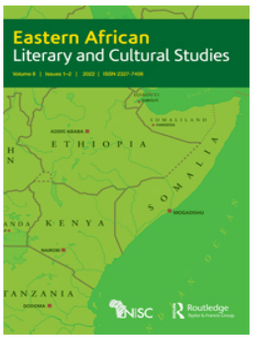

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BOOK REVIEW

Narrating Kenyan Oceanic Encounters in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

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Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is one of Kenya's most respected authors. Her most notable fictional works include *Weight of Whispers* (2003) which won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2003, *Dust* (2013) which explores the violent history that has characterised the nation of Kenya and the silences that perpetuate the trauma and, *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) which this essay reviews.

The Dragonfly Sea (2019) engages the Indian Ocean not only as a means of travel and water body but also as a historical site of cultural exchange and a narrative metaphor. The engagement of the Indian Ocean as a narrative metaphor revisits a long history of exchange along the Swahili coast. This exchange was characterised by the trade of goods, cultural and linguistic traits, and also of genetic code, as the novel reveals the protagonist's ancestry as African and Chinese. The novel, highlighting the historical importance of the Indian Ocean to the Kenyan coast, explores encounters that have existed between littoral communities of Kenya and those who arrived at its shores from elsewhere. It is in part set on the coastal island of Pate, as well as in the Indian Ocean, China, and Turkey.

With her lyrical and philosophical way of writing, Owour further investigates what the Swahili coast means to mainland Kenya and to the world. This meaning is revealed in the novel by interrogating relationships between Kenyan littoral communities and the mainland communities. The Indian Ocean is represented as a source of both spiritual and economic solace for the littoral communities. The islanders commune with the ocean as they would with God and find in it a mystery and power similar to that found in God. Turning to the Ocean for solace by the littoral communities provides relief against the economic and social isolation by successive Kenyan governments since independence which has historically plagued the coastal region.

The novel uses omniscient narration to relate the life of Ayaana, the protagonist. We meet Ayaana as a child — presumably seven years old (20) — in the opening sections and the novel spans her life up until early adulthood. Ayaana's birth is spoken of later when the narrator reveals Munira's initial plan to abort the child but something inside her changed once the baby 'popped' out of her body. The narrator recounts that once Munira felt the 'still-warm bloodied creature … something feeble fluttered and the fluttering turned into a stabbing explosive light inside her soul … '. This marked the beginning of Munira's journey with Ayaana not caring about what anyone thought of her or the contempt that came with having a child out of wedlock. 'She loved. That was all. She could endure anything — go anywhere, do whatever she needed to do — to live for Ayaana' (165).

For a better part of the novel Munira and her daughter, Ayaana, are isolated from the community after Munira returns to Pate with Ayaana whose father was unknown. Munira describes the father as ' … a shadow of wind' (21). To cover over the existing shame of a child out of wedlock, her family organises to have Munira get married to an austere scholar who wanted to merge with Munira's patrician family so he could be part of the family's ancient business heritage that span across most port cities of the world.

Munira refuses by threatening to commit suicide which compounds the scandal of having a child out of wedlock. The act of attempting suicide entrenched the fact that she was mad or worse still, cursed. To save face, Munira's father, who was cherished by the community, declares her an anathema — *maharamu* (21–22).

The novel borrows from the story of Mwamaka Sharifu, detailed in the *Daily Nation* (Ndurya, 2012), who is believed to have been a descendant of a Chinese sailor of Admiral Zheng He's fleet, who once found refuge on the Island of Pate after their ship capsized, to narrate the story of Ayaana. Survivors settled in Lamu and married local women with whom they bore children. Evidence of this contact in the town is not only biological but also cultural in the form of Chinese porcelain and coins. In a bid to cement this heritage that lasted for and was almost lost during the past six centuries, the Chinese government offered a scholarship to Sharifu to study Chinese traditional medicine in China. Though entirely fictional, *The Dragonfly Sea* parallels the story of Mwamaka Sharifu who until the discovery of her Chinese ancestry risked dropping out of school. Ayana, the protagonist in the novel, is an intelligent girl but poverty and the fact that she was born of a 'cursed' mother almost makes her drop out of school but the discovery of her Chinese ancestry helps her enrol at Xiamen Maritime University for a bachelor of science programme in nautical studies (283).

The 'discovery' of Mwamaka Sharifu in 2003 and the fictionalisation of this account speaks of not only the Chinese contacts that once existed but also the silence associated with these contacts. This is a silence that has contributed to the alienation of the coastal towns. This alienation comes across as both geographical and cultural. It is a marginalisation that creates a barrier between the culturally rich coastal town which is at the periphery and mainland Kenya. It would also not be farfetched to state that the ocean and its heritage have also been alienated. The question thus emerges 'What comes about as a result of this cultural alienation?' The answer is that cultures and heritages are lost or somehow buried and stay in that state as they wait for curious researchers, as those who discovered the Chinese linkages in Lamu, to unearth them and treat them as the treasures that they are — bring them to the centre of cultural conversations and discourses. *The Dragonfly Sea* breaks this silence by telling the story of an isolated community that links Kenya to the Chinese world through the Indian Ocean, thus contesting the idea that one culture can ever be superior to another, let alone one human being to another.

This idea of alienation is centred at the beginning of the novel when the author introduces us to the cultural wealth of the coastal town of Pate by starting the chapter with a *methali* — the Kiswahili word for proverb — that alludes to what we should expect in the chapter and also the book. She introduces us by the saying '*Roho ni mgeni* (The soul is a visitor/stranger)' (1). It is an idea that goes beyond the characters to the setting of Pate Island and the cultural isolation that it has experienced. The proverb *Roho ni mgeni* does not only speak of Ayaana's life but also of the life of the community within which she lives. It is a community that feels cut off from the country. The irony of the proverb that begins the novel is that something so important will always remain a stranger in the body it occupies. It is definitely true that the coastal towns remain vital contact points between Kenya and the rest of the world, especially in the economic and cultural sense.

The idea of alienation in the novel is evident when the narrator reveals the alienation of the coastal communities since independence. This is narrated through the character of Muhidin, the man who later on comes to marry Munira. Muhidin, a fisherman, was married to Raziya, Haroun's daughter. Haroun was a well-educated man who at the onset of independence tried and succeeded in betrothing his daughter to Muhidin and insisted on speaking to Muhidin in English.

The narrator, through the characters of Haroun and Muhidin, narrates the different attitudes with which news of independence was received. While Haroun was excited at the idea of being part of Kenya, Muhidin reveals his scepticism in their conversations. Haroun, in his optimism tells Muhidin 'We are now Kenya' (27) to which an unimpressed Muhidin answers, 'So?' While this may pass as a rude remark to a father-in-law, it simply communicates Muhidin's desire to understand what Kenya means to him. It is later on in the narration that we discover how Kenya had lost its meaning for Muhidin. He leaves Pate Island and years later when he returns, things have worsened:

> … years later, Muhidin had drifted back to Pate, and it looked smaller, shabbier, more derelict, isolated, and even more occupied with trivialities. The nation of Kenya's half-century of neglect had consumed the soul out of the land … Most conversations were now about departures — intended, hoped for, planned, or executed. (27)

This narration paints two scenarios: one is that of a country and a town that have lost their souls and the other is that of a country that has turned a blind eye to one of its culturally rich towns. Either consciously or not, the narrator informs the reader that Muhidin 'drifted back to Pate'. The word 'drifting' in this sense acts as the opposite of 'returning', which implies some intentionality to the act. The choice of language advances the theme of alienation. Muhidin's drifting back to Pate meant that the world outside the town was much harsher than Pate itself. He comes back with this knowledge of how harsh the rest of Kenya is and finds himself in the midst of conversations with young people who are planning or hoping to leave Pate. In his heart he wishes he could tell them the truth about Kenya but chooses not to and lets them discover the harsh realities of the Kenya that lies beyond Pate Island should they choose to leave. They are just but strangers in Pate just as they are in the larger Kenya.

The scenario of a nation that has turned a blind eye to one of its most culturally rich towns is evident in the sense that both the characters and the town struggle for acceptance; both do not feel that they belong to the country. The subject of alienation and the quest for belonging show that just as the country alienates the coastal communities, so the coastal communities alienate the individuals who live within them.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, therefore, the narrator paints a complex picture of a coastal town that thrives in itself but within the larger context of the country, it is an isolated entity. Consequently, the coastal towns focus on the ocean for refuge from the harsh situations that mainland occasions them.

While the novel primarily narrates the life of Ayaana, the omniscient narrator introduces us to almost every character that Ayaana meets, as well as the towns she visits. The towns in the novel, as exemplified by Pate earlier on, have souls of their own. The narrator opts for many characters to entrench her concerns with narrating the stories of people we might otherwise have never known. Individuals, who even though in the midst of some sort of a crowd, still yearn to make themselves stand out in their own ways, even if this means going against the grain. The narrator's concern with marginalised characters grounds *The Dragonfly Sea* as a novel of encounters that go on to have a significant bearing on the lives of the characters as well as the towns in the novel.

The narration of *The Dragonfly Sea* as a novel of oceanic encounters comes full circle with the encounter between Ayaana and Captain Lai Jin. Lai Jin captains MV *Guolong/Qingrui* — the ship on which Ayaana travels to Xiamen, China; he is also the man that Ayaana marries later on in the story. While aboard MV *Guolong* to China, Ayaana and Lai Jin fall in love. Their love is disrupted when Lai Jin gets to China and is arrested and jailed after being tricked into transporting illicit wildlife cargo. MV *Guolong* is destroyed

as a result and Lai Jin loses his captainship. Ayaana on the other hand meets with Koray while studying at the university in China and this encounter reminds her of the harsh patriarchal life that she left in Pate. This happens when Ayaana visits Koray's family in Turkey and they try forcefully to marry Ayaana to Koray but she frees herself from this attempt.

The crystallisation of in the relationship between Ayaana and Lai Jin is evident when they reunite and marry on Pate Island. This marriage speaks of the redemption of the island in terms of the hope that is now within it, which contrasts with earlier depictions of it as a place that had lost its soul to years of marginalisation and its young men to the pursuits of a better life elsewhere. Lai Jin's reputation is redeemed when he regains his captainship, albeit from a nickname bestowed upon him by the Pate Islanders who call him Nahodha Jamal — Captain Jamal (544) and it is also with this new found identity that he finds a wife.

The narrator befittingly ends the last section of the novel with the proverb '*Mwendo dahari hauishi*' (561) translated to 'The infinite road never ends'. It is a proverb that implies that both Ayaana and Lai Jin/ Nahodha Jamal embarked on infinite roads in their separate lives and their encounter aboard *MV Guolong* was just a harbinger of their journeys together in spite of the disruptions they faced.

In *The Dragonfly Sea,* Owuor takes up the role of a historian and narrates stories of coastal towns and individuals that have long remained silent. The Indian Ocean is narrated both as a point of contact between Kenya and the oceanic worlds as well as a dividing bridge between mainland Kenya and communities along the Swahili Coast. Ayaana, the protagonist, takes us through the challenges and opportunities that come with being born along the Kenyan coast. Owour's lyrical and philosophical style of writing is evident as she interrogates the history and relationship between mainland Kenya and the Kenyan coast and what this relationship has meant to the Oceanic communities.

The Dragonfly Sea emerges also as a timely contribution to the discourse around Kenyan history with regards to its colonial heritage. The consequences of this colonial history that led to the invention of the nation of Kenya are aptly captured in the lives of the characters who try to find out what being Kenyan means not only to them but also to their community.

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