of women in the traditional African marriage in some traditional African societies.

Keywords: Traditional marriage – distortion – culture – commodification – instability

1. Introduction

The commodification of women/girls in traditional African marriage is a serious public issue that cuts across traditional African societies. In spite of the persistent highlighting on bride price payments in African literature nowadays, little is known about the distortion of this customary practice, which has now a commercial subtext. With the odd turn that traditional marriage is taking in society nowadays, M. Apostolou contends that "parents place such great emphasis on the resource acquisition abilities of a prospective son-in-law, since such an individual will become an invaluable family member that will help the parents and their kin in their struggle for survival and reproduction" (2008, p. 91). Interestingly, J. U. Ogbu defines marriage as a "publicly recognized union established between one man and one or more women, […] or between a woman and one or more men, in accordance with the defining rules of a given society or social stratum" (n. d. 243). It follows suit that when a union gains public recognition in traditional Africa, society gives it a legal status and the married couple enjoy protected rights, privileges, and obligations by virtue of being established according to recognized and accepted rules. The normative African marriage traditions are typified by the negotiation and payment of bride price or bride wealth to the prospective wife's people. In most sub-Saharan African societies, the payment of the bride price is a prerequisite for traditional marriage and constitutes family onuses, as it legitimizes the union.

This subject matter raises serious controversies because Africa is a multicultural society where each tribe or group of people has its customs and traditions; this might account for the societal deviance noticeable regarding the socio-cultural praxis of African traditional marriage. However, marriage, no matter the cultural differences, becomes a challenging and stimulating issue because colonization has introduced new reforms in this institution. Commenting the impact foreign powers

have had on the African culture, M. Mawere and A. M. Mawere postulate that "[…] colonialism together with globalization in Africa have been […] criticized […] for transforming most parts of Africa's traditions" (2010, p. 225). In this vein, this paper contends that the customary payment of the bride price should not be commercialised in that hefty bride price leads to the commodification of the traditional marriage.

The majority of scholars and critics who address marriage as unequal power relations among female and male characters for marriage praxes, in male-authored literature, seem to be detrimental to female characters. The previous literature has not fully addressed the question of commodification of the traditional marriage. This paper attempts to bridge the gap. That is why this article explores rarely discussed aspects of the payment of the bride price in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*. Rightly, the choice of the late forefather of Anglophone African literature, Chinua Achebe, and the one of the utmost representatives of the emerging female Ghanaian voice, Amma Darko, is a proof that the marriage issue is an everlasting and challenging one. In addition, their novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Beyond the Horizon* respectively, lay a strong emphasis on the commodification of the girl or woman in traditional marriage. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the issue from the perspectives of these African writers' representation of marriage, the procedure of traditional wedding in the novels under scrutiny so as to show that the customary marriage practices have been distorted. Simply put, the reader response theory constitutes the backdrop for the analysis along with post-colonialism. According to the reader response theory, "the meanings of a text are the 'production' or 'creation' of the individual reader […]" (M. H. Abrams & G. G. Harpham, 2012, p. 330). As a consequence, I have drawn from my reading experience to construe the novels under scrutiny. Furthermore, post colonialism "deals with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies" (B. Ashcroft, *et al.*, 2007, p. 168). As originally used by historians after World War II, it has a clear chronological meaning designating the post-independence period. However, in the late 1970s, the term was used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonisation (Ashcroft, *et al.*, 2007, p. 168). Marriage is an integral part of African culture, however, its structure has been somehow affected by colonisation. It is important that its authentic organisation be explored in the selected novels in this paper. One can therefore see how Achebe and Darko grant marriage a golden mission. Indeed, in an African context, marriage is a sacred institution because it guarantees the perpetuation of human race. It is then a must for both men and women as C. A. Obi quoting Basden wrote: "*Inu nwunye* (marriage) has a foremost place in Igbo social economy. It looks upon the horizon of every maid and youth as an indispensable function to be fulfilled with as little delay as possible after reaching the age of puberty. Since the Igbo are a patriarchal people, marriage is deemed an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent" (1970). From Obi's argument, the main function of marriage is biological. Reproduction is then the ultimate goal of marriage. What does marriage then symbolise for Africans in the novels under scrutiny?

2. Africans' Representation of Marriage in the focus novels

For the sake of a safe reproduction and protection of future generations, in the majority of African communities, marriage is rather an agreement among families. Achebe in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, makes the narratee capture the essence of this institution by locating it in pre-colonial times. The sequence of actions about the character Akueke's betrothal ceremony – the first step of traditional marriage – shows that marriage is not a mere joke. It is not a fight either as the male character Machi, Obierika's eldest brother, says: "If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play. Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so, we are falling down again" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 58). This Igbo proverb illustrates the hidden spirit of togetherness and union that marriage represents among Africans.On the other hand, Darko, as a typical Fanti, commits herself to examining this institution. As a matter of fact, although Darko's story is set at a different time, post-independent Ghana, she points out that, in any rural African space like the fictitious village of Naka, marriage is still a family business. Indeed, Mara's marriage is an outcome of the negotiations between Mara's father, on the one hand, and the groom's father and his people, on the other. The following utterance by Mara's mother followed by the autodiegetic narrator's in *Beyond the Horizon* shows, by all means, parents' great involvement or rather 'intrusion' in their offspring's love affairs in traditional Africa: "Your father has found a husband for you […] a good man […]. I soon learnt that […] it was his [Akobi's] father who had approached mine and not vice versa." (A. Darko, 1995, p. 4). The

autodiegetic narrator, in this quotation, showcases an important aspect of traditional marriage in Africa. It is the groom's family who first expresses their intention to marry a given girl. On this score, "In most human cultures known to anthropologists parents do not allow sexual freedom to their offspring, and they control their mating choices by arranging their marriages with individuals of their own choice" (M. Apostolou, 2007; G. J. Broude & S. J. Greene, 1983; S. G. Frayser, 1985; L. Minturn *et al*., 1969; M. K. Whyte, 1978). When the choice has been made, the negotiation is led by the man's family. Nowadays this practice is on the wane on behalf of love and drastic social changes due to globalisation, and cultural alienation as a result of colonisation.

In practice, Achebe and Darko pinpoint parents' implication in traditional Africa because it appears as a barrier to early divorce or an avoidance of a wrong choice by pointing out the necessity to investigate the groom's family because it should not be the one with criminal records, laziness, physical deformities, hereditary disorders, and bad reputation. More precisely the elders see to it that the bride's life be secured. Indeed, a girl is not an item to trade. A suitor is then this man whose family should be honest and hardworking. This certitude, the elders believe, is the only way to guarantee the welfare of the future generations. In *Beyond the Horizon*, the subjective narrator, Mara, confesses that the social position of her prospective father-in-law has been a decisive factor in her father's agreement to marry her off to Akobi. Indeed, not only is Akobi's father the richest man in the village but his son, Akobi, is the only educated boy in the fictitious village Naka, and to crown it all Akobi is a civil servant. Through the narratized speech, the narratee can learn:

> He [Akobi's father] earned more respect for using the money to educate his son Akobi at the Joseph Father of Jesus Roman Catholic school, making his son the first child to earn a Form Four General Certificate […]. The point was that his son had studied and got a certificate. They stood out in the village crowd and were held in high esteem (A. Darko, 1995, p. 5).

Achebe's and Darko's choice of a rural space to address African traditional marriage connotes their great attachment to this form of marriage. Such a space better embodies the cultural dimension of traditional marriage in Africa. In fact, this form of marriage is losing its mystique in modern African societies because the different criteria are no longer met. The first step is the betrothal ceremony that is, the introduction of the suitor. The use of a male heterodiegetic narrator allows Achebe to visualize the original version of this step as Obierika lets Okonkwo know: "My daughter's suitor is coming today and I hope we will clinch the matter of the bride-price. I want you to be there." (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 51). Here, Achebe's use of language highlights the difference between suitor and a groom. Indeed, in *Things Fall Apart*, among the Igbo and Africans, in general, the man is called a suitor because nobody knows him. Then, a suitor is he who has not paid the bride-price yet. Ibe, at this step, is simply Akueke's boyfriend.

During the betrothal ceremony, for instance, Achebe shows that the suitor brings just some palm-wine which symbolizes his first introduction into his prospective family-in-law. The quality of the palm-wine reflects the type of husband he will be. That is why the suitor, Ibe, sees to it that his palm-wine is of a better quality as the narrator assumes it: "It was a very good wine and powerful, for in spite of the palm fruit hung across the mouth of the pot to restrain the lively liquor, white foam rose and spilled over" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 57).

Among the Igbo, this preliminary is not the nuclear family's business either. Achebe pictures the presence of some close and extended relatives at this ceremony as it is clearly stated: "There were seven men in Obierika's hut […]. The suitor was a young man of about twenty-five, and with him were his father and uncle. On Obierika's side were his two elder brothers and Maduka, his sixteen-year-old son" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 55). Through this image of the betrothal ceremony, one can condemn the exclusion of the extended family from this ceremony in contemporary Africa for no obvious reasons. The most interesting thing is the obvious presence of the suitor because it is an opportunity for his prospective in-laws to have a clearer picture of his personality. This is the reason why it is the suitor's responsibility to serve the palm-wine. Indeed, Ibe performs this ritual successfully, which is a sign that he is a good man.

Moreover, the authors view, in the selected novels, the bride price as the pinnacle of the African traditional marriage. Whether in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*,

the brides, respectively Akueke and Mara, get their bride prices. Achebe's and Darko's intention through the choice of the phrase 'bride price' is to enlighten the narratee and more particularly the African narratee on the difference between 'bride price' and 'dowry'. M. Ogundipe-Leslie has revealed the intrinsic meaning of bride price. According to her, bride price is the original word to designate the compensation paid to the woman's family. Today, it is called bride-wealth. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, be it bride price or bride-wealth:

> *it was a kind of material benefits compensation to the family of the wife from the family of the groom. This is very different from the dowry, as in India, which goes from the bride's family to the groom's family to compensate the groom for taking on the responsibility of a woman. The dowry is a very different, in fact, opposite, concept. Bride-wealth was a symbolic expression of the respect and valuation of the woman (1994, p. 211).*

As a result, it comes in the form of cattle, foodstuffs, drinks, kola nuts, money, and some items for the bride. Ogundipe-Leslie's definition of bride price conceals the procedure to be followed. Achebe discloses it so as to remind the African narratee of its authenticity. The payment of a bride price requires absolutely the presence of relatives otherwise, it is null and void. Obierika's daughter's bride price payment is an illustration of its cultural meaning:

> *Very soon after, the in-laws began to arrive. Young men and boys in single file, each carrying a pot of wine, came first. Obierika's relatives counted the pots as they came in […]. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five. The hosts nodded in approval and seemed to say, 'Now they are behaving like men.' […]. After the pot-bearers came Ibe, the suitor, and the elders of his family […]. Then the bride, her mother and a half dozen other women and girls emerged from the inner compound, and went round the circle shaking hands with all. The bride's mother led the way, followed by the bride and other women. The married women wore their best clothes and the girls wore red and black waist-beads and anklets of brass. (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 93).*

The main function of the bride price is to create a tight bond and cement the union between both families. The elders' main prayer is that of reproduction: "We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 93). The festive air in the novels, on the one hand, conveys the birth of cohesion and harmony in both families. On the other hand, it underscores the neutrality of the groom's family. Purposefully, Achebe resorts to an extradiegetic voice to strengthen parents' attachment to marriage. It is, indeed, the whole community's concern: "Kola nut was eaten and the drinking of palm-wine began. Groups of four or five men sat round with a pot in their midst. As the evening wore on, food was presented to the guests. There were huge bowls of foo-foo and streaming pots of soup. There were also pots of yam pottage. It was a great feast" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 94). The more the plot progresses, the more Achebe discloses useful information about the payment of the bride price. Achebe allows the reader/narratee to make a clear comparison between Umuofia, Okonkwo's fatherland, and Mbanta, his motherland. The use of open spaces helps the narrator create contrasts in the procedure. In Mbanta, the bride is subjected to a confession ritual because the girl's virginity is of a paramount importance.

> *They sat in a big circle on the ground and the bride sat in the centre with a hen in the right hand. Uchendu sat by her, holding the ancestral staff of the family […]. Uchendu's eldest daughter, Njide, asked the questions.*
> *'Remember that if you do not answer truthfully you will suffer or even die at child-birth,' she began. 'How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?'*
> *'None,' she replied simply.*
> *'Answer truthfully,' urged the other women.*
> *'None?' asked Njide.*
> *'None,' she answered.*
> *'Swear on this staff of my fathers,' said Uchendu.*
> *'I swear,' said the bride.*
> *Uchendu took the hen from her, slit its throat with a sharp knife and allowed some of the blood to fall on his ancestral staff. From that day Amikwu took the young bride to his hut and she became his wife (C. Achebe, 2008, 105).*

It turns out that the mighty male controlled society imposes on women the oath-taking ceremony to subjugate womenfolk more to their male counterparts. This practice can be viewed as a gender-based discrimination in that only womenfolk go through it. In this regard, this oath-taking safeguards the bride's faithfulness to her potential husband and might well be viewed as humiliating and unfair by feminists. However, from a phallocentric perspective, such a practice protects the bride spiritually and socially testifying to the ability of the bride's family to have educated their daughter adequately.

Achebe's and Darko's depictions of male and female characters show that marriage does not only have a reproductive dimension but it also bears a cultural one. The diegetic level of Achebe's and Darko's narratives, as typical African artists, associates female characters with the latter because female characters as representatives of the African woman need a house to live in and a roof over their heads. In this respect, female characters are mothers and wives. Clearly, womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood are contingent to the cultural meaning of marriage. It empowers men while women are portrayed as the weaker sex. This can be seen in the portrayal of Okonkwo's household where women are viewed only as caretakers and child bearers. Rejecting such an argumentation, E. Palmer (1983, p. 40) contends that as child bearers, women are central to the literal survival of community and societal norms.

Still, in *Things Fall Apart*, the heterodiegetic narrator confesses that marriage is definitely woman's business during the celebration of Obierika's daughter's *uri*[1]: "Everybody had been invited – men, women and children. But it was really a woman's ceremony and the central figures were the bride and her mother" (C. Achebe, 2008, p. 88). Despite this key role played by female characters during the ceremony dedicated to the payment of the bride price, the male characters in Achebe's and Darko's respective novels make women their property. Although Igbo and Fanti are culturally different communities because the former is patrilineal and the latter is matrilineal, Achebe's and Darko's depiction of marriage shows that it is an institution into which one does not venture unprepared, and it is serious enough to venture into it in secret. Unfortunately, in postcolonial African communities, capitalism has made the marriage institution fall apart and the centre can no longer hold.

3. Capitalism and the Downfall of the Traditional Marriage Institution in the focus novels

Postcolonial thinkers believe that independent African countries still experience the effects of the imposition of foreign cultures. This has distorted African countries' social organisation. Therefore, post-colonial novels like those under study have become veritable weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries. Needless to say that committed African novelists' primary concern is to salvage the history of their people that colonisation has taken off or manipulated. Achebe and Darko have used women's experience to criticise the downfall of the traditional marriage institution and that of Africa as a whole. In Achebe's and Darko's societies, the traditional marriage institution consists of the patriarchal elders, fathers and brothers. These latter symbolise an interior colonisation. Within this institution, the patriarchal agents hold the power of decision while women, actually the pillars of the system, are rendered powerless and voiceless. Indeed, the colonial administration introduced the taxation system to collect fund for the administration of the colonies. Therefore, they made marriage gifts a kind of taxation. On this basis, as M. Ogundipe-Leslie wrote: "A man must pay ten pounds or so many hundred francs" (2004, p. 211). By so doing, the colonialists introduced the commercialisation of marriage. Colonialism, obviously, goes hand in hand with capitalism. Consequently, men seize this golden opportunity to make women saleable items. Some men turn their wives into heads of the household because they can no longer meet their family's needs. So negatively does capitalism affect African societies that some men no longer look at the forthcoming of a baby as a good piece of news. Instead, it is a total misfortune since it calls for more responsibilities. In this line of thought, Akobi's utterance, in Darko's *Beyond the horizon*, is very telling: "I have decided that you [Mara] work to earn proper money, now that we are going to increase […]. You have been here long enough now. I can't cater for us all when **your**[2] child comes and I have more important plans" (A.

[1]Marriage in Igbo language

[2] Emphasis, mine. In fact, Akobi's use 'your' here is a way for him to evade responsibilities.

Darko, 1995, p. 17). Akobi's capitalistic attitude toward his spouse tallies with Karl Marx's historical materialism positing that "all social conditions, practices, and beliefs come from the economic or material organization of a culture […]" (K. Klages, 2012, p. 113). The traditional image of the woman as a caretaker has then changed and it comes out here that the Ghanaian feminist writer, Amma Darko, presents her male character, Akobi, as selfish, someone shirking his spousal duties. Beside their traditional roles, African women are forced to be involved in western formulation of jobs. As a mere victim of capitalism and lacking educational skills, they get nothing but menial tasks. In a capitalistic system, those who own the capital and the means of production are the ones holding power. It comes out that, in the focus novels, male characters are the ones holding power as a result of their domination over female characters who therefore belong to the working-class people. The following utterance of Mara is very expressive as it can be read:

> *He […] gave me the capital for my first batch of eggs plus the sieve container in which the land law required cooked foods to be sold, but not before he had made it clear to me that he expected me to repay the capital as soon as I made my first profits. And to blackmail me mentally into keeping my word, knowing how superstitious I was, he made me swear to the river god to drown me if I didn't (A. Darko, 1995, p. 18).*

Like a capitalist, the character Akobi gives with the right hand and withdraws with the left one. This is a clever practice that silences a woman forever because her business can never prosper. This capital, often granted as a loan with a higher interest rate, makes women's business collapse. Most of the time, they end up closing their businesses down. Mara, being ignorant of this practice, is quite surprised at her husband's use of the word 'interest' when he states: "What do you mean paying without interest?" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 21). This is what the majority of uneducated and unskilled African women experience daily in the cities. The permanent quest for wealth renders husbands and fathers heartless and mere mercantilists.

Moreover, since post-colonialism is the discourse of the 'other', it helps to have a sexist glance at women's issues. Purposefully, Mara is called by different names to refer to her status of 'other' as a stupid woman. For the city dwellers, Mara is nicknamed the greenhorn/Johnnie-just come/ Villager-in-town. In this line of thought, a postcolonial reading of the traditional marriage institution makes the female characters the representatives of the Oriental people. The male characters, like the West, impose their rules over women, Oriental people. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe makes the portrayal of the male character, Okonkwo, who looks down on women. Then, the use of a male character as the protagonist conveys the image of the West over the Orient; that is to say, of the African men over African women. Okonkwo associates womenfolk with cooking, gossiping and household chores. For him, a good man is he who regularly beats a stubborn wife. An illustration of this can be seen in his beating Ojiugo – his youngest wife who goes to plait her hair instead of cooking for a rather despotic husband – during the Week of Peace. This act of the central character signals the beginning of the decay.

In fact, the non-linearity of the plot in *Beyond the horizon* corroborates male's supremacy over women even though the autodiegetic narrator is a female character. Mara's marriage starts to fall apart the day her father sells her to Akobi's father without her consent. Mara is informed as if this decision is the best piece of information she has ever got. Mara's mother's attitude to this decision shows the older female generation's extreme passivity and complete submission as she tells her daughter: "Oh, dear child, […] you know your father would consider it rude if I disclosed him to you before he did" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 4). For Akobi's father, female children are mere commodities and can be disposed of as one wishes. The subjective narrator in Darko's *Beyond the horizon* derides on the mercantilist and carefree attitude of her father when she opines: "I later learnt that, drunk from palm-wine and belching boisterously, he had proclaimed that he would gladly have given me away even for one goat" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 7). The idea of transfer is purely Western and Mara's father as its agent sticks to the rule. His drunken state is illustrative in an African context where it is commonly said that truth is in the cup of glass. In other words, whatever a drunken person says is inwardly true and should be taken for granted. In doing so, Mara's father disrupts the marriage institution because parents'

involvement should not mean the total absence of the girl's consent. In order to condemn this practice, Darko opts for a female voice as the central character.

The non-linearity of the plot calls for the author's use of analepsis; the purpose of which is to create emotions such as suspense, curiosity and surprise. The analepsis, known as flashback, tells what happened in the past with respect to the present. Most of the time, the analepsis is used to refer to the main story. The narrator therefore tells the main story in retrospect, which testifies to the use of the first person narrator. Although this is a very limited narrator because he/she cannot read the characters' mind, in *Beyond the horizon*, the first person narrator voices women's disempowerment in postcolonial Africa. As a literary device, then, the analepsis in Darko's debut novel allows the narrator to use Mara and Akobi's city life to point to the rift between the old and the new order and their world-views in postcolonial Africa. This device similarly offers a glimpse at women's status in contemporary African cities and furnishes a background to Mara's experience of wifehood, motherhood and to the critique of (marriage) in the narrative.

Post independent African countries can boast of significant improvements in every domain but there is nothing left for women because they still live in a man's world. Indeed, the story in *Beyond the horizon,* opens with the last stage of a plot, denouement/resolution. The reader/narratee comes into contact with a totally heartbroken and hopeless woman, Mara, whose life like the majority of the African women, has been disrupted by her own father and husband as Mara confesses bitterly: "I am sitting here before my large and oval mirror […]. I am staring painfully at an image. My image? No! – what is left of what once used to be my image […]. I've used myself and I have allowed myself to be used to care any longer […]" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 1). Rather than being a mere complaint of a loose woman, it is the image of the whole continent that this quotation projects into the African's mind. "I am just in brief silky red underpants, so I'm virtually naked, but that is not why I feel so cold because this coldness I feel does not grip my body so much as it does my soul. It's deep inside me that feels this chilliness, from the dejected soul my body harbours, a soul grown old from too much use of its shelter" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 1).

The traditional marriage, devoid of its intrinsic value, is thrown into the garbage tin. The rotten state of marriage is associated with the African city where economy and personal interests rule life. Mara's introduction into this new life reflects the stark contrast between rural and urban spaces. For rural dwellers, city is a paradise where life is easier and smoother. In literature, the city is depicted as the metropolis where a luxurious life can be enjoyed if one is materialistic. In a town, solidarity is out of question. Money rules the world as Mama Kiosk lets Mara know: "You are in the city and in the city nothing is for free, you get me?" (A. Darko, 1995, p. 10) The first day Mara sets her feet on Accra, she begins her disillusionment and thus the signal of her ordeal. Mara feels dismayed by the ugliness of her husband's house as she says:

> *To say I was shocked when Akobi brought me to his home in the city would be an understatement. I was stunned. Our homes in the village were of mud and leaves but no one needed to tell a visitor they were homes. Akobi had to tell me this was his home before I believed it. First, there wasn't the group of huts with large compounds about them and backyard gardens that I was used to in the village, but a cluster of shabbily-constructed corrugated-iron sheet shelters that looked like chicken houses, while all about and between them shallow, open gutters wound system their way (A. Darko, 1995, p. 8).*

Through this depiction of working class people's living conditions, Darko pinpoints the unequal power relations between countrymen and women. The hidden message is the new leaders' mismanagement of their countries. There are not adequate elaborated strategies to enhance a sustainable development. For this reason, the unskilled and low educated people stay at the margin, which justifies Akobi's extreme aggressiveness toward Mara.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the customary marriage practices in African traditional societies have been distorted through the commodification of the traditional African marriage. Achebe's and Darko's great interest in the traditional marriage institution does not come from a vacuum. Although their novels under study are set in different times, these writers remind the readership and the African

community as a whole of the necessity to revisit the African traditional marriage institution. The redefinition of the bride price, they argue, is a sine qua none criterion. Achebe and Darko think that it is unfortunate that African men fail to be true husbands because of materialism. Behaving like white imperialists, Achebe's and Darko's male characters look down on the female characters. As a result, the title of Achebe's debut novel is a prophecy because things really fall apart and the centre can no longer hold. In addition, no prosperous future can be seen beyond the horizon for the oppressed African woman.

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