

Sharon Dodua Otoo

Ada's Realm



Ada is not one, but many women: She revolves in orbits between Ghana and London before eventually landing in Berlin. But she is also all women—because these loops transport her from one century to the next. And so, she experiences the misery but also the joy of womanhood: she is a victim, she offers resistance, and she fights for her independence.

With vivid language and infinite imagination—with empathy and humor—Sharon Dodua Otoo's novel *ADA'S REALM* paints an astonishing picture of what it means to be a woman.

Since winning the Bachmann Prize in 2016, **Sharon Dodua Otoo** has become a fixture in German-language media, and the charismatic voice of a new generation: Black, self-confident, feminist. Her opening address for the 2020 Ingeborg Bachmann Prize was a sensation. Born in London in 1972, she now lives with both the English and German languages in Berlin. Her first novellas, *the things i am thinking while smiling politely* and *Synchronicity*, were written in English; since the publication of her Bachmann Prize-winning short story *Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin*, she writes primarily in German.

ADA'S REALM

English sample translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

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Ada hadn't stirred from her seat. The storm rain pelted against her eyes, her chin, her cheeks, but she remained seated next to her son. Soon he will be completely free, she thought. The pearls of her bracelet would protect him on his final journey. Yet she labored to tie it around him, the cloth clinging to his body like a second skin. And as Guilherme—hope in his heart—signaled to her with a few hand gestures that he could lift the child in order to ease her task, she nodded. And as Guilherme—corpse in his arms—signaled to her with a few movements of his head and shoulders that he knew a good final resting place, she nodded again, grateful that Ataa Naa Nyõnmõ—or whosoever—had sent Guilherme to her. Perhaps it was relief I felt as Ada struggled to her feet: relief because my work for this part of the story was done. Ada stumbled along behind Guilherme, and he carried her treasure away from the hut.

And the toothless ones were not alone among the living to observe this strange scenario from a rain-sheltered hiding place.

Stratford-le-Bow, March 1848

Incarnating the head of a lion was no easy feat for me, for I had never been a living being. It neither helped that I was cast in brass nor that I bore a heavy ring in my proud jaws. I'd never wanted to be an animal, much less approximate the appearance of one.

In 1848, the shape of a lion's head had been selected to adorn the doorknocker at 37 Battersea Road. It was meant to exude certain attributes like fortitude, protection, and strength. Things I knew nothing about. Once again, the object I became had been determined without my consent. I hadn't yet begun to question this customary procedure.

My opportunities for influencing events were limited to daily contact with refined houseguests. Those with riding gloves often had no chance at all and thought I was defective. Those with fingerless, embroidered gloves of silk had to knock many times before attracting the attention of the exhausted chambermaid. This was amusing, but also trying over time, and I longed to be an ineloquent broom once more.

From my perch at the entryway, I commanded an admirable view of Charles' angry departure. And not I alone. It may have appeared so to outsiders, but it was no coincidence that Ada's husband had arrived mere seconds before on Battersea Road. He tarried a few moments by the corner of Number 37, long after his rival had vanished in the fog—and presently he no longer felt weary. His hunger had evaporated, too, along with his heretofore urgent need to locate the next gutter or tree. The recent chain of events had simply gone too far: He had seen Dickens!

Naturally, scuddling after the scoundrel would have been below the bearing of Lord William King. He would not confront him; no, the time for friendly

exchange had passed. He would not imprecate him. It was even too late to slap him across the face with a glove—a lovely fantasy which, for a moment, brought a smile to William’s lips. He fingered the pistol in his coat pocket.

Communications concerning his wife’s behavior had reached him in Paris, including word that she was entertaining an “unconscionable friendship” with a novelist. Had this remained at just one or two whispered comments, he could have dismissed it as simply more Ada hearsay. He could—at his next convenience—have taken the knave aside and advised him to take care that no further rumors of the kind proliferated. But it was clearly too late for a civilized solution. He had *seen* the rascal with his own eyes.

Ten times it was that William chafed for not being able to bring his reason better under control; ten times more he felt the same sharp twinge in the pit of his stomach. At the eleventh, he slammed his right fist against the wall and managed not to cry out. The skin over his knuckles split, and he welcomed the external pain. How ironic that he had returned unscathed from the catastrophe known as France only to be wounded in slumbering England. The whitewashed façade had seen a rude, red awakening. He examined his bleeding fist and snorted. He would tend to Mr. Charles Dickens in good time. *First things first*. Where was Ada?

Since Ada lived for mathematics, William assumed she would already be sitting at her writing desk at this intolerably early hour. Secretly, he suspected that she was not so much a countess, but rather some kind of calculating machine in human form. He almost wanted to see this woman—his wife, the mother of his children—run weeping, perhaps even pleading from the house after Dickens. To see that the unscrupulous rogue meant something to her at least. That she maintained the ability to feel deep-seated emotions like desire, ardor, or even

hatred for another human being. That she possessed a heart of flesh and blood at all.

The moon was already fading, but the mist had not yet fully risen. William faltered, recognizing moments later that it was merely shadows he saw lingering defiantly in the alleyways. A few birds twittered—could they already be house martins? What cause did they have to be so merry? The time was ripe for a dramatic scene to unfold! To hammer on the ring in my mouth at Number 37 until the heads of households appeared in their starched nightshirts at the neighboring doorways!

William shook his head. No, he was consideration personified: He would never do such a thing to his comrades in misery. In only a few hours, they would be leaving their homes—neatly dressed, prepared, and in high spirits. To be sure, only after first offering some words of consolation to their anxious wives. The latest developments in Paris were enough to raise concern even in female heads. They also saw the papers. They, too, could put one and one together. No. William would by no means rouse these fine men from their precious sleep. It was the “good ones” like Dickens who had no sensibility for their fellow man. This hero of the toothless masses was, in principle, worse than a simple egoist. With his so-called art he deluded everyone into believing he intervened on behalf of the rights of the poor. He could certainly arouse passions. But what more? Who truly cared about *Oliver Twist*? Surely even the most obstinate Chartist must acknowledge that the average worker in Great Britain was far better off than in any other European country. Why, in France he wouldn’t even have freedom of assembly! Paris was burning for a reason!

William grasped my ring a little too tightly and pounded it three times against the door. I knew he was expecting Lizzie. Where else should she be? He anticipated

her sleepy footsteps on the spiral stairway and was planning to instruct her—after a portentous moment’s pause—to summon her mistress. But a few moments later, we heard, instead, how Ada herself sprung down the few steps from the first floor to the foyer. William’s restive heart skipped a beat.

“You may only come in if you promise me not to run away again...” Ada grinned as she opened the door. She had prepared to continue her teasing, but the words caught in her throat at the sight of William. She stood gaping at him. It was written all over his face: This man—her husband, the father of her children—had seen Charles.

She grew pale. After a good half minute, he cleared his throat.

“I will not run away,” he said. “It is about to rain.”

I could sense how every single hair on Ada’s body rose. There had been no indication in his last message that he would be returning so soon. At times, she had even thought he might have perished in the Parisian flames—and she had been startled because she had felt neither grief nor shame at the thought. His appearance robbed her of her speech.

“But where...? How...? Since when have you...?”

I was impressed that William could retain such composure. He said only:

“Where is your bracelet, Ada?”

In this way, we arrived at the matter without delay, and I was grateful because the storm had already announced itself with the first drops of rain. Of course, in 1848, Ada possessed any number of bracelets. Luckily it was not in her nature to stall for time with unnecessary questions. She knew he meant his wedding gift to her: an exquisite trinket made of pearls which exuded a splendid, rare white-golden

hue. A bracelet he had inherited from his mother. According to tradition, she had received it from her husband, William's father, on their wedding day.

And William knew that Ada knew that he knew: She hadn't the foggiest idea where the precious bracelet could be.

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Kohnstein bei Nordhausen, March 1945

At first there were no designated rooms in the *Sonderbaracke*, the so-called special barrack. Everything in or around the Dora labor camp was quantified, measured, and recorded seamlessly. From the outside, it was all but indistinguishable from the other wooden huts in the bleak compound: ten-point-five meters wide, twenty-three-point-seven-five meters long, one-story; the Tommies would have deemed it “*unaccommodating*.” The building would have been entirely inconspicuous had it not been for the flowers in the windows. Its residents were hesitant to describe their lodgings as the “special barrack.” And although Ada would have had a far more fitting designation for the place (she called it the “Gates of Hell”), they all eventually agreed—inspired by the administrative number—on simply calling it “Thirty-Seven.”

When they’d arrived—they had still been women then—each had been allocated a six-digit number. This was even sewn into their underwear, and it was not to be altered for the length of their internment. Clothing, haircuts, meals, breaks, positions—everything had been determined and mandated by the camp commander. Everything but the designation of rooms. Ada often wound up in the last room to the left at the end of the hall, where—if she opened her eyes at the right time—the evening twilight took on a particularly lovely sheen. She found herself there so often that it came to be known as “Ada’s Room.” And of all things, I was this room.

Friederike Lindauer or Linde, Little Bear to Ada and 972621 for the records, was one of eight—they had still been women then—selected in March 1945 “for pleasurable use” by the innumerable prisoners. “Still, it’s better here than at Ravensbrück” had been the unanimous assessment. At any rate, the food was

better at Thirty-Seven, they had warmer clothes, and there was at least the possibility of washing oneself.

Upon her arrival in Dora, Linde had become involved with a thin-lipped, bald-headed prisoner for no other reason than because he, too—in a manner of speaking—came from Göttingen. His name was Waldemar, he'd been toiling in the crematorium since the beginning of the year, and he smelled as atrocious as he looked. He used every resource at his disposal in order to win her for himself alone. Because he could. His delicate position within the camp hierarchy allowed him—shall we say—certain privileges. Between making lewd comments and shoving his tongue down her throat, Walde assured Linde that he would personally ensure that she was taken good care of in the special barrack. He sneered after she had repeated the word “good” doubtfully, the gaps in his teeth underscoring the dereliction of his haggard face. Thirty-Seven was, without a doubt, less horrid than the three days in the Ravensbrück standing cell, but the best that Linde could say of the place where she now found herself was far from “good.” Very, very far. Nevertheless, she tolerated this questionable deal with him in order to maintain even a chance of surviving the hell that was Dora. She rejoiced over his countless small gifts, she satisfied him with her hand or mouth as required, and remained otherwise aloof from his usual misdeeds.

One day, Walde bestowed her with an exceptional bracelet. They were in the room directly next to me when she received it.