

ARTICLE

The spiritualization of mental illnesses in Ghana: A social realist reading of Amma Darko's *Not Without Flowers*

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Abstract

The statement, "Ghanaians are very religious people," is often used by both Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians to describe the former's reading of spiritual meanings into almost everything. Spirituality has and continues to permeate various facets of Ghanaian society, sometimes destroying marriages and families and retarding progress in various spheres, including mental healthcare. In Ghana, mental illnesses are often associated with demonic forces, curses, witchcraft, or other spiritual causes. From a literary perspective, the following paper undertakes a social realist reading of Amma Darko's *Not Without Flowers* in order to explore this phenomenon that continues to militate against proper mental healthcare in Ghana. The paper argues that in *Not Without Flowers*, wherein the mental illness of Ma, a female character, takes center stage, Darko draws on Ma's mental disorder to mirror the spiritualization of mental illnesses in Ghana, explore the underlying factors responsible for this, shed light on the real causes of mental disorders, and ultimately condemn the reading of spiritual meanings into these disorders. The paper also discusses how Darko successfully presents these issues through a social realist approach, and eventually concludes that through this approach, her novel effectively exposes a sociocultural problem that has persisted in Ghana to date and offers insights into what the paper terms "African social realism."

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1. Introduction

The assertion, "Ghanaians are very religious people," has become one of the most common attributes used by foreigners—and Ghanaians themselves—to characterize the people of Ghana. One only needs to pay attention to Ghanaians' conversations, which are often dotted with expressions such as "by God's grace" and "God willing," as well as Ghanaian names such as *Uwumborja* (which means God defends/protects), *Nyamekye* (meaning God's gift), and *Mawunyo* (God is good), to validate this assertion. Added to these are the numerous God-related slogans that often adorn most Ghanaians' cars, homes, and offices. A stroll through the streets of Ghana will reveal a plethora of car slogans, such as "God First," "God Is Watching," and "*Onyame Ne Hene*" (translated as God Is King) among others.

What is more, a walk through the streets or markets of any Ghanaian city or town will reveal numerous self-proclaimed pastors preaching over loudspeakers to audiences busily going about their daily activities. Perhaps the most vexing of these self-styled pastors are the dawn preachers, who often compete with Muslim dawn prayer callers for the attention of their drowsy neighbors between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. GMT. In the midst of all the usual attendant noise and chaos at these dawn hours, one noteworthy fact emerges about Ghanaians—the centrality of religion or spirituality in their lives.

Admittedly, human beings are naturally spiritual beings, and Ghanaians are no exception. Ghanaian spirituality has and continues to permeate almost every facet of Ghanaian society, sometimes destroying whole institutions like marriages and families, as well as individuals, and retarding progress in various aspects of society. One such area that has been adversely impacted by this “overspirituality” is mental healthcare. In Ghana, mental illnesses have often been attributed to demonic forces, curses, witchcraft, or some other spiritual causation. Annabella Opare-Henaku^{1(p55)} confirms this when she reports that during her research in the Akan communities she visited, she observed that “[s]piritual influences in the development of mental illness were highly emphasized when explaining the causes of mental illness.” According to her, these spiritual causes included “causes resulting from having spiritual indulgences, coming under the influence of a curse, punishment from the Supreme Being, oracle, and other spiritual forces such as an evil spirit, Satan, demons,

and witches.”^{1(p55)}

But these findings, it bears pointing out, are not peculiar to the Akan people; they cut across all other ethnic groups and cultural contexts in Ghana. As a result, dotted across Ghanaian cities, towns, and villages are numerous prayer camps, shrines, and churches purporting to treat mental disorders spiritually (as shown on the billboard in Figure 1). There are equally several faith-based television and radio stations that sometimes broadcast pastors exorcizing demons from mentally ill persons in a bid to heal them. It is also common to chance upon television and/or radio advertisements linking mental disorders to spiritual causes and calling on viewers or listeners with such problems or whose relations have mental issues to visit particular churches, prayer camps, or traditional shrines for solutions. However, as the subsequent subsection will soon reveal, such an association of mental ailments with spiritual forces is not an isolated Ghanaian peculiarity.

1.1. The spiritualization of mental illnesses across cultures and epochs

The reading of spiritual meanings into mental diseases is an age-long phenomenon cutting across epochs, cultures, and civilizations. Meisenhelder *et al.*² observed that “[m]any studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between spiritual beliefs and practices and mental health in various populations.”^{2(p506)} The authors report that in their research on the relationship between spirituality and mental health at an adult medical oncology ambulatory center in the United States of America, “[p]atients who perceived a



Figure 1. A billboard advertising spiritual solutions to various problems, including mental illnesses (indicated with the yellow arrow). Reprinted with permission from Marcus L. Harvey (<https://www.mlharvey.com/gallery>).

loving God had higher mental health"^{2(p511)} while those "who scored higher in their concept of a stern God ... scored lower in mental health,"^{2(p510)} often manifesting mental disorders such as anxiety or depression.

Turning to ancient Israeli culture as represented in the Bible, the Sauline mental affliction recorded in the book of First Samuel (I Samuel), where Saul's irrational behavior is attributed to "an evil spirit from God" (I Samuel 16:14),³ provides us with a perfect historical example of the spiritualization of mental illnesses in that culture. Although it is not explicitly stated that Saul's affliction—captured in verse 23 of this chapter as follows: "And whenever the evil spirit was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played...; so Saul was refreshed, and was well and the evil spirit departed"—is a mental illness, his actions and expressions (borne out of paranoia) point to mental instability. From a literary perspective, the biblical narrator, as evidenced in the extract above, euphemistically shrouds Saul's mental condition in seeming ill health or "un-wellness," thus employing a Viktor Shklovsky literary concept termed *ostranenie* that advocates defamiliarizing or deautomatizing the familiar by, among other literary techniques, not designating things by their known names, tags, or labels.^{4(p779), 5(p27)} At the cultural and social levels, the stigma attached to mental illnesses and the status of Saul as the king of Israel arguably demanded such linguistic diplomacy to protect the image of the king and the royal institution. Bar⁶, a scholar of Judaic Studies, in an online article titled "Was King Saul a mad man?" corroborates my argument that Saul's illness was nothing short of madness when he admits that "On many occasions, Saul's strange behavior was attributed to his madness."^{6(p1)}

Juxtaposing Bar⁶'s assertion above with the claim in First Samuel 16:14³ that Saul's ill health was the result of an evil spirit, one could not agree more with my assertions that Saul's illness was a mental disorder and that this biblical evidence gestures to the spiritualization of mental illnesses in the ancient Israeli culture. Another biblical example that further authenticates the latter claim is King Nebuchadnezzar's God-induced madness in the Book of Daniel (chapter four). But rather than go into the nitty-gritty of this, I shall turn my attention to another historical and/or cultural context that lends credence to the phenomenon of spiritualizing mental illnesses—namely, the medieval English society.

In medieval England, mental illness was associated with supernatural forces such as demons and elves. According to Turner⁷, "medieval persons perceived the mentally incapacitated as either already in a state of punishment from God, or as innocents tormented by demons and in need of an exorcist and prayer."^{7(p28)} Zsuzsa⁸ corroborates

this when he makes the claim that "Christian culture brought the notion to Anglo-Saxons that madness might be the cause of sin, of demons, but it ultimately comes from God either as a punishment or testing."^{8(p109)} In an article titled "Mental disorders in Anglo-Saxon hagiographies," he adds that Anglo-Saxon "hagiographies show that there was a tendency to depict demon possession as madness,"^{9(p82)} noting that as far as "the supernatural etiology of mental disorders [in these hagiographies is concerned], the main perpetrators are usually either demons or ælfe."^{9(p89)}

All the evidence from the various cultural contexts explored above points to the fact that over the centuries, mental illnesses have been regarded in different cultural contexts and epochs as spiritual afflictions that require supernatural interventions. But while in some of these cultures this misconception no longer prevails, in others, such as Ghana, there is still the notion that mental disorders have spiritual or supernatural origins. As a result, in Ghana, when someone suffers a mental breakdown, family members' and friends' first inclinations are to exorcize whatever demons or evil spirits are responsible using prayers from pastors or charms, amulets, incantations, or dark powers (commonly known as *juju*) from fetish priests (or priestesses) and Muslim spiritual men known as *mallams*. Such an attitude toward mental health issues is what this paper terms the spiritualization of mental illnesses. It is a phenomenon that has seen several people with mental disorders end up in prayer camps, shrines, and on the streets of Ghana instead of psychiatric hospitals, where they could have received treatment or help.

Thus, the spiritualization of mental illnesses has militated against proper mental healthcare in Ghana. Agyekum¹⁰ authenticates this when he asserts that "[m]ental health in Ghana has always been a contentious issue due to its association with supernatural forces, such as witchcraft."^{10(p67)} According to him, "[t]his has led to mental health being poorly understood as a condition that can be dealt with through the healthcare system."^{10(p67)} The resultant effect has been the deaths and suffering of countless people, a section of whom Ma, the protagonist of Amma Darko's *Not Without Flowers*, represents in a tale that exposes the plight of mental patients in Ghana.

2. Ghanaians' attitude toward mental illnesses as mirrored in *Not Without Flowers*

Darko employs Ma's psychotic breakdown in her novel to mirror and condemn Ghanaians' continued association of mental illnesses with supernatural causes. The spiritualization of Ma's mental illness, therefore, provides a glimpse into the misconception about mental disorders across Ghana. Most importantly, Darko employs

Ma's "story of misery, pain, agony, dilemmas, [and] frustrations"^{11(p11)} to explore the real causes of mental illnesses and the underlying factors responsible for Ghanaians' spiritualization of this mental health challenge.

The story details Ma, a mother of three, who has been abandoned at a prayer camp following a mental breakdown. As her story commences in the prologue, her children (Kweku, Cora, and Randa), together with a journalist called Beam, a farmer, and his son, are on a rescue mission to free her from the Whip to Conquer Satan (WCS) prayer camp. When the rescue team makes its secret intrusion into the camp, one thing immediately hits readers—the insanitary and inhumane conditions to which Ma and the other inmates are exposed. No better words could have succinctly captured this than the omniscient narrator's graphic description below:

On the floor, where the farmer's son had pointed, was a figure. She was frail and huddled on a mat on the floor, fast asleep. There was no pillow for her head. She was about sixty, with skeletal features, and completely bald. Around each of her ankles was an iron ring linked to a thick iron chain. It was hooked through a hole in a huge, blunt iron rod buried halfway into the concrete floor in the center of the hut. There were other metal hooks in the hole from other chained ankles.

The frail old woman stank of stale urine. She must have wet herself several times while chained. Kweku's blood churned. They tiptoed to the next figure, also bald and huddled on a mat with no pillow. The ankle was also chained. Again, Kweku shook his head. They moved on to the next figure, and the next, all women, all old and bald, all frail and chained, all haggard and stinking.^{11(pp27–28)}

Shocking and disgusting as these details are, they gesture to the novel's agenda to expose and give a voice to mental patients such as Ma and the hundreds of voiceless others bound in chains in deplorable conditions in mental homes and so-called prayer camps across Ghana. But most significantly, the piercing narrative voice in the foregoing extract awakens readers to the dehumanization and physical harm caused to these mental patients due to the continued spiritualization of their illnesses. Agboadannon and Dossoumou¹² corroborate this when they assert that "Darko's description of these patients' asylum stays showcases the tortures they underwent to expel the causative spirits."^{12(p16)} "Whip to Conquer Satan,"^{11(p26)} the name of the prayer camp, points not only to the bodily harm inflicted on inmates of many mental homes and prayer camps in Ghana and the consequent violation of their fundamental human rights, but also to

the belief that mental illnesses are caused by satanic forces that must be exorcised through whipping. As the dialogue between Beam and the farmer's son reveals during their rescue mission, "[t]hey whip those frail old women in there [...] / 'That is how they deal with Satan,' the farmer's son replied," adding later that, "To them, mental illness means possession by evil spirits,"^{11(pp29,30)} which must be exorcised through whipping of victims—an act the farmer's son rightly associates with the "Stone Age."^{11(p30)}

At this early stage of the narrative, the Ghanaian society cannot help but bow in shame for such uncalled-for cruelties against humanity. In fact, as the rescue team depict the rot within the wooden structures of the prayer camp through their dialogues, Ghana's "dirty linen" is, as it were, being washed in the eyes of a baffled audience as they come face-to-face with the realities of prayer camp operators, who "[employ] people who do a wonderful public relations job for them all over"—sometimes even "around the psychiatric hospitals."^{11(p31)} As the old farmer indicates, the target of these criminals is the "well-to-do"^{11(p31)}—and these well-to-do folks, like Kweku and his siblings, easily fall for such tricks and exploitation. Regrettably, as Kweku admits, they are never allowed to see their relations once they are sent to these camps or asylums. Yet, they must keep sending money and food every month for the upkeep of their relatives, who obviously never get the money or the food.^{11(p32)} Considering all these vices that are perpetrated at the prayer camp, one cannot help but join in the rescue mission for Ma to be liberated.

As the rescue van speeds home after the successful extraction of Ma, Beam—and perhaps readers—cannot fathom how three educated, rational young adults could stoop so low as to believe that a mental illness could be treated in a prayer camp. His curiosity effectively brings to the fore the gullibility of some Ghanaians and the extent to which they have and continue to allow fake pastors and fraudsters to exploit and destroy innocent lives. As Pillay¹³ rightly puts it, "Amma Darko exposes ... religious exploitation in [the] Ghanaian society in the novel *Not without Flowers*."^{13(p71)} But it must quickly be reiterated that, while exposing this exploitation, Darko (through her authorial character Beam) holds her compatriots, such as Kweku, Cora, and Randa, liable for fostering such religious exploitation through their naivety.

Apart from the gullibility of some Ghanaians and the clever tricks employed by exploitative fake pastors and fraudsters, Cora, the second of Ma's children, offers readers yet another reason for the continued spiritualization of mental illnesses and the subsequent recourse to spiritual healing when she tells Beam that "That should tell you the extent of our despair. We were three extremely desperate

siblings.”^{11(p34)} Kweku authenticates her claim but adds a new dimension to this reason by pointing out, a couple of pages earlier, that sometimes the desperation of relations is not necessarily to get cures for the mentally ill but to find “a place far away to deposit their mentally sick relative.”^{11(p32)} This, Kwesi Yankah¹⁴ asserts, is usually because of the “stigma that mental disease attracts ...,” noting that “[t]hat is precisely what derail[s] Cora’s love affair with Afful: her mother’s ailment...”^{14(pp12–13)} As to whether the negative attitude toward mental health is the result of the clever tricks of scammers in the guise of God’s servants, the naivety of some Ghanaians, or the desperation of relations of mental patients to find cures for their ill relatives or avoid stigmatization, one thing is clear from all the foregoing evidence from the novel—the spiritualization of mental illnesses is a sociocultural problem that Darko’s novel seeks to interrogate and expose. In doing so, readers, through characters’ dialogues, the omniscient narrator’s renditions, and the novel’s plot structure, ultimately gain insights into the author’s opinion(s) on the origins of mental ailments.

3. Darko’s stance on the causes of mental illnesses

Darko’s position on the spiritualization of mental illnesses and, subsequently, her thoughts on what causes these illnesses first come to the fore following the dialogue between Kweku and Beam regarding how Ma ended up in the WCS prayer camp. In an attempt to explain this to Beam, Kweku reveals that it all started with Cora’s recurring nightmares about Ma’s funeral, which was celebrated with a lot of flowers. These nightmares coincided with the deterioration of Ma’s mental health, causing her to destroy every flower in sight. As evidence from the novel indicates, she develops a loathing for flowers and unconsciously destroys all the flowers in the house under the influence of a voice she keeps hearing in her head. The narrator relates it as follows:

The knife was in Ma’s hand, and the voice was screaming blood.... She was holding the purple lily, and the voice was ...

Blood!

Ma’s hand closed around the flower like the head of a fowl about to be slaughtered unto the gods.

“Whoosh!” the voice sounded. “Whack!” it yelled. “Whack!” ...

Whoosh! Whack! Whoosh! Whack! Search! Blood! Look! Sniff! Blood! Blood! Blood!

One after the other, the blooming flowers fell. Lilies, roses, hibiscus, all, till there were nothing more left to slice off.^{11(pp169–170)}

Ma’s hatred for flowers in mannerisms, as she destroys the flowers shows that she is mentally deranged. However, readers’ attention is quickly whisked away from this uncomfortable spectacle to the mystery behind her dislike for flowers, as readers get to know that her mental instability is caused by a young lady called Flower.

However, far from being a spiritual attack from this young lady, it emerges that Ma’s psychotic breakdown is the direct result of her husband’s extramarital affair with a young university girl called Aggie, whom the husband, Pa, affectionately calls Flower and devotes his life to. As Diasse¹⁵ observes, “Pa puts forward Flower’s exorbitant needs as priorities”^{15(p98)}, while neglecting his family’s needs and his marital responsibilities. Thus, Ma’s loss of Pa to Flower and the resultant lack of affection are the real causes of her mental illness—not a curse, demonic possession, or any other supernatural causation. This is corroborated by Ohwovoriole¹⁶, who notes that “Ma’s madness as a result of her husband’s infidelity and suicide is vividly depicted”^{16(p88)} in *Not Without Flowers*. Ma’s loathing and destruction of the flowers in her house are therefore symbolic acts of transference, wherein she hates and destroys Pa’s Flower—the cause of Pa’s infidelity and her psychotic breakdown. Her destruction of the flowers can, thus, be interpreted as a veiled act of revenge much akin to that of Electra, who, in Greek mythology, “murders her ‘adulterous’ mother Clytemnestra and thus avenges her dead father.”^{17(pp137–138)} In Ma’s case, the “adulterous” Flower must die for her adultery—just like Clytemnestra.

Perhaps, it is Pa’s demise (through suicide) due to his inability to meet the material needs of Flower that exacerbates Ma’s mental illness. Having taken loans from banks and his office and even sold his personal belongings, Pa is left with no choice but to commit suicide. All these traumatic experiences obviously break down Ma’s mental defenses, thereby resulting in her mental instability. Without pretending to be a psychologist, psychoanalyst, or neurologist, Darko—through all these details—proves beyond doubt that mental illnesses are psychologically and socially induced and have nothing to do with evil spirits or demons. Such a practical, scientific stance on the causes of mental illnesses exposes the folly of spiritualizing mental diseases and ultimately leaves Ma’s children—and society in general—condemned for dumping mental patients such as Ma in unhygienic shrines and prayer camps for spiritual healing.

To further prove that mental disorders such as Ma’s are triggered by social and/or psychological factors rather than spiritual forces, Darko deliberately gives her novel a closed-ended plot, in which all the tension and conflicts in the narrative are resolved by the end of the story. At the

climax of the plot, Kweku, Cora, and Randa embark on a devastating revenge mission against Flower (Aggie). Randa targets and destroys her marriage by seducing her husband, Idan. Worst of all, she ends up transmitting human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome to Idan, and he, in turn, infects Aggie. At this point in the narrative, nemesis seems to have caught up with the latter as the revenge seems complete, with Aggie contracting a disease and having marital problems—just like her victim, Ma, who suffers mental instability, marital problems, and the eventual loss of her husband.

The dark, gothic atmosphere these events create in the narrative can never go unnoticed as readers come face-to-face with the dark, painful realities of the devastating consequences of sexual immorality and revenge. Undeniably, Ma's and Aggie's marital problems and the series of characters such as Ma, Aggie, Randa, Damian, and Idan, among others, who contract human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome and suffer psychotic breakdowns are skillfully employed by Darko to this effect—that is, to create a dark, frightening atmosphere aimed at mirroring the harsh realities in her society, where infidelity and extramarital affairs between married men, such as Pa, and young university students, such as Aggie, have led to the destruction of marriages, caused pain, resulted in mental and other illnesses, and even led to avoidable deaths. This claim is corroborated by Tidorchibe¹⁸, who notes that *Not Without Flowers*:

...presents a tale of failed relationships and their daunting effects on victims, their families, and society as a whole. The pains, nightmares, agonies, and the lust for vengeance create a vicious cycle of cause and effects, so that in the end, innocent souls like Cora and Randa are condemned to perpetual sorrow because of the actions of adults like Pa.^{18(p66)}

Fortunately, the gothic atmosphere created by the dark events in the novel soon makes way for a more relaxed one when Aggie, upon realizing her error, apologizes to Ma. Her epiphany, as aptly observed by Tidorchibe¹⁸, occasions a sudden change in atmosphere and introduces a twist to the plot as “the tensions and conflicts that pervade the narrative from the onset, soon give way”^{18(p75)} to reconciliation, peace, and healing. This produces the semblance of a happy ending to Ma's tale. According to Tidorchibe¹⁸:

...as Aggie walks out of Ma's room and Ma tells her, ‘Tell my children I want to smell some flowers. Tell Kweku to bring me some flowers...’, it becomes obvious that there is finally a resolution of the conflict, tension, and mystery that have resulted in

the rather charged atmosphere in the novel.^{18(p75)}

Admittedly, when Ma asks to “smell some flowers”^{11(p367)}—something she previously loathed and even destroyed—it is symbolic of her recovery from anguish, pain, and even her psychotic breakdown.

By ending the novel on this relatively positive, reconciliatory note, wherein Ma appears calm and mentally stable, Darko tacitly gestures to the need for attitudinal change with regard to the perception that mental illnesses are caused by supernatural forces. The novel ends with Ma's optimistic journey toward mental recovery without any spiritual intervention, suggesting that, as far as Darko is concerned—and I do agree with her—mental disorders such as Ma's have no necessary correlation with the supernatural. She implicitly states this in the novel's prologue when she uses the old farmer as her authorial voice to encourage Beam to publish “the story about the camp and the issue of the misconception about mental illness as possession by evil spirits.”^{11(p33)} To this extent, it can be concluded that Darko rejects the assigning of spiritual causes to mental illnesses and points, instead, to social and psychological causes such as marital infidelity, loss (of property or loved ones), lack of affection, trauma, and unforgiveness, among others. She thus demonstrates an astute social awareness and adopts a realistic approach to her subject matter. The latter assertion certainly requires further elaboration.

4. Darko's social realist approach to Ma's psychotic breakdown

Social realism underpins *Not Without Flowers*' successful exposure and condemnation of the spiritualization of Ma's mental illness—and by extension, mental illnesses in general. According to Luijk¹⁹, social realism (or “*realismo social*,” as she terms it in Spanish) often “illustrate[s] the difficulties of working-class life and related poverty.”^{19(p272)} She notes that social realist novels often employ “the objective narrator, the dominance of dialogue, a linear plot and a reduced time and space”^{19(p272)} as stylistic techniques. Gladstone²⁰ offers a broader definition of social realism when he observes that 19th-century American social realists focused on depicting “the real spirit and disposition of the social life of late-nineteenth-century America[ns],” especially “workingmen and women, immigrants, the unemployed, Negroes, waifs and orphans, the poor and the dispossessed—the ordinary, heretofore neglected and ignored common citizen.”^{20(p117)} Drawing on both Luijk's¹⁹ and Gladstone's²⁰ assertions, it can be surmised that social realism tends to focus on the problems of the common people with the aim of often drawing attention to their disadvantaged or marginalized position in society.

It is a tradition grounded in what Gladstone terms “social awareness.”^{20(p113)}

Based on the foregoing, one can argue that Darko's *Not Without Flowers* is quintessentially a social realist novel. Like any social realist work, it presents the problem of a neglected, stigmatized, and marginalized population of the Ghanaian society—the mentally challenged. From the preceding sections, it is obvious that the novel sets out to expose and champion the cause of mental patients such as Ma, who are often regarded as victims of curses, bewitchment, “spiritual force[s] or demonic possession,”^{13(p71)} and other supernatural causations, for which reason they end up in fetish shrines and prayer camps. These preceding sections have already belabored the point that mental health issues and the mentally challenged have and continue to be neglected in Ghana. As a result, I will only add that the resultant disadvantaged or marginalized position of mental patients makes them an ideal subject matter for any social realist work, be it in art or literature.

If social realism, as a literary tradition, has carved out a niche for itself, it is due to its often unapologetic representation of the issues faced by ordinary and marginalized populations. Gladstone²⁰ has aptly observed that social realism is noted for its “graphic narrative[s]”^{20(p117)} on the appalling conditions of the ordinary citizen. Darko's unapologetic tone or graphic presentation of Ma's mental state—especially the voice in her head, her paranoia, and her destruction of flowers in hunger for blood, as captured in the extracts in the previous section—the neglect of her family, and the deplorable conditions in which she is found at the prayer camp, gesture to her use of imagistic language, sound devices (such as the onomatopoeia in “Whoosh! Whack! Whoosh! Whack!”), and an unapologetic tone to present the plight of an ordinary, mentally ill housewife like Ma, and by extension, the segment of the Ghanaian population she represents. This ability to employ graphic details—like any social realist—to draw attention to the plight of the marginalized, such as mental patients, accounts for my claim that Darko adopts a social realist approach.

In exploring the plight of this marginalized group, Darko also uses an objective point of view that allows her to present her narrative realistically and dispassionately. Luijk¹⁹ has observed that “pure objectivism is a stylistic device associated with social realist literary works.”^{19(p272)} In *Not Without Flowers*, Darko employs pure objectivism by using an omniscient narrator in presenting the dark tale of Ma in an impersonal tone, occasionally drawing on character dialogue to allow readers to gain firsthand information from characters such as Kweku, Beam, the

old farmer, and his son. This is the most obvious narrative style Darko adopts as her characters engage in expert conversations wherein they educate readers about mental health and its spiritualization in Ghana. For instance, when Beam and the farmer's son interact thus,

Beam was not deterred. “What do the initials WCS stand for?”

“Whip to Conquer Satan!” the farmer's son replied straight-faced.

“What?” Beam yelled. “Whip? They whip those frail old women in there?”

“That is how they deal with Satan,” the farmer's son replied....

“... To them, mental illness means possession by evil spirits,” [he added.]

“You mean they believe that it was when one was possessed by an evil spirit that one became mentally sick?”

“Yes.”

“So in effect we haven't come far from the Stone Age at all, have we?” Beam blurted....

“Yes, pal. That is how close we still are to the Stone Age”^{11(pp29–30)}

readers get informed about the physical abuse meted out to mental patients, such as Ma, in prayer camps and even psychiatric homes. Through this dialogue, readers also gain insights into the Ghanaian perception that mental illnesses are caused by spiritual forces. It equally reveals Darko's condemnation of this misconception through the farmer's son's statement, “That is how close we still are to the Stone Age”^{11(p30)} The novel is replete with such insightful expert dialogues; and these work collaboratively with the omniscient narrator's account of Ma's mental illness to give readers objective, vivid, and realistic representations of issues such as the spiritualization of mental instability, the reasons for this phenomenon, and the real causes of mental illnesses, among other things.

Contextualization—or rather localization—is another key component of Darko's social realist approach to Ma's illness. As it were, her social realist approach holds that localizing social realities, no matter how universal they may be, is essential to achieving the desired social impact. This characteristic of social realism is seldom emphasized by scholars; yet the localization of social realities—what Luijk¹⁹ has termed “reduced time and space”^{19(p272)}—has given rise to British, Spanish, and American social realism, among others. It is important to point out that contextualizing social realities is a major requirement

for making literature as socially relevant and politically sensitive as Jean-Paul Sartre's "concept of *littérature engagée* (engaged literature ... [or] committed literature)" demands.^{21(p438)} As a result, although the spiritualization of mental disorders cuts across several cultures worldwide, Darko takes this issue from the universal stage and makes it authentically Ghanaian. She achieves this not just by situating her narrative on Ma's mental instability in Ghana, but also by making her characters Ghanaian in name and speech—speech habits that scholars such as James Adogpa²² and Kari Dako^{23(p48)} have termed "Ghanaianisms." Adogpa²² defines Ghanaianisms as the "expressions that Ghanaians create or employ to serve the peculiar linguistic context of Ghana,"^{22(p85)} noting that usually these expressions "are semantically divergent from Standard English and mostly [defy] explanations of lexicographers."^{24(p300)}

Through Ghanaianisms, Darko's social realist approach draws on the African novel's aesthetic quality of Africanizing narratives through vernacular linguistic borrowings and local speech mannerisms to localize literary genres and the English language—a linguistic development "[Paul] Bandia and others have termed 'glocalization,'" according to Tidorchibe.^{25(p171)} Darko's social realist approach, thus, employs Ghanaianisms as a form of glocalization to localize the spiritualization of mental illnesses, ultimately giving her readers a glimpse, not only of the nature of this problem in Ghana, but most importantly, of what African social realism looks like and does—or should do. Consequently, her work—consciously or unconsciously—validates the claim made by Ngugi²⁶ to the effect that African writers and "scholars ... [often] tease out the various theoretical possibilities inherent in the elements and features that constitute the oral aesthetic."^{26(p73)} There is no doubt that the novel's use of Ghanaian names and Ghanaianisms to localize the spiritualizing of mental health gestures to the fact that African social realism must be authentically African in identity, not just in subject matter but in aesthetics as well.

As far as the employment of character names to localize her subject is concerned, names such as "Kweku," "Mena Penyin," and "Mena Kakraba," among others, are authentically Ghanaian and "sound familiar to the setting and the [native] reader does not need to make [the] effort" to comprehend them.^{27(p153)} "Kweku" is a well-known Akan name for people born on Wednesday in Ghana. It is derived from the Akan traditional system of naming people according to the days on which they were born. Mena Penyin (translated as "My older mother") and Mena Kakraba (translated as "My younger mother"), on the other hand, are not day names. They are mostly names or titles used by children in polygamous homes in Ghana to refer to their mothers' co-wives. Darko's use of these

names in her novel points to this Ghanaian practice and successfully "Ghanaianizes" her narrative and ultimately the spiritualization of Ma's mental illness.

Perhaps what better enhances Darko's attempt to use localization to present Ma's mental instability as a Ghanaian social reality is her creative use of Ghanaian English (aka Ghanaianisms) to give her narrative a distinctly Ghanaian identity. As Adogpa²² rightly notes, "Ghanaianisms are marks of Ghanaian cultural and linguistic identities."^{22(p85)} Consequently, when Darko¹¹ allows her omniscient narrator and characters to occasionally switch from standard English to Ghanaian English, such as "But shouldn't ... MUTE with its 'too-known' attitude ..., and who was always nosing around other people's backyards, also be prepared to have its own backyard nosed into as well?"^{11(p245)}, "Me, to tell you the truth, I don't see her problem at all"^{11(p101)}, and "Even me your dear aunt, ask me how many times I eat corned beef..."^{11(p225)}, among others, she successfully grounds her text in the Ghanaian sociolinguistic culture, thereby giving the social problem she exposes and condemns—which is, the spiritualization of mental illnesses—a local, Ghanaian identity.

But it is the ease with which Darko's omniscient narrator and characters mix codes that further cements her attempt to make her text authentically Ghanaian and real. Readers are occasionally confronted with quintessential Ghanaian code mixing, such as "Accra sweet paaaaaaa"^{11(p243)}, "Adweaaaaa ... eduro no akye no, a shirtless young guy in a dirty pair of brown knickerbockers spat outside..."^{11(p94)}, and "The mpesempese man, do you think he has done his thing this morning?"^{11(p187)}, among others, which effectively gesture to the geo-cultural origin of the novel and, by extension, the issue it explores. Darko's narrator's and characters' linguistic habits, thus, serve as a powerful tool that further renders the spiritualization of Ma's illness an essentially Ghanaian problem. Hence, it can be argued that Darko employs Ghanaianisms not merely as a stylistic device, but as a social realist approach aimed at localizing the universal problem her novel explores. This approach, it bears reiterating, makes her narrative authentically Ghanaian to mirror and condemn the spiritualization of mental ailments in Ghana. But most importantly, it points to the fact that African social realism is sociopolitically sensitive and rooted in some of the aesthetics of the African novel.

5. Conclusion

From all the foregoing, one can argue that Amma Darko's *Not Without Flowers* is a social realist attempt to expose the spiritualization of mental illnesses in Ghana. The novel employs a social realist approach to explore Ma's psychotic breakdown to give readers insights into the spiritualization

of mental diseases in Ghanaian society and the factors that have fostered this problem. But beyond the mere graphic portrayal of the problem, the novel rejects assigning spiritual causes to mental illnesses and explores the real causes of this health challenge by gesturing to its social and psychological origins. Through its character dialogues and the closed-ended plot that stages the reconciliation between Ma and Aggie and the former's subsequent relative mental stability, the novel ultimately condemns the persistent spiritualization of mental disorders in Ghana to date.

By the end of the novel, readers not only come to the realization that mental illnesses have no spiritual causations but also get a glimpse of the sociopolitical nature of Darko's novel. *Not Without Flowers* is indisputably a social realist project embarked on by Darko to draw attention to a pressing but neglected social (or rather, health) problem in Ghana. Most importantly, as pointed out in the preceding segment, the novel's aesthetics (such as its unapologetic tone, graphic narrative style, pure objectivism, expert character dialogues, and the contextualization or localization of its content and language) ultimately gesture to how African social realism is grounded in the aesthetics of the African novel. The preceding social realist reading of *Not Without Flowers*, therefore, sheds light not only on Darko's exposure and condemnation of the reading of spiritual meanings into mental illnesses in Ghana, but also on the nature and character of what this paper has termed "African social realism."

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