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## Reviewed Work: The Housemaid by Amma Darko

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**THE HOUSEMAID (BOOK REVIEW)**

Amma Darko. Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann. 1998. 107 pages. \$11.95/£5.50. ISBN 0-435-91008-6.

A relative newcomer to the Ghanaian fiction-writing scene, Amma Darko is the author of a 1991 novel published in German and then issued in 1995 in its original English as *Beyond the Horizon* (see WLT 72:2, p. 468). *The Housemaid* is her second novel. Darko joins fellow Ghanaian female writer Ama Ata Aidoo in focusing on the social ills of modern Ghanaian society, especially as they concern and affect women. Thus, the themes are familiar as they range from general national corruption to issues of money and greed, from the role and view of women in modern Ghanaian society to destructive woman-to-woman dynamics, from pursuit of education to the politics of poverty and to polygamy and husband snatching.

*The Housemaid* is a two-part, twelve-chapter short novel which tells the all-too-familiar story of urbanization and its peculiar values. This time, however, the familiar plot line is couched in a mini-detective story: the homicidal death of an abandoned baby and the different responses of the women and the men. Woven through the whodunit plot is a bottom-line concern -- that is, the truth about what it takes for women to advance economically and professionally in a male-dominated world. This is what Tika, the protagonist, discovers after failing her fifth-form exam. As the story unwinds, it becomes obvious that without adequate education and professional training, women are exploited and some like Tika end up sleeping their way to the top. Her entrepreneurial success well in hand, all gained at the expense of other personal fulfillment such as wife-hood and motherhood (she has a hysterectomy), Tika seeks to remedy a familial omission: she would spend some of her wealth training a girl from her dead father's village extended family, undoubtedly a fitting memorial gift to her beloved father, who was ill-treated by her mother. Efia comes on the scene as the trainee housemaid, and all the ingredients of day-to-day living are played out in a web of deceit and intrigue, mostly by manipulative womenfolk. Efia gets pregnant and blames it on one of her mistress's lovers, an impotent civil-servant executive. As Efia's grandmother and mother's extortion plan falls apart, Efia runs away and soon delivers a Down-syndrome baby girl who dies minutes after birth. Out of fright, Efia disposes of the corpse, much decomposed from being carried around in a plastic bag in the hot sun. News of the discovery of the corpse in the thicket spreads throughout the town, reaching her porter friends, one of whom turns her in. Efia shows up

to give an account of what happened, but ironically, the novel's tension is resolved by the deft, quick thinking of one of Efi's porter friends, whose motive is quite simply to cover for herself and her cronies.

With the crime resolved and all speculation shelved, thought turns to the issue of the treatment of widows, the "poor lonely old widows... Ghana's poor, old, lonely women," who would have become victims of a "frenzied orgy of witch-hunting." The prospect of a similar fate befalling the protagonist's own mother, now old and abandoned by her only child, is implied and is too close for comfort. The novel ends on a redemptive note, as the protagonist and her friend laugh and cry away "their pain, their disappointment, their anger, their fear."

The Housemaid is divided into two parts. Part I, consisting of a single chapter, simply focuses on geriatrics, Ghana-style, with the murder, the general reaction to it, and its resolution. Part 2 then unravels the "why" and "how" of the crime -- the plot, so to speak -- through a web of relationships. While the language is unencumbered, the tension of the work feels loose, particularly for a detective novel. Nevertheless, it is a good story.

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By Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith, University of Nebraska, Omaha

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