

Portrayal of Pate Island and the Indian Ocean as Characters: Tracing Geocritical Ecologies in *The Dragonfly Sea*

PRATIXA JETHALAL PARMAR *

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology Raipur, India
pparmar.phd2024.hss@nitrr.ac.in

YEDDU VIJAYA BABU

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology Raipur, India

ABSTRACT

*The emergence of the “Spatial Turn” in the humanities emphasises spatial literary representation that engages the questions of regional associations across spaces, places, and the environment. The present paper addresses the need to bring oceanic viewpoints to the centre to examine the distinguished relationships of the littoral community with the sea, incorporating the geo-centric and eco-centric approaches in *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Her fictional work documents the rich ecologies of Pate Island and the infinite beauty of the Indian Ocean. The islanders’ intrinsic connection to Pate Island and their ability to read the sea manifest the interconnectedness of the coastal space. The paper incorporates a regional approach to portray the personification of space in the novel. The paper argues that the specific regional and environmental locations of “Pate Island” and “The Indian Ocean” do not serve merely as a “passive setting” or “locale” for the narratives; instead, they become substantive “characters” in interrogating the lives of the islanders and seafarers who inhabit the shore. By recontextualising “geocritical ecologies,” coastal territories are pushed to the “centre of discussions,” which are often sanitised and undervalued. The paper, therefore, contributes significantly to literary inquiry by focusing on inland and coastal areas to highlight the interconnectedness between coastal people and their Swahili Sea.*

Keywords: Geocritical ecologies; Indian Ocean; littoral society; Pate Island; spatial turn

INTRODUCTION: THE SPATIAL TURN

The rise of the “Spatial Turn” in the humanities arises from the postmodern condition's heightened awareness of space over time. This apparent shift in spatial inquiry reconceptualises ways to think about “space” in literary and cultural studies. The paper addresses this specific need by examining the association between the ocean rim and littoral communities, usually defined as communities that enjoy the distinguished island life and everyday exposure to the sea, and highlighting the distinguished relationships between people and the ocean in Adhiambo Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). The force behind oceanic viewpoints is Karin Amimoto Ingersoll (2016), who insists on articulating a significant shift from land-based geographies to centralising the oceans as expressed in *Waves of Knowing: Seascape Epistemology*, magnifying the ocean’s roles in shaping identity and knowledge. Littoral societies, as Pearson (2006) argues, share more similarities with other coastal communities around the world than with inland societies, possibly making the littoral society distinct from mainland society.

INTERSECTION OF GEOCRITICAL ECOLOGIES

Because the paper focuses on the Eastern Pate Island situated close to the Indian Ocean, “geocritical ecologies” are employed and recontextualised hitherto. By drawing attention to the development of the emerging disciplinary approach of “geocritical ecologies and ecocritical geologies” (Tally & Battista, 2016), *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by a Kenyan author, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, whose work reflects the intense engagement with the Kenyan coastal region, is investigated. It is pertinent, therefore, to introduce and explain “geocritical ecologies,” including their similarities or differences with existing terms, to the untrained eye. The term “geocritical ecologies” is used to highlight the intersection of geocriticism and ecocriticism, where Geocriticism scrutinises the relations of literature and spaces, places, and mapping. Ecocriticism, however, questions the links made between ecology and the environment in literature. Specifically, Tally and Battista (2016) emphasise social and political motivations within ecocritical and geocritical approaches to understanding spaces, places, mapping, and literature. It could be asserted that because they both concern social and natural worlds, these terms’ use might overlap. To understand the concept of Geocriticism, Westphal points out:

“The referentiality of fiction (and other mimetic arts) allows it to point to a recognisable place, real or imaginary or a bit of both at once, while also transforming that place, making it part of a fictional world. In this sense, geocriticism allows us to understand “real” places by understanding their fundamental fictionality. And vice-versa, of course. We understand “fictional” spaces by grasping their own levels of reality as they become part of our world”

(p. 126)

Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical approach to literature highlights the shift from author-centred to geo-centred interpretations, centralising the notion of space across literary representations of places. The geocritical approach generally shares a common room with the ecological approach, which aims to examine the impact of human culture on a particular environment. As an approach, ecocriticism documents human interactions with nature to maintain and sustain the ecological life of the region. Taken together, both approaches are exploratorily and flexibly used in inquiries concerning nature, raising consciousness on the ways in which literature and regional geographical ecologies and environment can mutually shape one another. By understanding these intricate links involving ecology and environment, the varied facets of meaning involving specific places and their surrounding environment can be presented.

The main argument of the paper, therefore, is the significance of specific regional and environmental locations; they do not merely serve as passive objects of “settings”, “locale”, or “coastal town”; instead, these places play a symbolic role as ‘characters’ in the novel, shaping the lives of the central characters. The paper personifies the realistic traits of the major settings of the novel, shaping and contributing to the lives of the seafarers and islanders. The novel is set on Pate Island in the Lamu Archipelago, linked to the Indian Ocean on the Kenyan coast. By analysing the interconnectedness of places, people, and the environment, their experiences against the very backdrop of oceanic configurations are brought to the fore. More broadly, however, the geocritical reading of *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) enables the relational understanding of the regional and environmental geographies and ecologies to accentuate the liveliness of nature and place, revealing the importance of inhabited spaces surrounding the port town and its heritage culture. In literary discourse, the sights of islands are almost always associated with their alienation, but these disciplinary approaches and their mutual critical inquiry about the space, place, and nature dispel this idea by enhancing the importance of the coastal town through the depictions of its rich

geographical and ecological resources that help in the preservation of marine lives. This unique exploration, therefore, helps to integrate coastal territory into this paper owing to its distinguishing features and adds depth and meanings to spatial representations in literary discourses.

The Dragonfly Sea is selected primarily because the details in Owuor's quest are used to describe the nuanced meanings associated with the coastal region, particularly the Swahili Sea and the port town of Pate, which can simultaneously be traced in her thesis (Owuor, 2015). Specifically, the novel is the direct result of Owuor's work and fieldwork carried out surrounding the Swahili coast and her interactions with the seafarers, particularly Haji Gora Haji, a seaman and a renowned poet from Tumbatu Island. The protagonist, Ayaana, resembles Mwamaka Sharifu, who, in 2002, declared a Chinese descendant. Her interactions with the real-life characters lead her to colour readers' perceptions about Pate Island and the Indian Ocean. It is these real-world interactions which bear resemblance to the real-life experiences of the seafarers and islanders and their distinguished relationships with the sea that form the motivation for the selection of this very text. The somewhat realistic representation of the place, thus, accords privilege to the employment of spatial and geographical inquiries, as the following discussion will reflect.

METHODOLOGY

Textual analysis is conducted to unlock the layered meanings and inferences from the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* and locate precisely the geographical territories. This approach also uses the thematic analysis of the text to critically evaluate the themes, emphasising space. By doing so, this indicates a paradigm shift in literary analysis by prioritising the coastal region over inland society. The close reading of the novel, therefore, helps to highlight the significance of the coastal region not just geographically but also culturally and historically. The analytical observation of the landscape enables us to trace the major settings of the novel as major "characters" affecting the lives of individuals. By employing this specific observation, the research paper might be able to showcase the littoral society's contribution to sustaining the ocean rim. That is, by focusing on the socio-cultural and historical aspects of the eastern coastal rim of Pate Island, its people and the sea, this small area significantly contributes to sustaining the ocean with the help of the islanders and seafarers who are regular visitors of the sea. This unique investigation of space, people, and the ocean adds a significant oceanic view to the literary discourse and brings oceanic studies to the centre to examine how regions and locals mutually enrich one another. This interconnectedness might raise awareness of the ways in which people and their relationships with the sea can simultaneously corroborate to ensure the longevity of marine life. By scrutinising the interconnectedness of region, people, and environment, their mutual portrayal sustains how the coastal areas are perceived.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The existing scholarly discussion of the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* focuses on the aspects of ecology, Kenyan oceanic encounters, and Eastern African maritime imagination. Existing scholarship has adequately engaged with the significant role the Indian Ocean plays in shaping the eastern coastal rim. Attention is paid to locals' indigenous knowledge about the sea, and their exposure to the sea contributes to the maritime management of the coastal region. The present research work

highlights the significant research gap with a focus on the regional approach of the islanders towards their surrounding world. The paper analyses the relationship between place, people, and environment to understand the coastal community and coastal rim better.

The following two literature reviews present the oceanic viewpoints to analyse the text that showcases the significant relations of Africa and Asia and how the Indian Ocean connects both territories, making a path for the comparative analysis of the shared history and culture. Siwei Wang (2023) examines how waterways can fundamentally shape Afro-Sino relations, and its complicated temporalities and maritime connectivity. The analysis signifies the role of the Indian Ocean in building the relationship between Africa and China to consider in the context of the Global South. Kosgei (2022) examines the materialistic knowledge of the ocean, which produces an intimate and personal oceanic cartography with the seafarers and islanders. Her work contributes to Indian Ocean Studies by analysing the indigenous knowledge of seafarers and islanders involving the oceans and surrounding environment. This signifies the materiality of the ocean rather than romanticising the ocean. Both these research work contributes to Indian Ocean studies by making a shift from land-based inquiry to water-centric inquiry.

Wang and Kosgei's analysis supports the idea of locating the place in the centre not as a geographical territory but as a major impact on history and culture. The significant role of the Indian Ocean in the novel makes it a powerful character to sustain regional life. Nirojita Guha (2021), in her thesis, "Making Sense of the Sea in Nautical Literature", talks about the portrayal of the sea in the Nautical Literature of Europe and America through the lens of spatial criticism. In her thesis, she traced the historical and mythological significance of the sea. She pays attention to theorising the sea with spatial, cultural, and heterotopia lenses to bring the literariness of the sea. This purview adds novel insights to the existing discussion on how spatial-temporal analysis brings the role of the Indian Ocean to the centre with a focus on an association with the people.

Evis Kertusha (2023), in her thesis, explores the distinguished relationship between the sea and people by locating the ocean as a sight of memory and how major characters connect themselves with the deep sense of memory and return to their roots in the novel. This represents the ocean as a metaphor for emotions, memory and attachment. The present paper also incorporates communication, keeping the people and their sea in the centre to examine the regional functionality of the Kenyan coast.

The study also incorporates the eco aspects to highlight the major concerns like island sinking and the sea levels rising. Akhter and Islam (2024) examines the environmental impact of rapid urbanisation in Kolkata through the lens of urban ecocriticism. By analysing Lahiri's depiction of urban development, the paper emphasises literature's role in understanding and critiquing real-world environmental changes. In this context, Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) also deals with the eco life of the small town of Pate and the effect of colonisation and globalisation, raising the question of eco security. Arunya and Kumar (2024) explore the deep ecological principles in Roy's novel. It examines how the novel reflects the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, emphasising the need for ecological consciousness and sustainable living. The paper highlights the literature's role in promoting ecological awareness and responsibility. Similarly, Owuor's fictional work pays attention to the relationship between humans and non-humans with an emphasis on the realistic attributes of the non-human components of Pate Island and the Indian Ocean, which becomes an integral part of the human world of the islanders and seafarers.

The paper signifies the importance of the islandscape and waterscape by paying attention to Pate Island and the Indian Ocean to analyse the role place plays in shaping the lives of the people who inhabit the shore. Place is a method of understanding human relations and enhancing the meaning of the surrounding world.

GEOCRITICAL ECOLOGIES AND ECOCRITICAL GEOLOGIES IN *THE DRAGONFLY SEA*

The convergence of geocriticism and ecocriticism brings inquiry about the co-relation between literary representation of the regional geography and environment. In this regard, the idea of geocriticism is geo-centred in nature, which shares a much more common inquiry of geo-centred and eco-centred concerns and both mutually complement, correct and inspire each other. This convergence helps to inquire about the regional geography and environment and put forward the question of how fictional portrayals of locations deepen our comprehension of real-world places and how regional environments and locations enhance the literary representations of the spatial aspects.

The current paper explores the “geocritical ecologies” in Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). Her lively description of the island life adds much more sense to the place. As Amitav Ghosh (2007) writes, “Those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a ‘sense of place’” (p.136). The concept of geocriticism helps to achieve the sense of the place by making sense of the real-life world that Owuor truly justifies in her description of Pate Island and her unrequited love of the Indian Ocean. The changing seasons, the symbolic significance of the ocean, moon, boat and sky, Pate’s rich flora and fauna, mangrove jungle and her careful description of the underwater creatures add much more sense to the island setting. These ecologies build a harmonious balance between nature, people and place.

Owuor’s symbolic description of the moon reflects a deep sense of uncertainty in life. The way the moon changes its shape signifies that nothing is constant in life. In the same way, the moon symbolically resembles the life of Ayanna, the central character of the novel. She goes through many ups and downs in her life and always struggles for her identity. The sight of the infinite ocean and the sailing boat indicates the hope of homecoming, which is a part of the relief for the islanders. The sight of *dau* symbolises the idea of hope for Ayaana. As Owuor writes, “Every day, in secret, she went to and stood by the portals of this sea, her sea. She was waiting for someone” (Owuor, 2019, p. 3). Ayaana waits for her father, whom she has never met. She hopes that one day, the ocean will bring him back. Thus, for islanders and particularly the families of the seafarers, homecoming boats are blessings.

The ocean’s representation in the novel is not just an infinite waterbody. Owuor’s description of the ocean is as realistic and lively as the description of the people. For instance, the ocean plays a significant role in developing the relationship between Ayaana and Muhidin, who are beautifully represented as a father-daughter duo in the novel. When Munira discovered this relationship and asked how did you meet, Muhidin replied, “Ocean brought us together” (Owuor, 2019, p. 57). The ocean acts as a mediator to build the relationship between them, and later in the novel, both Ayaana and Muhidin become close to the ocean as one of their constant companions. The ocean symbolises a bridge to connect both of them together.

The novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (Owuor, 2019) is a documentation of the symbolic description of the 'Dragonfly' as an indication of changing seasons. The journey of dragonflies is considered optimistic as they bring monsoon season, which Pate islanders call "Dragonfly Season" (p. 16). The presence of dragonflies brings positivity because their arrival is auspicious for bringing monsoons and sustaining the ecological life of the island territory. In the novel, some creatures adapt to the changing seasons of the island. Their lively nature helps to understand the ecology of the Pate town. Owuor (2019) writes, "Harbingers- the birds borne on the *matlai* wind, sun-tinted dragonflies, moon-dancing swordfish, sand-nibbling parrot fish- spoke of the changing seasons of the earth, of its dying stars, and of melting time" (p. 68).

This description shows the ability of the creatures to understand the changing seasons, which adds much more environmental sense to the region. The close reading of the text enables us to trace the rich ecological life of the region, which not only adds sense to the place but also becomes an integral part of the lives of the islanders. For instance, When Ayaana asked Munira about their name, she replied, "We have a name'- 'A sky name', '*Wa Jauza*', An entire constellation" (Owuor, 2019, p.33). It shows how individuals depend on these ecologies to escape their everyday problems and how the symbolic significance of sky, moon and ocean can heal Ayaana. Pate Islanders have never accepted her; on the other hand, the ocean, moon, and sky have been her healers and acted as therapists. This unique relationship of Ayaana with the natural resources brings the realistic feature of nature and indicates the importance of nature in life. This uniqueness of the natural environment reflects their lively nature and concern for healing human life. It shows their understanding towards the people who inhabit the space. Ayaana's frequent escape to the mangrove jungle and black shore draws an ordinary relation between Ayaana and Pate's rich ecologies. Ayaana's underwater polysensory experience helps her to sense the sea in a better way. As Owuor (2019) writes:

"Time-dissolving floating. Solitude and wordlessness, and everything travelled toward an unknown beckoning. Even she did. But underwater, she did not worry about labelling things in order to contain them. Feeling, sensing, experiencing- that was enough for knowledge. The sea had many eyes now hers were another pair"

(pp. 19-20)

The underwater sensuous experience brings a moment of enlightenment and frees Ayaana from her worries. It shows the ocean's ability to provide a comfortable space for Ayaana. Polysensoriality emphasises the sensuous experience of the place. Tuan (1977) writes:

"Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch to the active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolisation"

(p. 8)

It enables an individual's understanding of the place using touch, hearing, and smell. This polysensory experience of the sea helps Ayaana understand the sea through sensuous experiences, which bring the real-life experience of the place and add sense to the regional ecologies and geographies. Rodaway (2002) also views sensuous geographies as a way to explore the immediate sensuous experience of the world. This sensuous experience further indicates the more integrated view of the role of the senses in geographical understanding. His viewpoint further indicates the role of senses as both, first, help to create a relation with the world, and second, how senses create the structure of the space and help to define the place.

Owuor's description of sea creatures adds informative acknowledgement about the underwater world, which helps to understand the fauna of the coastal region—the description of dolphins (p. 18), jellyfish (p. 19), and electric eels (p. 19). These sea creatures act as guides by showing the ocean's way. As Owuor writes, "A pod of dolphins acted like ship guides, leaping in and out of the ways before they disappeared" (p. 224). That is how the underwater world replicates life. Owuor's rich description of flora and fauna and islanders' relationship with the place and nature brings a much more real representation of the place. Munira's art of making rose water, using various herbs to heal wounds, and making rose scent shows the rich flora of the region. 'The aroma of rose, clove, *langilangi*, and moonflower (Owuor, 2019, p. 4). This regional geography and its ecological richness enhance the relationship between space, place, and nature and create a live image of the place, which makes it more accessible.

SPACE AS A CHARACTER IN THE DRAGONFLY SEA

The above discussion of the rich ecological life of Pate Island and the surrounding world contributes to understanding the eastern coastal region. The regional approach of understanding the place through the locals' lens brings a lively image of the place. Thus, the inquiry is geo-centred and brings heterogeneous images of the place in view. The exploration of geocritical ecologies brings a closer understanding of the place. As Tally writes, "Geocriticism explores, seeks, surveys, digs into, reads, and writes a place; it looks at, listens to, touches, smells, and tastes spaces" (Westphal, 2011, p. 22). It shows the explorative nature of geocriticism, which is flexible and brings much more inquiry to the place. This experiential approach helps to outline the realistic features of the place and its literary representation and how both enrich each other.

The paper analyses the two major settings of the novel; 'Pate Island' and the 'Indian Ocean'. These settings do not merely act as a 'passive setting', 'background' or 'locale' for the narratives; rather, they are the prominent 'characters' in the novel which shape the life of the characters, particularly the islanders and seafarers. Both these settings associate the islanders economically, socio-culturally and emotionally. Pate islanders depend on the Indian Ocean for their livelihood as they are shipbuilders, mariners and seafarers. Some major characters like Ayaana, Muhidin and Munira have a deep emotional attachment to the place that juxtaposes the idea of survival on the island. As Owuor (2019) writes, "One who goes to Pate does not return. Only a wail resounds" (p. 6). This statement is about Muhidin's relations with the place and how he comes back to his roots. This also indicates how, mutually, Pate and Muhidin help each other to survive. Another incident marks Ayaana's journey to China for her studies, and eventually, she comes to Pate. Munira also left once and found her way back to her roots. This indicates the emotional and psychological interconnectedness of the people and place. Owuor's description of Pate Island has a humanistic characteristic in the way that the island has a distinguished mood. Pate Island is able to set the survival norms for the people, and its inseparable relation with the major characters gives it a humanistic characteristic which acts as a character and contributes to shaping the lives of the individual in the novel.

Owuor's lively nature of the Pate Island enables the Pate to act as a 'major character' in the novel. For instance, Muhidin, one of the experienced seamen, shared a unique relationship with Pate Island. There is juxtaposition in his relationship with Pate Island. For instance, Muhidin does not want to be on the island, and he ends up being there as if the island does not want him to leave the place. "When Muhidin returns to Pate after many years, it looks smaller, shabbier, more

derelict, isolated and even more preoccupied with trivialities” (Owuor, 2019, p. 27). Owuor’s lively description of the island helps to understand the space one place occupies. Muhidin sees Pate as a small, isolated sight, a place with less relevance which was prominent once upon a time. It shows the changing scenario of a particular place within a time and an individual’s perception of the place. Muhidin often feels a deep sense of belonging and a strange attachment to Pate. This belongingness does not permit Muhidin to leave the island as if both need each other to survive. Owuor’s Pate Island has a welcoming nature that expects new visitors frequently; one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Pate is its hospitality. Owuor writes:

“There were those who, unknown even to themselves, belonged to the island and were covenanted to stay. There were those who tried to leave but never could. And there were far more than expected who left, only to show up again years later. Some entered the portals of the land, sometimes naked, sometimes alone, sometimes naked and alone and even dead. The island renamed these. Some tendered false names; Pate did not mind. Names are mere place markers. Their manners alone established their character, and this determined if they should stay or leave. Other persons crossed into Pate to override its timeless codes. These, the would-be reformers, came, saw, scowled, sulked, scolded, and stipulated that the island transform itself for them. Invariably, the right winds swooped in to sweep these away”

(p. 68)

Owuor's Pate Island is a sight of openness, which indicates the arrival of anyone on the island. Thus, many outsiders and strangers are visiting the Pate. At the same time, Pate can only accommodate those who can fulfil the criteria of survival. It brings the realistic image of Pate Island, where the island has a unique feature to set certain rules about island life. Individuals should carry appropriate norms and ethics to match the criteria to survive on the island. And if people fail to meet the criteria, Pate simply abandons them. This unique nature of the island affects the life of an individual, which decides who can and cannot survive on the island. This brings a more realistic socio-cultural space for the island to understand the functionality of the coastal region. This also shapes the lives of the characters; for instance, Muhidin wish to leave Pate, but somehow, he cannot. Ayaana once left Pate to study in China, eventually coming back to her roots. It shows how places need them and how they also need the places. This yearning creates an inseparable relationship among them. Kosgei (2022) observation of the Indigenous knowledge about the sea highlights this unique bond between the islanders, seafarers and the major location of the Indian Ocean and Pate Island.

Pate Island is linked to the Indian Ocean, which also serves as a major character in the novel. The Indian Ocean is a sight of belief, a comfort space, an irreplaceable companion for the characters. The interconnectedness between the islanders and the ocean adds much liveliness to the narratives. They share a common space and become each other’s companions. Muhidin, an experienced seafarer, knows very well how to read the ocean. Unlike Pate Island, the ocean also has distinguished rules for the people. As Owuor writes, “There were unstated rules about who could and could not swim in the sea... He knew how the sea was with certain people, how it needed them, and they it (2019, p.18)”. It shows the sense of dependency between the people and the ocean; both need each other equally. This also draws our attention to how a place and its inhabited space enrich each other. Muhidin sings for the ocean, showing the ocean as one of the constant companions of the Muhidin, who lives a solitary life on the island. "The Ocean I am/ How can I drawn" (Owuor, 2019, p. 46).

Another incident marks Muhidin’s keen knowledge about the ocean and how polysensory experience helps Ayaana to understand the sea.

“...with the other senses as well as touch, she could discover dimensions in liquid, place, space, and timelessness; how to tell the mood of water and discern some of its intentions; how to intuit with inner eyes. In their aquatic world, in conversations with water, feeling the currents on her skin and tasting its salt on her tongue...”

(Owuor, 2019, p. 49)

This polysensory experience builds Ayaana’s ability to converse with the ocean, which teaches her the possible ways to understand the meaning of her existence. This experience also enriched her understanding of marine knowledge. The ocean’s ability to talk gives a realistic picture of the unique relationship between Ayaana and the ocean. Ayaana grew up seeing the sea, sharing her sorrow and grief with the ocean. When Ayaana leaves Pate Island and travels to China, on her voyage, the ocean keeps asking her the question, “‘*Ni Shi Shui?*’ (Owuor, 2019, p. 204)”. ‘Who are you?’ Another conversation appears when Ocean becomes the mediator for meeting Ayaana and Muhidin as a father-daughter duo in the novel when Ayaana asks Muhidin to read the ocean.

“She asked, “And the ocean, she is saying what?”
Muhidin listened. “‘Who are you?’” he interpreted for her. “‘Who are you?’”
“I am Ayaana!” she screamed to the water below, leaning over the edge”

(Owuor, 2019, p. 37)

This conversation reflects the ability of the sea and the islanders to listen to each other and to reciprocate the messages and meaning. Later in the novel, when Muhidin does not return from the sea, Ayaana urges them to talk to the sea – “I will speak with the water.” But the more she walked, the more she felt the sea come close to her, and if the sea was close to her, so was Muhidin” (Owuor, 2019, p. 373). Her attempt to read the water does not give any sign of the Muhidin.

“She lifted up her arms and stretched them over the water. She waited for a tingle at the tip of her fingers, something to indicate that Muhidin had heard her heart screaming out to him.
Nothing.
Nothing.”

(Owuor, 2019, p. 176)

This unique communication between Ayaana and the ocean is possible through the ocean’s ability to listen and respond to the message. This lively nature marks a distinguishing feature that helps Ayaana to find Muhidin. Unfortunately, the sea did not give any sign of positivity. This unique relationship between islanders and the ocean is possible through people’s knowledge and their daily experience of the sea. Owuor’s description of the aesthetic sight of the sea reveals the importance of the sea as God. For Ayaana sea has carried her Muhidin, and thus, it becomes an auspicious sight as it “informed both God and the sea that Muhidin was her heart, her spirit, her breath. She told God and the sea that they owed her his life” (2019, p. 390). For Munira, the sea acts as a powerful entity. She has a deep faith and a sense of gratitude towards the sea. When Ziriyab went missing for many days, Munira asked the sea for help. “Munira had gone to the water to hurl prayers into its depths. She pleaded with the sea, parading within its waves” (Owuor, 2019, p.103).

Both these settings, Pate Island and the Indian Ocean, serve as the 'main characters' of the novel, participate actively and remain the main reason for survival for the island people. Tracing the humanist traits of Pate Island and the Indian Ocean gives a novel perspective to understand the place, bringing a unique representation in literary discourse. It requires a long experiential approach to understand the place adequately and to reciprocate to make sense of the surroundings.

The major characters in the novel, particularly Muhidin and Mehidi, can understand the ocean well because of their daily exposure and observation of the water. Ayaana's emotional attachment to the sea brings the idea of belonging, and the sea becomes her lifelong companion. Thus, people's ability and knowledge to understand the surrounding environment through daily life experiences enhances the understanding of the place and its significance.

Westphal's geocritical approach helps to examine how literature and place can shape one another and make sense of the surrounding world. These humanistic traits help shape characters' lives and show their interconnectedness. This unique reading of locating the place in the centre and understanding its lively nature brings a realistic image of Pate Island and its mundane space, people's beliefs, and their association with the island. There is a need to preserve the culture of such territory to highlight the everyday struggle of the islanders and seafarers. Their lives are much more complex compared to mainland society. The idea of sustainability and living in harmony is possible because of the people's ability to feel and understand the place and surrounding environment, including the ways in which it reciprocates the same to maintain harmony.

THE PATE ISLAND AND LITTORALITY

The reading of geocritical ecologies in *The Dragonfly Sea* traces the rich geographical and ecological sight of Pate Island, adding much more sense to the island setting. The present paper centralises the coastal territories to highlight the importance of their functionality. As Moorthy and Jamal (2010) indicate in *New Conjunctures in Maritime Imaginary* writes, "to write a story of an ocean, then, is to write the story of those who have traversed it, who have inhabited its shores, and who, through the power of the imagination, have conjured its many meanings" (p.11). Moorthy and Jamal's observations, therefore, highlight the contribution of the coastal people in maintaining and understanding the sea, emphasising the interconnectedness between the sea and its people. The literary representations of coastal territory expand seafarers' indigenous knowledge about the sea. How better can one feel and read the ocean, and how much more informative their knowledge is about marine life? These inquiries might highlight the importance of the island territories and push these questions to the centre to raise consciousness on the functionality of these territories.

Isabel Hofmeyr's idea of "amphibious" inspires the present research work to manifest decentring and re-centring, which reflects the analysis of locations from land to sea, inland to littoral. As Mohan (2019) succinctly summarises, "Her point that the Indian Ocean is both place and method provides a new way for us in literary and cultural studies to rethink the methodologies that have tended to ossify around the centre-periphery model of European modernity and reactionary postcolonialism" (pp. 3-4). The idea of centralising the oceanic viewpoints and littoral space in the centre enhances the understanding of the coastal region. Thus, the paper reveals the dominant ideas about the coastal zone, which has since been largely alienated. Owuor's detailed description of Pate Island bolsters one's understanding of coastal towns and their shores, including the intricate and inseparable relationships among their inhabitants. Such a locale integrates inner and outer meanings of life, enriching a greater sense of its surrounding worlds. By advancing this inquiry, the observation that the rich heritage culture of the island bears a rousing contrast to the mainland's cultural configurations could be presented.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the researcher brings the following three observations to light: First, the paper highlights the literary importance of critical inquiry in the area of Literature and Geography. It brings the emerging aspect of 'Geocritical Ecologies' to understand the significance of the place and surrounding environment to enrich the lives of the locals. Second, the paper draws attention to the distinguishing characteristics of the major settings of the novel, namely, Pate Island and the Indian Ocean. The geocritical reading of the novel enables one to trace the lively features of the 'place' that become the essential 'character' to shape the lives of the islanders. The third aspect of the paper pushes to the centre of discussions the significant places, the island settings and the Indian Ocean, areas that are generally undervalued and sanitised.

The understanding of the coastal region adds much more sense of the place and expands the understanding of the functionality of the coastal region. Thus, the study contributes to enhancing the regional functionality of the coastal region by incorporating geo and ecological lenses. Simultaneously, it interrogates the people's roles in understanding and enhancing the surrounding worlds with their abilities to nurture the spaces they inhabit. At the same time, the environment and places also reciprocate the same values and beliefs to maintain the lives of the people, indicating, in one way, our efforts to integrate the regional approach into the studies involving the eastern coastal rim of Kenya. However, the paper is limited to focusing on the Eastern coast, which indicates the need for prospective investigations to scrutinise the western coast, connecting oceanic territories with other countries, for instance, Australia, in the context of the Australian/Western perspective. This might enhance and contribute to the oceanic discussions of the Western perspectives and the role the regional spaces play in shaping the Western coast off of the Indian Ocean.

REFERENCES

- Akhter, Z., & Islam, M. S. (2024). Urban ecocriticism and Kolkata's metamorphosis: A narrative exploration of environmental crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 30(1), 36-49.
- Arunya, S., & Kumar, V. V. (2024). Deep ecology and environmental sustainability: A study of Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 30(3), 92-104.
- Ghosh, A. (2007). *Incendiary circumstances: a chronicle of the turmoil of our times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Guha, N. (2021). *Making sense of the sea in Nautical literature* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Banaras Hindu University.
- Ingersoll, K. A. (2016). *Waves of Knowing: A seascape epistemology*. Duke University Press.
- Kertusha, E. (2023). Ocean and Belonging in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*. Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia.
- Kosgei, J. (2022). Swahili seafarers' musings and sensuous seascapes in Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*. In *History and Violence in Contemporary Kenyan Fiction* (pp. 6-19). Routledge.
- Mohan, A. (2019). The contours of a field: Literatures of the Indian Ocean. *Postcolonial Text*, 14(3 & 4), 1-12.
- Moorthy, S., & Jamal, A. (2010). Introduction: New conjunctures in maritime imaginaries. In *Indian Ocean Studies* (pp. 19-49). Routledge.
- Owuor, Y. A. (2015). 'Dragonfly Monsoon' and Imagined Oceans: In search of poem-maps of the Swahili Seas [Unpublished Master's thesis]. The University of Queensland.
- Owuor, Y. A. (2019). *The Dragonfly Sea*. United States: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Pearson, M. N. (2006). Littoral society: The concept and the problems. *Journal of World History*, 353-373.
- Rodaway, P. (2002). *Sensuous geographies: Body, sense and place*. Routledge.

- Tally, R. T., Jr., & Battista, C. M. (2016). Introduction: Ecocritical geographies, geocritical ecologies, and the spaces of modernity. In *Ecocriticism and geocriticism: Overlapping territories in environmental and spatial literary studies* (pp. 1-15). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Wang, S. (2023). The aqueous form and the Afro-Sino encounter in Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 59(5), 577-592.
- Westphal, B. (2011). *Geocriticism: Real and fictional spaces*. (R. Tally Ed.) Springer.