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Navigating Identity in Immigration: A Postcolonial Study of Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's The Dragonfly Sea

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how *The Dragonfly Sea* reframes immigration as a tidal, multi-sited process rather than a one-way border crossing. Set between Kenya's Pate Island and East Asia, the novel follows Ayaana as kinship, religion, language, and state agendas tug her in competing directions. Using postcolonial theory, Owuor portrays the oceanic world as an alternative map to land-based nationalism, where islands, sea routes, and port cities create a network in which identity and belonging are shaped through memory, oral traditions, and ritual practices. A study of Ayaana's selection as a "descendant" of Zheng He, her education in China, and her encounters with security regimes reveal how heritage can be validated, branded, and weaponized by institutions. The textual analysis shows three key moves. First, Owuor dislodges Euro-Atlantic migration templates by centering Swahili, Arab, and Sinophone circulations. Second, she spotlights the gendered textures of mobility—care, vulnerability, and endurance—often obscured by policy talk. Third, her multilingual prose and partial translations stage cultural translation as lived labor, not gloss. The novel converts the Indian Ocean into a method: identity is tidal, citizenship is contingent, and maps are scripts that people resist, rewrite, or sail around. Read this way, *The Dragonfly Sea* offers a humane critique of heritage politics and a richer vocabulary for thinking immigration beyond borders.

Introduction

"Diaspora refers to a large group of people who share a cultural and regional origin but are living away from their traditional homeland. Diasporas come about through immigration and forced movements of people" (National Geographic Society, 2023, para. 1). It extends beyond mere physical displacement, encompassing the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of living in foreign contexts. Such communities frequently navigate layered identities, negotiating between the traditions of their homeland and the influences of host societies. As noted, diaspora refers to "any ethnic group or community that is forced or induced to leave their original homeland for another place in the world" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), leading to a dispersed population often detached from its nation. At the same time, it encompasses "the traditions and culture that these people develop throughout time away from their original countries" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), highlighting the evolving forms of identity and cultural expression among displaced groups. This condition produces a complex dilemma, fostering the emergence of hyphenated identities as immigrants contend with challenges that are physical, psychological, and emotional (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 596). Mishra (2005) reflects on the unsettled condition of diasporic existence, observing that "all diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" (p. 1). Diasporic individuals as those who find discomfort in the "non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport" (Mishra, 2005, p. 1). Such individuals seek to examine the meaning of the hyphen that connects multiple aspects of their identity, though they hesitate to "press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia" (Mishra, 2005, p. 1). As Mishra (2005) argues, they occupy a fragile space shaped by "real or imagined displacements" and a self-imposed sense of exile, where they are "haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements" (p. 1).

Diasporic Literature is written by authors who live outside their homeland; and is characterized by alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, search for identity and constant displacement of the self. It deals with emigrant sensibility and focuses on the lives of immigrants and their internal and external conflicts in an alien land. (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 136)

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* explores the tensions of diasporic life through the story of Ayaana, a young woman whose journey across borders follows the Indian Ocean's trade and memory routes. Approached through a postcolonial lens, the novel foregrounds themes of belonging, hybridity, and cultural inheritance, illustrating how identities emerge and evolve under the influence of colonial legacies, global commerce, and shifting geopolitical realities. It reconceptualizes the Indian Ocean as more than a geographical expanse, presenting it instead as a connective space where multiple histories, languages, and cultures converge. In Owuor's (2019) narrative, sea lanes and ports operate not simply as points of departure and arrival but as transformative thresholds where identities are reshaped and cultures intermingle, with the ocean itself functioning as both a literal and symbolic stage for migration and exile. Its tides mirror the instability of borders and the fluidity of belonging, while its depth evokes the unspoken memories and ancestral ties carried across generations.

Ayaana's journey is thus not only personal but emblematic of wider transnational experiences, casting the sea as both witness and participant in the making of diasporic worlds. By situating Owuor's (2019) work within debates on migration and postcolonial identity, this study highlights how literature illuminates the changing terrains of home, displacement, and cultural negotiation in an interconnected world. *The Dragonfly Sea* ultimately challenges and expands prevailing ideas about belonging, presenting the ocean not as a barrier but as a medium of memory, transformation, and interconnectedness.

Literature Review

"Diasporas connote to people who are permanently residing outside their country of origin, but maintaining connection with people back in their old homelands" (Khanal, 2019, p. 129). Diasporas are "dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement [and] adaptation" (Clifford, 1994, p. 309). Diaspora discourses" take into account the "experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home, while remaining rooted in specific, discrete histories" (Clifford, 1994, p. 302). Laxmiprasad (2020) highlights the "diversity, fluidity, and constant transformation" inherent in diasporic identities, suggesting that individuals undertake an ongoing process of self-fashioning as they move across cultural boundaries. This continual negotiation frequently produces what is termed a "transcultural identity"—a flexible yet coherent sense of self that synthesizes multiple cultural traditions. Diasporic identity is never static but "constantly in flux," shaped by both "memory of the homeland" and the "pressures of assimilation" within the host nation (Hall, 1990). This tension resonates with Bhabha's (1994) notion of a "third space," a liminal zone where migrants negotiate between cultural worlds, forging hybrid forms of identity even as they encounter alienation and marginality.

"Migrant communities bear the imprint of diaspora, hybridization and difference in their very constitution" (Hall, 200, p. 232). They embody a dual orientation, maintaining strong ties to the memories, traditions, and cultural practices of their origins while simultaneously adapting to the demands of new environments. This interplay frequently produces intricate identity formations in which individuals develop "hyphenated identities" that signify both inherited and adopted affiliations. As Bhabha (1994) describes, such conditions give rise to a "third space"—a site of hybridity where identity is continually renegotiated beyond fixed national or cultural categories. In this sense, diaspora represents "not as a homogeneous, unified, monolithic, harmonious form of sociality, but as heterogeneous and conflictual" (Werbner, 2010, p. 77), foregrounding the diverse and sometimes contested ways in which belonging and selfhood are experienced across transnational contexts.

"Diasporic Literature is written by authors who live outside their homeland"…It deals with emigrant sensibility and focuses on the lives of immigrants and their internal and external conflicts in an alien land" (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 136). Such narratives revolve around the intertwined themes of home, memory, and displacement, where the homeland is imagined both as a tangible location and as an idealized space shaped by the distance of exile. Conversely, the hostland functions as a realm of adaptation and cultural negotiation, offering opportunities for new identities while simultaneously engendering marginalization, cultural loss, and the experience of "double consciousness." This "double consciousness" signifies a condition of "two-ness," comprising "two souls, two thoughts, and the awareness of perceiving oneself through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1996, p. 2).

Jare (2021) highlights how diaspora creates intersections of languages, cultures, and ideologies, producing Bhabha's concept of "hybridity." Writers like Lahiri, Naipaul, Mukherjee, Mistry, and Desai depict this hybrid identity and the ongoing negotiation between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to host societies. Terms such as expatriate, immigrant, and transnational capture different aspects of this experience. Diasporic literature thus serves as a key space for expressing the dual condition of rootedness and displacement.

Raj and Tiwari (2023) point out that *The Inheritance of Loss* engages with themes of diaspora, globalization, cultural displacement, and colonialism. It not only portrays the lived realities of individuals shaped by these historical and socio-cultural forces but also situates itself within

broader debates on cosmopolitanism and diaspora. As a diasporic text, it navigates the tensions between home and host societies, reflecting Desai's own position within a cosmopolitan elite that transcends national boundaries. "Desai reimagines the Indian diaspora in relation to various diasporic groups, as well as in the context of global capitalism" (Raj & Tiwari, 2023, p. 77).

Qasim et al. (2024) argue that Dur e Aziz Amna's *American Fever* interrogates the complexities of diasporic experience by showing how displacement fosters the emergence of hyphenated identities. Focusing on Hira, a sixteen-year-old Pakistani student living in Oregon, the novel foregrounds the tensions of cultural dislocation and the ongoing struggle for self-definition. Hira's story traces a gradual negotiation between inherited traditions and the cultural frameworks of her host society, ultimately producing a hybrid identity that mediates between her Pakistani roots and American surroundings. As Qasim et al. (2024) observe, "diaspora significantly influences the formation of hyphenated identities and contributes to immigrants' sense of alienation" (p. 596), a dynamic powerfully illustrated through Hira's journey.

Although *The Dragonfly Sea* is noted for its portrayal of the Indian Ocean world, little scholarship has examined it through postcolonial and diaspora frameworks focusing on identity formation. Most studies prioritize South Asian or Caribbean diasporas and overlook East African perspectives, leaving underexplored how Owuor uses oceanic routes to depict migration, belonging, and hybridity. This study addresses that gap by positioning the novel within broader debates on diaspora and postcolonial identity.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive approach based on close reading of *The Dragonfly Sea* to examine how the novel portrays migration, hybridity, and identity formation. Drawing on postcolonial diasporic theories of Bhabha, it analyzes narrative structure, symbolism, and character development while situating the text within wider debates on African diasporas and Indian Ocean migration.

The notion of "postcolonial" refers to cultures and societies whose identities and structures have been profoundly influenced by the historical dynamics of colonization, continuing well beyond the formal end of imperial rule (Ashcroft et al., 2007). "The concept of postcolonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (Sawant, 2012, p. 120). As an analytical framework, postcolonial theory interrogates the lasting political, social, and cultural repercussions of colonial encounters, drawing attention to the asymmetries between imperial centers and colonized margins (Castle, 2013). Postcolonial theory functions as an analytical framework that interrogates the enduring social, cultural, and political legacies of colonial and imperial power, especially in regions formerly subjected to European domination across the Global South. "It is concerned with exposing and challenging how colonialism has shaped and continues to shape the world, as well as advocating for the rights and agency of formerly colonized peoples" (Sharma, 2024, p. 19). It throws light on the challenges "encountered by marginalized communities subjected to poverty and cultural upheaval due to colonial domination" (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 600).

The rhetoric of hybridity or the hybrid talk is fundamentally associated with the emergence of postcolonial discourse and its critiques of cultural imperialism. This stage in the history of hybridity is characterized by literature and theory that focuses on the effects of mixture upon identity and culture. (Jan et al., 2025, p. 176)

"Identity is the most significant concept in postcolonial theory due to colonization and globalization" (Jabeen et al., p. 1026). The experience of identity crisis occupies a pivotal place within postcolonial theory and literature, frequently examined through the paradigm of cultural

hybridity as individuals and communities negotiate between inherited traditions and imposed or adopted cultural frameworks. As Bah (2024) notes, "cultural hybridity in diasporic literature challenges traditional notions of authenticity and purity in cultural representation" (p. 109). Many writers from the diaspora challenge fixed or essentialist definitions of identity, opting instead to foreground the layered, often contradictory dimensions of multicultural and transnational experience.

"Contemporary applications of Hybridity in cultural studies is borrowed from several scholars, one of whom is Homi K. Bhabha, the most important scholar of postcolonial studies" (Jan et al., 2025, p. 110). Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of hybridity stands as a cornerstone of postcolonial discourse, emphasizing the fluid and negotiated nature of identity and culture. Central to his framework are concepts such as mimicry, ambivalence, and the "third space." Mimicry occurs when the colonized adopt the language, customs, or behaviors of the colonizer to gain recognition or advantage, yet its incompleteness exposes fractures within colonial authority. Ambivalence reflects the simultaneous attraction to and resistance against the dominant culture, capturing the tension of wanting to belong while preserving one's original identity. Both dynamics unfold within the "third space," a liminal arena where identities are reconstituted, meanings are renegotiated, and binaries such as colonizer/colonized or self/other are destabilized. Among his significant contributions, *The Location of Culture* remains a landmark text, in which the "third space" is described as "where two cultures come together, interact, and become something new" (Jan et al., 2025, p. 110).

Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes hybridity not as a seamless fusion of cultural forms but as a critical practice that reveals the constructed and unstable nature of identity. This view challenges essentialist notions of "pure" cultures, showing instead that cultural and social formations—including nations, ethnicities, and diasporic communities—emerge through historical processes of exchange, negotiation, and resistance. As Al-Qassab (2025) observes, hybridity in this sense "signifies the cultural mingling and interaction that happens in colonial and postcolonial settings, bringing about the rise of new, hybrid identities that cannot be deftly classified" (p. 313). Hybridity operates as a compelling concept for understanding the construction of identity, functioning as a marker of innovation and cultural translation. According to Bhabha, "hybridity is camouflage" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 193), and he further provocatively frames it as "hybridity as heresy" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 226), positioning it as both a disruptive and generative force. It represents "how newness enters the world" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 227) and is intrinsically linked to the "process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 252). By situating hybridity within the third space, Bhabha (1994) underscores its power to disrupt hegemonic authority, transform marginality into a site of agency, and affirm pluralistic, evolving forms of identity. The third space may be understood as a form of articulation—one that characterizes a generative rather than merely reflective arena, opening pathways for new possibilities. It operates as an "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 103) domain where fresh cultural meanings and practices emerge, destabilizing established boundaries and questioning conventional classifications of culture and identity. For Bhabha, this hybrid third space represents an ambivalent zone in which cultural meaning and representation lack any "primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 176). Conceptually, the third space serves as a valuable framework for examining enunciation, transgression, and the undermining of dualistic structures, thereby exceeding colonial binary thinking and oppositional models. Even though this space is marked by tensions and ambiguities, it nonetheless envisions a politics of

inclusion rather than exclusion, one that "initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1).

Textual Analysis

Identity crisis/hybrid identity is a dominant theme of literature in the rapidly growing globalized society. It has become a highly debatable issue. In the postcolonial world, cultural hybridity is an ever-present phenomenon, characterized by the constant blending of cultures. (Mortaza, 2024, p. 4177)

The Dragonfly Sea is a sweeping coming-of-age novel set across Kenya's Swahili coast, China, and Turkey. At its heart is Ayaana, a young girl raised by her single mother, Munira, on Pate Island in the Lamu Archipelago. Their world shifts with the arrival of Muhidin, a seasoned sailor whose stories and guidance introduce Ayaana to the wider Indian Ocean world and provide a long-absent paternal anchor. As Ayaana matures, she embarks on a transformative journey that carries her far beyond her island home.

[*The Dragonfly Sea* is a] bildungsroman of Ayaana, her conflicted self, her quest to create an identity, and the various identity shifts she goes through in various turbulent plural cultures. The novel, whose opening setting is Pate Island –a palimpsest of cultures –is an account of the experiences of Ayaana. (Mogire et al., 2022, p. 72)

Owuor (2019) renders these journeys in lush, poetic prose, using the sea as a powerful metaphor for separation and connection, loss and renewal. Through encounters with diverse cultures—from Islamic traditions to Bollywood songs and even a Turkish magnate's son—Ayaana's world expands, revealing the intertwined histories of the Indian Ocean and the hybrid nature of her own identity. This fusion of cultural legacies propels her journey towards China, where she embarks on advanced studies that crystalize the fluidity of the Indian Ocean as a conduit for both cultural fusion and fragmentation. Through Ayaana's journey, Owuor (2019) foregrounds the ocean as a powerful metaphor for the fractured yet intertwined identities forged by colonial histories and postcolonial realities. *The Dragonfly Sea* thus exceeds the contours of an individual coming-of-age narrative; it becomes a meditation on navigating identity in a postcolonial landscape where subjects must negotiate and reconcile overlapping cultural inheritances. The novel underscores the ocean's role as both a literal and symbolic site of exchange, displacement, and memory, capturing the intersections that define Ayaana's search for selfhood. In doing so, it illuminates the ongoing processes of identity formation and the contested meanings of belonging in a world shaped by colonial legacies. "The diasporic writings captures the invariables of diasporas experience, their state of exile and homeland. The diasporas literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities" (Khanal, 2019, p. 130).

"As the colonial imperative in Africa strengthened, however, maps generally began detailing mostly geographical and political regions. Overall, maps became more important to European governments, not just traders or missionaries" (Nock, 2001, para. 15). Postcolonial cartography challenges the presumed neutrality of Western mapmaking, exposing how colonial authority and spatial domination are inscribed into cartographic practices. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, characters' interactions with maps reveal their attempts to situate themselves within cultural and historical terrains shaped by both imperial and postcolonial forces. Far from being objective representations, maps function as potent instruments of omission and erasure. This becomes clear when Ayaana, in a pivotal classroom moment, discovers that her home—Pate Island—has been excluded from the map, underscoring the symbolic violence of cartographic invisibility. The

omission of her island from the map produces a profound sense of erasure, rendering it invisible not only in spatial terms but also within broader cultural narratives. Ayaana's confusion is palpable as she questions, "So she wanted to know about places that could be rendered invisible" (Owuor, 2019, p. 43). This omission is not merely spatial but also emblematic, signaling Africa's historical marginalization within global narratives. Muhidin, who serves as both mentor and adoptive father to Ayaana, offers a corrective perspective by elucidating the often-overlooked geography of the Indian Ocean. He tells her, "The best and biggest mountains of the earth lived under the sea, unseen" (Owuor, 2019, p. 44). Muhidin's statement introduces the idea that not all important histories are visible on the surface. This metaphor suggests that while colonial maps have erased much of the indigenous histories and cultures of the Swahili coast, these histories still persist, albeit submerged beneath the dominant colonial narratives. In this way, Muhidin reframes the map, urging Ayaana to view her homeland through a deeper, more nuanced lens—one that acknowledges both the visible and invisible forces that shape cultural identity.

"Symbolism refers to the use of representational imagery: the writer employs an image with a deeper, non-literal meaning, for the purpose of conveying complex ideas" (Glatch, 2025, para. 3). Owuor (2019) employs recurring symbols to illuminate both the tensions and the generative potential inherent in hybrid identity. The dragonfly—signifying transformation, mobility, and liminality—serves as a central emblem of in-between spaces, embodying the fluidity of belonging and a rejection of rigid boundaries. Rather than framing hybridity as loss or dilution, the text positions it as a creative condition through which Ayaana simultaneously inhabits multiple histories. In this way, Owuor (2019) narrativizes postcolonial theory, illustrating how the hybrid subject resists imposed categories while actively forging new cultural meanings. Dragonflies symbolize the hybrid and migratory nature of identity. She describes the dragonflies as "water-chasing dragonflies with forebears in Northern India" riding the monsoon winds (Owuor, 2019, p. 1), a vivid image that mirrors Ayaana's own movement across cultural and geographic boundaries.

Owuor (2019) also uses the Indian Ocean as a symbol of historical continuity and postcolonial rupture. The Indian Ocean itself functions as the central metaphor: its tides and crosscurrents mirror Ayaana's shifting sense of self as she moves between African, Arab, and Chinese worlds. Long used for colonial trade routes linking East Africa to Europe, India, and the Far East, it becomes in the novel a renaming that reframes African identity within a transnational and decolonized framework. Ayaana's declaration of the ocean as "Ziwa Kuu" (Owuor, 2019, p. 1) reasserts African ownership and disrupts colonial naming practices, transforming the sea from a symbol of Western control into a space of movement, exchange, and connection.

"Postcolonial identity is a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by the aftermath of colonialism. It encapsulates the intricate processes through which individuals and societies navigate the complexities of self-definition amidst the remnants of imperial influence" (D'Cruze, 2023, p. 51). Names carry histories, affiliations, and power relations; they signal attempts to fix or classify fluid subjectivities. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, identifying Ayaana as a "descendant" of Zheng He exemplifies this "naming of hybridity." This label both acknowledges her transoceanic heritage and instrumentalizes it for state agendas, positioning her as a symbolic bridge between Kenya and China. Her given name "Ayaana" evokes African and Islamic resonances, while the new identity imposed in China attempts to fold her into a Sinophone lineage. Owuor (2019) underscores naming as central to postcolonial identity formation: when an Indian classmate invokes colonial naming conventions, claiming "It is not for nothing that the ocean is called Indian" (Owuor, 2019, p. p. 288), Ayaana counters by insisting on the Swahili name "Ziwa

Kuu." This resistance highlights naming as an instrument of power and marks her refusal to accept imposed labels, asserting instead her agency and African heritage. Ayaana's journey extends far beyond physical travel, becoming an emotional and intellectual search for selfhood. Sailing the Indian Ocean and later studying nautical sciences in China, she confronts colonial legacies and the complexities of cultural hybridity. Her Chinese ancestry, initially distant, becomes pivotal as she discovers her lineage as a "Descendant" of Chinese seafarers along the East African coast—an inheritance that complicates her sense of belonging. Both her African roots and Chinese heritage are shaped by imperial histories, and the ocean's fluidity reflects her hybrid, evolving identity. At the same time, Ayaana's experience in China reveals postcolonial power dynamics. The Chinese authorities treat her less as an individual and more as a symbol, using her image in public appearances to project geopolitical influence (Owuor, 2019, p. 269). This objectification underscores the tension between external perceptions and her struggle for self-determination, mirroring the larger postcolonial condition where identity is continuously negotiated under the lingering shadow of imperialism.

Owuor (2019) employs a nonlinear narrative structure to illuminate the postcolonial struggle with historical memory. By interlacing past and present through flashbacks and fragmented storytelling, the novel mirrors the disjointed nature of postcolonial identity, where the past resists full reconciliation with the present. This strategy underscores the enduring effects of colonialism, especially in how history is remembered, reinterpreted, and contested in the postcolonial era. Against this backdrop, the novel critiques any notion of returning to innocence or pre-colonial purity. Ayaana's return to Pate Island is not a retreat to a 'pristine' home but a confrontation with the ruins of her heritage and the legacy of colonization. Owuor (2019) writes, "Muhidin's heart started to ache...as he crisscrossed invisible boundaries that outlined the past, his and the island's" (Owuor, 2019, p. 9). This moment encapsulates the emotional and psychological toll of postcolonial history, where the past is never truly gone but continues to haunt and shape the present.

Owuor (2019) stages postcolonial hybridity not as a simple synthesis but as a site of negotiation, ambivalence, and transformation. "What he did was tilt her head to watch her eyes, to watch them and then to kiss her, biting her lower lip. And then she was crying ... She scratched his face where the fire scar was. He winced, but then laughed and dragged her to her feet" (Owuor, 2019, p. 254). This moment between Ayaana and Lai Jin on the ship marks a turning point in Ayaana's identity. The kiss and subsequent emotions symbolize the shift in Ayaana's internal conflict regarding her cultural identity. This moment of intimacy represents her growing attraction to Lai Jin, as well as the internal struggle between her inherited Chinese lineage and her African roots. It's a moment where cultural hybridity becomes apparent, as Ayaana navigates both her physical and emotional spaces between cultures. Further, Ayaana's emotional turmoil after leaving the ship shows the complexity of her identity shift. "Ayaana walked as one condemned. She ached for a return to life aboard the ship" (Owuor, 2019, p. 259). Her longing for the ship reflects her displacement and identity crisis, highlighting a struggle between her roots and the allure of a wider world, embodying the postcolonial tension of hybridity and divided selfhood.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, the motif of resisting colonial legacies plays a defining role in Ayaana's pursuit of autonomy. Although she initially attempts to accommodate the identity projected onto her by her Chinese benefactors, a growing consciousness of her African heritage prompts her to challenge these external constructs. Through this process, Ayaana reclaims her sense of self and articulates her independence against the backdrop of imposed cultural narrative. Her statement "Everything in time" (Owuor, 2019, p. 270) encapsulates this awakening, reflecting her

increasing defiance of the expectations imposed on her. This rebellious act is a direct confrontation with colonial assimilation, where Ayaana decides to no longer conform to the prescribed identity dictated by her Chinese hosts. It signifies her shift towards self-realization and rejecting external control. Ayaana's experience at the Chinese tea party marks a crucial juncture in her evolving self-awareness and resistance to imposed identities.

Then, four weeks later, she was invited by a classmate to a tea party to find thirty people waiting for her with cameras. Flashes of light, the forced selfies, and the rubbed skin-made her recognize the mere novelty that she was, something to display to family and neighbors. (Owuor, 2019, p. 269)

Ayaana's recognition of being treated as a novelty at a Chinese tea party is a pivotal moment in her rejection of imposed identity. Ayaana recognizes that she is being reduced to an exotic symbol rather than valued as an individual, reflecting Edward Said's and Homi Bhabha's ideas about the colonial construction of the "other." This realization exposes the dehumanizing effects of such objectification and becomes a turning point in her rejection of assimilation, affirming her right to self-definition and autonomy. "Ayaana realizes that she cannot fit into Chinese culture the way her sponsors want" (Owuor, 2019, p. 270). This realization is key in Ayaana's journey towards cultural autonomy. Initially, she believed she could fit into the Chinese mold, but over time, she recognizes the impossibility of this integration. This realization foregrounds the limits of assimilation within postcolonial contexts, where the structures of the dominant culture remain designed to maintain difference even while demanding conformity. Initially, Ayaana internalizes the belief that integration into Chinese society will secure her belonging and social mobility. However, her growing awareness reveals the asymmetrical power relations at play: she is never truly invited as an equal participant but positioned as a cultural outsider whose presence legitimizes the benevolence of the dominant group. This echoes Bhabha's notion of "mimicry," wherein the colonized subject may approximate the colonizer but can never fully become them, remaining "almost the same, but not quite." Ayaana's rejection of this imposed identity thus constitutes an act of decolonial agency, reclaiming her African heritage as the ground of her selfhood. This shift is not merely personal but symbolic of a larger critique of colonial modernity, wherein the demand for assimilation functions as a tool of erasure rather than inclusion.

"In Fanon's view the colonized has the ability to resist the cultural supremacy of Europe" (Sawant, 2012, p. 124). In Africa "Ayaana swallowed her food unafraid " (Owuor, 2019, p. 271). Ayaana's act of "swallowing her food unafraid" (Owuor, 2019, p. 271) operates as far more than a mundane gesture; it becomes a profound metaphor for self-possession, decolonial resistance, and cultural reclamation. Within postcolonial frameworks, food and eating are often read as sites where power, identity, and memory converge. In earlier scenes in China, Ayaana's discomfort around food signifies not only her displacement but also the internalization of the host society's scrutiny and disciplinary gaze. In contrast, Ayaana's return to Pate and her unguarded act of eating mark a renewed sense of belonging, a corporeal affirmation of identity within her indigenous cultural context. This moment reflects Fanon's (2008) conception of the "colonized body" as both an object of surveillance and assimilation and a potential locus of defiance and reclamation. What appears as an everyday gesture thus acquires a postcolonial dimension: Ayaana rejects externally imposed norms and reclaims her agency through a practice steeped in collective memory, cultural continuity, and pride in her African heritage.

Conclusion

This research has shown that *The Dragonfly Sea* displaces conventional, land-bound models of migration by recasting immigration as an oceanic practice shaped by currents of kinship, history,

and power. Through Ayaana's journey from Pate Island to China, Owuor (2019) dramatizes the competing forces of heritage, surveillance, and cultural translation that contour migrant subjectivities in the twenty-first century. The novel critiques the institutional branding of identity—its conversion into both privilege and burden—while affirming the enduring agency of individuals who navigate these systems. Owuor's (2019) narrative also draws attention to the gendered and embodied aspects of mobility, challenging the policy-driven abstractions that dominate migration discourse. By foregrounding multilingualism, ritual, and memory, *The Dragonfly Sea* offers an alternative map of belonging, one that privileges movement, relationality, and resistance over fixed borders and categories.

Taken together, these findings position Owuor's (2019) work as a critical intervention in postcolonial and migration studies. Her Indian Ocean framework not only provincializes Euro-Atlantic migration narratives but also illuminates the deep histories of exchange linking East Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In turning the sea into a method, Owuor (2019) offers readers a conceptual and ethical toolkit for rethinking how citizenship, heritage, and mobility operate in an interconnected world. This oceanic approach reframes immigration as a dynamic, negotiated process and opens space for imagining more fluid and humane futures for displaced and mobile communities.

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