

Portrayal of Transforming Identities in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*

Sherine Janet V.

Research Scholar (Reg.No.2421315022009),

Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629002.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012)

Dr. M. Mahesh

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor,

Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629002.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012)

ABSTRACT

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is a Kenyan author who has authored numerous works including short stories, essays and novels. Her novels *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) inspect the modification of identity by using a multidimensional perspective. In *Dust*, identity is nurtured by mourning, emotional distress and Kenya's post-colonial era. Ajany tries to investigate the factuality of her brother Odidi's tragic loss which reflects the national identity crisis and reveals the necessity of historical narratives that happened in the past and their role in reshaping as individuals and group identities. Conversely, *The Dragonfly Sea* illustrates cultural exchanges and self-discovery. Ayanna, a young Kenyan girl from Pate Island adapts an alien heritage while sailing with Zheng He and his crew. Her identity is carved by migration and by the path that she embraces on her way. Her self-discovery is grounded in celebrating flexibility and

stepping into unrecognized confidence and fascination. Both novels stress personal growth rather than an unchanging principle.

Keywords: Kenyan ancestry, Truth, Recollection, Conflict, identity, Migration exile, Cultural heritage.

In contemporary African Literature, Owuor's works are defined by their thought-provoking and detailed exploration of identity. Her novels *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) come up with profound contemplation of growth, changing nature of identity and proficiently unifies features of culture, history and personal narration. *Dust* is a novel that analyses the transforming identities of the Kenyan people as a whole and focuses on the Oganda family's experience. The novel is set in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, during the anxious and disputed general election of December 2007. The denial of elections incites violence and almost separates the country. The personal experiences of Oganda, his wife, son and daughter craft, modify and reframe their identities. Nyipir is born near Lake Victoria and later shifts to the parched and conflict zone of Turkana in northern Kenya.

On the contrary, *The Dragonfly Sea* narrates Ajany's journey to discover herself. It reveals her tribulations, her quest for self-discovery and how she transforms through her trials as she endures cultural differences and obstacles set before her. The novel begins on Pate Island, a place with culturally diverse community. It tells the story of Ayaana, her mother Munira, her supportive father Muhidin and her future husband Lai Jin. The story conveys how they modify and transform to endure life's challenges. She yearns to find where her comfort zone belongs, especially as she faces hurdles to find her missing parent's secrets.

In *Dust*, Owuor deconstructs the concept of nationhood and portrays Kenya as a community of multifaceted identities. She exemplifies this through phrases like the "real Kenya," implying the presence of an "unreal Kenya". The northern region is depicted as underprivileged, along with its people struggling to

moderate territorial and patriotic identities. Odidi and Ajany confront the truth in boarding school, where educators insist their residence are not located on Kenya's map.

In both *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*, cultural heritage plays a significant role in transforming the changing identities of different personalities. In *Dust*, Ajany experiences cultural challenges from her birth. She explores the difficulties of new surroundings, faces radical changes and finds an unseen aspect of herself. Equally, in *The Dragonfly Sea* Ayaana's life is defined by the secrets of her birth, her name and search for her identity. Ajany's beginnings in *Dust* are wrapped by problems. Identity plays a central role in her daily life. Her mother believes that her daughter's birth was an ill sign and would bring bad fortune. As a result, she abandons her daughter under a tree, handing her over to destiny. When Odidi and Galgalu discover this, they find the baby and rescue her from hungry vultures. After bringing her to life, Odidi names her Ol Arabel, beyond the river, and Galgalu calls her Arabel (a cool green mountain). "Giving something a name gives it life" (Owuor 35).

Odidi gives a cultural identity to her daughter. Ajany has an unresolved issue with her mother. She is treated unfairly among other children. Ajany's identity before her mother is unresolved. Her mother never calls her by name, instead calls her 'This One' (Owuor 28). She loses her identity in front of her mother. Her rejection makes Ajany to find consolation from her brother Odidi, but unfortunately the death of his brother makes her feel uncomfortable, emotionally unstable and leaves her uncertain. The loss reopens old wounds -what Helene Cixous describes as a "translated into a haemorrhage of the soul" (9). and pushes Ajany into a constant hunt for a sense of identity.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Munira Ayaana's mother deals with similar challenges due to traditional values when "Munira talks about her pregnancy to Ayaana's biological father, a geology consultant" (Owuor 163). But he is nowhere to be found. Munira's struggles highlight brutal truths of Aka's in *Dust*. Both women

struggle under the stress of conventional values and in molding their daughter's identities meaningfully.

Owuor says:

... She went out in the late evenings, traversing nights, hoping to be attacked by night trolls who would offer her an excuse that would lift from her the burden of responsibility... Most of the day she sat on her mattress, retching into a blue bucket ... Surviving on spiced tea ... She cried because she needed her mother (164).

Munira's difficulties with her pregnancy stimulate her to deliberate about abortion. "She buys herbicides and rat poison and is ready to end the pregnancy. She almost dies in the process of doing this" (Owuor 165). Following childbirth, she becomes romantically involved with her baby and call her as Ayaana meaning 'God's Gift,' which is not familiar in Pate Island. According to her customs, women do not have rights to name their child. For her daughter's benefit Munira confronts her landlady's insult with fortitude and submissively seeks to develop new abilities. Unlike Ajayn's mother in *Dust*, Ayaana's mother in *The Dragonfly Sea* swears that "she will do anything for her baby and that she will do whatever is needed to live for her daughter" (Owuor 165). This choice inspires her to relocate from Ganjoni in Mombasa to Pate Island when Ayaana is half-a-year old.

To stay alive in an ethnically diverse society, she must locate a new home where she can thrive. Munira's decision highlights that home is where love dwells. Ajany in *Dust* finds peace with her elder brother Odidi. On the other hand, Ayaana in *The Dragonfly Sea* finds a fatherly love figure in Muhidin, a seafarer. He has a significant impact in structuring Ayaana's identity. Both men play important roles in mentoring the girl's journey of identity formation. Ajaany's artistic talent achieves the first prize in the National Art Show, but she doesn't get praise from her family. As a result, she feels peculiar in the family right from her childhood age, and her hard work goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. Invisible accomplishments from her parents trigger a modification in her identity.

Odidi performs a meaningful responsibility in creating Ajany's personal growth. The vision of going 'far away' becomes a reality when she moves to Brazil to uncover her identity. She is very interested in painting. Finally, she experiences and recognizes, through her paintings, a sense of calmness and happiness. In Freudian terms, painting allows her to express her emotions and bring hidden feelings to the surface (Freud 1949). This helps her to restore what Hall calls a "rediscovered basic identity" (Stuart 224).

Both women endure challenging school experiences in their early childhood. Children expel Ayaana from their playgroup. She drops out of school and finds comfort in embracing Muhidin as her caretaker. Traumatized by her past, she openly tells Muhidin and narrates her situation that her school is unpleasant and pleads with him to teach her. Muhidin protests but at last, he consents to teach her. Therefore, this portrayal of transforming identities is to withstand in a culturally mixed environment is obviously highlighted by Ayaana in *The Dragonfly Sea* and Ajany in *Dust*. The transition motif is another notion that foretells the transforming identities in both novels. Physical and psychological problems are endured by the characters in both texts that lead to transformation in varied ways.

Ajany relocates to Brazil to uncover a new personality but remains perplexed. Her attachment with Bernado leaves her unfulfilled, and in an outburst of temper she stabs him. In a state of panic, she strives to connect with Odidi for support, but his situation is too endangered to respond. This illustrates that though Ajany is in an unfamiliar territory but her personal perspective is still connected to Kenya.

Ajany's father informs her of the heart-breaking news and asks her to come home. In her native place she meets Isaiah Bolton who is from England, Son of Hugh Bolton. He also comes here to find his father. Ajany greets him and conveys the news about his brother's death. This path redefines her personality. Together they travel to Nairobi to discover the secrets of Odidi's death. At this time Ajany feels protected and supported by Isaiah. However, though they are from diverse backgrounds, they build a strong relationship. According to Humphries (John 275). Transnational migrants are people who feel

connected to two places at the same time. They do not fully belong to either place but are involved in both. To live in different cultures, they must change and adopt, just like Ajany and Isaiah.

This journey is recreated in *The Dragonfly Sea*. Ayaana, just like Ajany in *Dust*, creates meaningful changes in her identity. According to Mathew (2019) in his review of *Dust* in The New York Times entitled 'A Kenyan woman probes Ancient Links between Africa and Asia', ancient Chinese lineage to the East African Coast is a genealogical mystery that dates to a fleet led by the famous Chinese admiral Zheng. He's shipwrecked on Pate in the 15th century. Ayaana's heritage opens the door to a new possibility. She goes to Turkey with Korey. His father engages in Black market ocean trade. This journey empowers Ayaana to rediscover herself, but soon her voyages to Turkey and China strengthen her understanding of African culture. Initially she is delighted to go to China as a learner but soon after she discovers that they utilize her for their own benefit and decides to return home.

In the first stage the native people start to assimilate and replicate the dominant culture, often neglecting their own traditions – a concept that Homi. K. Bhaba calls, mimicry. Ayaana encounters this when she is selected by the Chinese and endowed with "the descendant." In the second stage they realize that they are not completely embraced by the dominant culture, even as they try hard to mingle. As a result, they begin to see their own cultural identity. Through her experiences she comes to agree with the reality that the identity is connected to her own culture, and not from other cultures.

In the third stage of cultural insights, the native people completely decline the dominant culture and begin to value their native traditions. In *The Dragonfly Sea* Ayaana proudly honors her family traditions and accepts her identity. In the end she remains authentic and maintains her freedom and cultural pride. After completing her education, she reenters to Pate Island because it's her native land and is ready to help her people. She knows that wherever she goes home is where her heart finds peace.

Character identity changes are inevitable, notably in multicultural societies. Owuor examines this theme in *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* through the voyage of Ajany and Ayaana. As they are from different cultural backgrounds, these characters find personal growth in their identities which are both rational and emotional. Ajany and Ayaana find themselves at the convergence of different cultures which trigger them to change, so that they may stay alive. They merge cultural identities matching with what Homi Bhabha describes as a third space of cultural expression. Their identities are moulded by western values predominantly, and in some contexts Eastern traditions take a prominent place in their identities.

Additionally, Frantz Fanon's theory of resisting cultural control is obvious in Ayaana's story as she breaks external definitions and finds inner strength in her own cultural heritage. Similarly, Ajany's experiences with multiple cultural spaces enlighten her identity profoundly. Owuor's novels portray that identity undergoes continuous transformation and that it is crafted by adventures, relationships, social exchange, personal growth, inner wisdom and self- knowledge. Ajany and Ayaana's transformation exposes that identity is a journey, not an outcome, and change is a process of personal growth.

Works Cited

Cixous, Hélène. *Stigmata*. Routledge, 2005.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

Humphries, John. "Resisting Race Organising African Transnational Identities in the United States." *The Oxford Handbook of African Diaspora Studies*, Edited by Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Mathew, S. "New York Times Book Review: *The Dragonfly Sea*." *The New York Times*, 2019.

Owuor, Yvonne A. *Dust*. Knopf, Borzoi, 2014.

Owuor, Yvonne A. *The Dragonfly Sea*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.