

The Exploitation of African Women: A Feminist Exploration of Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

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ABSTRACT

Gender and social inequalities in the African society have rendered African women vulnerable and susceptible to subjugation and various forms of exploitation. However, the insidious nature of women's exploitation, the factors responsible for it, its magnitude, and overwhelming impact on both victims and society are yet to be fully comprehended and tackled in the African society. Bearing this in mind, this paper adopts the feminist perspective in its identification and exploration of the three major forms of women's exploitation - socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation - highlighted by Darko in *Beyond the Horizon*. It is evident that the perceptions, systems, and structures in society that impel women's exploitation repress and deny them of avenues of self-expression and development and, by implication, society loses potential contributors to its growth and advancement. It then becomes necessary to expose the strategies of the exploiters and proffer solutions to this anomaly.

INTRODUCTION

In her debut novel, *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Darko's commitment to the literary arts and the African woman is revealed. She emphasizes this commitment when she asserts: "I am first and foremost a storyteller who feels inspired to create stories out of pertinent issues. As an African woman also, I feel inclined toward working around female issues" (as cited in "Ghanaian Novelist," 2008, para.1).

Beyond the Horizon made the list of the top twelve books of the Feminist Book Festival in the United Kingdom in 1995. This was a testament to the success of her contributions to the feminist cause by exposing the harrowing forms and avenues of exploitation women encounter in the African society and the diaspora through the experiences of her protagonist, Mara, in her native Ghana and Germany.

Anyidoho (2003) aptly observes that the novel made "immediate and startling impact, as much for the timeliness and urgency of its subject and message, as for the shocking, freshness and frankness of the narrative voice" (p. x). This message, that women's exploitation degrades not only women but, by extension, men and society and, therefore, must be eradicated, has become even more urgent as this problem has currently assumed enormous and global proportions.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine Darko's representation of women's exploitation in a society which Anyidoho (2003) describes as a "merciless" male-dominated African society (p. x). The objectives are to identify and analyze the major forms of exploitation; to reveal their debilitating impact, not only on women, but also on men and the entire African society for better awareness and understanding; and to proffer possible solutions to these problems.

Literature Review

The major motivating factors for the emergence of women's writing in Africa, according to Uko (2006), include the "inter-gender polemics of women-as-outsiders [which] involves issues as the marginality, subjugation and relegation of women" (p. 85), reinforced by the power dynamics in the African society. Uko's perception is substantiated in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* which, since its publication, has received much critical acclaim for its honest depiction of the exploitation African women suffer at home and abroad.

Among the critics who have evaluated Darko's writing is Anyidoho who observes that her novels "tell one long and disturbing tale ... of a diseased society that ... has developed a tragic ability of guiding its young ones, especially the girl

child, into a life dedicated to prostituting every conceivable virtue for the sake of flimsy material possessions" (2003, p. x). Highlighted in this assertion is Darko's indictment of the African society and families that are complicit in the exploitation and victimization of their vulnerable daughters. Clearly, the emphasis on the role of society and families in the exploitation of women is geared towards highlighting the pervasiveness of this problem which has resulted in the degradation of African womanhood.

Chasen (2010) traces one of the root causes of women's exploitation to "intersections among globalization, colonialism and traditional cultural practices [which] contribute to the proliferation of forced prostitution and violence" (p. 3). This perception is valid for these intersections result in new desires, opportunities and challenges in a society where women are torn between the traditional and the modern in ways which, according to Quayson (2007), "make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedoms without severe sacrifices or compromises" (p. 585).

Adjei (2009) also identifies cultural notions and practices as being responsible for the promotion of abhorrent cultural practices in the African society "which leave women consigned to fear, trauma, suffering and death" (p. 48). To reshape the patriarchal values and systems that influence societal attitudes to women, Darko, as posited by Adjei, devalues the image of her male characters to "engineer a new social order in which women are in control of their common destiny" (2009, p. 49). This is in line with feminists' call for the deconstruction of patriarchy to re-conceptualize womanhood by breaking down those patriarchal barriers that stand in the way of women's freedom and progress. In so doing, Darko embraces the concept of re-visioning. Mui and Murphy (2002) explain that this revisioning "[challenges the] traditional theories about power, language, rights, gender, the self, the body ... [which translate] into positions and actions we take in our everyday struggles against violence, harassment, inequality, and restriction on freedom" (p. 4).

Udumukwu (2007) in his assessment of Darko's and other African women's writings also avers:

women's writing in Africa has benefitted from the capacity of literary discourse to restructure consciousness ... by transforming women's traditional way of thinking and perceiving their world ... [serving] as a veritable instrument to overcome alienation ... [enabling us to] apprehend its relationship with the dialectics of action. (pp. 148-149)

This is evident in *Beyond the Horizon* in which Darko proffers education, sisterhood and consciousness-raising as significant avenues through which women can become knowledgeable, support each other, encourage self-awareness and explore their potentials for self-expression and actualization.

Bearing in mind that the woman's story is replete with images and themes which have, for long, revolved around the concept of patriarchy and the subordination of women, the following remark by Ofusu (2013) in her study of the feminist voice in Darko's works is significant and captures the essence of this paper:

[Darko's novels] reflect the nature, causes of, and possible solutions to the numerous feminist issues confronting the contemporary Ghanaian female ... [and] provide important lenses through which we can better understand some of the core cultural contexts of feminist issues in contemporary Africa as a whole. (Abstract)

Evidently, gender and social inequalities create opportunities for predatory men to victimize women through various mechanisms of control. One of such mechanisms is patriarchal ideology which embraces negative socio-cultural practices and norms which increase the risk of women's exploitation. Among other significant factors are the lack of access to education and poverty.

Although critics and scholars have identified exploitation as a catalyst for female objectification and subjugation in the novel, they have failed to properly identify and explain the major forms of women's exploitation highlighted by Darko. Furthermore, the interconnectedness of these major forms of exploitation in the novel has not been established. This gives cause for grave concern because until the underlying factors have been exposed and tackled, the problem of women's exploitation can not be solved.

The significance of this paper, therefore, lies in its identification and analysis, not only of the major forms of women's exploitation highlighted in the novel, but also of the nexus between them which enables them to thrive. This paves the way for consciousness raising and their eventual eradication.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

For its recognition of the role of gender inequality in the exploitation of women and advocacy of parity in the social, economic and political spheres of society, feminism has been adopted as an appropriate theoretical framework for this paper. As Lorber (2005) posits, what feminists want is "a social order that does not privilege men as a category nor give them power over women as a category" (p. 304). For this reason, in addition to their fight to end the exploitation of women by men, feminists also seek the advancement of women through reforms in society that give them access to educational opportunities, economic resources, political power, and equal respect.

To showcase their commitment to the feminist cause, many women writers/activists use their works as platforms to critique patriarchal and sexist values in society that propagate issues such as "... female subjugation, psychological brutality, individual inferiorisation and exclusion on gender lines" (Uko, 2006, p. 82). Darko falls within this category of writers and, for this reason, an analysis of her novel from the feminist perspective, using the qualitative approach, will allow for an in-depth examination and discussion of her protagonist's story vis-à-vis the aim and objectives of this paper.

DISCUSSION OF THE MAJOR FORMS OF WOMEN'S EXPLOITATION

The major forms of exploitation which manifest in *Beyond the Horizon* are socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation. Through her protagonist's experiences which

will be discussed hereafter, Darko highlights their pervasive harmfulness in the African society and the need to eradicate them.

Socio-Cultural Exploitation

Socio-cultural exploitation involves the social conditioning of women to accept patriarchal notions and values which devalue them, reinforce their supposed inferiority to men, and leave them open to manipulation and exploitation. Socio-cultural exploitation plays a major role in the victimization of Mara, the protagonist of Darko's novel. As a girl, Mara is denied an education which would have equipped her with knowledge, skills and self-confidence, thereby facilitating her positive participation in contemporary society. Instead, she is subjected to early marriage, exploited by a father who marries her off to the son of a wealthy man in their village. Mara is, thus, "sold" to Akobi, a clerk, for "two white cows, four healthy goats, five lengths of cloth, beads, gold jewelry, and two bottles of London Dry Gin" (p. 3).

Conditioned to regard the man, her husband, as superior and, as such, deserving of her worship and obedience, she is taken to the city where she commences her duties as a wife, bearing in mind her mother's advice that "a wife was there for man for one thing and that was to ensure his wellbeing, which included his pleasure" (p. 13). Mara dutifully plays the role of the perfect wife despite her husband's maltreatment which eventually degenerates into domestic violence. Mara holds on to the teaching that her husband is always right no matter what he does, a situation which prompts her friend and confidant, Mama Kiosk, to enlighten her thus: "Tradition demands that the wife respect, 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" (p. 13). Unfortunately, this attempt to educate Mara on her traditional rights as a wife fails. She retorts: "Mama Kiosk, I probably have eyes that see blue where you see red. But I would still not like to exchange my eyes for yours. I like my eyes as they are" (p. 14).

For Mara, the successful performance of her wifely duties supersedes everything else. Her response, thus, validates Huber's observation that "when a belief shores up the privileges of the powerful, it may persist even when the factors that brought it into being have weakened" (2007, p. 125). Traditionally, Akobi fails to earn the privilege of being worshipped and obeyed by his wife, but he enjoys both by exploiting her naivety and determination to be the perfect wife. This situation is revealed in the following conversation with Mama Kiosk:

'Hey, I have seen your Ministries man in a new embroidery shirt,' she said once.

'Yes, he bought it yesterday. Isn't it beautiful?' I replied with pride.

'And what did he buy for you?' Mama Kiosk asked.

'Nothing,' I replied. 'Should he have?'

'Tell me,' retorted Mama Kiosk, 'You find it normal that he buys for himself and buys nothing for you?'

'Because he is the man,' I answered. (p. 13)

Evidently, Mara's social conditioning requires her not to question her husband's motives or actions. Ironically, Akobi only marries her as a careful strategy to use her ignorance, naivety and subservience to advance his life economically, much to her detriment. Mama Kiosk fails in her attempt to shake Mara's resolve by informing her that "there's a law that says [husbands] must [care for their wives]" (p. 14) as Mara reveals: "I must say Mama Kiosk nearly convinced me at this point because even though it was true that I saw my mother worship my father daily, I saw, too, that father took ample care of her ... But still I wasn't going to let Mama Kiosk spoil my marriage for me..." (p. 14). Groomed to accept male superiority and domination, and to regard marriage as the zenith of a woman's achievement, Mara becomes prey to Akobi's selfish exploitation. This selfishness becomes even more evident when she announces her pregnancy and he responds with rage because the arrival of "her child" would deplete his resources and affect his plans for a brighter future which, ironically, does not include Mara.

As Chukwuma (1989) observes, the socio-cultural system "of deep-rooted norms and practices and belief in female subordination ... [breeds women's] passivity [and]... acquiescence to the status quo and so a perpetuation of it" (p. 5). To end this form of exploitation, African women must seize every opportunity for consciousness-raising, break their silence and passivity and strive for recognition as humans deserving of equal dignity and respect as men. Had Mara been educated, she may not have fallen prey to early marriage; she would also not have been complicit in her exploitation by Akobi. She would have benefitted more from her sisterhood with Mama Kiosk and become more enlightened and assertive. She would also have demanded her rights as a legitimate wife.

Evidently, self-awareness, assertion, individualism (even in marriage) and the rejection of the culture of sexism are avenues through which the socio-cultural exploitation of women in the African society can be eliminated. In agreement with this notion, Chukwuma (1989) asserts:

Culture is dynamic and, like every human phenomenon, is subject to the pruning machinery of time which slices off outmoded parts to prune it to a modern, progressive, and more acceptable mould. Such change is not only desirable but inevitable. It is one that societies and cultures cannot fight against. Time changes everything and must therefore mould anew the African attitude to women. (p. 14)

The implication of the statement above is that, a change in negative societal prejudices and stereotypical attitudes towards women will diminish the socio-cultural exploitation of women. It is this change that Darko solicits through her novel.

Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation is rife in the African society because it embraces value systems that commodify women. It manifests through the manipulation of women for financial gain or gratification. Economic exploitation is, thus, another predominant theme in Darko's novel. Like Mara, many women in the African society are denied opportunities that would

equip them to challenge and overcome gender inequality and subjugation. Subsequently, ignorance and poverty make them vulnerable to economic exploitation.

Mara's father gives out his daughters in marriage with the total cooperation of his wife even though she is aware, as the daughters are, of their exploitation for financial gain. Mara reveals that her father's formula "for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters ... took into consideration the number of cows coming as bride price than the character of the man" (p. 14). In her case, poverty serves as the extenuating circumstance that propels him to choose Akobi because of his need of Mara's dowry to redeem his debt.

Unfortunately, Akobi regards Mara as a "commodity" bought with the dowry his family pays to marry her. This gives him the leeway to maltreat her by subjecting her to neglect, domestic servitude, and economic exploitation. He had wanted a classy, educated wife and had set his heart on Comfort, a secretary at the Ministries where he worked. Rejected, he marries Mara in a carefully calculated plot to benefit maximally from her labour. He puts this plan to work when he forces her to supplement the meagre sum he provides for their upkeep. He later provides her with capital to start a trade with the proviso that she pays back with interest. Once Mara begins to profit from her trading, Akobi's "more important plans" become evident: he ceases to provide any more financial support and, to concretize his travel plans, sells off Mara's prized possessions - clothes and jewelry - to acquire a visa.

Mara's assumption of the financial responsibility in their home is a violation of the stereotypic traditional "breadwinner code of conduct" which Wood (2009) explains thus: "Perhaps no other stereotype so strongly defines men in our society as does that of breadwinner. Men are expected to be the primary or exclusive wage earners for their families and achieving this is central to how society views men's success" (p. 237). Invariably, a man's identity and self-worth are linked to the successful performance of his role as the breadwinner. However, due to his ulterior motive, Akobi defaults and all efforts on Mama Kiosk's part to make Mara aware of this fail. As a last resort, she cautions Mara: "Mara ... this your Ministries man, he is not only a bad man and a bad husband, he has also got something inside his head. I only hope that he won't destroy you with it ... "(p. 17).

Apparently, Akobi exploits Mara economically to reserve his wages towards his journey to Europe while subjecting her also to domestic abuse to exert his control over her. He also neglects and refuses to acknowledge her in the presence of friends and colleagues. These actions should have been red flags to Mara had she not been so naïve and preoccupied with her socio-cultural commitments.

Mama Kiosk's foreboding, thus, becomes even more significant when Akobi travels to Germany and comes to terms with the harsh realities of migrant life. To ease his burden and his way into a comfortable lifestyle with Comfort, he lures Mara to Europe under false pretenses. There, he continues to exploit her by pushing her, first, to work as a housemaid to earn her keep. Mara narrates:

... I found myself working as a housemaid for a German family. I worked three times a week and sometimes at

weekends if the Madam demanded it. Akobi took the money I earned as payment for the roof he and Gitte had provided over my head, for my food and transport, for the investment in my trip from home and for the cost of setting me up for my coming big job. (p. 106)

The "big job" turns out to be prostitution which Collins (2005) defines as "exploitation for an economic purpose [which involves] the commodification of [women's] sexuality" (p. 177).

According to The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR): "the development of a culture which condones the commodification of individuals (particularly women and children) in an effort to acquire material wealth, increases the vulnerability ... to fall victim to ... exploitation" (2018, p. 21). This observation holds true for Mara and millions like her who are trapped and subjected to modern-day servitude.

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation in *Beyond the Horizon* is presented as an extension of economic exploitation. Mara becomes a victim when Akobi has her trafficked to Europe with the help of an organized trafficking ring on the pretext of uniting them. His objective, however, is to further exploit her financially through prostitution.

Mara arrives in Germany where she is "reunited" with a cold and distant husband whom she can hardly recognize. Cobby, as he is now known, welcomes her with a lewd grin and remark: "I can bet my all that this my most trusted friend Osey here was nice to you" (p. 75). Osey blatantly subjects Mara to sexual harassment while accompanying her on the latter part of the journey, so she becomes uncomfortable and apprehensive, a feeling which increases when he later informs her thus:

... many of us have sold our properties and inheritance and taken money from every member of our family just to come here to work in the factories we heard at home were in abundance and needing workers. You have to come here to know that it is not true. But we have already taken all this plenty money from back home. So how do we return home with empty hands? We must find the money somehow, fair or foul ... (p. 77)

Mara is also casually informed that Akobi now has a German wife of convenience and she must, therefore, live with them as his "sister". As an African wife, she is expected to accept this without complaint because the African culture condones polygyny. Thus, begins her journey of deceit and sexual exploitation for Akobi's benefit.

Two forms of sexual exploitation manifest in *Beyond the Horizon*: personal and consumer sexual exploitation. The first, Mara is subjected to in her marriage to Akobi, while the second occurs when she is blackmailed into prostitution to earn him money. Akobi has no love or respect for Mara but uses her for sexual gratification. When Osey urges him to "welcome" her to Europe properly, which he reluctantly does as a duty, she makes the following observation: "I could as well have been a four-penny whore ... drained of all dignity, filled with abhorrence" (p. 83). Bindman (1998) is, therefore, validated when she notes:

... many women and girls in the industrialized and developing worlds are brought into the sex industry by deception or find themselves forced to stay within it against their will. There is debt-bondage in which the bonded person effectively becomes the property of the creditor until the debt is paid, rendering the bonded person extremely vulnerable to abuse. (p. 67)

In Mara's case, the cost of her transportation to Europe, the debts accrued back home from money borrowed for the journey and her total dependence on Akobi place her in debt-bondage to him. Mama Kiosk's fears materialize as Akobi introduces her to prostitution by drugging and having her participate in an orgy with several men. By filming the orgy, Akobi and Osey blackmail her into prostitution in a sex nightclub. Mara explains:

The situation was this: the three of us were watching a video film that showed me completely naked, with men's hands moving all over my body. Then some held my two legs wide apart while one after the other, men, many men, white, black, brown, even one who looked Chinese took turns upon me. All this was captured clearly on the video film. And this was what Osey and Akobi blackmailed me with so that I agreed to do the job at Peepy. (p. 115)

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) defines sexual exploitation as "a practice by which women are sexually subjugated through abuse of their sexuality and/or violation of physical integrity as a means of achieving power and domination including gratification, financial gain, advancement. (as cited in Doezeema, 1998, p. 37). This definition aptly reflects Mara's experiences and, as expected, the proceeds from the exploitation of her body are split among the exploiters – Akobi, Osey and the owner of the nightclub.

It is pertinent to note that sexual exploitation, like every other form of exploitation, is a violation of women's rights as humans. Mara only realizes the extent of her violation when she becomes aware that the real beneficiary of the rewards of her suffering is Comfort, now secretly resident in Germany, at Akobi's invitation. This is what prompts her to expose Akobi's shady deals to his German wife, Gitte. Subsequently, Gitte divorces and reports Akobi to the authorities who arrest and jail him.

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

One significant fact which becomes evident in the analysis of the various forms of exploitation in the novel and the driving force behind them is their interconnectedness: they are all extreme outcomes of gender inequality which overlap and reinforce one other. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in their evaluation of the problem of gender inequality assert that "... gender inequality is a characteristic of most societies, with males on average better positioned in social, economic, and political hierarchies ... gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain the behaviour of women and men in ways that lead to inequality" (2013, pp.162, 163). Apparently, gender inequality is inevitable in the African society due to its

patriarchal nature. For Mui and Murphy (2002), patriarchy breeds power relations controlled by men which place women in a disadvantaged position. They further reveal:

Men have created external barriers to women's freedom by setting up restrictive laws, customs, and social rules. This social reality to the extent that it has been instrumental in shaping women's self-definition, preferences, and desires, in turn becomes part of women's psyche, creating an internal barrier, as it were, to women's freedom. (p. 7)

The view above is largely evident in Mara's self-perception and relationship with Akobi which leave her open to exploitation.

Macionis (2006) also explains that "sexism, the belief that one sex is innately superior to the other, is the ideological basis of patriarchy ... [which] is built into the institutions of our society" (p. 254). Gender inequality, therefore, thrives in the various structures of the African society, reinforcing the oppression and marginalization of women through the denial of equal opportunities and access to resources that would enhance their lives and social progress.

In Barry's opinion, "patriarchal societies ... where women are ... the 'properties of men' and where [they] are often ignorant, poor, uneducated, family-oriented, [and] victimized..." (as cited in Kempadoo, 1998, p. 11) render them vulnerable to exploitation. Evidently, had Mara received formal education, instead being tutored in the traditional rudiments of wifedom, she would have stood a better chance against the various forms of exploitation she suffers. Instead, she becomes a statistic of systemic exploitation facilitated by gender inequality.

As acknowledged by Hawkins (2017), "solutions that encompass and address the seamless connections between all forms of exploitation" must be found ("It can't Wait," para. 37). To this end, one must not only identify the forms of exploitation in the society but also take cognizance of the evidence of gender inequality which connects and reinforces them.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to identify and analyze the forms of women's exploitation highlighted in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* with a view to revealing the factors responsible for them, and their impact on women. In the process, it has been established that the patriarchal nature of the African society facilitates three major forms of women's exploitation - socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation - as highlighted in the novel. Also discovered is the fact that these forms of exploitation are inextricably linked by gender inequality which sustains them, resulting in the subordination, dehumanization and marginalization of many African women. Consequently, education, consciousness raising, sisterhood, economic independence and self-affirmation are advocated as some of the avenues through which women can be empowered to elude these forms of exploitation.

Darko is numbered among the feminist writers and activists who have called for the complete eradication of patriarchy and gender inequality and, although this seems

farfetched, the UNDP proffers the following suggestion: "The complexity and multi-dimensionality of the drivers of inequality call for a complex and multi-dimensional response. In fact, only a generally holistic approach can fully address the multiple factors that cause inequality and create the conditions for a truly inclusive society" (2013, p. 2).

In addition, as observed by Pritchard (2014), for an effective intervention, feminists do not only "define, establish, and defend equal political, economic, and social rights for women ... [but also recognize that] men's liberation is a necessary part of feminism and that both men and women are diminished by sexism" (p. 314). In view of this, Darko's adoption of the feminist perspective becomes significant as it allows her to paint, through her female characters, a vivid picture of gender inequality as the underlying cause of female exploitation in the African society and to prove, albeit indirectly through her portrayal of Akobi, his strategies of exploitation, and his subsequent divorce, arrest and imprisonment, that in the process of exploiting women, men harm themselves and society as well.

Darko's Mara is, therefore, a significant example of the subjugated African woman, battered and scarred physically, psychologically, emotionally and economically through socio-cultural, economic and sexual exploitation as we witness in her revealing self-assessment:

I am staring painfully at an image. My image? No! - what is left of what once used to be my image ... Tears are building up in my eyes. They always do when I stare at what is left of me ... I sit here alone before my large oval mirror and stare painfully at this bit of garbage that once used to be me and I cry. (pp. 1, 2, 3)

Mara represents the African woman, victimized and stripped of her pride, dignity and humanity through exploitation. She is a woman who must not only be rescued but rehabilitated and empowered to rise above her limitations.

It then becomes clear that unless African governments put into place and act on policies that decimate the inequities that exist at all levels of the African society, women will continue to be subordinated and exploited. The structures that support and facilitate the exploitation of women both at home and in the diaspora, be they human or systemic, must be investigated, exposed and destroyed.

Government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, feminists and women's groups should also develop agendas that involve the organization of programmes and campaigns to raise awareness and sensitize women and the public on women's exploitation. This will make women aware of, and less vulnerable to the strategies adopted by the exploiters and, with time, lead to fewer women being victimized. Also, established laws on women's exploitation must be fully enforced and those found culpable of breaking them brought to book.

Finally, Udumukwu's perception of consciousness-raising as "a core issue in feminist ideology and discourse ... [which] has contributed in no small way in reclaiming the woman's story in postcolonial Africa" (2007, p. 149) is validated, for with feminist writers such as Darko playing their part in the process of intervention through their literary

works, the menace of women's subordination and exploitation in the African society will gradually dissipate.

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