

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Contesting Notions of Cultural Purity: Analysis of Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*

Lwoba Millicent Ayesa

MA Student, Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies,
Maseno University, Kenya

Catherine Muhoma

Professor, Department of Literature, Linguistics and Literary Studies,
Maseno University, Kenya

Pamela Odhacha

Lecturer, Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies,
Maseno University, Kenya

Abstract:

There is usually a pronounced tendency to venerate one's ethnic or communal culture and to abominate any perceived intrusions of other people's cultures. Trumpeting the pristineness of communal roots, traditionalists spread the belief in the mythic purity of their past and the intolerance of anyone or anything foreign that threatens its further existence. They feel duty-bound to protect the traditional culture from foreign influences. They do not appreciate mixed ethnic and cultural heritage; they think of themselves as pure in their ethnic and cultural origins. They are not open to borrowing foreign ideas and institutions that are considered the basis of contemporary cultures. Yet, there is always a masked recognition of mixed heritage. Cultural debates cannot be divorced from foreign influences. This study explores the contestation of the notions of cultural purity in Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*. Through the construction of narratives of experience, the lived and told stories re-imagined in the two literary works emphasize the diversity of cultural identities that are negotiated within personal, historical, and situational contexts. The study acknowledges that literature is a mirror of society, and contemporary literary works not only provide a lens through which the question of cultural construction can be understood. This study examines Yvonne Owuor's two novels to explore her representation of these post-colonial debates on cultural purity. The objective of this study is to demonstrate how notions of cultural purity are contested in *Dust* and *Dragonfly Sea*. The study employs the post-colonial literary theory. The main characters' experiences in Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* demonstrate that cultural purity is a mirage. The phrase 'cultural purity' is in itself oxymoronic. No culture can be divorced completely from other cultures. A culture contains many influences from other cultures. Even that which is considered a traditional or single culture has adopted a trait or practice from another in the past. Resistance to change, as exhibited in some traditional cultures emanating from the fear of extinction, are misgivings that hardly last for long. These so-called traditional cultures do not lose all their characteristics; rather, they borrow things from other cultures and evolve to accommodate new realities. The results of this study will be particularly significant because it will serve as a key reference point for post-colonial scholars with biases towards cultural fluidity.

Keywords: Cultural purity, fluidity, contested notions, colonized, colonizer, post-colonial theory, imperialism, Occidentalism and Orientalism

1. Introduction

Cultural purity refers to the idea that culture should remain unchanged and free from external influences or the notion that a people's way of life is structured in such a way that it maintains its original customs, traditions, and values. This cultural perspective often stems from a desire to preserve a particular (communal, ethnic, or national) heritage in the context of globalization, human interaction, and the attendant cultural mix that ensues. As such, cultural purity is a controversial concept. It is believed that cultures naturally evolve through interactions, exchanges, and adaptations. This is contributed by the exchange of language, mode of dressing, food, intermarriage and even education, and this is just but to mention a few. Efforts to maintain cultural purity can sometimes lead to exclusionary or xenophobic attitudes, as they may resist the diversity and dynamism that characterize human societies. In Yvonne Owuor's novels *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*, this concept is contested. The two novels appear to dichotomize cultural purity and cultural mixing. There is so much controversy around the idea of cultural purity. Whereas some strive so hard to ensure that culture remains pure, they find it difficult to resist the consequences of their interaction with other cultures, which culminates in mixed cultures.

Shared communal values and historical experiences play a significant role in the development of a cultural entity. Hall (1994) elaborates on his concept of 'being and becoming.' The concept of 'being' refers to the origin and similarities

among a community of people. He also acknowledges the role of present negotiation, which he refers to as 'a process of becoming.' Both 'being' and 'becoming' conjointly recreate cultural identity. Cultural identities 'come from somewhere, have histories... they undergo constant transformation [and far] from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' (Hall, 1994, p. 225). Unlike Bhabha (1994), Hall insists on the role of origin in the negotiation of cultural identity. The origin of an individual, or what Frenkel (2008) regards as the 'nationally embedded unit,' plays a crucial role in shaping the self-perception and perception of other people. Furthermore, Bhabha (1990) argues that it is the space of ambiguity, uncertainty and the renunciation of colonial authority and deconstructs the authentic and essentialist oppositional polarities. Bhabha (1990) posits, "The psychic and cultural fault-lines which are generated around and constantly threaten, any simple 'black-and-white' distinction between two conventional parties to the colonial relationship."

2. Contested Notions of Cultural Purity: Analysis of Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*

In Owuor's *Dust*, the main characters appear determined to preserve their cultural purity in the face of uncertainty after the post-election violence. Ajany, for instance, strives so hard to ensure she remembers the ways of her people after her return from Brazil. While the characters in this text seemingly aspire to maintain the purity of their traditional cultures, changes in social circumstances they are exposed to make it difficult, almost impossible, for them to do so, even with the best of intentions. 'Different selves 'rip each other' to find spaces in their temporary location, ... tension arising from this confrontation forces the [individuals] to lose a 'piece' of themselves' (Wangari, Oketch & Ouno, 2022, p. 66). In this story are people of many provenances: Turkana, Luo from the south, Somali herdsmen and traders, an Eritrean police officer, an intelligence officer originally from Mombasa, an Indian shopkeeper, missionaries, Ajany's Brazilian boyfriend and an English colonial police officer. All these characters play significant roles in the development of the plot.

In Nyipir's culture, naming is a significant ritual for cultural preservation. When a child is born, it has to be given a name. This name then becomes the basis of its identity. It gives the child a sense of belonging. In *Dust*, Nyipir does this for his son. In his case, he does this so that the family name is not lost. In Nyipir's community, the male children bear this cultural responsibility. One needs a son to preserve the cultural purity of his people. A son, unlike a daughter who can be married to a different community, follows his father's footsteps and maintains the family tradition. Having a male child who would continue the lineage of the family is a great privilege. Nyipir's devastation as a result of his son's death can be understood in this context. In a desultory talk between father and daughter, Nyipir says, 'I named him. ...Your brother, Ebewesit. Akai's father — she expected that. Oganda so our name would outlive us' (Owuor, 2014, p. 42). The young man's death puts the family's lineage in jeopardy. The Oganda family cannot escape the Occidental ghosts of colonialism and their attendant cultural imperialism. The Oganda family portrait is a symbol of the subjugating nature of colonial cultural dominion: the family is arranged in a manner likely to suggest it is 'facing a firing squad.' This story is set in Turkana, yet neither Nyipir nor Oganda is from this community. Besides, their homestead – a colonial relic – is slowly crumbling down, signifying the disintegration of Occidental imperialism.

Nyipir's nostalgia for lost traditional values indicates that things have changed. There was a time when honour came from loyalty and a guarantee that one would be safe, a time when a brother got his sister's back and vice versa, so did the mother, and no one would be silent if a vice was committed against the other. Nyipir yearns for these days because he feels life is no longer valued, and nobody is ready to speak out, especially against social vices. It is unfortunate that a brother betrays a brother, and the same goes for a family; family loyalty is lost. Nyipir yearns for the lost communal traditions, which emphasized such practices as oath-taking. Any person who took an oath understood what it meant and always stood by it. The narrator observes Nyipir's 'mind tumbles back to a different time, when brother, son, mother, and father sealed family members in rooms and huts and set these alight in honour of covenants of terror that guaranteed silence: If I speak, may the oath kill me. Much later, the horror was painted over and replaced with myths of triumph, repeated, repeated again, and then adorned in all seasons of retelling. Nyipir waited for the inheritors of these silences to call out the names of their undead dead' (Owuor, 2014, p. 76).

The folkloristic wisdom of a community is always handed down from one generation to the next by someone. The purity of what this person conveyed is questionable as the form and content of these oral traditions are bound to be (re)packaged differently. The cultural meanings that individual members of the so-called pure societies derive from these traditions are bound to vary significantly. The storyteller has to be very resourceful to safeguard the original contents of the cultural information that they convey, a quality that may be as exceptional as it may be unrealizable. In Owuor's *Dust*, this burden is borne by the trader. This makes sense because these traders always interact with different people as they move along the trade routes. The narrator says this of the trader and his first encounter with Nyipir:

"The Trader is a gatherer and carrier of stories. He collects secrets, a source of income, and a pleasurable economy. He cannot endure not knowing. Every memory, even borrowed ones, is his. Sometimes, he distributes these when he needs to, and always for a profit. The Trader trades in names but never with his. Misery had brought Nyipir to the Trader in 1970. Over fourteen lucent nights, the Trader had sung soft songs to return the right rhythm to Nyipir's heartbeat and then convinced Nyipir's soul to trust human life again, explaining that what had happened was not Nyipir's fault. Afterwards, the Trader took names Nyipir had known and written and made him recite these until they became soft to the taste, which meant that Nyipir was no longer indebted to the disappeared." (Owuor, 2014, p.76)

The Trader has a sharp memory, for he ensures that Nyipir does not forget even those who were there before him. That he carries out a significant role in cultural transmission is not in doubt. He is a principal cog in the cultural transmission wheel, and it appears that everyone needs such a person. This trader has to possess the intellectual hindsight

that facilitates the sifting of cultural information. One cannot preserve what one does not know; therefore, one has to treasure the people who pass traditional knowledge on to oneself. It is from stories that they get the pieces of information they need to educate the generations that will always come.

Nyipir narrates this story to foreground the importance of preserving old ways and what it means to lead a bold traditional life and defy contemporaneity. Boys and sons in modern societies prefer to sit in silence because of fear. It would please him if these boys upheld their history and customary practices, a possible return to what Armah (1973) regards as 'the way.' Owuor, in this way, pits the community's past against 'Western [Occidental] progressive thought and evolutionary ethics, which [spawns] Western historicism and [legitimizes] imperialism' (Guendouzi, 2017, p. 566). Nyipir advocates for the retention of traditional cultural heritage and the maintenance of its originality:

We were as young as our generation could be in the sad season after the war when we met. We eloped eleven days later, certain, in the way of fools, that we had been created for one another. We sought adventure in blank-slate kingdoms where we owned the rules and would remake a country in our image. Your generation, son, so easily discards the burdens of history and its mind-the-gap strictures. For us, leaving was a bold act, and we left England with its weary nostalgia for a past that had been burned to ash with our far too many war dead. Hugh and I skipped into a ship that was heading out to the Kenya Colony ... (Owuor, 2014, p. 82)

When one is exposed to a new culture, they almost automatically adapt to a new way of life. When Hugh travels to Kenya, a new opportunity for exploration opens up. He does not hold back; this new location allows him to interact with multiple cultures within Kenya. To survive in this environment, he cannot continue to uphold the values that he had cherished before coming to Kenya. He, for instance, finds poaching an interesting game and an economic activity in Kenya. Whereas this practice contradicts his respect for animal life, he enters the gaming fray and somehow enjoys the experience. Dimensions of cultural flows, as argued by Appadurai (1996), 'are [presented in this novel as] deeply perspectival constructs, influenced by the linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors' (p. 33). Whether or not traditional cultures in Kenya Orientalise Hugh's is debatable, but claims of cultural purity are untenable in this context as the narrator observes: 'The tempest unshackled Hugh, and he roamed deeper territories. Safari after safari and an assortment of guns entered the house, as did a parade of slaughtered creatures — heads, skins, tusks. All those things they had never needed until they came to Kenya' (Owuor, 2014, p. 86). The purity of the traditional cultures of both the host and the hosted is ruptured.

The idea of coming back to one's home always breeds a certain feeling of relief from the discomfort in a foreign cultural environment, some homeliness. Selene, for example, feels at home because of the idea of changing the cultural environment. Kenya, in this case, is her home. This experience is dear to her as she realizes she has missed this place. She explores every aspect of culture that comes her way; everything seems new to her. The Kenyan history is very important to her, but she has to take time to reconnect with her past. In this process of reconnection, the pristineness of a natural interaction is no longer achievable. That she is so in love with her country, Kenya, is obvious, but things have significantly changed: 'So, Selene returned to Kenya in tears, just as the Nandi flame trees were in crimson blossom. Outbreak of luxuriant redness; Spathodea campanulata in glory. She reached her Naivasha gates under the light of a dry-season full moon' (Owuor, 2014, p. 88). Discussions centre on aspects Kenyan history and culture: the new favourite topic dinner topic is 'Mau Mau,' the subtheme is 'kiapo – the oath, the covenant,' the fears are 'the death of the European' and 'requiem for an ideal,' and the unspoken is the possible 'loss of a nation, nowhere to go,' 'crop fires' and 'Hugh's perfect plans for the perfect country where they could live out perfect lives [is threatened]. Mau Mau. Acrid fear' (Owuor, 2014, p. 89).

Culture naturally evolves through interactions. These interactions are manifest in different aspects, such as language, travel, and exposure in the general sense. Ajany is exposed to a different culture when she goes out of Kenya; consequently, she has to contend with a cultural mix. When she comes back to her country, she realizes that most of the things are still the way they were twenty years ago. The languages that she once used are the same ones being used. The narrator observes: 'The same potholed sliver of road that had rattled Ajany's body almost twenty years ago does so again, the same kind of policeman manning inconvenient roadblocks, waylaying wayfarers. Travel companions still reek of rancid butter, the desert's special sweat. Pulse of language — Kiswahili for trade, English sports, and fifteen murmured dialects — this was how they crossed worlds' (Owuor, 2014, p. 106). Though everything seems to be as it was, Ajany has to re-integrate herself into this society. Everything, it would appear, is 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86).

Traditional customs are observed to the letter in societies that are perceived to be culturally pure. Life is precious even after death. The bond between the living and the dead cannot be easily severed. Burial rituals are considered as important cultural aspects that need to be preserved. These burial customs tend to vary from one community to the other. Zaman, for instance, is a Muslim, and in Islam, burial customs are different from those performed by Christians. Burial rites are performed in Zaman's absence in a bid to uphold cultural purity: 'And he told Zaman the truth. In keeping with burial customs, all bodies were buried just before sunset. The prayer man said, 'It is God's will.' He told Zaman that they would all meet in paradise, thanks be to God. He said they were in a better place.' (Owuor, 2014, p.113)

Dust also explores the possibility of maintaining a non-physical cultural contact. Persons who live outside their traditional locations can still establish contact with their close family members. All they need, as suggested in this novel, is something that will always get them back on the right cultural path whenever they seem to be losing it. Such objects as bracelets can serve as symbolic sites for reconnection with their families. When Ajany gets hold of the Kenyan flag with some writings, she stares. Opirr's explanation for keeping it is that it is a constant reminder of where he belongs and the desire to ensure it remains that way. He wants to preserve his identity as a Kenyan. The narrator notes:

"But it is a silver-edged, elegantly inscribed framed text, beneath which a small square of the Kenya flag is glued, on which Ajany focuses. She reads: 'I heard my country calling, away across the sea, across the waste

of waters she calls and calls to me ... I haste to thee my mother, a son among thy sons.' Opirr follows her gaze. 'A reminder, for when I forget'" (Owuor, 2014, p.123).

Those individuals' beliefs and character change further casts doubt on the question of cultural purity. As times change, people strive to find new ways of fitting in new cultural spaces. These changes impact the purity of traditional customs. It eventually becomes difficult to preserve that which may not be relevant to the changes in the society. In Owuor's *Dust*, the reaction of the kiosk man is a typical example of the problematic nature of cultural preservation. The kiosk man snaps, 'Ati, Mluyia!' Like most citizens, he is now careful about small, unconsidered talk. New sensitivities. His cultural roots had not mattered before the chaos — not in the city. Now, most citizens understated ethnic roots, overemphasizing Kenyan-ness in brash Kiswahili and even louder English. Renegotiating belonging, desperate faith in One Kenya' (Owuor, 2014, p. 164). Claims of pure cultural roots are only voiced for political convenience. The fear of losing the Kenyan nation, it appears, forces citizens to make cultural pronouncements that are not anchored on hypocrisy.

When emerging cultures are perceived to be retrogressive and poisonous, parents always want to protect their children from anything that can corrupt them. It is on such basis that a return to what Armah (1973) calls 'the way' is aggressively advocated for. When Kenya's cultural purity is purportedly stained with violence, and people do not feel the sense of security that once existed, some begin to yearn for a different cultural space. Petrus, for instance, says this to Ali:

"[Let] us go back to England, for the children's sake. There's nothing here for us. These people are only good for shouting, killing, and dying. That's all they know." (Owuor, 2014, p. 201)

In Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, the concept of cultural purity can be discussed through the experiences of various key characters in the text, such as Ayaana, the protagonist, Munira and Muhidin. In this novel, just like *Dust*, Owuor problematizes notions of cultural purity. The story revolves, on the one hand, around characters that are in conflict with themselves. As they try to preserve their culture, they fight so hard to resist the winds of change around them. On the other hand, there are characters that are perfectly adapting to the new changes. This set of characters acknowledges that culture is something that keeps changing with time. As they interact with others, they gradually embrace their way of life, and, in this process, new cultural experiences are adapted, and traditions are dismantled.

Communities also identify themselves by the food they eat. The presumption here is that there are traditional foodstuffs that define ancient cultures. This cultural aspect is canvassed in Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*. Through Muhidin, the spicy food of coastal people is painted in the readers' minds. The Swahili way of greeting, pleasantries as it were, and mode of dressing are also depicted in this novel. Vivid images of 'the single fluttering gaze and bracelet – tinkling seduction perfect here,' 'food smells,' Muhidin's inhalation of 'biryani, pilau, coconut-flavoured aromas; chutney, pickles, yoghurt, peppers, *mbaazi*, and *mahamri*; custard apple and avocado juice offered by a baby-faced vendor' pervade the novel. 'Shikamoo,' a pigtailed girl said in greeting as she curtsies before an older rotund man dressed in a gleaming white *kanzu*; 'Kiswahili cadence and ubiquitous whispers, reggae by Bob Marley and Peter Tosh' are heard; 'dim doorways that veer off the maze' are seen (Owuor, 2019, p. 12). Even in the description of what may be construed as pure Swahili traditions, there are elements of foreign cultural intrusion. The reggae, for instance, is Jamaican culture.

In Pate Island, social gatherings are ritualistic; these meetings take place in the evenings. During these meetings, people not only learn things but also use this platform to express themselves. These communal gatherings are presented as part of the Pate people's culture that Pate people and they want this ritual to remain unchanged. The Swahili word *mabaraza* is used in reference to these meetings. The narrator observes:

"On some Pate Island nights, conversations among men converged on the Island square. In the absence of reliable television service, those mabaraza were Muhidin's new roundups. The men, mostly retired civil servants with rolled up two-day-old newspapers whose every word they pored over, merchants, nondescript workers and scholars talked. Children played, and women murmured and tittered, and voices gentled by the day's end debated Kenya's contorted politics, its brothel-opened approach to everything, and English Premier League scores. There were three main groups unfairly distributed in support of Arsenal, Manchester United, and Chelsea. A few clung to much-mocked nostalgia for Liverpool." (Owuor, 2019, p. 23)

Muhidin is presented in the novel as a prominent advocate of the people's culture. However, he understands the importance of interacting with other cultures. He has books from different parts of the world. Whereas this showcases the role of art in cultural preservation and transmission, 'mediascapes,' one of Appadurai's five dimensions of cultural flows (1996, p. 32), impacts cultural construction and evolution. Cultures are mediated through technology. Muhidin, the narrator says, 'pointed to a cavernous engraved hardwood cupboard made in Bombay became Mumbai. It had come via Oman. Its main purpose was to aid concealment. There was a deep shelf inside where Muhidin stored his best books, his attar and blossoms, and spice-incense experiments lined up in several drawers' (Owuor, 2019, p. 29). Though there are a variety of ways through which culture is preserved and proliferated, art is presented in this novel as a principal avenue. Muhidin exposes Ayaana to other cultures at an early age. He uses artists' records:

"Music amplified what they could not find in books. Ecumenical music lessons. Algerian rai, Bangla, kora, the symphonies of Gholam-Reza Minbashian and Mehdi Hossein, and every sample of taarab they could get their hands on. No contemporary outpourings, which Muhidin told Ayaana, were the residues of the disordered screechings of Ibilisi. Thus, they roamed soundscapes. Hearing a melody, Ayaana often cried out, "What she singing?" or "Read," while pressing clenched fists to her heart, where a stranger's musical yearnings throbbed. Mid-afternoon one Tuesday, Muhidin reread her poetry of Hafiz. First in broken Farsi, followed by his Kiswahili translation." (Owuor, 2019, p. 44)

The Dragonfly Sea also interrogates the notion that cultures retain their original shapes irrespective of the generational differences between those who transmit them. Despite the age differences, the general perception is that

what is handed down from one generation to the next will always remain original and unbarbarised. Bollywood and Nollywood are depicted in this novel as representations of the different generations of film producers. However, the consumers of the films they produce are presumed to be watching the traditional versions of indigenous cultures. Muhidin rummages through 'a pyramid of books, layered with enough dust to grow an herb garden, and retrieved his favourite videos' and 'in these new lessons, just as Muhidin had twenty-three years ago, Ayaana discovers Bollywood. *Haathi Mere Saathi*. She watched it once. Twice. Four times. Muhidin rewound the tape. They sang with Kishore Kumar' (Owuor, 2019, p. 45). The power of art in cultural construction cannot be gainsaid. Interaction with art compromises the purity of traditional cultures. This is what Ayaana's experiences as she interacts with different cultures demonstrate. While she appreciates Bollywood, Ayaana suddenly feels awkward, trying to 'explain the feeling that her world had become larger, more colourful, and musical because of her dips, with Muhidin, into Bollywood?' (Owuor, 2019, p. 297).

Using what he regards as a 'multi-dimensional construct of critical hybridity,' Ouno (2019) argues that when people move to a new cultural location, 'they embark on a process of cultural renegotiation ... [and the outcome of this process] 'is usually aporetically presented as cultural ambivalence' (p. 180). In a new cultural environment, an individual may be forced to acquire a new name to make them feel that they belong. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, the Chinese visitor, for example, is given a Swahili name just like every person who lives on Pate Island. The idea of naming is a cultural aspect, yet, as opposed to Nyipir's notion that it is meant for cultural preservation, it is an outcome of cultural negotiation. This is what the Chinese visitor's newly acquired name, Mzee Kitwana Kipifit, represents:

"Along the way, they ran into the Chinese visitor, who was fiddling with a small net, a thin cigarette in his mouth, his face in profile to them. The sun and humidity had basted him dirt-brown. 'Mchina Nihao' was his first nickname in Pate. His smile, when he met anyone, was broad, his gestures fluttery: 'Ni hao,' he did not neglect to say-hello. However, when he had taken up jogging in the early mornings, Hudhaifa, the vendor, started to call him Mzee Kitwana Kipifit. The name stuck; the visitor now answered to it." (Owuor, 2019, p. 65)

The family also acquires a new meaning in this novel. Mzee Kitwana Kipifit is welcomed into a family so that what he imagined would be impossible becomes a reality. Hospitality to visitors is still preserved on Pate Island. The Chinese visitor is warmly received and becomes part of the bigger Pate family. 'Transcendent expectations,' the narrator observes, are 'synchronized, and the guest would find another ready to guide him into Pate Island's tenets to belonging' and at 'some point in his Pate life, this person, now linked to a family and treated as such,' makes 'a public pronouncement of Shahada: *Ash hadu anlla ilaha ilallah...*' Afterward, the new islander, 'giving his life over to the place, ... after taking a purifying bath to shed the skin of the past, after taking a purifying to shed the skin of the past,' adorns himself in a clean white garment and re-emerges, finally, at home. An island bride might be offered to him then. If the betrothal flowers, the visitor takes up a trade to sustain his home and finds himself written into the palimpsest that is Pate' (Owuor, 2019, p. 69).

The first thing that one exposes their child to determines how the child reacts to other things; this is the responsibility of every member of the community. Ayaana, born in an Islamic community, takes it upon herself to ensure she preserves the chastity and cultural purity of her people. She understands what it means to cover her body with a *buibui* at a tender age. She also recognizes the art of prayer. 'Although she was young and on her island, this was not expected of her; Ayaana soon took one of her mother's *buibuis* to shroud her body. She took to praying most of the day, head pressed into the earth, the rocks, and the floor – starting over if she was afraid, she had been facing a degree off east' (Owuor, 2019, p. 73).

Seduction is an art ingrained in the minds of the Pate people. Their oral traditions also reflect the significance of this art. The use of sweet or romantic words to win a lover's heart determines a man's cultural maturity. Ziriyaab understands the effect of using songs as he tries to win Munira's heart and the power of art that is expressed in movies and songs. In this case, culture is conveyed in songs. Ziriyaab also composed songs to express his feelings, which is something that has always been done from one generation to the next. The narrator says: 'Persistent, Ziriyaab bombarded Munira with crustaceans, songs, and Egyptian movies.' On one occasion, he hired cheap part-time minstrels to sing her these songs, two of which he had composed ... His hands gesturing skyward, he whispered, 'Why?' (Owuor, 2019, p. 95). Pure as Pate songs may seem, they cannot be divorced from other art forms, such as movies from ancient civilizations like Egypt.

Though religious societies ritualistically adhere to their traditions, their members cannot resist cultural influences from the media. Mama Suleiman is a typical example of the impactful nature of what Appadurai calls 'mediascapes' (1996, p. 32). She is compared to a Turkish soap opera diva. Amina says, 'Mama Suleiman ... who weeks ago had returned from her tenth pilgrimage to Mecca and hosted a party to celebrate that milestone [now smolders] in the doorway like a Turkish soap opera diva, eyes fierce, head angled, a voluptuous, concentrated object of craving.' (Owuor, 2019, p. 109). What complicates perceptions about cultural purity is that aspects of a people's traditions are sometimes recorded by visitors and transmitted to others as accurate representations of a specific cultural milieu, especially a world that many have not explored. The Chinese visitor who comes to Pate Island also writes about his experience in this part of the world to expose his readers to this part of Kenya. What is presented in such writings, in Appadurai's words, 'are deeply perspectival constructs' (1996, p. 33). 'Much later, in a formal letter home higher to a high-level party man, titled 'Belt and Road, Culture and Opportunity,' he spells out all he had known and seen on Pate Island. He writes of Admiral Zheng He, referring to uncompleted voyages. 'Our emissaries are here,' he adds, "Then he signed his name. Days later, he took a slow boat to Lamu, where he mailed the letter himself' (Owuor, 2019, p. 113).

Pate Island is not only hospitable but also rich in cultural traditions, yet these traditions are prone to misinterpretations. The fact that many would want to explore it makes it amenable to corruption. The notion that it is the only place that exhibits pure cultural traditions is largely contestable. That it attracts many visitors and treats its people

well is indisputable, but the pristineness of its traditions is disputable. Mzee Kitwana Kipifit and his ilk, who invite more strangers to this part of Kenya, further expose the region to cultural intrusion. These visitors also acculturate themselves into the Pate community, and Mzaa Kitwana is a paragon of acculturation. The *kusi* bombards the shoreline before easing up to reveal eleven new arrivals, visitors who beam and bow as they land on Pate Island. They travel to the southwest coast, to Pate town, where they stretch out their hands in overeager friendship. Mzee Kitwana Kipifit, sun-browned and nervous lest his actions be interpreted as dishonourable by the island to which his fate is bound, shifts as he waits for the visitors. Mzee Kitwana prepares to present the guests to the local member of parliament, the district administrator, the tall, attuned, and eternally lugubrious police inspector, and select imams and sheikhs from Faza, Siyu, and Pate town. A tinge of pride, because he can play host, extends the Pate codes of hospitality as if he were a *mwenyeji*, a person who belongs. He even introduces himself to these guests as 'Mzee Kitwana Kipifit,' much to their bemusement, and responds to their queries about the florid Kipate he has acquired from the island epics he studies. The narrator observes:

"The visitors crossed thresholds, and the full force of the island's hospitality codes came into effect. They shared family meals. Slept in family homes. They were listened to. They laughed in the right places. They had brought with them so many red-wrapped gifts. They spoke often of the desire to harmonize the past; they spoke of a debt of gratitude. It was not clear whose burden the debt was – the guest or host. They stood by the domed graves, where they shed a few polite tears. They listened keenly to Mzee Kitwana's explanations in Mandarin. They spoke often of Haji Mahmud Shamsuddin, the one they also called Zheng He." (Owuor, 2019, p.152).

To ensure that Pate Island's culture is preserved, it is told, re-told and taught to people. This is supposed to facilitate clarity and understanding. The men of Pate gather in the evenings to recite their genealogical epics with a view to handing down critical elements of their cultural heritage to the next generation: 'In the evenings, they sat down with the men to hear faltering recitations of genealogical epics, listening for the sound of familiar names' (Owuor, 2019, p. 153). Ironically, visitors such as Mzee Kitwana and the self-confessed *mwenyeji* also participate in this educational process. The purity of the cultural information that they convey to other visitors is disputable.

When individuals move away from their traditional locations, they lose touch with their people. As much as they strive to establish contact, something is lost along the way. Ayaana, for instance, does not wish to forget her culture even miles away from her home. To keep the traditional cultural fire burning, she literally practises it even with the new friends she makes along the way. In an attempt to suppress the dominance of the host's culture and its potential threat to the host, she deliberately exposes her new friends to Swahili culture. These deliberate efforts are illustrated in this recollection.

Ayaana nodded as she knelt down. She started to spread out the basics: a plastic-looking bag shaped like a cone, yoghurt-textured green paste, black in the silver evening light. Delaksha crouched next to her. 'Honey, I couldn't.' Ayaana looked at her. 'Keep it.' She laid out her henna kit. 'Sit,' she said, surprised by how lucid her voice was. Delaksha sat down in front of her. Ayaana sat cross-legged. This was her first practice without having her mother nearby. 'I start with your feet.' She tapped Delaksha's foot. Delaksha shifted. Ayaana tugged off the black heels and settled the right foot on her own thigh. 'The stem of vine,' Ayaana said, using the henna paste in a thin cone to draw a finger line on the ankle. 'Jasmine petals. First, I wipe your feet. Mother's *halwaridi*.' They settled into silence, and the scent of wild roses suffused the space for a moment, overwhelming the smell of oil and diesel. (Owuor, 2019, p. 214)

The novel highlights the notion that it is possible to maintain their pure cultural traditions in a new location. Miles away from home, Ayaana paints the picture of her family members back in Pate. This keeps her going in China. When she misses home, she calls them and keeps asking what is going on. This helps keep her updated and informed about her so dear Pate town. For Ayaana, thinking of Pate is a reprieve from the cultural detachment occasioned by distance; it is the ideal of home, which distance amplifies. Ayaana tunes into a vision of home as if she were a home-comer. Her face softens as she clothes her island in her mother's scents and the Almighty's stars. In Ayaana's grammar, her listeners glimpse Muhidin and Munira, witness the surge of Pate's moonlit seas from a sand dune, and smell a jasmine-infused night. Ayaana's Pate was an antidote to desecrated worlds, so when Ayaana finishes her remembering, 'there was silence' (Owuor, 2019, p. 247).

Despite her mother's misgivings about this new cultural environment, Ayaana is able to strike a delicate balance between home and China. Her mother's picture of China gives the impression of a culturally conservative nation. Their culture is, it appears, as dominating as their tall buildings. Their display of technological advancement is, in Ayaana's mother's view, as intimidating as their traditions. The narrator says, "Ayaana's laugh was flat. However, she started to regale her mother with the habits of her hosts. She suddenly needed to sustain the myth of her mother. 'Eh! They have buildings here that reach to and cover the sun'" (Owuor, 2019, p. 266). Ayaana is able to blend two cultures comfortably, upholding her own cultural practices at heart despite being away from home. She even teaches people about her culture to ensure they understand her background despite coming to China as the only 'Descendant' from Kenya and Africa in general. She also has to fit into the Chinese culture, so she has to know their culture: 'In between language and Chinese-heritage classes, Ayaana did her 'duty to history.' She knew her language skills had improved when she realized she could follow a whispered debate between two professors who were arguing whether to classify her as a *laowai*-old foreigner – or merely a *heiren*-black person.' How she blends the two cultures and still purportedly maintains the purity of her Swahili traditions is contestable.

In public, Ayaana cuts the figure of 'the Descendant' with the right kind of eyes. Her linguistic progress, though slow, is acknowledged, and her opinions of China and being Chinese are sought. On the few occasions when Ayaana speaks – swathed in Chinese dress, in a voice to which she was still a stranger – she speaks basic Putonghua. She cannot make a joke in basic Mandarin, and, on cue, a hall full of five hundred clap and beam at her, and she feels temporarily lit up from within.

'The next time she spoke to audiences,' the narrator observes, 'it was near Taicang Port, fifty kilometres north-west of Shanghai, where Admiral Zheng He had embarked on his journeys into worlds that included her own' (Owuor, 2019, p. 268). Learning a foreign language is a survival strategy. The host's culture assumes an 'Occidental' role, suppressing the culture of the hosted. In this kind of environment, the survival of Ayaana's culture is put to the test:

"Ayaana used words she had carefully prepared and rehearsed. She referred to common sailor ancestors, Tang and Ming dynasty ceramics, and distinctive crescent tombs. She spoke of a child stumbling home one night by the light of the moon and meeting an old man, her Yue Xia, the match maker who created connections between strangers. She said that she and other islanders called him Mzee Kitwana Kipifit. Her audience laughed. Ayaana added that fate had betrothed her small island to an immense nation. Later, Ayaana travelled inland, where many of the tens of thousands of Ming-dynasty sailors came from, places with names she promptly forgot. She watched a likely relation - there had been a DNA match of the sort, an uncle, presumably hack and spit a gob of phlegm. They shared one another's perplexity." (Owuor, 2019, p. 269)

The hosted may be compelled to resort to what Bhabha (1994) calls 'the third space of cultural enunciation.' For Lazarus (2004), Bhabha's third space 'is a fighting term, a theoretical weapon, which intervenes in existing debates and resists certain political and philosophical constructions' (p. 4) by interrogating the legitimacy and validity of the essentialist cultural identity. Ayaana has to prove she actually has a relationship with Chinese culture, so there is no better reference than the Chinese man back in her home, Pate Island. She understands that she has become a part of this other culture, too, and this has been contributed by different aspects. She invokes Admiral Zheng He in her letter as 'her motivator, reference and inspiration.' She writes of practical legacy. She sees herself as a bridge, as ships are, between worlds and people. 'The ocean is but a passageway,' she writes, 'It needs navigators.' 'She was offering her service to the sea' (Owuor, 2019, p. 283). Ayaana is exposed to a variety of cultures through her interaction with people from different cultures all over the world, and these are the perceived ambassadors of cultural purity:

"There were seventeen others in her class in the nautical science studies program, and they represented different maritime countries. Chinese and Malaysians, two Indians, two Pakistanis, one from Singapore, two from the Philippines, one Turk, and the rest from Indonesia. There were two other women, both Chinese, one of them being from Hong Kong. Ayaana was the only Kenyan and African. With her 'Descendant' tag, her lanky height - she was taller than most of the men and her dark-skinned yet also familiarly Asiatic looks, she had to contend with extra curiosity. She shrugged this off, focused on her work, and passed her continuous assessment tests with good marks." (Owuor, 2019, p. 286)

Ayaana, like other non-Chinese students, is introduced to new modes of dressing, different from her Swahili traditional dressing code back at home where she would wear *buibui*. 'Five pairs of Italian designer shoes - sling back, boots, ballet flats, peep-toes, and espadrille wedges - had replaced her sandals and scuffed sneakers.' She has another box which contains a black silk nightgown. Her clothes are 'replaced with Audrey Hepburn-style dresses in four colours - black, white, blue, and red - and an array of accessories, including shawls and handbags in black, white, and beige' (Owuor, 2019, p. 317).

Cultural aspects that deal with burying the dead, as witnessed in Owuor's *Dust*, are held high because they, too, have to be respected. The burial rites cannot be ignored. When Delaksha dies, she has to be buried before sunset, as dictated by the cultural beliefs of her people. She is buried on the Island to unite her soul with her ancestors and the Muslim community: 'They buried Delaksha before sunset. They burned incense for her and consoled themselves with the mystery of its scent. Her resting place was shaded by a tall pawpaw tree, beneath which lay the small bones of a long-dead kitten. Delaksha's belonging to Pate and its people' (Owuor, 2019, p. 429).

As demonstrated by Ajany and Ayaana, cultures naturally evolve over time through interactions, exchanges, and adaptations. As times change, culture adopts new things; Pate Island is not an exception. Art enters through all corners of the Indian Ocean; this basically means culture from different parts of the world. 'Maulidi. Music and prayer and dance, and the loud arrival of boats and souls from other Indian Ocean islands' (Owuor, 2019, p. 471). Even Occidental cultures evolve. As depicted in the experiences of Hugh and Mzee Kitwana, the Occidental cultures are occasionally suppressed in the 'Orient.' Appiah (2017) regards cultural imperialism (Occidentalism) as condescending. Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* suggest that the spread of one or more prominent cultures to others that are seen as demeaning or lesser known to modern, 'civilized' societies is not always the case. Even modern, the so-called dominant cultures are constantly changing because of other cultures' influences. There is a thin line between preserving one's culture and not giving it the opportunity to take advantage of societies' advances.

3. Conclusion

The evolution of cultures may be perceived to be destructive to traditional beliefs and practices, yet it is the norm rather than the exception. The notion that the traditions of these cultures can sustain themselves even with the innovations of the modern world is fallacious. Each culture can retain coherence and cultural values in the spread of multiculturalism, but this does not mean that they retain their traditional purity. Human beings in one geographical location should be capable of what any other human would be capable of in a different environment. While it is true that the colonial power produces and circulates discourses of their inherent superiority against the inferiority of the colonized people and their culture and that such discourse functions as a form of power in creating the hegemony of the colonizers by facilitating the voluntary submission of the colonized people, these colonial discourses can also be suppressed in the 'Orient.' The main characters' experiences in Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* demonstrate that cultural purity is a

mirage. The phrase 'cultural purity' is in itself oxymoronic. No culture can be divorced completely from other cultures. A culture contains many influences from other cultures. Even that which is considered a traditional or single culture has adopted a trait or practice from another in the past. Resistance to change, as exhibited in some traditional cultures emanating from the fear of extinction, are misgivings that hardly last for long. These so-called traditional cultures do not lose all their characteristics; rather, they borrow things from other cultures and evolve to accommodate new realities.

4. References

- i. Appiah, A. (2017). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. W. W. Norton and Company.
- ii. Armah, A. (1973). *Two thousand seasons*. Heinemann.
- iii. Bhabha, H. (1990). *Nation and narration*. Routledge.
- iv. Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- v. Frenkel, M. (2008). The multinational corporation as a third space: Rethinking international management discourse on knowledge transfer through Homi Bhabha. *The Academy of Management Review*, 33(4), 924-942. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20159453>
- vi. Guendouzi, A. (2017). Revolution without evolution: The 'Way' of change in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*. *African Studies*, 76(4), 566-578.
- vii. Hall, S. (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader* (pp. 222-237). Columbia University Press.
- viii. Lazarus, N. (2004). *The Cambridge companion to post-colonial literary studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- ix. Ouno, V. (2019). Negotiation of cross-cultural complexities of new worlds in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels. *Mediterranean Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 3(2), 180-202.
- x. Owuor, Y. (2014). *Dust: A novel*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- xi. Owuor, Y. (2020). *The Dragonfly Sea*. Penguin Random House.
- xii. Wangari, J., Oketch, S., & Ouno, V. (2022). Conflicting selves and identity crisis in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* and *Homegoing*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 10(8), 65-70.