



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Oceanic space and marine ecosystems as ecological agents in Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, studies in ecocriticism carried out within the African literature field have focused mainly on the terrestrial landscapes as well as the petrochemical environment. This has resulted in the oceanic ecosystems of the East African Coast being ignored and understudied. This paper analyzes the representation of the oceanic space and the marine ecosystem in the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Owuor (2019) as ecological entities. Developed based on the theoretical framework of the Blue Ecocriticism, the study has a qualitative and interpretivist analytical study design, with a focus on close readings and thematic content analysis. The findings show that Owuor upends the conventional literary depiction of the ocean as a passive natural setting, portraying the Western Indian Ocean instead as an interrogative and challenging ecological force. The ocean's agency is evidenced by its temporal nature through monsoon cycles, ontological insights derived from storms, and independent migratory processes of the sea's marine and avian inhabitants. Moreover, littoral ecosystems are framed as living infrastructure and the ocean's floor as an active archive of sunken historical memories. This study concludes that *The Dragonfly Sea* expands the geographical and cultural range of Blue Ecocriticism by emphasizing Swahili oceanic ecology, thus placing East African literature into the larger global context of blue ecocritical discourses.

KEYWORDS: *The Dragonfly Sea*, blue ecocriticism, ecological agency, Indian Ocean, Swahili Coast, environmental consciousness

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1.0 Introduction

Ecocriticism emerged at the end of the twentieth century under the assumption that literature reflects the nature as well as impacts the way society perceives and interacts with it (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Key foundational writings in this discipline asserted that the analysis of literature should take into consideration the human interaction not only within their social setting but within their ecologies as well (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Nevertheless, early work in the subject developed a strongly terrestrial tilt, giving pre-eminence to terrestrial landscapes as the major location of ecological interest and questions, and systematically disregarding aquatic and marine ecologies (Mentz, 2009; Dobrin, 2021).

Ecocritical inquiry as it has evolved in the African literary studies has followed global trends which echo both with, and against (Adeniyi & Ngozika, 2023). African ecocriticism puts much emphasis on the convergence of the environment degradation and the postcolonial extraction, as it is aware of the socio-ecological historical conditions of the continent (Adeniyi & Ngozika, 2023). The petro-ecology of inland waterways and the Niger Delta, more specifically, has spawned a now established scholarly practice in West African literature (Ogungbemi, 2024). This has resulted in an overemphasis on these terrestrial and petrochemical environments by African ecocriticism to the detriment of oceanic and coastal environment, especially the East African Indian Ocean coast (Ogungbemi, 2024).

The Kenyan coast is a very diverse ecosystem and the hub of Swahili civilization that might be hundreds of years old (Ochiewo et al., 2021). Today, it is being exposed to the strains of climate change, resource exploitation, as well as geopolitical infrastructural development (Ochiewo et al., 2021; Ibrilim, 2024). The marine aspects of the Kenyan environmental literature have not received much critical attention in spite of their ecological and cultural importance. The novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Owuor (2019) explicitly addresses such spaces and ecologies of the Indian Ocean coasts. The current field of research on the novel has focused on the issues of identity, migration, transnationalism, and postcolonial belonging rather than on its deep ecological nature (Ibrilim, 2024). This study has carried out a blue ecocritical reading of *The Dragonfly Sea*, and thus investigated the representation of the environment in Owuor's oceanic narratives and its attempt to raise environmental consciousness in the Indian Ocean region.

2.0 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is based on the concept of Blue Ecocriticism, a sub-field within the field of ecocriticism which shifts the focus of the critical analysis from terrestrial landscapes to oceans and aquatic spaces. This blue turn was strongly advocated by scholars such as Mentz (2009) who noted the inherent imbalance in ecological studies where the oceans, despite being the dominant feature of the earth's surface, were systematically overlooked. Mentz (2009) suggested that oceans needed to be treated as major ecological topics warranting critical consideration over time, and no longer as background scenery.

Following in this footprint, Sidney Dobrin (2021) added another layer to the concept of Blue Ecocriticism and hypothesized that water bodies are dynamic ecological and cultural actors that define the human experience, identity, and ethical principles related to the environment. Further, Oppermann (2016, 2023) embodied the idea of material ecocriticism, according to which matter, such as water, is an agentic force that entwines in the creation of narrative meaning and the emergence of environmental consciousness. In this study, Blue Ecocriticism is applied to comprehend the manner in which *The Dragonfly Sea* portrays Indian Ocean as an active agent that shapes human actions.

Literary research around the world has provided solid approaches to the study of the marine ecosystem. In his idea of the *Thalassocene*, Mentz (2015) states that the sea is an ecological power that challenges and transforms the human subjects it interacts with, and operates at its best as a realm of "explosive fragmentation" where an overpowering materiality destabilizes conventional human ways of understanding. This idea is further complemented by Stacy Alaimo (2016), who uses the approach of trans-corporeality to present the sea as an active realm that constructs the human body, possessing its own "material agency" and ontological worth.

Furthermore, DeLoughrey (2017) notes a paradigmatic turn to oceanic submersion and large expanses of submerged space as ontologically real places, with the emergence of submarine aesthetics as a concept. This kind of aesthetics focuses on the hidden violence of the marine ecosystem crisis through a shift from the concern with surface movement to the deeper truth. From the perspective of non-human existence, some theorists such as Seibel (2024) have called for representations that recognize the independent existence, interiority, and otherness of the marine species, refusing to reduce them to mere symbols, resources, or human projections.

However, even though these are significant theoretical developments, African waterscapes continue to be ignored in this debate. As observed by Schulze-Engler (2023), it could be argued that *The Dragonfly Sea* is actually the

first African novel to consider the Indian Ocean not just as an entity of imperial domination, but rather as a multipolar, cosmopolitan and ecological 'Afrasian Sea'. Nevertheless, the geopolitical approach of Schulze-Engler ignores one important aspect related to the Indian Ocean, which is its life as a marine ecosystem. This study bridges this gap through a thorough examination of the ocean's biological, physical, and sensory agency in Owuor's text.

3.0 Research Design and Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research strategy on a backdrop of an interpretivist philosophical paradigm. The interpretivism approach supposes the construction of reality using language, narrative, and representation and believes that knowledge is co-created during a researcher and a text interaction, which is an interpretative act (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This approach fits ideally with the literary analysis, where the aim is to make sense of the multifaceted meanings of texts, and not quantify measurable phenomena.

An analytical research design was employed for a careful analysis of the text to enable the generation of theoretical inferences without involving any manipulation of human subjects. The novel, *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), was chosen as the only primary text using non-probability purposive sampling since the text involves the Indian Ocean as a complex environment and makes use of literary elements to illustrate environmental consciousness. *Dust* (2014) by Owuor was excluded due to its terrestrial focus.

Data was collected through close reading and critical content analysis. Close reading emphasized reading on the language, images, and style of the text and content analysis organized recurrent ecological motifs like tides, storms, and nonhuman life in systematic categories. The thematic analysis was followed by the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase analysis approach whereby the data was repeatedly read, initial codes were generated, the subsets of enunciated codes were clustered in broad themes that corresponded to the concept of Blue Ecocriticism, and the broad themes were narrowed down to be presentable.

4.0 Results and Discussion: Oceanic Space and Marine Ecosystems as Ecological Agents

Contextual analysis of *The Dragonfly Sea* shows a conscious literature initiative to decentre human dominance and make the Western Indian Ocean an active, interrogative, and shaping ecological being. The results are grouped under various unique forms of ecological agency, beyond the ocean as a situational context to demonstrate it as a constituent force in the narrative.

4.1 The Ocean as an Interrogative Agentic Force

Endowing the sea with an untranslated interrogative voice is one of the most vivid narrative effects used by Owuor in order to create oceanic agency. At several pivotal points within the novel, the ocean speaks to the main character, Ayaana, with the Mandarin phrase: "Ni shi shei?" (Who are you?) (Owuor, 2019, p. 241). This question surfaces during a life-threatening shipboard storm, in the aftermath of an intimate encounter with the Chinese captain Lai Jin, and when Ayaana first stands on the deck heading to Xiamen.

By endowing the sea with a voice of inquiry, Owuor achieves a radical dislocation of the conventional literary balance in which humans view the world and interpret the expressionless and passive space. The sea does not passively accept the human subject, but rather it disturbs her. This technology makes practical the tenet by Dobrin (2021) that water bodies are dynamic cultural participants that make human identity. Ayaana is constantly in the process of identity crisis, dramatised through her naming changes (Ayaana, Abeerah, Haiyan) and her geographical vacillation between Pate Island, China, and Turkey, and is performed as an open and unresolved conversation with a marine world that will never allow her to settle into a fixed, terrestrial identity (Owuor, 2019). This finding shows that the waters of the Swahili coast are as agentic as Blue Ecocriticism traditionally grants the Atlantic or the northern Indian ocean. It establishes the fact that the ocean in this text is a completely agentic space, combating the terrestrial bias of the current literature and demonstrating that Owuor considers the sea as a living ecosystem, but not just the symbol of a particular geopolitical power.

4.2 Monsoonal Temporality and Ecological Forces

The novel transcends scene-setting of atmospheric scene by describing the annual monsoon winds of the Western Indian Ocean the kaskazi, the kusi and the matlai as powerful agents of nature that determine human behavior. These winds play the roles of structuring factors in the story. The novel starts with the matlai wind, which carries dragonflies, and in its turn, a dhow with a stranger on board who arrives at the Nanjing shores and finds himself on the shores of Pate (Owuor, 2019, p. 17). The coming to the island is clearly portrayed as not a matter of human will but rather a matter of the right time of the wind. Likewise, not only human, but also

nonhuman paths are determined by the seasonal winds: the kusi takes care of the Chinese delegation arrival and the coastal rains, the matlai and kaskazi winds predict when the dragonflies will fly and the abrupt, state-sanctioned abduction of Ziriya Raamis, who is captured as dragonflies are about to ‘catch the tail end of the kaskazi’ (Owuor, 2019, p. 144).

Even state violence is brought to heel by these ecological calendars, the abduction of the character Ziriya is carried out in the ecological season of the matlai and kaskazi, and human political action is enrolled beneath the ecological calendar that determines migration. Moreover, the dependence of meteorological reality of the community is also indicated by the radio that the boat builder Fundi Mehdi carries around, always set to weather and tidal updates. The intermittent intertwining of tide and wind stories in situation where the narrative is most at stake propels the atmosphere to a level of plot actors. This is perfectly in line with the material ecocritical tenet of Oppermann (2016): the flowing air and water masses of the novel are not just details of the atmosphere but agentic and organize the meaning of the narrative, who comes, who leaves, and at which time.

4.3 Storms as Sites of Revelation and Crisis

The destructive and revelatory forces of the ocean are anchored by two key storm moments: a crippling storm on the shipboard that is about to take the life away of Ayaana and the historic 2004 Boxing Day disaster tsunami that sweeps away Ziriya to the sea (Owuor, 2019). Owuor uses a poetics of immersion, as opposed to observational distance, in composing these episodes. The events of Ayaana’s near-drowning are told in a series of fragmentary sensorial perception and echo the Mentz (2015) idea of the explosive fragmentation where the sheer materiality of the ocean violently cracks and restructures the human body instead of being a simple exterior threat.

Significantly, these storms are not portrayed as the instances of utter destruction, but as the locations of great ecological discovery. After the shipboard storm, Ayaana idealizes the duality of the sea as good and bad, recollecting her childhood teacher Muhidin, explaining that the answer to each idea lies simply in storms. The tsunami, on the other hand, is revealed retrospectively, highlighting the fact that the human mind did not comprehend the ecological signals: the echo of 250,000 screaming people who did not understand the withdrawal of the ocean (Owuor, 2019, p. 130). These storms work in scaled down versions: the storm of the shipboard takes place on the individual body at the scale of the most extreme proximity, and the tsunami takes place on the scale of civilization, revealing the historic susceptibility of people living near the coastlines to an ocean which does not respect national borders. This dual representation puts the storm as the most understandable though violent form of address on the part of the ocean, which serves as an event to be caught up in and a crisis to come.

4.4 Nonhuman Marine Life as Ecological Agents

One of the pillars of the environmental consciousness in the text is its rejection of anthropomorphization of nonhuman life. The dragonfly (kereng’ende), the first dragonfly to appear on the very first page of the novel, works to a migratory agenda that is solely independent of the human plot. It comes on the matlai wind and is named in many languages because no single human language can adequately capture it (Owuor, 2019, p. 31). Later in the story in a scenario where the dragonflies take refuge on a storm-tossed vessel, Ayaana acknowledges that the insects “won’t stay,” expressly denying the notion of an inherent ownership of the human vessels or human sensemaking (Owuor, 2019, p. 17). The dragonfly itself is placed at structural turning points within the life of Ayaana, but they are an independent ecological agent, who challenge the traditional literary norm of being an allegorical reflection of a human diasporic movement.

In the same way, marine animals, like the coelacanth, dolphins, and the ortolan bunting are portrayed with inherent evolutionary respect. When a prehistoric coelacanth has been caught downstream, Muhidin stands against gawking, superstition of the villagers, labeling it by the local name (kisukuku) and insisting that it be released because it was an ancient creature (Owuor, 2019, p. 33). Muhidin does not see a dolphin as a symbol, he sees a dolphin in independent action which is observed silently and tenderly (Owuor, 2019). That terrible seizing of the ortolan bunting causes Ayaana to feel nauseous and gives the ecological ethics of the text an extension to littoral bird life playing at the edges of the marine environment. In demanding the interiority and independent reality of these creatures, Owuor fulfils Seibel (2024) demand that literature must be ecologically responsible, concerned with preserving the wholeness of nonhuman life, in contrast to portraying it as a resource to be consumed, a symbol of human anxiety.

4.5 Submarine Aesthetics and the Ocean as Archive

Frequently, Ayaana dives into the ocean as a means to demonstrate environmental consciousness in terms of her feelings and actions. Underwater, Ayaana undergoes what she refers to as “time-dissolving floating,” that point where she does not try to define or understand the world around her anymore and “feels, senses, experiences” (Owuor, 2019, p. 36). In the water, the barrier between her internal self and the water in which she is submerged ceases to exist; she turns into “a space [that] had no gaps in the ocean, no distances between beings” (Owuor, 2019, p. 153). In essence, this is the submarine aesthetics described by DeLoughrey, only Owuor takes the concept deeper into the mind and emotions of the characters. The depths of the ocean turn out to be therapeutic to Ayaana, allowing her to grieve, recover from sexual trauma, and culturally relocate. The ocean is able to heal Ayaana and actively participates in reconstructing her identity.

The ocean and its coastlines are considered living components of the world and usable archives. For example, the houses made of coral stone in Pate are said to be “sprouting from the coral of the land” in the same way nature has created rocks (Owuor, 2019, p. 486). The mangrove forests serve as birthplaces and also are used as important and protective social spaces. In the water, the seabed becomes the largest non-human archive of culture and history. The main idea of the novel, introduced through the example of the 15th-century wreckage of the Ming fleet commanded by Admiral Zheng He, demonstrates that the ocean contains histories which cannot be found in land-based archives (Owuor, 2019). Muhidin’s statement that “the best and biggest mountains of the earth” are underwater reflects the ocean’s character as an active repository of history (Owuor, 2019, p. 64). The ocean holds its memory independently, and this is not limited by the political competition of the modern states.

4.6 Ecological Vulnerability and Extractive Violence

As Owuor points out the great agency of the ocean, she does not conceal its susceptibility to contemporary seaward capitalist exploitation. The text directly addresses marine degradation, basing it on identifiable economic agents and political apathy, as opposed to abstract climate apprehension. An acute ecological crisis is witnessed through a visceral event whereby the crew of the MV Qingrui find a bleeding shipping container when storming. Inside are the slaughtered bodies of hundreds of trafficked African animals—lions, pangolins, and elephant ivory, falsely labeled as “Scrap Metal” (Owuor, 2019, p. 298). The fact that Ayaana is physically disgusted with such desecration highlights how expensive this extraction can be on the environment all around the world.

Such acute violence is coupled with chronic degradation. The narrator adds how the migrating yellowfin tuna and marlin were vacuumed up by international sea bottom trawlers of most of the world, draining fish stocks and leaving the local fishermen with scraps (Owuor, 2019, p. 44). This environmental decline is directly attributed in the text to political inattention of the post-independence Kenyan government. The novel fulfills the empirical evidence described by Ochiewo et al. (2021) on the socioeconomic effects of marine degradation on the populations of Kenyan coastal regions by dramatizing how these factors are intertwined in political governance and ecological health. Owuor shows how, even with its tremendous agency, the Indian Ocean is very vulnerable to the compounding violence of trawling by wildlife and multinational corporations.

5.0 Conclusion

This study shows that the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Owuor is an excellent conceptualization of oceanic space and marine ecosystems as dynamic, and the creators of ecology. The novel breaks the anthropocentric paradigm which makes the environment a mere backdrop. Rather, the Western Indian Ocean appears as a powerful force that challenges human objects, regulates time by using monsoonal winds, and uses storms as means of ontological disturbance and discovery. This ecological awareness is further supported by the independent, non-symbolic representation of marine and avian life in the novel and by the ocean as a repository of historical memory and a place of psychological healing. Simultaneously, the novel bases this agency on the bleakness of environmental vulnerability, making a direct criticism of the extractive nature of global trawling and poaching of wildlife facilitated by political laxity. Using the principles of blue ecocriticism to the Swahili coast, this study demonstrates that the work by Owuor expands the geographical and cultural boundaries of environmental humanities. It corrects the historical terrestrial bias of African ecocriticism and shifts blue ecocritical discourse out of its customary focus on the Atlantic and northern Indian Oceans. *The Dragonfly Sea* is, therefore, a pioneering African sea text, which confirms that Swahili maritime ecology has a multi-dimensional, agentic reality that cannot be ignored in discussions about ecological ethics, vulnerability, and relationality between human beings and the ocean.

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