

# Portrayal of the Problems of Single Parenting in Amma Darko's *Faceless*

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of single parenting in Amma Darko's *Faceless*, focusing on the socio-economic challenges faced by Maa Tsuru, a single mother, and her children. Using a qualitative analysis, the study explores the emotional, physical, and psychological struggles of single mothers and highlights the impact on the children from singled parenthood through a lens of social theory. The methodology involves a close reading of the novel, focusing on the character of Maa Tsuru and her relationships with men, children, and the broader community. The findings focus on Maa Tsuru's struggles as a single mother. Her life, marked by emotional and physical exhaustion, marked the difficulties faced by women in a patriarchal society, where their roles are primarily domestic, and economic opportunities are limited. As a single mother, Maa Tsuru bears the entire burden of raising her children without sufficient financial or emotional support. The findings also reveal the emotional toll Maa Tsuru faces. Her desire for affection and emotional connection leads her into relationships with men like Kwei and Kpakpo, who ultimately abandon her, further deepening her struggles. These men leave her pregnant and abandoned, with societal expectations placing the burden of blame on her. Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes the emotional and psychological toll on her children, especially Fofu, who is forced to mature prematurely and survive on the streets. The absence of a father figure leaves the children vulnerable to exploitation and trauma, as demonstrated by Fofu's exposure to sexual violence and Baby T's abuse. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that *Faceless* vividly portrays the real-world struggles of single-parent families and show how lack of parental support leads to the breakdown of family structures and emotional instability for the children. The novel's critique of societal neglect highlights the need for stronger social support systems for marginalized families.

**Keywords:** Single parenting, Amma Darko, *Faceless*, family dynamics, societal neglect, child development, single mother

## INTRODUCTION

Parenting is universally recognized as a fundamental aspect of a child's development, shaping their cognitive, emotional, and social well-being. The structure of the family, particularly the presence and active involvement of parents, plays a crucial role in fostering stability, identity, and resilience in children. However, when this parenting is disrupted by the absence of one parent, whether through separation, death, or other circumstances, the challenges faced by both the caregiver and the child can be profound (Awitor, 2014; Abolarin-Egbebiola, 2020). Globally, approximately 320 million children between the ages of 0 and 17 are living with single parents, and around 11% of Nigerian families are headed by single parents (KAINOS Edge Data Service, 2020). It is reported that nearly 8% of all households worldwide are led by a single parent, with 84% of these households headed by mothers, equating to 101.3 million single mothers. These figures continue to rise (MakeMothersMatter, 2024). In Anambra state, Nigeria, female single parents make up 73.3% of the total, while male single parents account for 26.7%. The increase in single parenting is driven by a variety of factors, including death (78.9%), divorce (77.8%), desertion (70.0%), separation (62.2%), and cultural practices (50.0%). These

factors, particularly those related to marital instability, are significantly contributing to the rise in single-parent households in the state (Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2024). Single parenting is often accompanied by financial difficulties, emotional strain, and societal stigma, and it is a global reality that warrants urgent attention. This issue calls for a comprehensive response not only from policymakers and sociologists but also from literary scholars who seek to interrogate the human condition and societal norms.

Amma Darko's *Faceless* is a powerful story that highlights the struggles of single parents and their children, exploring the challenges they face in the society. Amma Darko's *Faceless* is a profound literary text that encapsulates the multifaceted problems associated with single parenting, particularly within the socio-economic and cultural context of contemporary Ghana. Through the harrowing yet deeply human story of Fofo and her community, Darko explores themes such as abandonment, poverty, and the cyclical nature of societal neglect, offering a lens into how the absence of parental guidance impacts not only the individual but society at large. By foregrounding these issues, Darko dissects the life realities of urban Ghanaian life, portraying how single parenting often becomes synonymous with vulnerability and hardship, especially for women who bear the brunt of societal prejudices and economic burdens.

Amma Darko's *Faceless* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, especially in the context of African literature and its engagement with social issues. Researchers have explored the novel's feminist dimensions, focusing on gender roles, the challenges faced by women in Ghanaian society, and the empowerment of female characters (Ofosu, 2013; Ouarodima, 2019; Ajidahun, 2020). Other studies have delved into how the novel portrays the struggles of growing up in difficult circumstances, with a particular focus on the loss of childhood innocence and the lives of street children (Okyeso, 2013; Allagbé, Alou & Ouarodima, 2020; Aba Sam, 2021). Specific works such as Tchibozo-Laine (2019) have examined feminist limitations in *Faceless* through mood and modality analysis, while Awitor (2014) investigates the novel as a social tragedy reflecting the plight of street children. Segalo and Ennin (2023) explore gender inequality and homelessness, providing critical insights into the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalized groups. Similarly, Tayol (2019) addresses the social commitment in Amma Darko's works, situating *Faceless* within the broader context of African literature's engagement with societal issues. Furthermore, scholars like Marfo (2016) and Owan (2019) discussed the empowerment of the girl-child and the portrayal of wisdom in Darko's narratives, respectively.

Despite these contributions, few studies have directly examined the portrayal of single parenting and its implications in *Faceless*. Even with the growing visibility of single-parent households in African societies and their representation in literature, there remains a limited scholarly engagement with the ways African female writers like Amma Darko portray the specific socio-emotional and economic struggles of single parenting in urban Ghanaian settings. Most available analyses of *Faceless* examine themes like streetism, poverty, gender-based violence, or motherhood in general, without isolating the complexities and consequences of single-parent family structures. While Yeboah (2015) touches on motherhood conflicts and Okolo and Ogbele (2024) explore the girl-child as a victim, a focused analysis of single parenting as a central theme remains under-explored. Abolarin-Egbebiola's (2020) critique of absentee fathers in *Faceless* highlights an ironic approach to streetism but does not fully address the broader dynamics of single-parent households. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how fiction functions as a mirror to and critique of the societal neglect of single parents and their children. This article, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how Amma Darko portrays the problems of single parenting, both from the parental and child perspectives. This study does not treat single parenting as a sub-theme under broader discussions but as a distinct, multidimensional theme in *Faceless*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Single parenting has become a prominent social reality in the 21st century, reshaping traditional family structures and provoking wide-ranging debates among sociologists, psychologists, and literary scholars. Globally, the incidence of single-parent households has risen significantly, driven by factors such as divorce, separation, unintended pregnancies, domestic violence, migration, and even the death of a spouse. According to the United Nations (2022), nearly one in five children worldwide is raised in a single-parent household, with women constituting the majority of single parents. In South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (2019) estimated that 60% of children grow up with an absent father, and 40% of mothers are single parents. In contrast,

data from the Better Care Network (2015) shows that nearly 74% of children under the age of 18 in Nigeria live with both biological parents, while 11% live with their biological mother, 5% with their biological father, and 10% do not live with either biological parent. In Africa, although extended family systems have traditionally cushioned single parents, urbanization, economic hardship and contemporary migration patterns have eroded such support networks, leaving many single parents, especially women, vulnerable to poverty and social marginalization (Ligaga, 2020; Garutsa & Owolabi, 2024).

Scholars have explored the psychosocial and economic effects of single parenting, highlighting challenges such as reduced household income, emotional stress, stigmatization, and poor educational outcomes for children (Ochen, 2012; Chitakunye & Takhar, 2016). Single mothers often bear the brunt of these challenges, particularly in patriarchal societies where childcare responsibilities are disproportionately assigned to women. In the African context, cultural norms tend to blame women for the failure of marriages or relationships, intensifying the emotional and psychological toll of single motherhood (Amadiume, 1987; Esere et al., 2015). Yet, despite these obstacles, single parents, especially women, have also been shown to demonstrate remarkable resilience and ingenuity in raising their children and sustaining livelihoods (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Literature, as both a mirror and critic of society, has long served as a platform for exploring the implications of single parenting. African fiction in particular has taken up the task of representing changing family dynamics, especially in urban contexts. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Amma Darko have used narrative to interrogate the burdens placed on women in the context of broken homes, gender-based violence, and child neglect. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) are prime examples of how African women writers critique traditional expectations of motherhood, exposing how societal structures often fail women who are left to raise children alone. In these texts, single motherhood is rarely romanticized; rather, it is portrayed as a site of conflict, survival, and societal critique. The children of single parents in such narratives are often depicted as emotionally affected or socially displaced; sometimes leading to behaviors such as delinquency, streetism, or early exposure to abuse. Literature thereby provides a valuable lens for understanding the real-life implications of parental absence and the socio-economic structures that perpetuate it (Salami, 2021; Arndt, 2002). It is in this tradition that Amma Darko writes.

Darko, a Ghanaian novelist, is widely recognized for her deep engagement with social issues affecting the marginalized in urban Ghanaian society. Her novels—*Beyond the Horizon* (1995), *The Housemaid* (1998), and *Faceless* (2003)—are concerned with themes such as human trafficking, exploitation, gender inequality, and urban poverty. Her style of realism, often interwoven with feminist critique, allows her to highlight the voices of those frequently excluded from mainstream discourses: poor women, street children, and the socially invisible. In *Faceless*, Darko tackles the issue of single parenting head-on, using it as a lens to explore broader themes of domestic violence, male irresponsibility, child neglect, and systemic failure. Scholars such as Arndt (2002) and Ayeleru (2014) acknowledge Amma Darko's commitment to representing the urban poor and the disenfranchised, particularly women and children. The protagonist, Maa Tsuru, is a single mother whose life is marked by abandonment, shame, and struggle. Her experience is emblematic of many African women who are left to care for children alone after being deserted by male partners. The novel exposes how societal stigma, economic hardship, and lack of institutional support contribute to the cycle of poverty and vulnerability for both mothers and their children. In the case of Baby T and Fofo, the children of Maa Tsuru, their descent into street life and exploitation is directly linked to the absence of a father figure and the limited protective capacity of their mother. Darko thus demonstrates the intergenerational effects of single parenting within a failed social system.

Despite her maternal efforts, Maa Tsuru is vilified by her community and even by her children—a representation that challenges romanticized portrayals of African motherhood. Rather than depicting her as a heroine, Darko offers a nuanced portrayal of a woman overwhelmed by both structural and emotional burdens. This aligns with Ogunyemi's (1985) notion of "motherism," where African motherhood is seen not just as nurturing but also as socially and politically loaded. *Faceless* forces readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of maternal failure, not as a personal flaw but as a symptom of societal decay (Nnaemeka, 2004; Makinde, 2020). Thus, this study isolates and examines single parenting as a distinct, multidimensional theme in *Faceless*, analyzing not just its representation but also its implications for gender roles, urban poverty, and social exclusion in postcolonial Ghanaian society.

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## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a qualitative research design to analyze the theme of single parenting in *Faceless* by Amma Darko. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for literary studies as they allow for an in-depth examination of textual meanings, underlying ideologies, and socio-cultural implications (Creswell, 2014). The primary data for this study is derived from a close reading and textual analysis of *Faceless*. Specific narrative elements such as character development, dialogue and plot structure are examined to uncover the author's commentary on single parenting. Key themes such as abandonment, maternal struggles, child neglect, and societal stigmatization are identified across the chapters of the text and critically examined to explore how these issues are represented through the struggles of key characters like Maa Tsuru and her children. In addition to the novel itself, secondary data is drawn from scholarly articles, books, and journal publications that discuss single parenting, African feminism, and Amma Darko's literary contributions. These secondary sources provide a broader academic context and enhance the interpretation of the novel.

In this study, social theory is adopted as the theoretical framework. Social theory is an intellectual framework used to understand the complexities of social life, providing explanations for how societies function, evolve, and change. It encompasses a broad range of ideas, examining various aspects of society, including power dynamics, social structure, class, gender, ethnicity, and social behavior. According to Austin Harrington (2015), social theory seeks to offer insights into the ways societies develop, the methods of explaining social behavior, and how societal norms and structures shape individuals' lives. At its core, social theory is concerned with understanding the underlying forces that influence human interactions and societal development, providing a lens through which scholars can analyze issues such as inequality, oppression, and the quest for social justice. One of the foundational goals of social theory is to bring about social change. It encourages critical reflection on existing social norms and practices, urging individuals and societies to re-evaluate their behavior and values. For instance, social theory often addresses societal issues such as poverty, injustice, and social inequality, suggesting that these problems are not merely personal but are embedded within larger social structures. The theory provides the tools to critically engage with issues like economic exploitation, gender inequality, and the marginalization of certain groups. In this context, social theory acts as a powerful agent of critique, offering a roadmap for understanding the root causes of societal problems and envisioning new, more equitable ways of organizing society (Harrington, 2005). In the context of Amma Darko's *Faceless*, social theory offers a critical framework for understanding the social problems portrayed in the novel, particularly the issues surrounding single parenting and the broader societal implications of poverty, gender, and social inequality in African societies. Through her narrative, Darko engages with themes such as social neglect, moral decay, and the challenges faced by single mothers, all of which are deeply connected to larger social structures and power dynamics. Social theory not only provides the theoretical foundation for understanding Amma Darko's critique of single parenting but also offers a broader perspective on the social issues she addresses in *Faceless*.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis on the portrayal of single parenting in *Faceless* by Amma Darko focuses on different aspects of the narrative, analyzing the experiences of Maa Tsuru and her children, and examining how these struggles are shaped by the intersection of gender, class, and socio-economic factors. The analysis is done below

### Maa Tsuru's Struggles as a single Mother

In Amma Darko's *Faceless*, Maa Tsuru's character vividly portrays the harsh realities of single motherhood within a poor, urban context. Her struggles highlight how poverty, gender inequality, and lack of societal support disproportionately affect women, particularly in a patriarchal society like Ghana's. Darko uses Maa Tsuru's life to expose the systemic issues that trap many women in cycles of poverty, where limited resources and opportunities make it difficult to escape their circumstances. As a single mother, she is expected to bear the responsibility for her children's welfare without the necessary support systems in place. Darko illustrates how the dual burden of economic hardship and gender expectations stifles her chances for upward mobility. The absence of a stable income and the social neglect she faces are compounded by a male-dominated society that



offers little room for women to thrive. Darko critiques these societal structures, showing how they contribute to women being trapped in cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

Maa Tsuru's plight begins with her complex and ultimately damaging relationships with men, particularly Kwei and Kpakpo. In seeking affection and emotional connection, Maa Tsuru becomes entangled with these men, who, rather than providing support, abandon her after impregnating her. Her loneliness and yearning for validation lead her to make choices that deepen her struggles. Kwei and Kpakpo's irresponsibility not only leave her without emotional support but also without the resources to care for her children, marking the beginning of her descent into poverty and social isolation. She admits to feeling lonely and needing a man to feel complete:

"I am a woman and I was lonely... He gave me the right words

He said, "I want to retire to bed with you at night and wake up with you in the morning.

It felt good...I had been without a man since Kwei's final disappearance from our lives...

I felt like a woman, I needed to be wanted by a man " (Darko, 2003, p. 150).

This reveals that Maa Tsuru's desire for emotional connection significantly influences her decisions, even though these relationships ultimately lead to more problems. As Abolarin-Egbebiola (2020) points out, many women experience emotional and psychological pressures, particularly in societies where their self-worth is often tied to their roles as wives and mothers. Maa Tsuru's need for a partner and her sense of validation through male attention are not solely personal desires but reflect broader societal expectations. In Ghanaian and Sub-Saharan African cultures, women are frequently socialized to view relationships with men as a central aspect of their identity. The unplanned nature of Maa Tsuru pregnancies leaves her without the resources to provide adequately for her children. Despite the mutual nature of the conception, it is still the mother who must bear the full responsibility of raising the child. When Maa Tsuru becomes pregnant again, Kwei's reaction exposes the gendered nature of blame in patriarchal societies, where women are often solely held accountable for reproductive decisions and their consequences. Kwei, the father, blames her entirely:

" How?...Why? Why did you let it happen?

Why didn't you ensure it didn't happen by gluing an iron sheet around your loins?" (Darko, 2003, p. 150).

Kwei's scornful words place the entire blame on Maa Tsuru, not only for the pregnancy but also for the social repercussions that follow. His behavior reflects societal norms that absolve men of responsibility. In many African societies, men are often not held accountable for reproductive decisions, with the responsibility falling solely on women. This gendered divide in accountability perpetuates neglect, where men's actions are overlooked while women bear the consequences. Kwei eventually abandons Maa Tsuru, leaving her to face the economic and emotional burdens of single motherhood. Patriarchal structures, which allow men to avoid familial duties, leave women like Maa Tsuru to cope with the economic and emotional burdens of single motherhood on their own. As Kamame notes, "A woman like Fofu's mother, whose 'village' happens to be inner-city Accra, is more likely to lose her sense of responsibility quickly when pushed by joblessness, poverty, and the absence of male support" (111). Maa Tsuru's dependence on unreliable men results in a loss of both moral strength and the ability to handle the challenges of motherhood. This loss of strength is critical in a society shaped by male chauvinism, where women are often left to cope alone. One of the most poignant moments in *Faceless* occurs when Maa Tsuru's infant son struggles to find nourishment from her empty, exhausted body:

In the midst of angry mothers and screaming children and bleating goats and sheep, Maa Tsuru looked like a soul drowned in torpidity. The baby in her arm didn't seem to even impact into her oblivion. And but for the sounds from the child's throat, her world was dead. A life dissolved in absolute lethargy. Odarley smiled sadly; then even the sad smile waned when she noticed the desperate scramble of one tiny hand to ferret for something loose almost non-existent in Maa Tsuru's bosom. The weak grab of the loose and hanging breast. The searching mouth in the tiny lean face. The voracious draw on tired wrinkled nipple. The spurt of energy from the enervated body that was clearly the anger of a little child. And Odarley knew that the gurgling of Fofu's half-brother was

one of anguish. In process, was the nurturing of another prospective soul into the devouring jaws of the streets. A life brought forth for the sake of bringing forth. A hungry mouth created not out of want. (p. 42)

Anger and want become living realities of this baby's life whose need for breast milk is obviously not fulfilled. Indeed his mother, we are told, is neither moved by her child's hunger nor even bothered by the lack of milk in her breast. Maa Tsuru has literally allowed the trials of motherhood to sap both her energy and her breast milk: "And but for. These descriptions make it clear that Maa Tsuru's neglect is not just physical, but also emotional. The child's desperate hunger represents the lack of care and attention he receives. Darko uses vivid language to show the contrast between the child's need for nourishment and the mother's inability to provide it (Segalo & Ennin, 2023). This powerful image of a mother who has given up emotionally reflects the devastating effects of poverty and neglect. It also shows how difficult it is for single mothers like Maa Tsuru to meet their children's needs when they are overwhelmed by their own struggles. The child's persistent hunger, despite knowing that there is no milk to be found, symbolizes the deep sense of yearning for care and attention that remains unmet, not due to a lack of desire, but because of the crushing circumstances that Maa Tsuru faces. The use of terms like "*spurt of energy*" and "*voracious draw*" emphasizes the child's unyielding hope, while also highlighting the hopelessness of the situation (Darko, 2003, p. 42).

The desperation of the child searching for milk in a barren, exhausted body contrasts sharply with Maa Tsuru's own mental and emotional state. Darko describes Maa Tsuru as "drowned in torpidity" and her world as "dead" (Darko, 2003, p. 42). These expressions show how Maa Tsuru has become numb to the needs of her children. She has been worn down by the harsh realities of her life, leaving her disconnected and passive. Darko's portrayal of Maa Tsuru highlights how social and economic pressures can lead to emotional burnout, where even a mother's basic instinct to care for her children is dulled. The exhaustion of constantly dealing with financial instability, societal neglect, and emotional isolation eventually leads her to a state of resignation. Her life, as Darko portrays it, is one "dissolved in absolute lethargy," where survival has become a mechanical process, devoid of joy, hope, or nurturing (Darko, 2003, p. 42). This passive acceptance of her condition reflects the larger societal neglect of single mothers and the emotional burnout that results from this systemic abandonment. This image of a mother who has lost the will to fight for her children's future is a sad reflection of how deeply poverty and neglect can affect a person's spirit, especially single mothers.

Through the character of Maa Tsuru, Darko critiques not only the personal failures of the mother and fathers but also the larger society's failure to support single mothers. The lack of government assistance, the failure of men to take responsibility, and the societal expectation that women should manage alone all contribute to the tragic outcomes for Maa Tsuru's children. As Ekeanyanwu (2021) contends, single mothers often face mental health challenges, financial strain, low-income living, and limited social support. Unlike many North American and European countries, most sub-Saharan African nations lack robust welfare systems or social policies to protect vulnerable individuals from deep economic hardship. The precarious living conditions faced by some single mothers in sub-Saharan Africa perpetuate underdevelopment, as these hardships stunt progress and distort development indicators. When single mothers cannot provide adequate financial support on their own, they frequently rely on the goodwill of extended kin and social networks. This reliance, however, can lead to exploitation, vulnerability to harmful practices, and an ongoing cycle of dependency. The eventual abandonment of Maa Tsuru's children to the streets highlights how societal neglect leads to devastating consequences. Darko's criticism is directed not only at Maa Tsuru's failure to care for her children but also at the failure of the social system that allows such neglect to happen. The collapse of the family structure, made worse by poverty and gender inequality, results in a situation where children are left to fend for themselves.

The relationship between Maa Tsuru and her daughter Fofu further reveals the emotional strain caused by Maa Tsuru's failure to meet her children's needs. The readers' first encounter with Fofu and Maa Tsuru demonstrates the deep resentment Fofu feels towards her mother. Fofu accuses Maa Tsuru of exploiting her children and failing to protect them:

"Why should I go away, mother? Who are they?"

Maa Tsuru wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and blew her nose into her cover cloth. "It's Baby T," she said eventually.

“Baby T?”

“Yes. Maami Broni . . .”

“The fat fair woman she lives with?”

“Yes. She came to me last week.”

“So? Doesn’t she sometimes come to . . .”

“I know Fofo. I know. Oh God!”

“Don’t bring in God’s name, mother. You knew what you were doing when you chose him over . . .”

“It was for their sake.” She pointed at the baby and the sleeping boy. “What should I have done?”

“I don’t know. But you should never have fed him and his sons at Baby T’s expense. You don’t see her. We don’t know how she has grown to look like. All for what, mother. For what?”

Maa Tsuru didn’t respond. She wiped away fresh tears from her face and resumed from where she left off. “Something happened, Fofo.”

“Something is always happening, no? Always and had I not gotten the good sense to leave home, who knows, he probably would have made you send me away too to work for some woman to make money for you four to live on. No?”

Maa Tsuru choked on saliva and coughed violently. “I don’t have the strength to fight you with words Fofo,” she spoke slowly. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t do it.” (Darko, 2003, pp. 46-47)

This tense exchange highlights the breakdown in communication and the emotional disconnect between mother and daughter. The emotional conflict between Maa Tsuru and her daughter Fofo stems from Maa Tsuru’s inability to meet her children’s needs and the consequences of her decisions. Fofo’s resentment towards her mother is clear when she accuses Maa Tsuru of exploiting her children and failing to protect them. The immediate cause of their argument is Maa Tsuru’s decision to provide food for Kwei’s children, even at the expense of her own. Fofo’s anger is palpable as she questions why her mother would choose to feed Kwei’s children when they are already struggling. When Maa Tsuru tries to explain her motives, she asserts, “It was for their sake,” referring to the children, but Fofo’s sharp response challenges the legitimacy of this reasoning. She questions why her mother would choose to feed Kwei’s sons, especially when the family is struggling so much. Fofo’s accusation reveals the depth of her anger and frustration, while Maa Tsuru’s inability to respond or defend herself exposes her own feelings of guilt and failure (Abimbola, 2019). She cannot fully defend herself because she recognizes the truth in Fofo’s accusations. Her silence and inability to fight back with words show her deep sense of guilt and powerlessness. This exchange reflects the strain caused by her failure to protect her children and the broader . Fofo’s disillusionment is evident as she expresses the belief that Maa Tsuru has sacrificed her children’s welfare for the sake of men who have not taken responsibility for them. The conversation also underscores how Maa Tsuru’s choices, such as allowing her children to be exploited by men like Kpakpo, have led to her failure as a mother. This loss of control and the breakdown of their relationship further reflects the emotional toll that neglect and exploitation have on family dynamics

Fofo’s decision to leave home and find refuge in the streets speaks to the complete breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship. Fofo is forced to grow up quickly and make difficult choices, leaving behind the woman who should have been her protector. Fortunately, Fofo finds a nurturing role model in Kabria, a social worker at MUTE, who provides the care and emotional support that Fofo has been lacking. The contrast between the relationship with her mother and that with Kabria is striking. While Maa Tsuru’s attempts to embrace Fofo are met with resistance—“*Fofo went rigid*” when her mother tried to hold her. “*Inside the room, Maa Tsuru was made to embrace Fofo. Fofo went rigid. Maa Tsuru’s face fell. She withdrew slowly from her daughter. There was pain in her eyes* (Darko, 2003, p. 185). This communicates an act of revolt calculated to make her mother

feel guilty and alone (Osei and Addei, 2013). Kabria's embrace offers Fofu the emotional security she desperately craves. This moment highlights the failure of Maa Tsuru to provide the nurturing and guidance Fofu needs, while Kabria serves as a positive alternative, showing how important it is for children, especially those from broken families, to find supportive figures in the lives of marginalized children.

### Poverty and Abandonment in Single Parenting Family

In Amma Darko's *Faceless*, poverty and abandonment are central themes that intertwine to create a harsh reality for characters like Maa Tsuru and her children. The absence of a father figure, both in terms of financial and emotional support, places an overwhelming burden on Maa Tsuru, forcing her to navigate the struggles of single motherhood without the resources or assistance that could alleviate her hardship. This abandonment, both literal and figurative, amplifies the cycle of poverty, leaving women like Maa Tsuru to sacrifice their own well-being to meet the basic needs of their children.

One of the most striking aspects of the poverty depicted in *Faceless* is how it limits the options available to Maa Tsuru and her children. For women in urban areas, informal work often represents the only viable source of income, as formal sector employment opportunities are limited by factors such as lack of education, discrimination, and the informal nature of the economy itself (Chitakunye & Takhar, 2016). Many single mothers participate in small-scale trade, domestic work, or other informal economic activities to support their families. While these activities allow for some financial autonomy, they are often unstable and poorly remunerated, with few protections or benefits. The instability of informal work, combined with the lack of access to social security or unemployment benefits, means that many single mothers are trapped in a cycle of financial insecurity, which is further exacerbated by rising living costs and the economic pressures of urban life. Maa Tsuru, for example, has to take on menial jobs to survive. She works for her aunt, and her children, particularly the older boys, run errands at the seaside and the fish market. Meanwhile, Fofu and Baby T do petty chores for relatives in exchange for food leftovers and second-hand clothes

"By the time Fofu's two older brothers each struck ten, they were running errands at the seaside and the fish market. Baby T and Fofu by then were performing petty chores for family members in exchange for food leftovers and old clothes. Kwei was gone, but his lover and their children remained together..... they were poor" (p. 127).

"Maa Tsuru has been without a man since Kwei disappeared from their lives. She wasn't in any regular job either. Following the death of her aunt in whose kenkey business she was employed, she only contended herself with odd jobs now and then. She would work a few days at a kenkey house or do people's washing for a fee. She never stayed on one job for long because her two sons kept them going with the money and free fish they bought in daily from the seaside and the fish market. Fofu and baby T were also bringing home money from the streets. It wasn't living but they were surviving (p. 129).

This highlights the lack of stable income and the desperation to get by. The work they do is not enough to pull them out of poverty, and the whole family is trapped in a cycle of economic deprivation.

This portrayal underscores how the lack of stable employment and the absence of financial resources restricts the family's ability to move beyond a hand-to-mouth existence. The work they do is insufficient to pull them out of poverty, and the entire family becomes trapped in an ongoing cycle of economic deprivation. Maa Tsuru's struggle to make ends meet demonstrates how these broader socio-economic factors limit her opportunities for upward mobility. The work she engages in, '*odd jobs in a kenkey house or washing clothes for a fee*', are not enough to secure a stable income. This scenario mirrors the broader societal issues in many urban environments, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where single mothers often face significant barriers to accessing well-paying jobs and resources that could break the poverty cycle. As argued by Garutsa and Owolabi (2024), the patriarchy that prevails in many African societies places immense expectations on women to fulfill domestic roles while simultaneously burdening them with the responsibility of financial provision, often without the necessary support structures. As a result, single mothers, like Maa Tsuru, face the compounded pressures of low wages, poor job opportunities, and minimal institutional support, which perpetuate cycles of poverty. The lack of robust welfare



systems or social safety nets in many African countries means that single mothers have few options outside of informal, often precarious economic activities.

The absence of a father in Maa Tsuru's life not only exacerbates the family's financial difficulties but also creates a significant emotional void that deepens their poverty. The father's absence represents a lack of both emotional and financial support, forcing Maa Tsuru to bear the entire responsibility of raising her children. This absence is symbolic of broader societal patterns in which men, especially in patriarchal contexts, are often disengaged from the caregiving and financial obligations of raising children, leaving women to shoulder the overwhelming burdens of both domestic and economic responsibilities. Drawing from the researcher's experience as a lecturer and informal interviews with students from single-parent households, the majority of students in tertiary institutions rely on their mothers to cover tuition fees and other educational expenses. Fathers, often perceived as authoritative figures, frequently use their stern and dismissive demeanor to distance themselves from such responsibilities, citing financial constraints. It is the mothers whom students call upon when they need financial assistance for essentials like handouts, transport fees, provisions, or daily sustenance. This dynamic highlights the disproportionate emotional and financial burden placed on mothers in the absence of paternal involvement, leading to increased stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. In many cases, these mothers are not only responsible for meeting the immediate survival needs of their children but are also expected to navigate societal and institutional challenges without the support structures typically afforded to dual-parent households. This situation mirrors the experiences of Maa Tsuru in *Faceless*, where the absence of a husband and father forces her to prioritize the basic survival of her children over her own personal development or aspirations.

Fofo, one of Maa Tsuru's children, is particularly affected by the family's economic hardships. Her struggle to pursue an education is a direct result of the family's inability to afford the necessary resources, such as uniforms and school supplies. Fofo and her sister, Baby T, drop out of school because their family cannot afford these basic items (p. 127). Fofo's reaction to her educational failure is not one of despair but indifference. She knows that without money, going to school is a distant dream, and survival is the more immediate concern. This sense of resignation shows the overwhelming weight of poverty and how it traps children in a cycle where their future is compromised by their present struggles. Fofo, like many others in her position, is forced to abandon her education to engage in survival tactics, such as begging on the streets, which later leads to negative behaviors like pickpocketing, alcohol consumption, and sexual immorality.

Fofo's description of poverty further emphasizes how deeply ingrained it is in her life. When speaking to her friend Odarley, she explains that she knows poverty intimately, describing it with vivid imagery:

"Head to toe. It's face; it's ugly square head; it's big fat toes, I know its shape like... I know its length and breadth and its width and its stench" (p. 27).

This description indicates not only the physical and emotional toll of poverty but also its constant presence in her life. Poverty is not just a financial state for Fofo; it is something she feels, sees, and even smells. Her family's impoverished state is a direct result of her father's absence. With no man to work and contribute to the household, Maa Tsuru is left to struggle with low-paying jobs that are not enough to provide for her children, pushing them into further desperation and, eventually, onto the streets. Their forced transition from school to the streets resonates with UNICEF (2020) reports that highlight how poverty and family instability in urban slums across West Africa result in increased streetism among children. In Ghana alone, it is estimated that over 90,000 children live and work on the streets of Accra (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), a figure that reflects the structural absence of state-supported family welfare systems. In Nigeria, the phenomenon of street-connected children is alarmingly prevalent, with estimates suggesting that approximately 7 million children are living on the streets. In Lagos, the nation's largest city with a population of around 24 million, about 100,000 children are affected by streetism. These children often engage in activities such as hawking, begging, and other forms of street labor, facing numerous risks including exploitation and exposure to criminal activities (The African Spectator, 2024; Infoans, 2024).

The Policy Brief reports of the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (2024) show that many children from poor families drop out of school due to the inability to afford school fees, uniforms, and other basic materials. In many communities, the lack of financial resources often leads to an early cessation of

education, pushing children into the workforce to contribute to family survival. This situation is not unique to Nigeria; across countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana, single mothers frequently struggle to provide the necessary resources for their children's education, leading to widespread school dropouts and limited opportunities for future advancement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). In such contexts, the consequences of dropping out are far-reaching. Fofo's decision to leave school and engage in survival tactics, such as begging on the streets, is not an isolated example but a reality for many children in similar situations. These children, often faced with limited options, turn to street life, which can expose them to dangerous activities such as pickpocketing, drug abuse, and sexual exploitation.

### **Psychosocial Effects of Growing Up in a Single-Parent Household**

In *Faceless*, the lives of Maa Tsuru's children, especially Fofo, are profoundly impacted by the absence of a father figure. The story shows how growing up without both parents, especially the father, affects the emotional and social development of children. Fofo, the protagonist, faces trauma, neglect, and confusion as she struggles to survive on the streets of Accra. In many African societies, the patriarchal family structure places considerable emphasis on the role of fathers as providers and protectors. The absence of a father often leads to emotional and social instability for children, especially in urban areas where poverty and family disintegration are increasingly common. According to the *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020)*, children in single-parent households, particularly those without a father, face higher risks of poverty, emotional neglect, and exploitation. These children often lack the necessary emotional and financial support to ensure their well-being, placing them in precarious situations, especially in urban slums where poverty and family instability are rampant. The phenomenon of "fatherlessness" in urban environments often converges with other macro issues to create a social environment where children, particularly girls, face significant psychosocial risks. From the age of fourteen, Fofo is forced into a life of survival, living on the streets due to the absence of her biological father. Without his protection, guidance, and emotional support, she, along with her siblings, is left vulnerable to the harsh realities of urban poverty and exploitation (Ofosu, 2013). The emotional toll on Fofo is profound, as she becomes hardened by the brutality of street life. Forced to contribute to her family's survival, Fofo is deprived of the chance to experience a normal childhood, instead becoming involved in child labor at a tender age, as seen when she and her siblings are expected to bring home money from working for others on the street.

Baby T and Fofo by then were performing petty chores for family members in exchange for food leftovers and old clothers. Kwei was gone, but his lover and their children remained together..... they were poor" (p. 127).

Maa Tsuru two sons were already running errands at the sea side before they attained the age of ten. At this same time, Baby T and Fofo were also performing petty chores for other family members in exchange for food leftovers and old clothes. With the departure of the boys from Maa Tsuru's room due to the discomfort they feel any time Maa Tsuru and Kpakpo make love, Fofo and Baby T become the automatic breadwinners doing menial jobs and pick-pocketing to bring in the money.

Because of the absence of a father figure and social The psychosocial effects of growing up in a fatherless home are not limited to economic hardship but extend to emotional neglect, which can manifest as psychological trauma. This lack of parental structure significantly hinders Fofo's ability to develop trust and emotional stability. Fofo's experiences with mistrust and emotional detachment are common among children raised without a consistent parental presence. She grows up without the kind of nurturing environment that is essential for healthy psychological development, which leaves her vulnerable to exploitation and trauma. This emotional strain is depicted in her difficulty to trust others and form meaningful relationships with her colleagues. In her interactions with Kabria, for example, it takes significant effort for Fofo to begin to trust again. She becomes hardened, unable to trust others, and learns to survive by any means necessary, even if it means abandoning her childhood innocence. The emotional impact of growing up in such an environment is clear. As Fofo learns to trust again, it takes immense effort:

"It seemed too much work for her to develop some faith and trust in two groups of people within the space of a day. After having lived without faith or trust for so long on the streets, learning to trust and have faith again was like a crawling child learning to walk..." (p. 98).

This shows the lasting emotional damage caused by a lack of parental support and trust. Fofu's inability to trust people reflects the deep psychological scars caused by her upbringing. Fofu's internal conflict, balancing her survival instincts with her desire for emotional connection, serves as a potent symbol of the deep psychological consequences of growing up in a dysfunctional family environment.

For girls like Fofu, the dangers they face are heightened by their vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation. In Fofu's case, she is not only deprived of a normal childhood, but she is also exposed to the dangers of street life, including sexual exploitation. The near-rape incident Fofu experiences at the hands of Poison are a reflection of the vulnerability many girls face in situations of poverty and abandonment. This vulnerability is further intensified by the absence of a father or any other protective adult figure, leaving these girls ill-equipped to navigate or defend themselves against the dangers surrounding them. In societies where child welfare systems are underdeveloped or nonexistent, and informal labor markets dominate, the risks faced by these children are magnified. The lack of institutional support and protective measures forces vulnerable children, especially girls, to fend for themselves, often leading them into precarious situations of exploitation and abuse. In Nigeria, for instance, UNICEF (2021) reports that over 3.6 million children live and work on the streets, facing various forms of abuse, including sexual violence, exploitation, and neglect. In a report by *Save the Children* (2018), it was revealed that one in every five girls in West Africa has experienced sexual abuse. This is consistent with the experiences of both Fofu and Baby T in *Faceless*, where the lack of a father figure leaves them exposed to exploitation and abuse. For instance, Fofu's stepsister, Baby T, suffers from sexual abuse by her stepfather, Kpakpo, and Onko (uncle), a relative (P.133, 136-137). This familial abuse, stemming from a dysfunctional family structure, is not isolated but rather a pervasive theme in the lives of many children in the novel. Baby T's experience reflects the broader societal issue where children, particularly girls, are left unprotected and vulnerable.

This abuse is compounded by the emotional neglect that comes from the absence of a responsible father figure. Children like Baby T, Fofu, and their peers are left without guidance or protection, making them susceptible to further exploitation. Fofu is at the verge of being raped by Poison, the street lord as portrayed by the writer:

She was smiling still in her dream... when she felt the light pressure on her breasts under the weight of a pair of hands... she felt a squeeze, which jolted her very rudely into full awakening ... someone was kneeling over her... It was a man. She stiffened, closed her eyes again and remained still. (P.3).

The narrative shows how such environments breed destructive behavior and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Poison, a street lord who also suffers from the trauma of being abandoned by his father, seeks revenge on society through violence and crime, as a way to externalize the anger and pain inflicted upon him. His violent behavior reflects the cycle of abuse that often stems from absent or abusive fathers and is perpetuated by a lack of intervention from the community or the state. Boys like Poison are pushed towards a destructive form of masculinity, while girls like Fofu become increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.

Naa Yomo reveals this on Poison's visit to Maa Tsuru saying, "... He came here. To her .Evil man. Very evil. And because he came to her, nobody wants to have anything to do with her" [P. 89]. He engages in theft, rape, brutality, promiscuity and assaults as a means of unleashing his pain and anger on the society. (P.170). Poison suffers abuse from his step father and runs away from home to the street at a tender age of eight. Though shy and very soft spoken, his step father delights in beating him which results into him being covered from head to toe in scars (P.169).

The story of Odarley, Fofu's friend, further reflects the damaging effects of broken family structures and emotional neglect. Odarley is rejected by her mother, who transfers her aggression onto her daughter after the father leaves. Fofu comments,

"She didn't leave home. She was sacked. By her own mother... she didn't just want Odarley around after Odarley's father left her for another woman and she too found another man". P. 103.

This moment of emotional abandonment adds another layer to the children's trauma, showcasing how neglect by parents, whether emotionally or physically, can result in psychological harm and push children into survival modes where they face further exploitation.

Moreover, young girls like Fofu are often lured into prostitution under the direction of older women, such as Maame Broni and Maame Abidjan, who manipulate their circumstances for their own gain. In sub-Saharan Africa, young girls in single-parent households often face such exploitation as a means of survival. According to a report by *Girls Not Brides* (2020), early marriage and prostitution are common survival strategies for girls living in poverty-stricken environments. These girls are often manipulated into engaging in transactional sex for food, money, or protection, exposing them to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Their survival becomes tied to commodifying their bodies as a means of survival. The novel paints a stark picture of how unresolved trauma and systemic failure force these children into perilous, unhealthy situations where their well-being is neglected by society.

The death of Baby T, Fofu's Sister as a direct result of parental neglect and the dangers of street life, serves as a painful reminder of how severe the consequences of street life can be. Her mutilated body, discovered behind a kiosk, symbolizes the brutality and danger faced by children left to fend for themselves. "*Her face was so mutilated... and her head ... ah! That too was completely shaven*". P.42. This statement reveals the extent of damage done on Baby T's dead body to show how dangerous the street is for those children. According to *UNICEF* (2021), over 1,000 children die annually in Nigeria alone due to exploitation and abuse, including those who fall victim to trafficking, child labor, and sexual violence. The height of danger on the street is further affirmed by a male nurse who has gotten accustomed to the rate of dead bodies brought daily to the morgue when Aggie and Vickie; representatives of MUTE are at the mortuary for Baby T's autopsy report:

Honestly, whoever the dead street girl is, must be very lucky to have two fine women like you come here to find out what killed her. God knows how many bodies are cut up each day the causes whose of death show clear signs of murder... P. 149.

The streets become a dangerous place, where children are not only subjected to exploitation but also face the real threat of losing their lives. These experiences highlight how children, especially in single-parent households, are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

## CONCLUSION

In Amma Darko's *Faceless*, the portrayal of single parenting, especially through the character of Maa Tsuru, offers a powerful reflection of the real-world challenges faced by single mothers, particularly in impoverished, urban environments. Maa Tsuru's struggles, shaped by poverty, gender inequality, and societal neglect, mirror the experiences of many single mothers around the world today. These women often face an overwhelming lack of support, whether from absent partners, inadequate social services, or systemic inequalities that trap them in a cycle of poverty and emotional burnout. Maa Tsuru's exhaustion and emotional neglect of her children reflect the harsh realities faced by single parents, especially in developing countries where access to resources like healthcare, education, and social safety nets is limited. In many parts of the world, single mothers often have to juggle multiple jobs to survive, just as Maa Tsuru does, yet still struggle to make ends meet. These mothers, like Maa Tsuru, are often burdened by the expectation to care for their children alone, while the absence of fathers, both emotionally and financially, exacerbates their hardships. Fofu's journey, marked by trauma, neglect, and a loss of trust, reflects the real psychological and emotional toll that growing up in such an environment can have on children. Like Fofu, these children often face challenges in developing trust and emotional stability, as they lack the nurturing and protective environments that are essential for healthy psychological development. In conclusion, *Faceless* serves as both a social critique and a reminder of the urgent need for structural reforms to address the root causes of poverty and gender inequality. The emotional and financial toll depicted in Darko's novel is not just fictional—it is a harsh reality for many single mothers and their children across the world today. By shedding light on these issues, *Faceless* challenges readers to advocate for stronger social support systems and greater equity, ensuring that single-parent families are no longer left to bear the weight of society's neglect alone.



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