

BRIGHT EXPECTATIONS and Shattered Dreams

Helen Fallon

Amma Darko was born in the Gold Coast in 1956. A year after her birth her homeland became Ghana, the first African colony to gain independence from Britain. She was brought up by her aunt and uncle. In an interview she explained that she was adopted, but it was a very different system of adoption to the European model. Amma's adoptive mother was unable to have children, so her sister and brother in law, who had a number of children, gave her their baby daughter to bring up as her own.

After graduating in 1980, from the University of Science and Technology at Kumasi, Amma spent five years in Germany. There, in order to survive, she had to take low-paid unskilled work. She has spoken about how she got "a small room in a small village, in a small town. And the people had not seen a black person before. It's not like someone was going to harm me, but you feel hemmed in. You don't want to socialise a lot. You feel safer when you are by yourself." To fill the long lonely evenings she began to write.

A TROUBLED MARRIAGE

Her first novel *Beyond the Horizon* was published in 1991. It tells the story of a young innocent Ghanaian woman called Mara who is told by her mother "Your father has found a husband for you." The husband is Akobi, the son of the local undertaker; a young man filled with self-importance because he is the first child from the village to get a form four school certificate. Armed with his school certificate, Akobi had travelled to the city only to find that city life was "not the glamorous days and nights he had seen in his dreams." Disappointed that the job of messenger clerk is the only one open to him, he dreams of meeting a typist or secretary "who bathes with skin-bleaching soaps and applies skin-lightening creams." When this doesn't happen he tells his father

to find him a wife in the village. Mara is chosen and dispatched to the city, where a life very different to that of the village awaits her.

Like many other African women writers, Amma Darko emphasises the power and support of female friendship. Mammy Kiosk, who gets her name from the kiosk she runs at the main lorry station, befriends Mara and suggests that she sell boiled eggs to travellers at the railway station in order to earn some money.

When Mara returns from her village home, after giving birth to her first child, she is shocked to find that Akobi has sold the cloth and jewellery that were her dowry. He appeases her by telling her he is using the money to buy a plane ticket to Europe: "I will make so much money that I can buy us everything. Everything, Mara! Television, radio, fridge, carpet, even car." Mara, bewitched, listens incredulously as Akobi tells her "In Britain the people are so rich that they throw fridges away. And in Germany they throw cars away." Promising to bring her back six sewing machines so that she can open a sewing shop in the city, Akobi sets off for Germany.

BETRAYED AND HUMILIATED

Over two years pass with very little contact and no money sent by him. Then he sends for her. Too late she realises she has been deceived. He now has a German wife. As the truth about Akobi and his new life unfolds she realises she is trapped. She is concerned that he has not notified his family that he is taking a junior wife. Then she realises that his new wife believes Mara is Akobi's sister. Akobi tells Mara that what is regarded as polygamy in Africa is bigamy in Germany and she must keep up the pretence that she is his sister.



Book Cover courtesy of Heinemann publishers

Eventually forced into the dark world of prostitution, the expectations of her family in Ghana compel Mara to remain in Germany. As she fights back, she finds that the revenge she takes can in no way compensate for her loss of innocence and a lifetime exile from her home country.

While she was in Germany, Amma Darko had met women from Ghana and other West African countries who worked as prostitutes. Talking of these women and the expectations of their families back home Amma noted: "They don't have the heart to disappoint their people... People would really part with things to help you go. A brother would sell a plot of land meant for the whole family, and the family would say that's OK, because we know if you go, you will come back and buy more plots." Amma admits that, because she was only able to get low paid work in Germany, she felt she had disappointed her family.

Amma Darko's second novel, *The Housemaid*, tells how a decomposing newborn infant's body is discovered hidden in a clump of bushes. The mother of the child, a village girl called Efia, works as a housemaid in the city home of Tika, a woman who came to the city in her youth. Tika had found that without education the quickest way to get ahead was to sleep with wealthy men. When Efia becomes pregnant she blames one of Tika's lovers. Her grandmother and mother support



One of the most significant contemporary Ghanaian literary writers, Amma Darko was born in Tamale, Ghana, and grew up in Accra. Her third novel, *Faceless*, has been nominated for the 2005 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

(photo: courtesy Heinemann)

her in this false claim, hoping that it will result in compensation and plenty of money. When their plans go awry, Efia flees. She delivers a baby who dies minutes after birth. Frightened, Efia disposes of the corpse.

The plight of street children in modern Accra is the theme of her most recent novel, *Faceless*.

Amma Darko is married and lives with her husband and children in Ghana. She works as a tax inspector and has said that she gets the ideas for her stories from the people she meets and from listening to the radio. Her characters come to life on the page and, in between the sadness of the stories, there is often hilarious dialogue. ■



GHANA



Ghana is one of the most densely populated countries in West Africa. It lies south of Burkina Faso, between Togo to the east and the Côte d'Ivoire to the west, on the Gulf of Guinea.



In the capital, Accra, the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial (left), commemorates Dr Nkrumah, who was the motivating force behind the movement for the independence of Ghana, then British West Africa. He was its first President when it became independent in 1957. Overthrown by the military in 1966, he spent his last years in exile, and died in Bucharest, Romania, on April 27, 1972.

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Housemaid* are published by Heinemann. *Faceless* is published by Sub-Saharan Publishers, Ghana.