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## Why and to Where does Ajany Run? Culture and Femininity in Yvonne Owuor's *Dust*

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### ABSTRACT

Launched around the time Kenya was marking fifty years of independence, Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* has been described as a 'cultural inheritance.' It portrays a collection of colourful characters who laugh at themselves in their search for some sense of belonging. This paper is a critical interrogation of how culture and gender shape the identities of characters in the creative works of East African writers. The present analysis focuses on the character of Ajany, in *Dust*. Ajany is a timid character who always lurked in Odidi's shadow. Initially she has no sense of self and seems to be on a journey in search of her identity. She makes international contact mentally, physically, philosophically, intellectually, psychologically as well as emotionally. Among what is affecting her self-realisation is the collective culture of her people and her gender. The study thus interrogates the contribution of femininity to the identity that Ajany eventually acquires. Since Ajany has interacted with different cultures in the search for self-realisation, the study also examines the effects of the different cultures on Ajany's character. The study is based on ideas of hybridity advanced by Homi K. Bhabha.

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## Introduction

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* is about the Oganda family and the Kenyan nation. The setting of the opening scene is Nairobi during the hotly contested general election of December 2007 which escalated into violence that nearly tore the nation apart. The scene is indeed a vignette of violence in which a brilliant engineer turned criminal is gunned down by the police. Thereafter, readers are taken through a history of Kenya going back to colonial days and the emergency period; a string of seemingly unending eruptions of violence. This history is revealed through the upheavals of the lived experiences of Aggrey Nyipir Oganda and his family: wife, son and daughter. Nyipir, born near the shores of Lake Victoria, eventually makes a home in the drylands of Turkana in Northern Kenya, for reasons steeped in violence. The story of the Oganda family, like the story of the

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country Kenya, is the demystification of secrets from the dark past, in the hope of appeasing the future.

Running is at the core of the narratological structure of Owuor's *Dust*. Indeed, the story opens with a physical all-out sprint as Odidi runs for dear life.

He leaps over two fire-painted blossoms resting on the stark cracked city pavement.  
(Owuor 2014, 7)

...

*I want to go home.* Odidi lifts his feet higher, trying to fly. Odidi runs.

...

Odidi runs.

He turns down Jogoo Road and glances upward, childhood habit born when Galgalu, the family herdsman, had told him that God was *Akuj* — Eternity Revealed as Sky. (9)

Odidi is not the only character who does some running, though. There are many instances where we have other characters running: Ali Dida Hada, Petrus Keah, Akai-ma, Galgalu as well as Isaiah, who is a newcomer to the story, 'he had run and screamed and howled out a name' (264). In addition to the actual physical running, however, there is a great deal of metaphorical running throughout the text. Hugh Bolton and Selene ran away from England and came to Kenya (97). Akai-ma does a whole lot of running. Selene runs away from Hugh Bolton and Kenya just before independence, 'She had escaped from Kenya a few months before the December 12, 1963, Independence Day and returned to England. At Heathrow, she had almost fallen on the tarmac to weep for joy, delighted that at home death was wrapped in a decorous package, very genteel' (96). Indeed, Selene's letter to her son, written a lifetime later on her deathbed, hints at psychological running as well.

*Darling Isaiah,*

*There is a story behind every no, every maybe ... This is a story about a dry well. If you look — I pray you don't — you will find it close to a house of gargantuan pretensions, a pink folly. This is a small part of the man who dreamed it, built it, and offered it to me: Hugh Bolton. You've idolized him as your father. I fled his desert, left him with his gift, for I had found you, and for you I would have forsaken my life. (97)*

The psychological running (and hiding), effectively pervades the whole text. We take the character of Nyipir, Ajany's father, for example. As a young man, Nyipir hides from disappointment and murder: the disappearance of his father and brother; murders he has witnessed over time; murder he has prevented; murder he has committed: 'Nyipir spoke of an almost-teenage boy running from a psychotic uncle whose head he had split' (284).

Nyipir, the character who proudly carries the Kenyan flag in 1963, eventually goes into hiding from independent Kenya.

To protect new post-independence citizen children, parents like [Nyipir] had painted illusions of a future Kenya, shouting out the words of the national anthem as if the volume alone would restore hopeful dreams. Keeping mouths, ears and eyes shut, parents had partitioned sorrow, purchased even more silence, and promised a 'better future.' (30)

Indeed, the character of Nyipir is a representation of the collective memory of Kenyans, who have been running away from, and trying to hide, the truth that is all around them: illiteracy, poverty and disease; made worse by tribalism, nepotism, and corruption. As far as running is concerned, physical, metaphorical and psychological, Arabel Ajany Oganda is the protagonist of this complicated story.

Inside her room, numb. Weary of scrubbing tears away. She needs a destination. Maps made from her matter of memory. And that is when the walls start to close in. And she runs out of the room, out of the guest-house, out of the gates, into a darkening city. (174)

Exhausted by mysteries, of confusing answers, fuzzy thoughts, bad dreams, drowning in unknown sensations, the accumulation of silences, Ajany rises up like a creature on fire and flies out of the room. She runs past Jos, onto the lawn and through the gate. (290)

Arabel Ajany runs back and forth, and round and round. Eventually she arrives, a lifetime later, at *Wuoth Ogik* (Journey's End), where she had started; a totally different person.

## Literature review

First published in 2013, *Dust* has been reviewed by many critics. One of the earliest reviewers, Ndivo (2014), predicted that the book, being well written and covering critical subject matter, would be 'widely read, researched and discussed.' In his review, however, Ndivo mentions Ajany in one sentence, as the sister of Odidi who '... maps her life from Wuoth Ogik to Brazil then back.' Gurnah's (2015) review in *The Guardian*, focuses on the metaphorical complexity that ties memory and stories to dust and flood. Mbithi's (2016) review does mention Ajany as a character to reckon with, in the sense that readers 'journey with [her and Isaiah] backwards and forwards in order to establish how they got to where they are as they are.'

As predicted by Ndivo, many research studies have been undertaken on the work. These studies, like the book reviews, tend to focus on the politics, history, landscapes, memories and emotional entanglements related to a tumultuous and violent past.

In her 2016 MA Thesis, for example, Liswaniso's interest is 'political violence', highlighting how 'different sections of the society are depicted as victims or perpetrators of political violence,' in a comparison between *Dust* and *The Uncertainty of Hope*. A different comparison, between *Dust* and *The Gift of Rain*, looks at 'post-colonial illuminations of past betrayals' (Gagiano, 2019).

## Theoretical framework

The arguments in this paper are based on the ideas advanced by Homi K. Bhabha (1990) on hybridity. Hybridity is, in simple terms, a mixture. In literary criticism, hybridity, which Bhabha also alludes to as the third space, refers to a position occupied when originals join to produce a new identification that is autonomous. According to Bhabha, the third space displaces the originals and opens up avenues for other positions to emerge. Even with this displacement, the third space retains traces of the originals that inform it. This means that hybridity, cannot in itself be original.

An interaction of different cultures results in cultural hybridity. This creates a totally new culture that Bhabha says is unrecognisable. A character yearning to belong to a culture that is different from what is considered the group or collective culture must forge forward in order to move away from that which dissatisfies to come up with a more fulfilling one. The new culture is consciously proud of the difference between it and the original one(s). This different new culture (a hybrid culture), however, retains some cultural aspects of the original(s).

A character who acquires a hybrid culture gains a hybrid identity and such a character occupies a space between the two cultures that have informed this hybrid culture. Stuart Hall argues that a shared or collective culture creates a true self that hides inside many other 'more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' (Hall 1990, 223). Artificial oneness is not original; it is an assumed commonality that gives a character a sense of self.

Identity refers to a character's sense of self or sense of belonging. Jeffrey Weeks (1990) points out that identity is about belonging, what people have in common and what differentiates an individual from the others. This may include language, gender, history, ethnic group, or culture. If any of these aspects is shared among a group, then each member acquires a sense of belonging and contentment while in the group.

In a multi-ethnic state like Kenya, different ethnic communities have different cultural values and customs. Because of the different cultures, acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity is a pre-requisite if there is to be peaceful coexistence among people of different ethnic groups. More often than not, there is a subconscious attraction between persons who have something in common: culture, for example. A people's culture encompasses language, beliefs, history and religion. Cultural oneness which arises from sharing these cultural aspects gives a character a sense of belonging. The character thus acquires a cultural identity.

As the work under study is authored by a female writer, this paper looks at the character under study, Ajany, through the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Though being female is biological and it cannot be reversed, femininity is a social construct. In many cultures women only become visible in the presence of their menfolk (fathers, husbands, and sons). The female character's sense of

belonging, therefore, is attained while in the presence of the male character. There are, no doubt, women who take advantage of this and present themselves as being weak in order to rely on men, even in decision-making. By so doing, the female character loses her sense of self. This may be the reason female characters have been 'presented as being unoriginal, private and domestic — creative only in their biology' (Eagleton 1996, 7).

Our argument is in line with Freud's belief that people could be cured by 'making conscious their unconscious thoughts and motivations' (Freud 1949, 15). This would explain the eventual acceptance by Ajany of herself, her history and the power of choice within her.

### Why does Ajany run?

Arabel Ajany, the second child of Nyipir and the fourth of Akai, was born under difficult circumstances. The pregnancy surprised Akai. The child, on delivery, was hot, and according to Akai-ma, she had refused to suckle. Her mother had left the unnamed child to die. On arriving home, Galgalu and Odidi, Ajany's elder brother, had asked for the baby. They had then set out to search for it. They had found the baby. Vultures were about to feast on her. They had saved her and Odidi gave her the name Ol Arabel after a river while Galgalu named her Arabel (a cool green mountain). To name something is to bring it to life (Owuor 2014, 35). Giving Ajany a name had thus driven Odidi to take full responsibility over her; he claimed that Ajany was his baby. From then on, Ajany had become Odidi's baby; to protect and to literally take care of. She had, therefore, learned to seek refuge in her brother. Giving Ajany a name is equivalent to giving her an identity. She thus acquires her sense of self through Odidi, her brother. As she grows up, however, Ajany is uncomfortable with herself. Perhaps even without realising it, she is in search of an identity, something she can proudly claim and hold on to. This may be the primary reason for her running. Ajany runs away from the unpleasant present, what H el ene Cixous (2005) refers to as 'the horror we would not live in the present' (xi), looking for a more accepting and comfortable space (identity).

Ajany runs away from the mother who has rejected her. Akai-ma had learned so late that she was expecting a child. When the baby was finally born, she was born hot (feverish). Akai had not named the baby because, according to her, those who are born hot die. Akai-ma was so afraid of losing the child that she chose not to have a relationship with her. Readers and the child do not know the mother's reasons until towards the end of the narration (Owuor 2014, 361–371). In the meantime, the girl child is traumatised and unsettled. Even after Ajany is given a name by Odidi, Akai never called her by her name. She always referred to Ajany as 'that one'. In the African cultural context, a person's name gives him/her a sense of belonging and therefore the character identifies with the culture of his/her people. Ajany wonders where she belongs in the mind of

her mother. She asks in quite a sympathetic tone, 'And me ... where do I belong?' (37). Ajany's sense of belonging is only realised in the presence of Odidi. In Odidi's absence, she is lonely and 'takes refuge in stillness.' In running away, Ajany probably also runs from a fate similar to her mother's. She manages, unknowingly perhaps, to 'flee the fatal nail, the sword, the knife, the axe which threatens to fix, to nail, to immobilize [] in, by, death' (Cixous 2005, xi).

Ajany runs from her female school mates (other females). She seems uncomfortable in the company of her female school mates. They tease her into climbing a tree, then she falls down and hurts Odidi who had climbed up to help bring her down. Later, she bumps into one of those school mates in a supermarket. She spends as little time with her as possible, and even that little time is spent strategising on how to escape. The former school mate, in any case, is far more interested in getting an update on Odidi, Ajany's brother.

Ajany runs with her brother:

They were chance offspring of northern-Kenya drylands. Growing up, Odidi and Ajany had been hemmed in by arid land geographies and essences. Freed from history, and the interference of Nairobi's government, they had marveled at Ka'alakol the desert lake that swallowed three rivers — the Omo, Turkwell, and Kerio. (10)

He had started it, Odidi had. Their homelessness. He had conjured up stories of Elsewhere — imagined siblings, aunties, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, a web of dotting dream relations into which he and Ajany inserted their longing to leave. (124)

Both Odidi and Ajany run from the shame of knowing that their mother had been pregnant before either of them was born (14). Growing up, no one tells them the truth, or the details of what happened, so they cringe in shame, and hide in the silence of 'not knowing.'

Ajany and Odidi grew up surrounded by silences, memory and a solitary life brought about by lack of relatives (10). Odidi who seemed to have a solution for every problem that he and his sister Ajany had come across, had occupied the time narrating stories of relatives who never turned up. He told her of demons who were jealous of humans, Obarongo who was forever in search of little girls' eyes, and ogres who emerged from petrified silences. It was Odidi who told Ajany, 'we'll go Far Away'. (17)

There is a poignant scene (57) where Odidi tells Ajany to 'paint a river out of *Wuoth Ogik*' to take them to a new home. Both Odidi and Ajany run away from unexplained anger. Odidi is quite the academic. He finds books in a library and gets engrossed in them. When, with the natural curiosity of a child, he asks whose they are, he is told angrily 'someone else's' (58). He does not understand the anger, the attitude, much less the fear beneath the anger. Odidi and Ajany also run away from inherited guilt:

Nyipir and Akai had planted new myths about *Wuoth Ogik*. It was an aborted mission base. Its disappointed priest had gone back to Europe, after giving over its stewardship

to his assistant and friend, Nyipir. In Kenya's pre- and post-independence days, anything was believable. And a story repeated often enough became fact. (372)

In the end, Ajany runs from even her brother and from Kenya. She does not seem to fit in the culture of her people. She craves something different; something new. When she finds no sense of self in Kenya, she moves to Brazil where she hopes to find contentment. Whether she realises it or not, Ajany may be running in response to her feminine sixth sense; and it may be that the 'cowardly' act of running to Brazil is what ultimately saves her life.

Eventually, Ajany runs in search of her brother. Since Odidi had promised that he would take Ajany 'somewhere else', she swears to chase the absence resulting from his death until it takes her to 'Odidi's somewhere else'. This means that Ajany has been clinging to Odidi while he was alive, and in his death, she clings to his absence. His absence has, however, made her lose her sense of self. She comes to the realisation that she must go after Odidi's 'somewhere else' until she acquires her own identity. This means that she has to forge ahead to achieve a sense of belonging. Her desire to understand how her brother met his death takes her to Justina, Odidi's girlfriend who is pregnant (202). When they discuss Odidi, Ajany feels a little bit relieved. She feels that his rugby ball, which he had received at the university and which he always took with him, represents him. She embraces Odidi's ball as if she were embracing him. By so doing, she 'gathers her shattered selves by putting together pieces of Odidi' (197).

Arabel Ajany almost runs mad. The two instances cited above (174 and 290) are indicative of great psychological stress which forces Ajany to run. It seems as if it is therapeutic for her to summon all her energies into a physically straining exercise, in order to stop thinking. In running she releases the tension that is building up inside her mind. By the time her mother finally draws her into her arms for a hug, Ajany has begun to hear the sound of a child crying in her head. In fact, she asks her mother whether that is a sign of madness. To paraphrase Hélène Cixous [Ajany] had received blows from all directions right from birth, blows that have opened wounds, wounds which have 'translated into a haemorrhage of the soul' (ix).

### To where does Ajany run?

Perhaps without being consciously aware of it, Ajany is running away from the oppressive reality of the present. At a different level, she is therefore running away from the expectations of her culture and the society in as far as she is feminine. Failure to understand her roots had led Ajany to explore other ways of expressing herself and unleashing what was hurting her. She had turned to drawing. Her parents had reprimanded her when she brought home copies of her school paintings which had won the first prize in the national art show. What they did not know was that winning and being applauded in school had made Ajany feel contented in a school she hated.



Odidi encourages her to continue painting. Painting is the avenue that Ajany uses to express herself even after Odidi's death. Odidi has thus been a significant figure in Ajany's journey of realising her sense of identity. Ajany encounters a totally new culture in Brazil and she feels lost all the more. Since she has learned to fill the gap created by silences through painting, she continues painting the skull to fill the missing parts. This is the skull she and Odidi had found in the forbidden red cave; the cave of memory. History, which is a part of a people's culture, is represented by this skull. Ajany is also a sculptor, and as pointed out by Gurnah (2015) while talking about a different piece, Ajany's work is metaphorical, 'The metaphor is made concrete in the sculpture Ajany makes of her father's missing brother, whom she only knows from stories.'

Through painting, Ajany is fulfilling the promise she made to Odidi that she would keep painting. At the same time, the painting fills the void created by the cultural differences of her people back in Kenya and those in Brazil. This painting therefore makes her contented. Without realising it, her painting seems to represent therapy which releases her emotions, in Freudian terms, and eases her unconscious into the conscious. Running away, and painting, then, become Ajany's imaginative rediscovery, the avenue into a 'rediscovered essential identity' (Hall 1990, 224).

It is Ajany, home for Odidi's funeral after her exile in Brazil, to whom the parents confess; for whom they ask forgiveness; in whom they see a future. Nyipir speaks about his youth, his brother, his father, and his uncle (Owuor 2014, 284). He also talks about forgiveness (311). Akai-ma tells Ajany about her first pregnancy and the dead twins (361–371). She finally cries over the pain she suffered going through that pregnancy, being rejected, losing the twins in a drought and nearly being killed (362).

Ajany gains her sense of self in her father's presence and assurances. She describes Nyipir, her father, as standing where the outside world was separated from the inside melee. He thus occupies the gap between the others and her inner self that is not at peace. His presence at the airport when she arrives after Odidi's death makes her feel contented. The assurances of Nyipir when he calls Ajany 'nyathina' and pats her on the back calling her his own, make her feel secure. She thus feels contented.

As a girl, Ajany's timidity fades when Odidi takes her to the red cave; the cave of memory. They had been warned by their parents never to visit the cave. It was a forbidden place. She is told by Odidi to swear never to tell anyone that they had been to that cave. When she hesitates, he teases her that she is easily scared and therefore she must swear. Since she wants to prove to him that she is not silly, she swears and just as the soil she holds when swearing, 'something elemental inside her flowed away' (75). Her timidity fades and in its place, courage is born. She thus gains self-confidence and realises her sense of self through Odidi's coercion.

Interaction between different races breeds cultural hybridity. Ajany meets Isaiah Bolton after her return to Kenya from Brazil. Isaiah is a visiting Englishman

who is searching for his father, Hugh Bolton. Isaiah had received a book from Odidi, bearing Hugh Bolton's signature and Odidi had thought the book would help Isaiah trace his father. When Isaiah comes and finds that Odidi has died, he is received by Ajany. Later, as Ajany moves to Nairobi to search for the cause of her brother's death, she meets with Isaiah, who has been advised to follow her for she may have answers to his questions. Ajany feels secure and warm in Isaiah's company. Their differences symbolised by their different skin colour, their different cultural backgrounds and nationalities, do not hinder them from giving each other a sense of belonging. The character of Ajany is quite different from many female characters in other works of art, especially in novels written by male writers, such as the character of Wanja in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977).

Incidentally, as Ajany is calling Odidi on the phone from Brazil (Owuor 2014, 10), Odidi is being pursued by the police who have shot him after a foiled robbery. Ajany's calling and Odidi's dying are juxtaposed. Her confidence and trust in her brother are being replaced by his mortal absence. He therefore cannot answer her call. Since she had grown to be so dependent on Odidi, she calls repeatedly awaiting the kind of advice he would give since according to her, he had always known what to do and she trusted everything that he said. She has to sort out her own mess now. She later receives her father's call telling her to come home since Odidi is dead. Coming back home is a solution to her troubled self, since she is moving away from the crime she had just committed, of stabbing her boyfriend Bernado. Even though Odidi is dead, she would feel that she belongs in the place where she and her brother had grown up together.

In *Dust*, the character of Ajany has been carefully constructed. She starts life near death and grows up in the shadows — the timid, quiet sister of Odidi. She is presented as the complete contrast of her mother Akai-ma, who Kenny (2016) describes as 'at once fearless, unwomanly, and ungovernable' (3). By the end of the novel, however, Ajany has become a veritable force. Like her mother before her, she gets intimately involved with an Englishman. Ajany, however, does so on her own terms. The character of Ajany is, effectively, the feminist 'coup de grâce' of *Dust*, a postcolonial novel crafted by a female writer. In her research project, "Murder she wrote: Reading Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* as postcolonial feminist crime fiction," Mũrĩithi (2018) recognises this achievement and indeed considers Ajany as the 'postcolonial detective, a transnational figure suturing together, in her body and travels, Akai-ma and Justina, but also going where they cannot go in some instances' (11).

Eventually, Ajany's running is brought to an abrupt end by Odidi's death. When she receives news of her brother's death from her father, Ajany runs home. Her seven years in 'exile' have made her that much more confident. She has seen enough of the world to assert her presence. This change may be confirmation of what Rushton (2017, 45) says, 'Travel both within and away from the

continent is a central part of Africa's global historical narrative.' Ajany comes to the realisation that it may be too late for Odidi, but she has been saved from his fate. After a tortuous journey around the world, she runs into self-acceptance and a hybrid identity.

The territory of infinite pain.

*Odidi.*

She runs.

Past Nyipir

Arms flailing, feet gliding above the ground, she runs.

Beguiled by her rush, the gathered gawk. By the time Nyipir kicks aside the gate to try to stop her, the darkness has already swallowed Ajany.

Isaiah shakes his head to dislodge the lost-in-dreaming sensation that suffuses him.

The trader stares into nothing with a finger across his face. 'It's out', he explains. 'Now it roams'.

Silence. (Owuor 2014, 112)

## Conclusion

Arabel Ajany runs a full circle. In the process, she undergoes a complete metamorphosis. It is at *Wuoth Ogik* (Journey's End) that Ajany's metaphorical wounds, which have been dripping since birth, find healing and finally dry up. In the final act of razing the coral house to the ground, Ajany finds closure. Having started out as an unwanted child, left by her own mother in the wild to die; having lived in the shadow of her brother for thirty-two years; she finally becomes the first-person universal, the survivor who has a future to look forward to.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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