

Re-interpreting Rural-Urban Moral Binarism in Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* and Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*

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Abstract

*Many studies of the African novel amplify the devaluation of the city preferring the countryside where the balance between human beings and nature is ostensibly better sustained. However, recent trends in the African novel which depict social anomie and mass disenchantment as resulting in urban-rural reflux call for a new strategy towards re-thinking the city. This paper offers a new approach of looking at the city by confronting the rural bias which tends to privilege the countryside over the urban space. The study aims to discover why characters' experiences are as unpleasant in the village as in the city. It employs a close-reading technique that engages the city as a 'living space' in two selected African novels, *A Cowrie of Hope* by Binwell Sinyangwe from Zambia and *The Housemaid* by Ghanaian Amma Darko. The two novels are selected for being representative of recent novels focusing on the city. In the two texts, the city becomes the logical home, not a transit camp for the multitudes that besiege it. Because it is there that major decisions are made for rural migrants, it comes across as an empowerment locus for womenfolk as they seek visibility and fulfilment. However, events in the two novels suggest that although the city offers recompense to African women who flee the countryside to escape its patriarchal structure, women living in the city are not necessarily happier than their counterparts in the village. In the end, neither the village nor the city is a haven; each demands choices that are both personal and public.*

Keywords: rural-urban, moral-binarism, Sinyangwe, Darko

Introduction

The variety of possible interpretations of the city is
matched only by the multifaceted character of urban life
- Max L. Stackhouse (1966: 26)

Literary encounter with the city moves from the early novel in England to the momentous cityscapes of the American novelist: Thomas Pynchon (*V*, 1963, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1965, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973, *Vineland*, 1990, *Mason & Dixon*, 1997, *Against the Day*, 2006, *Inherent Vice*, 2009, and *Bleeding Edge*, 2013). Pynchon writes with the conviction of someone who has a profound understanding of the complexities of the world. He creates characters that are not only strange but also shady, thereby leaving the reader with the conclusion that there are no easy answers to life's unending problems. Interest in urban life continues to bloom and along the way, it gathers a rich entourage that includes Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Bram Stoker, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Italo Calvino, Harriette Arnow, Elena Ferrante, Edward P. Jones, Jason Lutes, Leonard Gardner and Joyce Carol Oates among others. The question of what the novelist does with the experience of the city is of great importance because of the special relationship between the rise of the city and the rise of the novel. The potential of the novel as a suitable vehicle for addressing the full range of contemporary issues, personal and political, local and national, may be compared to the development of the city as a location for an enormous range of people and activities. Indeed, the urban experience may have had its effect on the form and content of the novel as Malcolm Bradbury (1976, cited in Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, 1994, 6), points out: "one might argue that the unutterable contingency of the modern city has much to do with the rise of that most realistic, loose and pragmatic of literary forms, the novel." Thus, cities may have been seen as a kind of purgatory or hell, as in Eliot's "unreal city" where death has "undone so many," (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922, cited in Preston and Simpson-Housley, 1994, 6) but they were also "generative environments" for intellectual debate and artistic experimentation, as well as "novel environments, carrying within themselves the complexity and tension

of modern consciousness and modern writing” (Bradbury, “*Cities*,” in Preston and Simpson-Housley, 1994, 6).

Writers have tended to look upon the city as inherently bad, or at best, a necessary evil that must be tolerated. Cities seem to exist in sharp contrast to the countryside; one ‘natural,’ the other ‘unnatural.’ It will appear that the countryside’s potential for growth gives it the advantage of being labelled natural while the city’s glaring decay and constant demand for maintenance has continued to work not in its favour making the people perceive it as being unnatural. Cities all over the world are regarded as deadly places to live in due to health problems resulting from contaminated water and air and communicable diseases. Garbage and sewage are also major problems confronting cities all over the world. Other problems impacting negatively on the city include crime and high traffic. Because interactions amongst people take place more in the cities than in rural areas, there is a higher tendency for people to contract contagious diseases in cities.

Earlier African writers have tended to preoccupy themselves with issues of colonialism, imperialism and the clash between the western and African culture. Significantly, however, many contemporary African writers are moving away from these ‘ancient’ concerns to explore other areas of African collective experience. One of such ‘new’ areas in African literature is the rural-urban influx which appears to be providing a very reductive preoccupation especially in recent decades. Of particular significance to the African novel are trends which demonstrate social anomie and mass disenchantment resulting in urban-rural reflux. This calls for a new strategy of re-thinking the city. The need for a new approach to looking at the city by confronting the rural bias is therefore mandatory if we are to discover why characters’ experiences are as unpleasant in the village as in the city.

Perennial Devaluation of the City in Literature

The biblical reference to the City of Babylon as “the Mother of all the prostitutes and perverts in the world” (Revelation chapter 17, verse 5) seems to have set the dark tone which pervades nearly all city novels. Also, the human propensity to pick out what is wrong with a situation has ensured that each generation of writers attempts to find reasons to justify a discomfiting notion of the city as the

source of human failing. Plato anchors his negative view of the city in the unregulated interaction of people of higher and lower virtues in society which the city permits. He believes that this unregulated interaction has a capacity to induce a corruptive force which, although may be independent of human will, nevertheless is capable of making the society ungovernable. Plato prefers that human beings be restricted and regimented to predetermined roles so as to prevent corruption, dissidence, treason and instability. Consequently, he limits the size of his ideal city to the number of citizens who can be addressed by a single voice failing which cities are banned from his ideal republic (John Reader, 2004, 12).

Other factors that have contributed to the consistent negative depiction of the city in literature include the Industrial Revolution which is credited with radically transforming the more human *polis* into an impersonal hub of communications. Leslie Fiedler (1981) recalls that the transformation appeared to be a blessing rather than a curse initially as it created more work, more goods and eventually lifted more men and women above the subsistence level. Ironically, however, he explains that it also raised expectations even higher and made those still excluded and deprived more aware of their suffering. Worse still, the Industrial Revolution is blamed for creating a kind of alienation of humankind from the natural world. Further to the impact of the Industrial Revolution is capitalism which reportedly exacerbated the already horrid circumstances of the early decades of the Industrial Revolution. Capitalism is widely criticised for institutionalising a culture of shameless profit-seeking, material acquisition, and exploitation of labour. It is believed to have created congested streets, where the craving for the means of livelihood turned millions into desperate opportunity seekers. Eventually, this twin evil led to what is generally regarded as the Romantic Movement and saw to the emergence of a class of poets known in literature as the Romantic Poets who saw the post-industrialised urban environment as essentially anti-poetic and destructive. Although the poets differed in their views, yet collectively they wrote great poetry in their total rejection of the modern city and were unanimous in their desire to withdraw into the friendlier environment of nature where they believed they could live and write poetry. To them, the surroundings of nature were natural and uncorrupted unlike

the city with its smoke and slums which were created by the factories.

Thus, as industrialisation developed in Europe, what might be described as pastoral debate – City versus Country, Culture versus Nature and Mechanical versus Organic – took on a greater urgency as the city came to be regarded as the most obvious symbol of a new and pressing reality. Wordsworth, in Book VII of *The Prelude*, discovers in London some of the delights of variety and energy; but ultimately finds no difficulty in rejecting its sights, sounds and inhabitants. His images of London are conveyed in a sense of falsity so much that he sees in London: “those mimic sights that ape / The absolute presence of reality... imitations, fondly made in plain / Confession of man’s weakness and his loves” (247-8,254-5, cited in Preston and Simpson-Housley, 1994, 4). Wordsworth admits that there is allure and entertainment from theatre to law courts, all of which London offers him and which culminates in his description of Bartholomew Fair as a crowded variety but Preston and Simpson Housley observe that his summing up of the fair also becomes his summing up of what the city means to him:

Oh, blank confusion! And a type not false
Of what the mighty City is itself
To all except a straggler here and there,
To the whole swarm of its inhabitants;
An undistinguishable world to men,
The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,
Living amid the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end.

(695 – 704, cited in Preston and Housley, 4).

Obviously, it is not difficult for Wordsworth to reject the city in favour of the rural area. The Romantic poets note that the landscape itself exists only as perceived and becomes a metaphor for the observer’s state of mind. Rana Singh argues that we see the city through the filter of the writer’s imagination, which produces a very particular and idiosyncratic way of seeing.

Like the Romantic poets, many writers of fiction view the city around the idea of alienation and oppression, the sense of how individual lives may be lost in the busy aggregation of the city (*Writing the City*, 1994, 6). That aggregation, with its opportunities for losing oneself in the crowd, may offer a kind of freedom and possibility, but many writers often suggest in their writings that the freedom almost always proves to be illusory. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley (1994), chronicle the perception of the city as a place of violence and alienation in Elmore Leonard's *Detroit* and Bernard Mac Laverty's *Belfast*. They also make reference to Lorne Foster's description of Detroit as a city "of Hobbesian brutes in business suits, where civility in its full sense had broken down and the social contract is radically breached" (*Writing the City*, 1994, 10). In this city, "only the rules of confidence tricksters and casual violence apply; cops and robbers, operators and their marks are caught in an eternal dance" (11). In *Detroit* and *Belfast*, the cities have their human scale and have become symbols of disorder, because for the inhabitants of the cities, there is a link between urban decay and inner breakdown just as the presence in a community of one family from the "wrong" side of the divide leads to persecution and violence. There are sharp differences between the dwellings of the rich and of the poor leading to ignorance, incomprehension and conflict between the classes.

Studies have also shown that crime rates in the cities are higher, the chances of punishment after getting caught are lower and the higher concentration of people in cities creates more items of greater value that are worth the risk of crime. The high concentration of people which creates traffic problems also results in less time being spent on more valuable activities. Apart from environmental problems, Louis Wirth (1938, 2) identifies other problems of the city when he asserts that the "city is characterized by secondary rather than primary contacts." He posits that although the contacts of the city may actually be face-to-face, they are nonetheless "impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmented." He adds:

Our acquaintances tend to stand in a relationship of utility to us in the sense that the role which each one plays in our life is overwhelmingly regarded as a means for the achievement of our own ends. Whereas the individual gains, on one hand, a certain degree of

emancipation or freedom from the personal and emotional controls of intimate groups, he loses, on the other hand, the spontaneous self-expression, the morale and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society (2).

The tendency to dislike the city also finds adequate expression in African literature with African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, among several others, drawing a sharp contrast between the city and the countryside in their novels. In spite of the age-long devaluation of the city, however, there are recent and fascinating trends about the city in African literature that are worthy of investigation. This paper is intrigued by what seems to be an emerging modification in the figuration of the city in literature. The new figuration, exemplified by Amma Darko and Binwell Sinyangwe's novels, is that the gap between the urban space and the village is no longer as wide as it was thought to be. This is in terms of the comfort each can provide its residents, or their capacity to insulate their denizens from pain. In other words, living in the village comes with challenges that were not recorded by earlier literature.

Recent Perspectives on Notions of the City in African Literature

In his book, *The African City: A History* (2007), Bill Freund traces the evolution of cities from a variety of beginnings into sites where more and more complex activities take place and avers that "at a certain point historically, the city may look parasitic on the productive countryside where the balance between human beings and nature is so much better sustained;" but that further along the line, the city becomes "the logical home for multitudes" because of social and economic activities that are fundamental to the material life of mankind which take place in the city and with that, the balance between city and countryside changes (vii). He observes further that "cities attract friends and enemies" and that while the city may be the site of alienation and oppression "where modernity becomes a prison for man and woman," more importantly, it is "a symbol of wisdom and balance, of good life and of democratic politics" (vii). Freund cites the example of Andrew Hake's classic study of Nairobi called the "self-help" city and published in 1974 in which Hake posits that the poor dwellers in the city, far from being parasites, are there for a

reason – “to make themselves and their families a better life” (153) adding that they also perform important services, create their own employment and make useful contributions to the economy. Freund’s account confirms that the postmodernists’ view of the city also holds that the poor dwellers in the city do not drag down the economy but are actually engaged in building it up.

He celebrates the distinguished Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, who, in getting to know Lagos, declares that he has come to know the city not merely as a “welter of disaster, chaos and crime, but also as a place where massive traffic jams inspire equally massive numbers of informal sector traders to find their customers and where the complex processes of waste disposal lead to the creation of vast numbers of jobs and to ingenious forms of recycling” (Rem Koolhaas in *Under Siege*, 2002, 183. cited in Freund, 164). Freund also quotes the Dutch architect as having described Lagos “as a patchwork of self-organisation that has evaded the rigorous organisations of ‘70s planners” (Rem Koolhaas in *Under Siege*, 2002, 183. cited in Freund, 164).

Edward Glaeser (2011) agrees with Freund’s submission on the city. Glaeser contends that although cities can be places of inequality because they attract some of the world’s richest and poorest people; nevertheless, he expresses his conviction that the poverty in a city often shows that the city is functioning well. He maintains that cities attract poor people because they are good places for poor people. Glaeser finds studying the city “so engrossing because they pose fascinating, important, and often troubling questions.” In his book, *Triumph of the City* (2011), he asserts that cities have been engines of innovation “since Plato and Socrates bickered in an Athenian marketplace” (1). Not losing sight of the personal experiences of many city dwellers which seem to suggest that city roads are paved to hell and that the inhabitants of the city are at the losing end of the triumphs of the city, Glaeser nevertheless posits that cities have and will continue to expand enormously because urban density provides the clearest path from poverty to prosperity. Taking a firm positive view of the city, Glaeser queries the anti-urbanites of all ages and debunks Mahatma Gandhi’s declaration that “the true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its 700,000 villages” (7) and that “the growth of the nation depends not on cities, but on its villages.” Glaeser insists that “the

great man was wrong,” asserting that India’s growth depends almost entirely on its cities and that there is a near-perfect correlation between urbanisation and prosperity across nations (7).

Another area of interest in recent notion of the city is gender related. Not only are women increasingly being made protagonists in urban works, African women may also be seen as fulfilling three key functions in city novels. The first is to enjoy the city as a place of refuge where they find true liberation, for the first time, from the clutches of traditional practices that have tended to degrade them and diminish their individuality for so long. The second is to deal with the city’s violence and indifference. The third is to offer some kind of redemptive escape from the city’s excesses. At the end of Sefi Atta’s novel, *Everything Good Will Come* (2008) the little hope the reader perceives is gender-related, and can be understood as deriving from her feminism and belief that the true political literature of our time permits women to become educated and thus able to share in the world’s collective burdens. The positive disposition of Atta’s heroine is an affirmation of Joyce Carol Oates’ assertion of some of the greatest and most fascinating assets of the city that:

The city’s [...] promise of wages for work - wages agreed upon in advance – make the individual possible for the first time in history (Oates in M. C. Jaye and A. C. Watts, 18).

Indeed, the new trends in the African novel suggest that women who live in the city can command economic resources of their own; they are courageous, fearless, and they take initiative. They are capable of meeting their difficulties philosophically by having zest for life. Hence, female characters in recent urban novels are not like the insipid creatures that moon submissively in the world of earlier narratives most of which are written by men. It is deliberate, therefore, that the two novels selected for this study use women as subjects.

Synopses of *A Cowrie of Hope* and *The Housemaid*

A Cowrie of Hope and *The Housemaid* are drawn from different regions of Africa, the Southern and Western regions respectively. What is common to both novels is that they are post-independence

narratives capable of providing useful insight into post-colonial experience of urban dwellers and city life in Africa.

A Cowrie of Hope narrates the triumphant story of Belita Bowe, copiously referred to in the novel as Nasula, meaning, mother of Sula. Nasula is an orphan without relatives, and a widow with neither education nor a skill. Yet, she undertakes a brave struggle to ensure that her only child, Sula, gets an education in spite of the sordid condition mother and daughter live in. Although, she had been trifled with as a wife to her equally illiterate husband, Wineo Chiswebe, when he was alive and despised by her in-laws both before and after her husband's death, Nasula had also been privileged to live in the city having been married off at an early age and taken to the capital city, Lusaka, to live with her husband and his parents. The reader will later see her hold tenaciously to the knowledge of the young women she met during her earlier sojourn in the city. In the meantime, her lack of education and the dictates of her husband and in-laws ensure that she survives by merely being a house wife, depending solely on her husband for her needs and the upkeep of her daughter. Her husband, who combines stealing with his regular job as a labourer, loses his job after he is caught stealing. He dies eventually when he is gunned down by the police while trying to escape from a crime scene.

Characteristic of African in-laws who are quick to target the wife for blame and persecution over a man's misfortune, Nasula is promptly accused of being responsible for her husband's death. To further compound her anguish, her in-laws decide to pass her on in marriage to her husband's younger brother, Isaki Chiswebe, an equally irresponsible and randy man who already has three wives. Nasula is poor but dignified. She refuses to be passed around like a commodity. Having lived in the city with her husband and notwithstanding the pitiable condition she lived in, she realises the potential of the city to bring improvement to life and wishes to go on living there. This is however not possible as her in-laws not only ensure that she is denied all the money her husband leaves behind for the up-keep of their only child, they go as far as selling the house she had shared with her late husband thereby rendering her homeless. With no relative to turn to, she spends many nights at the bus station trying to find her way back to Swelini, her home village in Luapula where the only available option for survival is to till the land. But

“these were the nineties”, the omniscient narrator informs darkly; “the years when there was a harshness and hardness in the land that had little sympathy for the weak” (*A Cowrie of Hope*, 30). These events occurred at a historical period in Zambia when “the rains were not enough” (39), “new people were in government” (30), and “the crops were [...] not good (40), Hence, in this novel, “the nineties were difficult years. [...] They were dangerous years” (30) because citizens’ lives had been complicated by drought and scarcity of fertilizers. Consequently, Nasula continues to wallow in poverty and penury with her daughter. She does not give up trying. She devotes her life, energy and time to raising her only child, and in particular ensuring that she gets an education. Nasula desires that her only child will one day be counted among the educated women in her country:

She had not forgotten [...] the faces and voices of those young women of good education and good jobs in offices who came to [...] where she lived with Winelo, to talk to the women of the compound about the freedom of the woman. What they said about the importance of knowing how to read and write and of having a good education, what they said about the rights of a woman to stand on her own. [...] In them she saw Sula her daughter and in Sula she saw them (8).

Upon her return to the village and following her tireless efforts at seeing to the continuous progress of her daughter, Sula eventually graduates in flying colours from primary school, known as Grade nine, and is eligible to go further to grade 10, which is a secondary boarding school, the St. Theresa’s School. However, this will be subject to her mother being able to pay her fees and buy the required materials for boarding house. This is the climax of the novel – Sula secures secondary school admission but her mother lacks the financial resources to pay her fees. Eventually, Nasula accepts the proposition of her ebullient friend, Nalukwi, to take the only possession she has in the world, a bag of beans, to the city to sell so as to raise money for her daughter’s fees. However, “men of the city in suits and ties who looked like ministers or even the president himself turning into cheats and thieves” (88) lay in wait for her and in spite of her carefulness, she falls into the trap of Gode Silavwe, a notorious beans thief who is infamous for dispossessing traders

especially village folks who are coming to the city for the first time to do business. Although Silavwe succeeds initially in stealing Nasula's beans, thereby casting a heavy cloud on the possibility of Sula getting proper education, Silavwe is caught eventually and made to pay for the beans, thanks to the incorruptible police chief and Nasula's resilience as she returns to the city and persists in hunting for the thief.

The Housemaid tells the story of a hitherto village-based teenager, Efia, who is tired of living in the village and longs to escape to the city. She is enamoured of her city-dwelling village folks who visit home yearly for the new yam festival with glamour and glitz to the admiration and envy of villagers. Specifically, Efia has been a childhood friend of Akua, who, upon relocating to the city through sheer determination, begins to visit the village annually just to put her city lifestyle on display thereby escalating Efia's desperation to leave the village for the city to fever pitch.

Fortunately for Efia, it seems, she has a grandmother who, apart from being greedy and completely bereft of moral compass, is also possessed of the 'wisdom of the gods and ancestors' of the village (*The Housemaid*, 46) who 'directs' her to scheme about how to undeservedly take over the wealth and material possessions of "a rich but wasted" city woman who has "no womb at all" (46). The city woman, Tika, is the daughter of the old lady's late townsman whose death indirectly resulted from the mistreatment he received from his city wife who is also Tika's mother. At thirty-five, Tika is unmarried, although she was involved in a love relationship with Owuraku when she was just eighteen. While Owuraku passed his school certificate examinations with distinctions, Tika failed hers miserably giving her the excuse to divert her attention from education to business. Her decision to jettison education is encouraged by her knowledge that her mother, Sakywa, despite being an illiterate, became wealthy through Tika's father who set up his wife in business. Unfortunately, however, the man's kind gesture to his wife only earned him disrespect, scorn and mistreatment all of which eventually culminated in his death. Being aware of the grave injustice and unfair manner her mother treated her father who had nothing but genuine love and respect for his wife, Tika is unable to forgive her mother and is determined to placate her father's spirit by supporting and practically adopting a citizen of her father's village also as a way of

making it up to her father's people. This is the noble intention Efia's grandmother converts to her mischievous advantage when the village cum city woman, teacher, who helps in recruiting young village girls to work as housemaids for city women luckily knocks on the door of Efia's parents, wanting to recruit her for Tika's double purposes of securing for herself a housemaid and fulfilling her dream of being a benefactor to her late father's folks.

Acting on her evil design, grandmother instructs her granddaughter to get pregnant for any man as soon as she arrives in the city upon which she and Efia's mother would ride on their poverty and lack to plead with Tika to assume absolute care and responsibility over the new baby and adopt it because "it is the wish of the ancestors to bring the joy of a crying baby into her life" (48). The expectation is that since Tika is childless, she would jump at the opportunity to have a child to call her own. It is also part of the old lady's plan that once Tika accepts the unborn child as hers, it would become the logical inheritor of all Tika's life possessions which would in turn mean that Efia and her family would dump their poverty garb forever. The old lady is careful in her plan to include the caveat that when her granddaughter gets pregnant, she must "refuse to name the father [...] because it will save us the risk of some foolish man getting up one day to lay claim to the child" (47). In the midst of all these, they will not lose sight of their task "to make sure that the child never forgets who her real mother is" (48).

Unfortunately for the old lady and worse for Efia, the plan boomerangs. Unknown to the old lady, Tika does not wish to have children and has deliberately procured an abortion shortly before employing Efia. In what seems to be a contest between the village wisdom of the gods and ancestors and the city's ways, Efia is eventually pressured into revealing the identity of the man that impregnated her, a task she has not been coached to do. The result is that she names a man who although is one of Tika's numerous lovers, but is incapable of fathering a child. Persuaded by Tika to play along in order to unravel the truth about Efia's pregnancy, Nsorhwe demands that a paternity test be carried out to ascertain that he is the father of Efia's pregnancy, the bubble bursts quite easily and the seemingly carefully put together machinations of the old lady fall to pieces.

The impending consequence of these events is that Efia's career as housemaid and city dweller has painfully come to an end and she is again village bound. The reasons are obvious, the paternity test being sought by Nsorhwe will be negative and Tika has no intention of having Efia's baby as a foster or adopted child. She aborted her own pregnancy because she does not wish to give birth to a child who would have no respect for her because of the dirty circumstances of its birth, just as she has no respect for her own biological mother who birthed her under scandalous circumstances. Tika seems to be saying that it takes more than biologically birthing a child to be a parent to that child, and that those who cannot live up to the responsibility of being responsible parents should have no business bringing forth children. Faced with the unfortunate prospect of returning to the village, Efia takes a desperate step: She steals Tika's money and hides it with her childhood friend, Akua, until she falls into labour. With no medical care, it is hardly surprising that her baby arrives with a down syndrome. Determined to remain in the city at all cost, she decides to send her child to the village to her mother but when the child dies shortly after birth, she returns to Teacher to help her plead with Tika to take her back. Efia has no education and no skill, how will she survive in the city? Like Akua, the potter? This is where the story ends but it may also be where another one begins for it is not only Efia that is in a dilemma, perhaps, the city, once again saddled with the task of playing host to an ill-equipped denizen, is worse off.

Analyses of A Cowrie of Hope and The Housemaid

What is most fascinating about *The Housemaid* is that it deconstructs two very important theories about the city. One is that immorality and negative values are to be found in the city but not in the countryside. Over the years, writers and literary critics have suggested that rural dwellers that migrate to the city are deserving of sympathy because they are coming into an environment that is not only different, but also dangerous due to rampant immorality, corruption and other negative tendencies usually associated with urban centres. Successive generations of writers and scholars all over the world have continued to lament and decry the crisis of urbanisation which often arises due to the unavailability or inadequacy of the means of solving problems created by a mass

movement of people from rural areas to urban centres. People of diverse backgrounds come together in the city creating a problem of corrupting influence on one another, although they also impact positively on one another. The social infrastructure in the city such as energy, water supply, housing, transportation, waste disposal system and other social amenities are grossly inadequate. Employment opportunities and other avenues for generating wealth which most of them desperately seek are not easily available. Consequently, city dwellers engage in unhealthy competition and a rat race that leads to nowhere. All of these problems, and more, constitute the crisis of urbanisation because the means of solving the problems are not there or because they are inchoate and not effective.

Familiar rendering of city life in African fiction maintains that village folk, often referred to as the 'rural innocent' are largely unaware of the existence of this crisis before coming to the city and that they easily fall prey to corruptive influences on arrival because the city has nothing but negative values to impact on them. Contrary to this submission, Darko's novel shows how an old woman who ought to be a symbol of decency, and who should be desirous of bequeathing a legacy of chastity to her granddaughter schemes for her teenage granddaughter to go to the city and get 'innocently' pregnant. The reader is confronted with a shameless display of greed which was hitherto associated with the city. It is city people in literature that are known to be covetous, greedy, and shameless. Also, the 'rural innocent' are traditionally the helpless lot who are predisposed to danger and destruction consequent upon tasting the 'city sin' which quickly erodes their much cherished village values. Eustice Palmer (1979) succinctly captures this argument when he asserts that:

The rural innocent... who is ignorant of the qualities needed to survive in the hot-house that is the city and who is quite often inadequately equipped as far as education is concerned, to qualify for the more lucrative jobs the city offers is sucked into the miasma of urban corruption and forgoes his avowed goals. Shady substitutes like crime, stealing, alcoholism, excessive materialism and prostitution are then sought (Eustice Palmer, 1979, cited in Ikonne *et al*, 24).

This theory suggests further that part of what makes a city a city is its sexual permissiveness and capacity to impact negative values on the 'rural innocent' who arrive in the city without being aware of the city's ways. However, *The Housemaid* deconstructs this notion by showing that sexual and other forms of immorality exist in the rural area as well. Therefore, contrary to the age-long belief in village folk being the custodian of morality, in this village, sex is a means of entertainment. Consequently, a twenty-two year-old man has impregnated twelve girls and even worse, young girls who are mostly hawkers sleep with men indiscriminately.

Kataso, a village in the eastern hills, had no flowing water, no electricity, no entertainment centre, nothing. Which therefore left sex as the only really affordable entertainment in Kataso. Everyone – young, old, mature and immature – indulged in it freely (29).

The heroine's friend and fellow village folk, Akua, who will later become the heroine's benefactor in the city, provides a useful insight into the endemic nature of sexual laxity in the village. When Akua is set to leave the village for the city, having grown tired of living in the village, she walks to the next village to:

... position herself on the Accra-Kumasi highway.
...a contractor's truck stopped for her. 'Where to?'
The driver asked curtly. 'Kumasi.' 'You have the money to pay me?' 'No.' He groaned. 'So you won't pay me?' Akua unbuttoned her blouse. The driver's eyes blazed with consent. She removed her pants. He grinned, and stopped the truck in a secluded bend. 'But don't make me pregnant.' Akua cautioned. 'I won't,' and he covered her nipples with his lips. Akua liked it (30-31).

Her boldness stems from the fact that this is the way they survive in her village but this scenario negates the popular view about the village. And if we are to regard this high sense of immorality and absolute lack of decorum as the new village ethic, how more decadent can the city be? Perhaps what makes the situation even more complex is that the city is not faring any better. We must pay

greater attention to the village-city ethics because it is the city that is known for corrupting the individual. But when the individual who is supposed to come to the city to experience the city 'sin' brings even greater 'sin' to the city, what then is the fate of the city that is already battling with its own 'sin' and corruption?

Two, the notion of the village as previously held in literature has often created situations in which rural folk who migrate to the city often return to the rural area after a fruitless struggle for survival in the city. This is the scenario in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Sefi Atta's *Swallow* but this does not happen in *The Housemaid*. Even when her employer sends her away, Efiya does not leave the city, she goes to hibernate in a friend's place and at the end of the novel, she demonstrates her determination to reconstruct her life in the city. Similarly, in *A Cowrie of Hope*, when Nasula's bag of beans is stolen and she is left with no option but to return to the village empty-handed, she only makes the journey halfway before changing her mind to go back to the city to hunt for the thief who has taken away her 'cowrie of hope' and therefore constitutes the greatest obstacle to achieving her goal:

On the other side of the road, a small, new white minibus, [...] stopped, and a voice in it cried out 'Lusaka'. Nasula sprang up. Slapping the dust from her knees, she traversed the road and climbed into the immaculate, petite little beast. The minibus jerked into motion as soon as she was on its stairway. She sat down and settled into her journey back to Lusaka. The fog and chaff in her head had cleared. She saw clearly why she was going back to the city (*A Cowrie of Hope*, 111).

It is significant that Nasula succeeds in achieving her life's ambition of giving her daughter an education only by enduring the pain of staying in the city. It is important that the same city that harbours criminal elements such as Silavwe who causes untold hardship and pain to fellow residents and visitors by dispossessing them of their hard earned property and living big on the sweat of others also has laws and diligent law enforcement agents like the incorruptible police chief who eventually ensures that Silavwe is brought to book and

punished. Even more noteworthy is the fact that Nasula's triumph at the end of the novel is the triumph of the city because her success at educating her daughter translates to her success at equipping young Sula with what it takes to be a suitable city dweller as it is fairly certain that her daughter will end up being a city dweller, in the class of the women Nasula had seen and admired while living in the city as a poor and illiterate housewife. The ultimate triumph for the city is that hopefully, more and more people who will make the city truly liveable will continue to populate it. It is paradoxical therefore that as she leaves the city back to the village and as she accompanies her daughter to the bus station for her journey to St. Theresa's School, and as she returns to their poverty-stricken home in the village, she, through her offspring, also simultaneously undertakes a symbolic journey back to the city, the ultimate home to her daughter and to her in the future, the future that has already begun. The city triumphs! It is symbolic as well that Sula's secondary school requirements are available for purchase only in the city. It seems the city is actually capable of taking to the next higher level, not only its own residents, but also all those who come to it for that purpose, if they can endure the pain and inconveniences that accompany the gain.

Village versus City: Which is a Haven?

Would it have been possible for characters in the two novels to have found a haven either in the village or the city? Corruption appears to be a common menace in the city in both novels. In *A Cowrie of Hope*, Gode Silavwe is dubious, heartless and corrupt. He is a notorious beans thief at Kanwala market where he crookedly feasts on poor village traders who come to the city to sell their farm produce. When he is finally trapped by Nasula after stealing her bag of beans and is taken to the police station, he promptly bribes the policeman as he does always, hoping to escape justice. Similarly in *The Housemaid*, Tika easily becomes an international business woman by giving sex to customs officers. While Gode Silavwe bribes police officers with his stolen money in *A Cowrie of Hope*, Tika and her mother bribe customs officers with sex in *The Housemaid*. Also, there appears to be no compassion in the city. This is evident when Nasula fights Silavwe over her stolen bag of beans and Silavwe almost crushes her to death with his car; onlookers gather around them merely as a form of entertainment with no one

offering a helping hand to the poor woman. It is the same scenario a week before in the market where traders gather to pose questions to her without offering useful suggestion or help. In *The Housemaid*, a young girl selling groundnut falls and her wares are littered on the ground, hungry children immediately swoop on her, not to help her gather her groundnut, but to feast on it turning deaf ears to the girl's protestations that her mother would kill her should she return home without the groundnut or proceeds from its sales. Accra seems to be just as wicked and heartless as Lusaka.

In spite of the problems in the city, however, none of the novels paints a happier picture of the village. Nasula recounts "the way she was suffering [...] in the village" (10) prior to her relocation to the city; but poverty, pain, and loneliness are not the only problems in the village. Upon Nasula's return to the village following the death of her husband, she appeals to the village headman for land to cultivate and build a home for herself and her daughter; but she has to toil alone on her land augmenting the meagre income from her crops with piece-work. She receives help from no one. Worse still, her customer, Pupila insists on being paid with all the five bags of beans she harvested even when he is aware that harvest is bad for everyone. Rather than compassion therefore, what exists in Nasula's village is individualism and self-centredness. Beyond helping to erect a dwelling place for Nasula, what other compassionate gestures does she receive in the village? There is none. Similarly, *The Housemaid* paints a picture of a village that is as bad as the city. In view of the foregoing, therefore, there are two questions to ponder on. One, is it possible that it is not the city that makes its residents 'evil' but that city dwellers are inherently 'evil' before sojourning in the city? Two, is it possible that the 'evil' that is easily perceived in the city actually derives from the 'evil' that comes from the village and that it merely finds full expression in the city?

Conclusion

The heroine in *A Cowrie of Hope* experiences how poverty and illiteracy ruin the soul. But through living in the city, she also sees how education liberates young women and saves them from being humiliated and trampled upon by men. The women in the city who are educated hold their head high and are untouchable by parasitic men and lowlife. Significantly therefore, Sinyangwe's heroine

declares that although “she was a woman of the village but she knew these things. [...]. Without an education, she would not allow Sula, her daughter, to come to the towns (101). Instructively too, Akua and her mates in *The Housemaid* who are not educated do menial jobs which pay very little and are able to survive largely by using their bodies to get favours. They live in unfinished buildings and bribe the workers through sex or cash to get tips on the next available uncompleted building they could live in. On the other hand, Teacher is considered to be among the most successful Katasoans living in the city “with a formal job and comfortable home” This is because she is educated and works as a teacher. Hence, both authors agree that having an education or skill is mandatory to living successfully in the city.

Perhaps, the major difference in the figuration of the city between the two novels is what appears to be a more complex situation in *The Housemaid* where a new story begins where the heroine’s story ends. As Darko’s heroine burns her boat in the village and returns to the city, impliedly about to be accepted back by her mistress who also has a whoring life of her own, the city becomes a permanent domicile for either good or evil. What possibilities are available to the young and still highly impressionable Efi who has no education, and who has to survive either as a house maid, or as a low-income girl? How the Efi in the city survive is what makes a city a city. Notwithstanding the fact that neither the village nor the city is a haven, this article agrees with Bill Freund’s observation that the future of Africa is likely to be increasingly urban. Like Freund, the researcher believes that it may be helpful if African studies situate themselves on an increasingly urban foundation because, as he notes, the city is the more likely residence of citizens of Africa in spite of the numerous challenges associated with living in the city.

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