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SOMMAIRE:

Editorial.....	i
DIDACTIQUE & LINGUISTIQUE	1
1. AHONNON, A. : TICE au service de l'ingénierie ...	3
2. BANKOLÉ-MINAFINOU, E.: Innovative approach to pre-service education...	11
3. BOKO, G. C.: Les langues de l'espace francophone ouest-africain ...	27
4. FANOU, C. et al.: Critical and creative thinking ...	37
5. GANGUE, M. M.: Le yaka entre le kabyè, le lamba et le nawdm...	45
6. KOUTCHADE, I.: Decoding ideological features...	59
7. TOGNON, K. Y.-M.: Sprachpolitik unter der Einbeziehung von Lokalsprachen ...	73
HISTOIRE & GEOGRAPHIE	2
1. ADJA, K. : Zur Analyse der Willkür und des Missbrauchs der Amtsgewalt ...	83
2. AJAVON, A. Y. C. et al.: Importances socio-économiques et environnementales ...	93
3. GUEZO, A.: The enslavement of the Africans ...	103
4. HOUNDEFO, V. M.: Caractéristiques et évolution des cultures africaines ...	115
5. ODJOURBERE, J. et al.: Efficacité des structures de cogestion ...	121
6. TCHIBOZO, R.: Les nouveaux lieux de négociation de l'art ...	133
LITTERATURE	3
1. AMOUSSOU, Y. C.: Discourse Tenor, Context and Character ...	143
2. AROUNA, C.: Voyage à Rodrigues de J. M.G. Le Clézio ...	159
3. GBAGUIDI, C. : A search for a better living in the city...	169
4. WEKENON T., M.: Reisen im Märchen...	177
PHILOSOPHIE & SOCIÉTÉ	4
1. ADANHOUNME, E. R. K.: Considérations sur la démocratie consensuelle...	189
2. AHODEKON, S. C.C. et al.: Les effets de la mortalité maternelle ...	199
3. ATABAVIKPO, V. : Lügen und Höflichkeit als Medium idealen Dialogs...?	223
4. DAAVO, C. Z.: L'intégration socioculturelle des femmes réfugiées togolaises au Bénin	231
5. NANTOB, M. M.: Du religieux en mutation sociale entre ruralité et urbanité...	241
6. ODOULAMI, J. A.: La gratuité de l'enseignement au Bénin à la lumière des faits	249
7. OUASSA KOUARO, M. et al.: Les mass media face au défi du développement local ...	263
8. TCHABLE, B. : La fréquentation préscolaire ...	273
ANNONCES	5
Abonnement.....	page 3 couverture
Notes aux auteurs.....	page 4 couverture

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A SEARCH FOR A BETTER LIVING IN THE CITY, A MIRAGE FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN AMMA DARKO'S *THE HOUSEMAID*?

By Célestin GBAGUIDI

Résumé:

Tout être humain est perpétuellement en quête d'une amélioration de son niveau de vie ; certains abandonnent leur milieu habituel ou lieu de naissance pour la ville dans l'attente de cet objectif-là. Ils prennent très souvent la ville pour la Terre Promise. Dans son œuvre romanesque, *The Housemaid* (1998), la femme-écrivain ghanéenne, Amma Darko, a fait un exposé vivant sur la quête du mieux-être en ville par les jeunes. Dans cette fiction, les personnages comme Akua et Efia pensent trouver ce mieux-être à Accra en laissant derrière eux la misère noire dans laquelle ils végètent à Kataso. Malheureusement, un grand nombre d'entre eux tombent dans le piège de la ville s'adonnant aux vices. Cet article vise à conscientiser les immigrants du village sur le fait qu'il n'y a pas meilleure place que chez soi.

Mots-clés : jeunes – village – migrer – ville – vices – pauvreté.

Introduction

Every human being is perpetually looking for an improved standard of living; some, particularly the flower of the society, leave their usual living area or birthplace for the city because in the village there seems to be a gloomy economic climate or a striking lack of basic development infrastructures. The youth more often take the city as the Promised Land. In this wake, they depopulate the village in search of a hypothetical material well-being; in other words, the search of an improved standard of living pushes a good many able-bodied young people to quit the hamlet in favour of the city. African fiction gives a thorough account of the massive movement of the younger generation towards urban areas where prospects to have a better living are more encouraging. Indeed, the 'city' novelists usually depict the conflict between two worlds: the traditional and conservative village, and the modern, alluring, but 'decadent' city. In this wake, David Cook accurately writes that with this type of novel, "*As is usual, the old confronts the new, but instead of one being essentially alien, we are presented with two different aspects of African society: the village and the city; the traditional and the ultra-sophisticated*".¹ *The Housemaid* (1998) published by the Ghanaian female writer, Amma Darko, may fall within the African fiction preoccupied by this contemporary issue. It is worth saying that once in the city, the village immigrants enjoy varying fortunes; a handful of the migrants are successful while the overwhelming majority endures bitter failures. Accordingly, Ayélé Fafavi d'Almeida fittingly upholds that "*It is obvious that the possibilities of the city giving available new potentialities for women to succeed is not a road paved with honey, but the road is paved with thorns and obstacles*".² These hindrances do not hamper the younger generation from rushing to the city.

¹ David Cook, "A Good Bad Heroine: A Study of Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*", in *African Literature: A Critical View* (London: Longman, 1977), p. 145.

² Ayélé Fafavi d'Almeida, "The Aesthetics of Survival in Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*", in *Particip'Action: Revue Inter africaine de Littérature, Linguistique et Philosophie* (Lomé: Imprimerie ST Louis, Janvier 2013), p. 41.

This study based on Amma Darko's novel published in 1998 aims at raising the consciousness of the youth over the hardships they might face migrating to the city. Omar Sougou is fully in line with the need to raise the younger generation's consciousness when he rightly points out that scholars have to "play important roles with regard to the awakening of the young protagonists and their adjustment to the changing world they live in".³ Many evils – like human exploitation, prostitution, infanticide, individualism – are outrageously rampant in the city and like an abyss, the city swallows in its bowels (or in its innermost part) the individuals, mostly the ones in the prime of their lives. Being in full agreement with me, the protagonist in Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* raises, ".... The city eats many an innocent life ... every year.... I have often asked, why do girls leave their happy homes and come here [to the city] on their own"?⁴ By ironically depicting the perverted life in store for the youth venturing into the city, Cyprian Ekwensi, like Darko, "loses no opportunity to 'expose' the squalor and degradation of the new city culture".⁵ In this respect, Louise Zak points out that Amma Darko's novels tackle "the conflict between the traditional values of the village and the pressures of urban life".⁶ It is my contention that the dire poverty, which is eating away at the younger generation in the village, appears as one of the root causes of the depopulation of the hamlet by the youth.

1. Destitution as the Root Cause of the Youth's Rush to the City

The village's dire paucity of resources makes many youth seek a utopian wellbeing in the city. One reads for instance that, "*Kataso, a village in the eastern hills, had no flowing water, no electricity, no entertainment centre, nothing. Only the chief owned a television set – old, black and white, and 100 per cent out of order. There would have been no power to run it, even if it had worked. It stood in the palace for decoration*".⁷ It appears that this imaginary village created by Amma Darko to convey her message does not have the essential infrastructures required to enhance its economic growth leaving its inhabitants in forced inactivity, and with a high reproduction rate. In this wake, Mawuli Adjei has made the point that, "*Kataso is a village with an appetite for material showmanship and obsessed with things of the city*".⁸ Therefore, in the absence of electricity, television sets in the different houses or an entertainment centre at Kataso, it leaves "sex as the only really affordable entertainment in Kataso. Everyone – young, old, mature and immature – indulged in it freely, making the two midwives the busiest of the village professionals". (p. 29.) It appears that the excessive sexual activity of the idle inhabitants of Kataso is only due to their lack of entertainment or leisure after their busy days. Similarly, Mawuli Adjei, depicting the debauchery prevailing at Kataso, points out, "*In addition, Kataso is also a grooming ground where boys and girls are sexually hyper-active ... giving vent to their teenage sex drive*".⁹ Nature abhorring a vacuum, sex appears as the only centre of interest for these youth with nothing to do as entertainment; this largely accounts for the high birth rate in their village.

Under these circumstances, when the youth or better still the flower of the society is beyond despair, they depopulate the village. In this wake, Amma Darko rightfully writes: "*The young men, when they could no longer stand this bland, grey life, would leave for Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi....*"

³ Omar Sougou, "Resisting Hybridity: Colonial and Postcolonial Youth in *Ambiguous Adventure* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane and *L'Appel des Arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall," in *African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/Sites of Creativity and Conflict*, ed. Tobias Döring (Matatu 25-26; Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi, 2002), p. 216.

⁴ Cyprian, Ekwensi, *People of the City* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1954), p. 154.

⁵ David Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁶ Louise Allen Zak, "Amma Darko: Writing Her Own Way, Creating a New Life" in Vincent O. Odamtten (ed.), *Broadening the Horizon: Critical Introductions to Amma Darko* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 12.

⁷ Amma Darko, *The Housemaid* (Edinburg: Heinemann, 1998) p. 29. Further page references to the same edition are in the main text.

⁸ Mawuli Adjei, "Male-bashing and narrative subjectivity in Amma Darko's first three novels" in *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* [online], 2009, vol. 1 n° 1, p. 51.

⁹ Mawuli Adjei, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

(pp. 29-30) It appears that tired of the utter destitution in which they vegetate in the hamlet, the desperate youth opt for the city where they seem to see life through rose-coloured glasses. Mawuli Adjei seems to be in complete agreement with me when he writes, "*this passion alone is enough to dismantle all the time-tested mores, norms and values as the people find themselves sucked into the desires and defining symbols and images of the city – radio, television, fridge, rasta braids, American hip-hop culture, sleek cars etc*".¹⁰ Unfortunately, ignoring the reality in the city, the young people fall into the trap of the city, and this, of course to their expense. In this wake, Ernest Emenyonu has this to say, "*In the end it is the city which emerges as the villain that lures its inhabitants to moral degradation and economic ruin*".¹¹ Even the description the narrator in *The Housemaid* makes about Efia, a character living her life in the village, is in complete agreement on the prejudice the young generation has about life in the village. This is how the narrator introduces Efia to the reader: "*Efia was looking pathetic, entering the Quebec Inn in an old crumpled dress*." (p. 33) Worse still, when the time for Efia to leave that pathetic village life has come, her father, rather a hardened old soak, sets down his requirements as if he were selling his daughter to her foster mother living in Accra: "*What are we getting out of our daughter's going away to the city to serve somebody? Didn't we take care of her up to this stage? And if we hadn't fed her up to now, would she have grown strong enough to be able to serve her?*" (pp. 43-44) It is crystal clear that the character Papa Kaawire, Efia's selfish father, will not let his daughter follow anyone to the city unless he gets payment in cash. In other words, this self-centred character wants to make as much money as possible from his daughter since he has invested so much in her upkeep. Flabbergasted regarding her husband's gluttony, Efia's mother rises up against the husband's greed to be paid back before the daughter leaves the village in this way: "*Why are you talking as if we were selling our daughter?*" (pp. 43-44) Efia's mother's indignation regarding Papa Kaawire's irresponsibility sounds like a plea against some irresponsible parents who, on the pretext that they are destitute, exchange their offspring for payment in coin of the realm.

2. Prostitution as the Main Consequences of the Youth's Rush to the City

The youth in search of a means of sustenance in the city, when they are utterly thwarted because they find no way out in their Promised Land, take to selling their body for money or for a provision of services. Indeed, in Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* Akua – a female character in the prime of life – learns this to her cost when she decides to tread on the dangerous ground of the city. In fact, fed up with the utter destitution in which she vegetates in the fictitious village of Kataso located in the eastern hills, Akua has to face the facts that it is a painful ordeal for a gullible and destitute character like her to set off on a journey to the city. Akua's misfortune in the city starts even on the outskirts of the city; this is what one reads about Akua's reluctant loose attitude:

So Akua walked on, left Kataso, continued through Braha, the next village, arrived at Osiadan, and walked through town to position herself on the Accra-Kumasi highway, armed only with her determination to make it to the city.

For nearly three hours she stood by the roadside asking for lift. Eventually a contractor's truck stopped for her.

'Where to?' the driver asked curtly.

'Kumasi.'

'You have the money to pay me?'

'No.'

He grunted. 'So you won't pay me?'

Akua unbuttoned her blouse. The driver's eyes blazed with consent. She removed her pants. He grinned, and stopped the truck in a secluded bend.

'But don't make me pregnant,' Akua cautioned.

'I won't,' and he covered her nipples with his lips. He sucked and fondled her body. Akua liked it and did the same for him. When it was over, the rest of the journey continued in stunned silence. (pp. 30-31)

¹⁰ Mawuli Adjei, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹¹ Ernest Emenyonu, "Cyprian Ekwensi" in *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1978), p. 93.

Beyond all hope, because she is idle at Kataso, Akua decides to tread on the dangerous ground of the city having no penny on; she leaves the village without her parents knowing it. After many days of walk, she pays a heavy price to hitchhike to the city: the unscrupulous driver of a contractor's truck consents to sleep with her in return for a lift to Kumasi. This is, for sure, a foreshadowing of all that is to come for her in the city. This ill omen does not deter Akua from continuing her journey to the city, as Ernest Emenyonu rightfully puts it, "*On the contrary, the city has a formidable influence, a magnetic force that brandishes from a distance only its excitement, gaiety, and transient glitter which lure people to either destruction or downfall*".¹² Akua "*is drawn to the city by its superficial charms and fantasies*".¹³ Akua's experience, as described earlier, should be an eye-opener for any young adventurer in search of hypothetical happiness in the city. Akua, a poverty-stricken character, falls into the trap of the jungle-like city life by bartering her body for her transport to the paradisiacal Kumasi with all the risks she runs sleeping with an unknown and providential truck driver who might infect her with sexually transmitted diseases.

Another village immigrant who moves to the city only to take to demeaning deeds is the female character Efia. It is noteworthy that Efia used to sell orange at the fictitious village of Kataso but migrates to the city to live by Tika as a housekeeper. Nonetheless, at the instigation of her excessively ambitious grandmother, Tika indulges in prostitution. The reader gets to know this, following the confession Efia's mother makes to her accomplice and mother, "*She said she slept with different men: the one she was nearly caught with, the building site labourer, the lotto forecaster at the station, and the dancer at ...*". (p. 74) It appears that in search of easy life in the city, immature female characters fall easy preys to sexual debauchery. In the end, she gets pregnant but is unable to say who has put her in the family way. Efia's pitiful story is identical with Sango's from Ekwensi's *People of the City*. Indeed, Ernest Emenyonu writes that, "*But the fortune-hunter in Sango is utterly transformed by the city. Instead of money, his quest is wholly for the pleasures of the nightclubs, with their lively and glamorous women. He is often misled and disillusioned, but he does not give up his new style of life*".¹⁴ It appears that once the city dweller indulges in vices, they get themselves tangled up in. Subsequently, with the help of her mother and grandmother, Efia sets her heart on Mr Nsorhwe, a wealthy Bank Manager and one of Tika's myriad sexual partners. Efia unjustly levels an accusation against Mr Nsorhwe not knowing that the accused man is incapable of inducing pregnancy. In fact, in a cruel twist of fate, as Mr Nsorhwe's supposed son is growing up, he does not share any physical trait with his assumed father. To remove any doubt on the matter, the doubtful father, "*secretly went through a series of tests and learnt that his sperm could never fertilise an egg*".(p. 85) Oddly enough, it is such a man Efia is blaming for getting her pregnant. However, when the two are brought face to face, the plaintiffs retract because Mr Nsorhwe suggests blood test to prove his paternity. To the refusal of Efia to go through the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) test, the grandmother rather repentantly raises, "*Why go through such a painful test when you know already what the result will be? The baby is not his*".(p. 91) Facing this unexpected development, the grandmother, wisely advises her granddaughter in this way, "*And you ... better start thinking about the life waiting for you back in the village. Even without a child, how was it?*" (p. 92) And realising that all her dreams have vanished into thin air, "*Efia left quietly for the kitchen and slumped on to one of the stools, her mind whirring, Kataso? How could she endure the shame? She would be scorned, snubbed and ridiculed. To go to the city, mess up and return not only empty-handed but with the additional burden of an extra mouth to feed was unforgivable. How could she bear it?*"(p. 92) Efia's frame of mind after this bitter setback in the city is symptomatic of the traumatic experience most inexperienced and unqualified village immigrants go through once in the city. Amma Darko's intention here "*seems to be to confront the city dwellers with the revolting social injustices and outrageous immoralities that seem to have become part of their way of life*".¹⁵ Efia ends up homeless in the city, committing theft and infanticide

¹² Ernest Emenyonu, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴ Ernest Emenyonu, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁵ Ernest Emenyonu, "*People of the City*" in *Modern African Writers: Cyprian Ekwensi*, [Gerald Moore (General Editor), London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1974,] p. 29.

convinced that she would be the laughing stock of her people once back in the village. It appears that Efia “*is almost eaten up by the canker worms of the city*”.¹⁶ In fact, like Sango in Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City*, Efia “*sacrifices inner beauty for a glittering physical exterior*”.¹⁷ The search of social wellbeing in the city seems then to be a mirage for some young people.

3. From Euphoria to Disappointment once in Town

Some young people leave the village for the city but end up with odd jobs such as housework, hawker, bricklayer, porter. Indeed, the most conscious young men generally resort to rural exodus by going to the city “*to work as shoe-shine boys, truck pushers or hawkers of items such as popcorn, dog chains and air fresheners along the cities’ busiest streets*”. (pp. 29-30) The village dwellers take the city as the heaven itself and as result, the dream of the parents is to see their offspring dwell there one day; in this wake, when a parent happens to have his or her child live in the city, he or she boasts over it. This is what the narrator in Darko’s novel says about this situation, referring to a village immigrant boasting to her companions in misfortune: “*Where I come from, when two women are quarrelling, do you know how they insult each other? ‘Who told you you can compare yourself to me? How many of your children are in the city?’*” (p. 31) One can therefore see the moral satisfaction the village dwellers have, when they have their relatives dwell in the town no matter their living conditions in the Promised Land. One of the female characters says this about her mother’s ecstasy over her daughter’s decision to move to the city: “*So when I told my mother I wanted to leave, she immediately gave me her blessing*”. (p. 31) It appears that it is a matter of great smugness for parents to see their children leave for the town, and the departure of a child to the town brings about a great ecstasy in the family concerned. In addition, being in the city is a kind of personal achievement for the young generation in Darko’s novel inasmuch as “*The dance that crowns the [yam] festival is called ‘showtime’, because that’s when returnees [from the city] put on their best clothes and compete with each other.*” (p. 31) As can be seen, the yam festival is an occasion for the city beentos to show their Sunday best off ostentatiously. Indeed, the celebration of the festival is an occasion for the returnees to display their regalia flamboyantly to arouse the admiration of onlookers. This is what one reads about the returnees to Kataso on the new yam festival day: “*Girls glowed in their outlandish kaba styles and the young men looked hip in their starched jeans, thick-soled boots and second-hand T-shirts, sporting slogans like ‘Chicago Bulls’ and ‘Wacko-Jacko’, with weird lop-sided haircuts to crown it all.*” (p. 33) Furthermore, when it happens that the urbanite sends to his or her home village articles he or she has bought in the town, his or her family becomes a centre of attraction at the village. All the villagers will rush to such a family to see with their own eyes the articles arousing so much envy and to recognise the generosity and success of the child prodigy. In *The Housemaid*, a female character boastfully raises, “*I hear when my mother received the thermos flask and lantern I sent her last month [from Kumasi], half the village called on her to have a look and make comparisons.*” (p. 31) No need to mention that the generous gifts that parents living in the village get from their children in the city delight them and make them grow in stature in the eyes of other villagers. Nevertheless, all this delight is a flash in the pan.

Indeed, the hope the youth like the female character Akua have when leaving their wretched village life turns sour once in the town. The unqualified villagers migrating to the city end up running errands for the privileged few expecting to improve their living conditions in town. The migrants’ disillusion rings as follows in Darko’s novel: “*There were many young girls here [in the city] working as porters, who had bolted from home [the village] to seek greener pastures, just like her [Akua].*” (p. 31) The expectations the village emigrants have when moving to the city very soon fade away and as the narrator points out:

Life as a porter in Kumasi was not what a normal person would call living. It was survival. But Akua knew that, come the yam festival, the adulation she would receive in Kataso would make all her sweat and humiliation sweet.

¹⁶ Ernest Emenyonu, “Cyprian Ekwensi” in *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1978), p. 94.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

Like her mates, Akua had no regular homes. They all lived in unfinished buildings; when final completion work started, they moved out. Thanks to bribes of cash and sex, workers at the building sites regularly tipped them on the next place available for occupation. Because they were living there illegally and the building owners occasionally stopped by, nothing that might betray their presence was allowed. Cooking was out; they ate strictly by the roadside. Water stored in reservoirs for construction work sufficed for their washing and bathing purposes. Drinking water was bought and stored in plastic bottles, and nearby bushes were their easing grounds. (p. 32)

It appears that the village immigrants, who invade the city, squat unfinished buildings in return for payment in cash or kind to unscrupulous builders because of the immigrants' homelessness. Those 'city invaders', indulging in debauchery and living in not very commendable hygienic conditions, are continually in search of unfinished buildings to squat for fear the real owners might see them as they have to face the hard realities of city life. In a nutshell, the Eldorado that the village immigrants think they might get in the city turns out to be a 'gall' and they are reduced to living from hand to mouth.

4. Migration of the Youth to the City, Achievement of Personal Blossoming with a Handful of Immigrants

The city returnees often have that moral satisfaction deriving from the fact that their fellow villagers take them as successful people due to the regalia they usually sport on special occasions or the pride their relatives at home feel to the idea that their 'child' is living or working in the city. In fact, even if the overwhelming majority of the youth migrating to the town meet with harsh difficulties to keep body and soul together, a tiny handful of them succeed in extricating themselves. Indeed, after hard exhausting effort or by a stroke of good luck, a small number of village immigrants manage to stand out. One reads in Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* that there is a female character who initially moves to the town to work as a domestic employee but through the generosity of the head of the family ends up with a teaching job. The success story of Teacher – this is the upstart's name so to speak – rings as follows:

Among the few Katasoans in Accra with formal jobs and the comfort of a home, one of whom had been Tika's father, was a lady called Teacher by virtue of her profession. And she got to where she did because she was adopted by a relation who was married to a man from Accra. Initially she had intended Teacher to come and live with her as a maid, but her kind-hearted husband saw the little girl's potential and told his wife that he wanted to enrol her in school. (p. 34)

As can be seen, it is only out of a stroke of good luck along with personal achievements that Teacher, who has been moved to the town by a blood relation to do household work, finds herself in the working life as a teacher. It is worth saying that Teacher starts schooling at an old age – in Class One she has been four or five years senior to her classmates deserving the mockeries "*School mother*" or "*School madam*" (p. 35) from her schoolmates and teachers respectively. In spite of this delay or age hindrance, Teacher strives to do well at school. This is the account the narrator in *The Housemaid* gives of Teacher's dazzling success: "*But, encouraged by her foster father, the girl stayed on and succeeded in making it all the way to teacher training college. After graduation, she stayed on in Accra to teach.*" (p. 35) It is noteworthy that Teacher's rise to the social ladder is due to her migration to the city. Like Sango in Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City*, Teacher

*represents a class of promising young men with a certain amount of education, who have come to the city because of its enchantment about which they had heard in their remote villages. They come to enjoy life and take advantage of the glittering opportunities in the city to acquire wealth and social stand.*¹⁸

¹⁸ Ernest Emenyonu, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

Because of Teacher's personal achievements, her relations in the village find their children host family in the city through her; Teacher's fellow villagers want their daughters to follow close on her heels. Teacher acting as a role model or driving force for her people in the village rings as follows:

Because of her position, Teacher was often given the task of getting young girls from Kataso positions as housemaids with families in Accra. Usually, a guarantee was given that, after the girl had served for four years, her training as a dressmaker or hairdresser would be sponsored. As a result Teacher was very well known among the Accra Katasoans, Tika included. (p. 35)

It is clear that if people from Kataso are now taking Teacher as a ladder to get to the city it is simply because of her personal achievement and sense of self-sacrifice. In that wake, Efi, once an orange seller at Kataso, gets a housekeeping job in the city with Tika. Efi is currently Tika's right-hand girl and masterfully runs Tika's house. Tika keeps nothing from Efi even her countless lovemaking with her 'business male partners'. The successful businesswoman, Tika, is surrounded by sumptuousness arousing the envy and admiration of visitors from Kataso. In this vein, Efi's mother cannot believe her eyes when she sets foot in Tika's living room. Indeed, after slumping back in the cushioned seat given to her by Tika, Efi's mother exclaims enviously: "*How soft, how comfortable, how pleasurable!*"(p. 59) With such an attitude, Efi's mother lets it know that Tika, her daughter's benefactor and host, wallows in affluence and once in the guestroom cannot help adding elliptically – at a loss for words: "*Soft bed. City food. A chance to explain things to my poor Efi.*"(p. 60) Better still following the visit Efi's grandmother pays to Tika, she goes into raptures over the luxury in Tika's living room: "*This was her first time in the big city, and her first time inside a well-furnished room. And it was fascinating. She greedily feasted her eyes on the elegant furnishings.*"(pp. 63-64) In fact, Maame Amoakone, Efi's mother, and her mother want their daughter and granddaughter to follow close behind Tika in the city by making the most of this successful woman coming from Kataso. One can see the admiration of the old lady devouring the luxury in Tika's dwelling place with her eyes.

Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing, government authorities should take the necessary steps to put a curb on the younger generation's rush to the city by equipping villages with the basic development infrastructures required to boost its development; only thus will they avoid the massive departure of the able-bodied population to the city. It goes without saying that when the able-bodied people depopulate the village, the economic growth of the area will greatly suffer from it; acute pauperization will be rampant. Furthermore, the youth must become aware of the fact that the city does not quite often offer opportunities but quite often nightmares.

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