

Book review

Dust. Yvonne Adhiambo Owour. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013; pp 369.

Nelson Mlambo

Polytechnic of Namibia

Dust is Yvonne Adhiambo Owour's debut novel which has captivated the world literary scene. Set in East African Kenya, the novel chronicles universal truths about the cruel beauty of life – it is an epitome of human experiences in their entirety.

The Kenya presented in *Dust* spans through the country's historical vicissitudes as portrayed through the lamentations of one single family. The plot is set in motion by the post-election violence of 2007 and as the plot unfolds; Owour's fictionalisation of history carries the reader into a tumultuous vortex of human frailty, tears, blood, cruelty, corruption, and love; and above all the resilience and inextinguishable shimmer of hope that defines human life.

What is most captivating in *Dust* is the author's use of style. The novel starts in *medias res* as Ajany's brother, Odidi is running for his life and then his murder which sets Ajany into a country in turmoil and whose history has been equally tumultuous and violent. The plot is enriched by the fragmentary manner of Owour's writing which captures the hallucinatory sequences of a memory haunted by history's wounds, hopes, thirstiness and aspirations. The inventiveness of the prose is marked by short, terse sentences which make the novel poetic, incantatory, arsenic and visceral. This makes the novel incoherently lyrical as the narration moves backward and forward, reflecting the murkiness and fragmentary nature of human thought processes. The density with which the novel is narrated gives it a deliberate density, impressionistic tone and ruggedness which set Owour's style as one of the most rare to come out of Africa. Her style is fragmentary and filled with lapses, reminding one of Dambudzo Marechera's writings. Owour capitalises on her poetic licence to present raw, fresh and unusual imagery which captivates the keen reader in a confounding manner. However, the density of the language and the fusion of unlikely words in one phrase can leave some readers lost in this literary abyss which she has crafted. Similarly, the winding and splintered plot can be confusing for some readers, though in my view this manner of writing is purposive. It is meant to capture and mirror the shattered nature of human life, how unfathomable human thoughts and perceptions are and also how disorienting human history is. On the whole, the style used in this novel will make an interesting case for psychoanalytic theorisations.

Through the harrowing account of the Oganda family, the novel universalises human experience using the Kenyan history as a microcosm of what happens, has happened and can happen anywhere else in the world. It is a philosophical novel about human experience; about what human beings do to each other and how history is a testament of the cords that bind human beings together, irrespective of their colour and creed. From Tom Mboya to Gordon Brown; from the war in Burma as well as King George's involvement and the unsung Africans who participated in that war to Kofi Annan's voice in world politics and post 2007 political violence in Kenya, the novel recounts the historical connectedness of human lives on earth. Kenya's bloody history of the Mau Mau and the British in the 1950s is recounted in fragmentary snippets through the characters of Hugh Bolton and his son Isaiah William as a way of showing how the ghosts of history will always haunt the world and how these ghosts need an earnest tripartite of truth,

justice and reconciliation. However, the author laments the corrosive and immanent “national economy of secrets” where Kenya’s official languages are “English, Kiswahili, and Silence.” It is the later that the author addresses at great length and the act of fictionalising history becomes a courageous leap of silencing silence and resisting obscurity. The novel handles this induced national amnesia in a poetic manner through seeking the truth that has been deliberately hidden in history. That is why the author celebrates the role of creativity by mentioning the fourth language which is that of “memory”; a language best expressed through fiction like in the novel *Dust*.

Right from the beginning another outstanding concern addressed in *Dust* is violence. The journey motif which colours the novel is evidenced from the poetic mysteriousness with which the novel begins. This is furthered by the dirge-like tone which colours the greater part of the novel and the image of a running man deepens this funereal sense and atmosphere of violence, brutality, murder, guns and treachery. The “mucus and saliva, blood and bitterness from a palate cut” becomes a mantra in the novel; symptomatic of a nation and indeed a world in mourning and in despair. The harrowing fragments of the Oganda family’s history as each one of the family members is given space to reminisce, allows the reader to unearth gruesome secrets and find answers to unanswered questions. Even though through authorial intrusion we learn that still “Words are so small. They cannot show the womb of [the] heart”. The Oganda family is presented as dysfunctional and it is this dysfunctionality which gives it form and this form is symbolic of a national family which is equally dysfunctional and looking for answers, healing and closure. And what comes out at the end of the novel is that though traumatic and utterly violent, there are still astonishing vestiges of resilience and hope – what Achebe would call “the anthills of the savannah”.

In conclusion, *Dust* is therefore an amazing novel from the Caine Prize-winning writer Owour, which resurrects and fictionalises the Kenyan history. In this poetic and dense novel, content and form are balanced so as to represent the plurality of Kenyan life. I found the novel to be charming and repulsive, both in its style and theme; and it is that oxymoronic flavour to the novel which makes it an interesting read and a special case for literary theorists. The mercurial nature of Kenya has been ably painted and the paradoxes of human nature explored. I will recommend this novel to a serious bibliophile only.

Dr Nelson Mlambo is an academic, lecturer and researcher specialising in Literature and Communication. He has a PhD in English and has published three books. His latest book entitled *Trauma, Resilience and Survival Strategies in Crisis Times* was published in July 2014.