

## Africa, the Global Minority: Ayaana as Africa in Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

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### Abstract

Most postmodern authors narrate societal ills by conferring foregrounded traits to selected characters. Often, the traits ascribed to these individual characters reflect events that affect the bigger or larger society outside the text. Published in 2019, Yvonne A. Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, to a great degree, encompasses this aspect of postmodern fiction. The novel revolves around the life of the Pate island-born Ayaana. From her relationship with her mother, Munira; to her obsession with Muhiddin; to her experience with rape; to her expedition at sea en route to China then to Turkey; and her eventual experiences in foreign lands and back to Pate, Ayaana's experiences provide the image of a character whose tribulations depict the challenges faced by the poor, girls/women and black minority people in the postmodern world. This paper analyzes the extent to which the author uses Ayaana's experiences as a microcosm of Africa as a minority in the global socio-political and economic interactions. Guided by Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak", the paper explores incidences where this character [and others] is treated as "the other" and establish how this treatment accurately serves as a representation of the treatment of Africa as a minority in global affairs.

**Key Words:** Other, Subaltern, State, African States, Nation

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### Introduction

Sometime in November 2018, the former President of the German Parliament Nobert Lammert visited Namibian President and Head of State Hage Geingob in his office. Among many issues discussed arose the issue of the Namibia-China ties.

In a video clip shared by the Namibia Press Agency (NAMPA), Lammert raises concern over the fact that in Namibia there were four times more Chinese than Germans. A seemingly furious Geingob responded:

“Mr. Speaker, what’s your problem with that? Why has it become your problem? It looks like it is more a European problem than our problem...You are so sorry for us...Chinese will never come and play around here as Germans...We allow Germans to come to Namibia without visas. Red carpet [treatment], while our people, including diplomatic passport holders are being harassed in Germany. Chinese don’t treat us like that. We know how to handle our own country, so don’t feel sorry for us.

“Every time a Westerner comes, it’s about Chinese...you tell Namibians Chinese have taken over Namibia. Not on my watch. I told the Chinese ambassador here, I am not your puppet. Chinese, they come here and, infrastructure all over Africa. And I saw in America they are there. Who bailed the Americans out during the financial crisis? Chinese money is there. So why small Namibia who fought Germans...Even Germans we were fighting with you. We are tough people. Now Chinese after our sovereignty come and recolonize us. You think so? Germans did not succeed. Even those Germans who were here. So please...Every European country is about Chinese. They’re in Germany they’re in America...France, they bought out France. So, Namibia is not bought out yet. So please, as I said, I told the Chinese kindly we are not going to exchange any old colonial or imperialist with new imperialism...”

So, the question is: should Africa go to the West or embrace the East?

### **Materials, Methods of Data Collection and Theoretical Framework**

This paper was developed through an in-depth analysis of the novel *The Dragonfly Sea*. Furthermore, reviews by other scholars also provide the foundation for an insightful exploration of the text. Other materials used include: Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Gayatri C. Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and selected relevant Internet videos. A textual analysis of the primary text has been undertaken to foreground situations where the main character, Ayaana, appears as a microcosmic representation of the continent Africa. Additionally, other secondary texts and publications have been referred to, and other internet sources relied upon as reservoirs of information supporting the fact that Africa is indeed a global minority.

This study has been guided by selected tenets in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri C. Spivak (1988). Upon reading the novel, it is apparent that, by approaching it through Spivak's theory's lens, Ayaana stands out clearly as a subaltern. Through her experiences at sea and her adventures in China and Turkey, Ayaana strikes the reader as a marginalized character who is struggling to beat the odds to establish her place in relationship with other 'superior' characters in the novel, much as Africa struggles to establish her place among 'superior' continents on the global stage.

Clearly, Ayaana is a subaltern whose position and place cannot, for instance, be equated to that of Ziriya, the Turkish man. The experiences, therefore, that Ayaana goes through can rightly be seen to be symbolic of the challenges that Africa as a continent endures as a minority in world matters, where Europe takes the lead. Ayaana's treatment by her Chinese [Eastern] friends, juxtaposed with her treatment by Ziriya's family [Western] paints a vivid picture of a girl whose attention is being fought for by two opposing forces. This scenario is analyzed in this paper and interpreted to mean that Africa as a continent is being scrambled over by the Western and Eastern powers. This also underscores how this scenario portrays the African continent as a powerless subaltern.

That Africa in the global scene is a minority is indisputable. Borrowing from Spivak, Africa as a subaltern is viewed as a subject vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment by other world powers. Equally, in the novel, Ayaana goes through these tribulations from her Western and Eastern acquaintances, therefore corroborating this paper's position that Ayaana is indeed a symbol representing the African continent in the global landscape.

### **Ayaana as Africa**

*The Dragonfly Sea* is a novel whose protagonist is a Pate-island born Ayaana. We are first introduced to her as a 'fatherless' girl and as the plot progresses, we discover that she's passionate and has a sentimental attachment to the sea. She often eludes her mother, Munira to go and spy on strangers around the sea wondering which of them could be her father. Ayaana's loneliness in this case signifies the extent of seclusion to which Africa has been subjected to by the global dominating nations. Her yearning for a father reflects how African nations, out of desperation for *Aid*, are torn between choosing to align with the Western or the Eastern superpowers.

Ayaana later chooses Muhiddin who, though not Pate-born, is African, nonetheless. This is a deliberate technique by the author to pass across the message that regardless of how African states are in a dilemma to choose between the West and the East, it is in Africa [home] where they will find

everything they seek. The bond between Ayaana and the father, Muhiddin, is strong enough that even after all her travels to China and Turkey, she still has to come back searching for him for that permanent, fatherly love. This is another strategy by the author to support the fact that even if African states choose to go East or West, it is still back in Africa where they will find genuine, long-lasting partnerships.

The novel also highlights the story of American soldiers who have come to Pate Island to look for one Fazul Mohammed, a terrorist who had bombed the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Saalam (p. 70-1). The narrator says that they arrested and tortured anyone who looked like Fazul. However, Fazul who is said to have fallen in love with a Pate-born girl is never betrayed as the Pate residents feel that he is one of their own. Upon failing to capture Fazul, the narrator says that the American soldiers built latrines that looked like goat shelters and sank "unusable wells" (p. 469). At almost the same time, there are reported cases of abductions and unexplained disappearances of young men from the island. It would however be discovered later that they were forcefully abducted or otherwise lured by Al-Qaeda operatives. These two parallel incidences show that the West (Americans) and the East (Al-Qaeda) come to Africa, not only to exploit her economic resources but also to torture/maim her old men and recruit her young men to be trained as terrorists to further their own (East West) political agenda. Essentially, the West's versus East's imperialism treats Africa as the 'other' to be dominated and exploited at will. Furthermore, in the West's versus East's supremacy battles, it's always the African continent that suffers, regardless of how neutral she is.

As the novel's plot progresses towards the climax, Ayaana is rewarded with a scholarship to study in China. Basically, this comes by because of her link to the Chinese people as she is said to have originated from the lineage of the Ming dynasty who had sailed to the island in the 1430s. As a result, Suleiman, who has performed much better than Ayaana isn't offered a chance. This can be taken as a sign of the author's deliberate attempt to show how getting the scholarship is limited to a selected few. In this case, Ayaana is awarded by virtue of her having Chinese roots. Predictably, it would have been impossible for her to obtain it otherwise.

Whilst in the ship en route to China, Ayaana's mind still revolves around Muhiddin. She even admits to the ship's captain that she is waiting for Muhiddin to return. Thus, "...she did not speak of Pate's expectations for her, or the thing she was beginning to sense she could no longer do: stay in China. She was not Chinese. 'What if there is no home?' she asked, her breath caught in her throat" (p. 387). This confirms that even before touching the Chinese

soil, Ayaana is not only skeptical about her survival in the place but she's also certain that she won't stay there because she is not Chinese. In other words, her feeling of homelessness coupled with her yearning for Muhiddin confirms that Ayaana knows that whilst in China, she is going to be treated as the "other".

The rich Turkish man Koray wants to kill Ayaana on suspicion that she has slept with another man. Here, Koray is exercising his power cum dominance over Ayaana who, according to him, is a minority and a *subaltern*. In the text, we are informed that Ayaana threatens Koray by holding the tip of a pen to his chest. We are further told that Koray's eyes turn green having been subdued by Ayaana. He says, "[W]hat do you want me to do now? . . . You want me to apologize and vow never to choke you again or something similarly banal, yes?" Ayaana responds: "No, I wanted to see if the threat of death affects you. It does." The narrator says that Koray's eyes were cold and yellowish. "You would be so easy to kill" . . . "True. But I swear, you will bleed to death with me." (p. 401).

This incident of Ayaana, a *subaltern*, subduing Koray indicates how Europe or the West can easily be overcome. The fallacy that Africans had hitherto been made to believe by the colonial masters that Europeans were 'invincible' is herein debunked. Can the *subaltern* speak now?

Ziriyab, the lost son of Muhiddin has been kidnapped at sea by unknown assailants who take him masked to Oman, Middle East. Here, he and other prisoners, for being 'suspects' are tortured and subjected to inhumane conditions. He later reveals to Ayaana that he could not speak about his experience because "it is a wound that never heals. It infuses you with the enduring stench of human evil" (p. 448). He later informs her: "A young man from Yemen – he has not eaten for eight years. They have to force food into him every day...He was only a child when they stole him from his mother." The narrator says that when he looked at Ayaana, "his voice was inflected with rust." He continues, "They bleed souls – that is their hunger. They are possessed, you understand. When they kill us, they do not think we are real" (p. 448).

Previously, when he has been left alone at the airport in Oman, it's said that Ziriyab is scared of planes and chooses to travel by ship (p. 444). All he wants is to return home to his wife. The narrator describes that "A corpselike man had appeared like an apparition on the island on which he had been born, from which he had been exiled, to which he had returned for refuge, and from which he had been stolen" (p. 446). Having been turned into a zombielike being by his torturers, Ziriyab returns home where he finds refuge, and upon

realizing that he has a small sister Abeera, he starts to develop emotions [love] which had completely been flushed out by his captors. There is no reason given as to why he is captured and tortured by his kidnappers but one certain thing is that what Ziriyaab is subjected into is meant to crush his spirit and make him worthless. However, upon reaching Pate, he is embraced with compassion, brotherliness and his sister's affection, which makes him learn to love and to be human once again.

Ziriyaab's experiences paints a picture of how Africans can be dehumanized, whilst out of their own continent either by will or through force. Ayaana for instance is raped by unknown people whilst in Pate. Later, she is racially abused when she is a student in China and in Turkey where she has gone to visit Koray's family. Benedict Anderson (2006) rightfully notes that "racism and anti-Semitism manifest themselves, not across national boundaries, but within them" (p. 149) The author is herein passing the message that regardless of where and what conditions one undergoes, home is always the right and best place to find rest, recovery and more so, love. Therefore, it follows that Africans in the diaspora, (immigrants or refugees) can be a minority or the 'other' outside the continent, but Africa still remains their home, nevertheless.

In the beginning, we are introduced to a Mama Suleiman whose son, Suleiman, despite been a bright student, is lured by the Al-Qaeda to fight for them. There, he seems to have easily integrated with his hosts and, as the videos suggest, is enjoying life outside his Pate home. His mother is constantly searching and waiting for him to return. Unlike Ziriyaab who is kidnapped and forcefully transported to the Middle East, Suleiman seemingly chooses for himself to abandon his family to join the group. This incident highlights how poor Africans can easily be swayed or lured, and recruited then trained into becoming terrorists and mercenaries in wars between the West and the East.

As the plot winds on, we are told of Lai Jin, the ship captain who, having previously sailed with Ayaana to China, has now come back to look for her in Pate island. He laments that the Kenyan people don't honour 'his people' despite them (Chinese) having built enough infrastructure for Kenya (p. 463). Ironically, Lai Jin admits to having introduced himself as Japanese in the bus since he is ashamed of the poor state of roads built by the Chinese. This incident foregrounds how the imperialists exploit Africans through poor service delivery. Just like (Fanon, 1963) said, "There are those who have obtained complete sovereignty but still live under the constant menace of imperialist aggression" (p. 4).

One striking fact that cannot go unnoticed in the text is that as the novel ends, Lai Jin changes his name and chooses to permanently settle on the island of Pate. Nahodha Jamal (Lai Jin) and Ayaana have a shipyard where they engage in building and repairing ships for Pate's seamen. Later on, the two get married. The author's foreboding message here is that Africans will eventually be independent and sovereign. Moreover, African states need not be disturbed or show any indication of being desperate and *needy*. The author foretells that that way, the imperialists would one day settle in Africa, not to colonize or dominate, but to partner and invest.

Mama Suleiman's hatred for Ayaana plus Muhiddin's arrest in Mombasa where he has gone to look for his lost son Ziriya are significant incidences worth noting. These occurrences reveal how African states have failed to accept each other as brothers, and betray and treat each other with contempt. In the denouement, however, Mama Suleiman who hitherto has been Ayaana's nemesis makes peace with her. With Munira having gone to Mozambique, Mama Suleiman urges Ayaana to refer to her as *Shangazi* (Aunt) henceforth, (to which she obliges). Mama Suleiman thereafter promises to play Munira's role in the preparation of Ayaana for her wedding to Lai Jin.

As the story ends, the author, through Mama Suleiman's gesture and her role of Auntie is telling African states that there's still hope for peace and reconciliation between African states: "Our baby is a true dolly." Mama Suleiman sighed to Munira' (p. 481).

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this paper has been to investigate the extent to which the author uses the character of Ayaana to serve as a representation and a microcosm of Africa in global affairs. It starts with the livelihood of the people of Pate Island with the little girl Ayaana who is desperately looking for her father. Ayaana's journey by sea to China reveals a lot about the Africa in her. Her interactions with the Chinese as well as the Turkish man Koray's relatives further compound the racism experienced by African immigrants outside the continent. The kidnapping and torture of some characters in the novel reflects the humiliation and miseries that Africans in the diaspora (and to some extent, refugees) undergo.

In conclusion, this paper recommends a further investigation to establish if at all the author's intention was to address the so-called Kenya-China relationship and its effects. Furthermore, the author chose to make the protagonist's stay in China and Turkey ephemeral but her stay in Pate Island

permanent. It will be worthy if a parallel study to investigate why this is so is carried out.

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