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From British Lake to Afrasian Sea: Recalibrations of the Indian Ocean in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

ABSTRACT This essay aims to show that Yvonne Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), the first major East African novel exploring Africa's relations to China, breaks new ground in African literature. Recalibrations of the Indian Ocean lie at the heart of this extraordinary text that explores Africa's role in a multipolar world where the centrality of Europe and North America has already given way to complex new realignments between countries, cultures, memories, and people, and is likely to erode even further in the future. Owuor's novel has crossed a threshold into a new phase of African literature that can by no stretch of the imagination be called "postcolonial" any longer. It is not the ideologically constituted "friendship between peoples," but the struggle to find connections between individuals that constitutes the Afrasian space in this novel, and it is relations that constitute home, not territory, biology, or culture.

KEYWORDS Afrasia, African maritime literature, Africa–China relations, Indian Ocean, multilingualism

Introduction

I would like to commence my essay with a scene from Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) in which many of the important themes of her novel are present in a condensed form. At the centre of this scene (and of Owuor's novel as a whole) we find Ayaana, a young African woman from the small island of Pate off the Kenyan coast, who is said to be a descendant of Chinese sailors who some 500 years ago survived the shipwreck of their vessel belonging to one of the naval expeditions of the famous Chinese Admiral Zheng He. Ayaana received a stipend as a guest of honour in China and now finds herself in a marine science classroom, where

she is embroiled in a heated debate on the name of the ocean connecting Africa and Asia with her fellow students.

One hot and humid day, Ari, a student of maritime engineering from India, observed that the Mandarin Silk Road initiative subsumed the *Indian* Ocean—he emphasized “Indian”—to “others.” “It is not for nothing that the ocean is called Indian,” he noted.

Ayaana retorted, “Ziwa Kuu?”

Ari turned to her. “Oogle Boogle?”

“Ziwa Kuu.” Ayaana refused to cede territory.

Ari said, “We’ll discuss this with your good self the day your country acquires a motorboat to start a navy.”

Ayaana said, “Ziwa Kuu, and we have a navy.”

“Doubtless its fish bounties are commendable, but what else?”

Titters.

“Ratnakara,” said an Indonesian.

“*Indian* Ocean,” emphasised Ari. “Ziwa Kuu,” repeated Ayaana. “*Indian* Ocean.”

Two Pakistani students chimed in: “Ziwa Kuu!”

The class slipped into an uproar that did not change Chinese foreign policy. The lecturer, who had watched the disintegration of order in his class in disbelief, his face becoming blotchy, at last screamed, “The Western Ocean! You are in China.” (288–9)

This essay will unpack this passage along three different trajectories that show to what extent Yvonne Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea* breaks new ground in African literature and how recalibrations of the Indian Ocean lie at the heart of this extraordinary novel.

Beyond Bandung Nostalgia

The first of these trajectories entails an exploration of South–South relations beyond what might be called Bandung nostalgia. What is at stake here, in a nutshell, is how far the social world of Owuor’s novel differs from earlier versions of African–Asian links that were formulated in the heyday of anticolonialism. To take a particularly striking example, here is a section of the speech Kenyan novelist and literary activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o delivered in 1973 when he received the Lotus Prize for Literature awarded by the Afro-Asian Literature Association:

This is an African story: it is also an Asian story, and any cursory glance at the history of China, Indo-China, India, Africa, the West Indies and

Afro-America, will see the testimony in tears and blood. We are truly a colonial people whose sweat has been cruelly exploited by western-monopoly capital to build the monument called western civilization. [...]

So why not now dream the hopes of millions: of a United People's Republic of Africa joining hands with a United People's Republic of Asia in the service of the true Republic of man and works. What greater story can we as writers be privileged to tell? We can only hope that our hearts and pens will always be equal to the task. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [1973] 1981, 102; 106)

This passage may resonate well with contemporary attempts to recuperate the grand narratives of anticolonial solidarity embodied in what has been called the “Bandung Spirit” (named after the famous conference of Non-Aligned Nations held in Indonesia in 1955);¹ and it may also strike a note with those in postcolonial studies who engage in what I have elsewhere called “enchanted solidarity” (Schulze-Engler 2015, 22) in an attempt to cling to the great historical moment of decolonization as if that constellation could be reproduced at will decades later.² Against the background of contemporary African–Asian relations in a rapidly globalizing world, these attempts arguably amount to little more than epistemological nostalgia, and the grand vision of looking at South–South relations in general and Afrasian interactions in particular through a common history of colonial oppression is hardly convincing any longer in the contemporary world.³

A few years ago, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's son, characterized the need to “rethink the Global South” in the following terms:

Writers and scholars from the Global South often engage with one another through their own relationship to the West. But triangulating ideas, whether political or literary, through the West ends up masking historical South–South relationships while feeding and giving cover to cultural nationalism and protectionist scholarly practices. We need to fracture this dialectical linkage to the West and allow South–South cultural, historical and political conversations to take place. [...] Unable to escape this locked and unequal dialectic, many postcolonial thinkers end up affirming the very relationships they are trying to undermine. (Mukoma wa Ngugi 2012, 5)

Mukoma wa Ngugi continues his thoughts on “rethinking the Global South” with a passionate plea for leaving the “comfort zone” which has arguably become the heuristic habitat of much of contemporary postcolonial studies:

1 See, for example, Phạm and Shilliam 2016, and Wardaya 2005.

2 See, for example, Halim 2012 and Yoon 2015.

3 For a critical assessment of current attempts to revive the “Bandung Spirit” in Postcolonial Studies see Schulze-Engler 2019.

The idea is not to look for what Glissant calls “ideological stability” [...]. To think about South-to-South relations is to enter a place of great intellectual vulnerability. Once we leave the relationship of, let’s say, Africa and Europe via colonialism, the world suddenly becomes very vast, complicated, and scary as the knowledge of just how little we know settles in. Yet, this place that is just outside our comfort zone is a beautiful place to be in—it’s a place of discovery of new ideas and seeing old ideas anew. (Mukoma wa Ngugi 2012, 6–7)

In a nutshell, I would like to argue that Yvonne Owuor’s novel is resolutely set outside the comfort zone of anticolonial friendship between Africa and Asia, and manages its exploration of historical and contemporary Sino–Kenyan relations entirely without recourse to the postcolonial triangulation with the West that Mukoma wa Ngugi has referred to. In the classroom scene in China presented at the beginning of this essay, Europeans and North Americans are totally absent, and the participants in the heated debate are all from what has often been called the “Global South.” Yet there is no romanticization of “peoples’ solidarity” at work here: the entanglements between Africa, India, China, Pakistan, and Indonesia across the Indian Ocean do not simply follow a benign agenda, but are part of new regional power negotiations based on China’s aspirations to global hegemony, India’s claim to be the major power hub in the region, Pakistan’s undermining of that claim, and Indonesia’s assertion of its lead role as the most populous nation in the Southeast Asian part of the Indian Ocean.

Owuor’s novel thus resolutely moves beyond clichéd notions of “the West and the Rest” and seeks to explore the contours of what Edward Said described as a “decentred or multiply-centred world” at the beginning of the new millennium:

[W]hat if the world has changed so drastically as to allow now for almost the first time a new geographical consciousness of a decentered or multiply-centered world, a world no longer sealed within watertight compartments of art or culture or history, but mixed, mixed up, varied, complicated by the new difficult mobility of migrations, the new independent states, the newly emergent and burgeoning cultures? (Said 2002, 470–1)⁴

This multipolar world is by no means one in which the machinations of the “Global West” and its enemies have stopped to matter altogether, as the murderous presence of Islamist terrorists and the no less murderous

4 On the notion of a multipolar world order, see also Clegg 2009 and Hiro 2010.

incursion of the American-led “War on Terror” on Pate Island amply testify, but the reassuring cognitive framework of a Manichean world split into the “Dominant” and the “Dominated,” the “West” and the “South,” or “Europe” and its “Others” is firmly dismantled in *The Dragonfly Sea*.

Instead, the novel seeks to explore the puzzling multitude of social, economic, political, and cultural relations emerging in a multipolar world in which China and Africa no longer interact in a triangulated space dominated by “the West,” but participate in the making of a bewildering new world order that generates new hopes and solidarities, but also new forms of power ambitions and oppression. Ayaana’s presence in China itself is part of this scenario and goes back to Chinese power politics in the framework of the Road and Belt initiative pushing for global hegemony. Tiny Pate Island, where Chinese sailors may have foundered and survived centuries ago, has become incorporated into this push, and Ayaana is transformed into the “Descendant,” a cypher of friendship between the Chinese and Kenyan people:

Five weeks ago [...] her hostess had declared to her, in a heartfelt speech: “There is one memory. Like blood. It is on your skin.” Ayaana had wanted to protect her body parts. [...] Cohabiting with shadows—here was the weight of a culture with a hulking history now preparing itself to digest her continent; here she was, with something of this land already in her blood, being made into something of a conspirator, anointed with a sobriquet: “the Descendant.” (275–6)

While entanglements across the ocean are everywhere and inevitable, one major trajectory of Ayaana in Owuor’s novel is thus to free herself from being the pawn of a Chinese power game, and to disentangle herself from a narrative that is not hers. When she leaves China and returns to Pate in the last part of the novel, this is by no means a retreat to a pristine island paradise, not only because Pate is located next to Lamu, where China plans to build a gigantic deepwater port that will have dire ecological effects on Pate, but also because Pate has always been a melting pot of innumerable cultural influences. Ayaana’s return to Pate is rather an attempt to find an African perspective in a rapidly changing transregional world and to explore African agency in that world:

China says she has come back. An “old friend.” But when she was here before, we also had to pay for that friendship. Now she speaks, not with us on Pate, but to Nairobi, where our destiny is written as if we don’t exist.
[...]

We hear China will build a harbour, and ships will come; we hear that an oil pipeline shall cross our land. We hear a city shall emerge from our sea, but first they will close our channel. These are the things we only hear. China does not talk to us.

[...]

She said, "We hear that Admiral Zheng He has emerged from out of time to resume his voyages." A twist of her lips. "Me, though, I desire Pate's dreams." She paused and shook her head, softened her voice: "If they can be retrieved. You see, we have lost even the memory of the name for our seas." [...]. Ayaana added, "China is here. With all the others—al-Shabaab, everyone else... China is here for China." She shrugged. "What do we do?" (470)

From Indian Ocean to Dragonfly Sea

I would now like to turn to the second trajectory of Indian Ocean recalibrations that hinges on renaming the Indian Ocean the "Dragonfly Sea." One of the central ironies in the classroom scene that has already been touched upon several times in this essay is the fact that the name of the Indian Ocean that the Indian student in a fit of nationalist fervour claims as a semiotic marker of Indian entitlement does, in fact, have its origin in the preponderance of Europeans in the region; it was British colonial and maritime power that finally ensured that the ocean that had been known by so many names before (and that the British in a bout of imperial arrogance often referred to as a "British Lake" located between their prized possessions in India and East Africa) became globally known as the "Indian Ocean." The struggle for the ocean's name that lies at the heart of the classroom quarrel constitutes a major theme in Owuor's novel, and it is highly significant that Owuor's poetic renaming does not seek to set up a geostrategic African counter-position to the "Indian" Ocean, as embodied, for example, in terms such as the "Eritrean" or the "Swahili" Sea.

Renaming the Indian Ocean the "Dragonfly Sea" (after the millions of insects that cross over from Asia to Africa every year with the monsoon winds) constitutes a highly effective method of poetically easing the Afrasian Sea⁵ out of the stranglehold of nationalist semiotic strategies and imbuing it with the fluidity and connectivity across national boundaries that the novel is so centrally interested in. While the very word "dragonfly" could possibly conjure up poetic associations of East Asian flying dragons or Chinese ships flying across the water, the dragonflies in the novel clearly do not belong to any one nation or continent; like migrant birds they cross

5 On the notion of the "Afrasian Sea," see Pearson 1998 and Karugia 2018.

man-made and natural boundaries and set up connections that long pre-date contemporary international relations. The dragonflies in Owuor's novel thus serve as mobile polysemic metaphors that connect Asia and Africa across the ocean in a manner that echoes the poetic suturing of the shared and disjointed histories of Africa and the New World across the Atlantic by means of the needle-sharp beaks of the sea swifts in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990).

Renaming the ocean the "Dragonfly Sea" thus forms part of a vision that might be called a "cosmopolitanism from below,"⁶ a vision that seeks out new connections between people (rather than nations) based on an interconnectedness across continents that includes Arabia, Turkey, and a number of other African countries, not all of which are located by the sea. This interconnectedness does not rely on nationalist identifications or on grand victimological tales of joint suffering, and it cannot be reduced to the bloodlines that the Chinese government eagerly wants to discover in Ayaana or to "national cores" of identity. Instead, this interconnectedness emerges from friendship (and even love) between fragile, marginal, and often enough wounded individuals across cultural, ethnic, religious, and national borders, from acts of solidarity between citizens from different countries who stand up against oppressive nationalisms, and from the lived experience of transcultural maritime lifeworlds.

After the "official" Chinese attempts at turning Ayaana into an embodiment of ancient bloodlines connecting "the people of China and Africa" have failed, the novel somewhat surprisingly ends with a successful African-Chinese love affair between Ayaana and Lai Jin, the captain of the ship that had transported Ayaana from Africa to China, re-travelling the route once taken by Admiral Zheng He. Lai Jin discovered that the ship carrying Ayaana was in fact engaged in massive illegal smuggling of ivory and animal parts, had the containers holding the booty thrown overboard, and fell out with the high-level Communist Party official who had set up Ayaana's triumphant sea journey as a smokescreen for his smuggling business. He is thrown into prison, and later becomes an internationally successful potter whose yearning for Ayaana eventually leads him to Pate.

Before Ayaana and Lai Jin can finally come together, they both have to unlearn the nationalist identities and identifications that they still partly inhabit. Ayaana has to learn to see Lai Jin as a unique person rather than as a cypher for another nationality:

6 For an interesting exploration of this concept see Kurasawa 2004, 233–55.

She said, “On my plane home ... there were more of you than there were of us on board. China is our typhoon.” Her mind grasped for clarity. At last she really looked at him. “Why are *you* here?”

Lai Jin’s hands opened and closed; opened and closed. “*Hǎiyàn*,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m not ‘China.’ I am Lai Jin. A man. I am here. My purpose is to find you. A man. He has come to find *Hǎiyàn*. A man, not ‘China.’” Pain spots in his eyes. (463)

And Lai Jin has to learn that his presence on Pate Island is by no means as extraordinary as he, still influenced by a Chinese exoticist discourse of wild and primitive Africa, likes to think. Visiting old Chinese tombstones generally attributed to the fifteenth century, the time of Zheng He’s Ming Dynasty expeditions, Lai Jin suddenly realizes that these graves are several centuries older and probably date back to the seventh to tenth century Tang Dynasty. Once more it is the dragonflies that poetically set the tone for what turns out to be a life-changing insight:

A moment in dusk. Migrant dragonflies flitted above Lai Jin’s head as he stopped to stare at Pate’s old crescent-spaced tombs. Tang, he suspected—not Ming, as was presumed. [...] Goose bumps. A realization: there was nothing unique about his presence here. He stroked the curves on a tombstone. Ebb. Flow. Repetition. Rhythm of the ages. Nothing new or unusual about the arrival or departure of souls from here or elsewhere. It was the warp and weave of existence. (467)

The Anglophone Novel as Worldly Contact Zone

The last part of this essay will address the third trajectory of the Indian Ocean recalibrations in *The Dragonfly Sea* and discuss how Owuor manages to turn her Anglophone text into a worldly contact zone. To return to the classroom this essay began with one last time, the heated argument is conducted in English, but the text is shot through with items from other languages such as “Ziwa Kuu” (Swahili for “Great Lake”) or “Ratnakara” (Sanskrit for “treasure chest”). In fact, the whole text of *The Dragonfly Sea* is a veritable linguistic contact zone in which English shares literary space with Swahili, Chinese, Arabic, and Turkish, to mention only a few of the many languages that have left their imprint on Owuor’s novel. Some of these items from other languages are translated, some are indirectly glossed, and some remain completely untranslated. Older debates on English as a literary language that pitted self-enclosed worlds of African

languages against an equally self-enclosed world of English (such as the notorious stance of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o against English as an allegedly “foreign” language in African literature)⁷ seem to have lost their relevance as we witness Owuor’s text in the act of “doing English.”

In an essay called “O-Swahili—Language and Liminality,” Yvonne Owuor has characterized the mutual permeability of languages in the East African context in the following manner:

What if, in an East African context, languages like Kiswahili and English were vehicles of transportation—metaphorically, *matatus* (there is subtle order to the seeming chaos)—through which symbols, experiences, messages, meanings, maps, and archetypes of one cultural zone not only visit one another but oftentimes hop aboard and contribute to the blend of passengers heading to Destination Wherever? (Owuor 2015, 142)

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor has arguably turned the novelistic text into such a *matatu* (or rather, to remain within the sea-bound semiotics that characterize what is effectively the first major maritime African novel) into a *dau* that, in a manner strikingly similar to other recent novels exploring multilingual contact zones such as Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* (2008, 2012 and 2015) or Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), has allowed a multitude of heteroglossic passengers to hop aboard. Her text thus incorporates multilingual dialogicity and testifies to what Arundhati Roy, in her 2018 W. G. Sebald Lecture on Literary Translation entitled “What is the Morally Appropriate Language in which to Think and Write,” has called the “mind-bending mosaic” of language politics and practices in the contemporary world (Roy 2018).

A Threshold Text

To conclude: to non-African or non-Asian readers, *The Dragonfly Sea* might at first sight seem to be a novel that is not written for “us.” It explores

7 Ngũgĩ’s largely polemical and one-sided critique of English-language literature in Africa and his rejection of “Afro-Saxon writing” seems to have found a permanent place in the inventory of contemporary postcolonial studies; see, for example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986. What is often less noted or totally neglected is Ngũgĩ’s return to English in his critical writings—see, for example, Gikandi 2000—and his more nuanced assessment of African literature in former European languages in his seminal essay on world literature “Globelectical Imagination: The World in the Postcolonial,” Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2012.

Africa's role in a multipolar world where the centrality of Europe and North America has already given way to complex new realignments between countries, cultures, memories, and people, and is likely to erode even further in the future, and the "postcolonial" impetus of writing back to European colonialism and its legacies is no longer a primary literary concern. One of the central themes of *The Dragonfly Sea* is the crossing of thresholds, and as the first major East African novel exploring Africa's relations to China and as probably the first African maritime novel, *The Dragonfly Sea* is decidedly a twenty-first century text that has crossed a threshold into a new phase of African literature that can by no stretch of the imagination be called "postcolonial" any longer. It is not the ideologically constituted "friendship between peoples," but the struggle for finding connections between individuals that constitutes the Afrasian space in this novel, and it is relations that constitute home, not territory, biology, or culture. That is why *The Dragonfly Sea* is, after all, written for readers in Europe, North America, or any other part of the globe, too. Like all great literature, it is not just an expression of a particular history, culture, or locality, but a gift to the world.

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