

METAFICTION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY KENYAN LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YVONNE ADHIAMBO OWUOR'S *DRAGONFLY SEA* AND KHADIJA ABDALLA BAJABER'S *THE HOUSE OF RUST*

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Abstract

This comparative study offers an in-depth analysis of metafiction and self-reflexivity in Yvonne AdhiamboOwuor's *Dragonfly Sea* and Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust*. Both novels employ innovative literary techniques to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, prompting readers to question the very nature of narrative. In *Dragonfly Sea*, protagonist Ayaana's introspective storytelling interrogates traditional ideas of authorship and investigates the ways memory shapes identity. In contrast, *The House of Rust* deploys self-referential strategies as its characters ponder their existence, break the fourth wall, and actively involve the reader in the unfolding story. This study also explores how Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber use intertextuality, allusions to other literary works, and cultural references to add richness and complexity to their narratives. The two novels share central themes such as women's empowerment and the construction of identity, using narrative approaches that challenge readers to reflect on the purpose and power of fiction. By threading these techniques throughout their work, both authors destabilize the boundary between fiction and reality, encouraging readers to contemplate not only the stories themselves but also the process and significance of storytelling. Both recent novels question conventional notions of truth, foreground multiple perspectives, and reveal the role of narrative in shaping both personal and collective identities.

Key words: Metafiction, Self-reflexivity, Intertextuality, Narrative Identity, Empowerment

Introduction

The inventive deployment of narrative techniques revitalizes contemporary literature, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dragonfly Sea* alongside Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* are prime examples of how metafiction and self-reflexivity can interrogate the porous boundaries between reality and fiction. This comparative study explores the ways these novels subvert conventional storytelling, inviting readers to become co-creators in the narrative process. In *Dragonfly Sea*, set on Pate Island in Kenya's Lamu Archipelago, Owuor crafts a lyrical meditation on identity, belonging, and the global currents that shape individual lives. Ayaana, the protagonist, experiences a profound personal evolution through introspective storytelling, ultimately blurring the lines between author and character. The narrative navigates complex historical and political terrains, from colonial legacies to migration and global geopolitics. By contrast, *The House of Rust* chronicles Aisha's mythic and fantastical quest through Mombasa, aided by a mystical vessel of bones. Abdalla Bajaber's novel, a bildungsroman infused with magical realism, dazzles with its vibrant imagery and incisive engagement with Swahili and Hadrami cultural identities. Both works employ metafictional and self-reflexive techniques—including unreliable narration, non-linear structures, the use of Swahili idioms, and layered literary allusions—to question the nature of narrative truth and the act of storytelling itself. The frequent breaking of the fourth wall transforms the reading experience into a participatory journey, drawing readers into the very fabric of the text. This essay examines the narrative strategies Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber utilize, illuminating their shared themes and highlighting their significant contributions to the evolution of contemporary Kenyan literature.

Overview of *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust*

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dragonfly Sea* unfolds primarily on Pate Island in Kenya's Lamu Archipelago, centring on Ayaana, a lonely child whose mother, Munira, faces community censure for her unmarried status. The mariner Muhidin's return, whom Ayaana chooses as her father, becomes a transformative moment, setting her on a journey across continents and cultures. Owuor's evocative, lyrical prose immerses readers in a world where the sea is not merely a backdrop but a living, shaping force, mirroring the ebb and flow of Ayaana's own development. The novel's unhurried pace allows for deep reflection on its themes, which range from coming-of-age and self-discovery to radicalisation, global resource competition, and the lasting impacts of colonialism and migration. As Ayaana travels beyond the confines of Pate Island, she encounters a tapestry of cultural influences and historical forces, making *Dragonfly Sea* both a personal narrative of growth and a broader meditation on the complexities of identity and belonging in a changing world.

Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* is an imaginative coming-of-age adventure set in Mombasa, following Aisha, a Hadrami girl who embarks on a fantastical maritime quest to find her missing father, a fisherman. Aboard a mystical vessel made of bones, accompanied by a learned, talking cat and other opinionated animals, Aisha faces formidable sea creatures and surreal challenges, culminating in a poignant confrontation with Baba wa Papa, the primordial shark. Upon rescuing her father, Aisha's anticipated return to normalcy is upended by the strangeness that lingers at home. Bajaber's debut novel is rich with magical realism and social commentary, weaving Swahili and Hadrami diasporic heritage into every page. Her vivid, observant writing captures the genuine complexity of adolescence: casting off illusions, wrestling with uncertainty, and forging one's own path despite societal expectations. *The House of Rust* stands out for its nuanced portrayal of female agency and its insightful exploration of the tensions between tradition and individuality.

Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity

Metafiction is a literary strategy that foregrounds the constructedness of a narrative, deliberately drawing attention to the boundaries between fiction and reality (Quendler 2001:15). Authors who deploy metafiction frequently break the illusion of seamless storytelling by employing self-aware narrators, experimental structures, intertextual references, and direct engagement with the reader—such as breaking the fourth wall. This conscious exposure of artifice invites readers to interrogate the nature of fiction, the storytelling process, and their own interpretive role.

Closely linked to metafiction, self-reflexivity—sometimes termed self-referentiality—occurs when a text or its creator turns inward to reflect on its own creation, conventions, or limitations (Rolf 2005:5). Self-reflexivity may manifest as commentary on the writing process, questioning of literary norms, or explicit acknowledgement of the text's constructed status. While metafiction encompasses a broad set of disruptive narrative techniques, self-reflexivity refers more specifically to moments when a narrative or its characters become conscious of their own fictionality or the mechanics of storytelling.

Common metafictional strategies include addressing the reader directly, exploring the act of writing within the narrative, constructing self-aware characters, and employing unconventional narrative forms. Self-reflexivity, as a component of metafiction, is evident when characters realise their fictional existence, narrators discuss narrative construction, or the text draws attention to its own narrative scaffolding. Both approaches are designed to foreground the artificiality of narrative, prompting readers to examine how stories are made, what they reveal or obscure, and how meaning is produced (Rolf 2005:6). This fosters a heightened, critical engagement, inviting readers to analyse both the author's intentions and the limits of fiction.

Dragonfly Sea and *The House of Rust* are exemplary in their integration of metafictional and self-reflexive techniques. Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber use these strategies not only to challenge traditional storytelling but also to encourage readers to question the very boundaries between fact and invention, and to reflect on the novelist's creative agency. The novels transcend entertainment, becoming meditations on the very act of storytelling and its implications.

Where mainstream narratives typically rely on linear plots, omniscient narrators, and a firm boundary between author, character, and reader, *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* subvert these conventions. Through nonlinear structures, unreliable narration, and characters who are, at times, aware of their own fictionality, these works foster ambiguity and interpretive complexity. Instead of immersion aimed at a single, stable meaning, they invite readers to dwell in uncertainty, producing a productive emotional dissonance that deepens engagement with the text and the very process of meaning-making.

Metafiction in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust*

In *Dragonfly Sea*, metafiction is intricately woven into the protagonist Ayaana's self-reflexive storytelling. The novel exhibits a heightened awareness of its narrative construction, with Ayaana not only recounting her life but actively situating herself as a character within her own story. This creates a layered, complex narrative structure that blurs the boundary between reality and invention, foregrounding the act of storytelling and the power dynamics that shape narrative authority. Ayaana's self-awareness as a narrator disrupts conventional ideas of authorship and opens a deeper examination of memory, truth, and the creation of meaning. In *The House of Rust*, Abdalla Bajaber employs self-referential techniques as Aisha,

the protagonist, reflects on storytelling and its role in shaping memory and identity. Through these metafictional strategies, both authors encourage readers to interrogate the nature of narrative and consider how stories impact personal experience and perception.

Use of Multiple Narrative Perspectives and Unreliable Narrators

Both texts challenge narrative reliability through limited perspectives and unreliable narrators, fundamentally reshaping the reader's relationship to the story (Wehling 28). Unreliable narration introduces ambiguity, requiring readers to navigate subjective accounts and question the veracity of events. Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber further complicate the narrative structure with non-linear timelines, flashbacks, and shifts between multiple points of view. These techniques deepen the narratives' complexity, offering a multidimensional exploration of events and character psychology.

By employing these methods, the authors immerse readers in stories where truth is elusive and meaning is contingent. The interplay of unreliable narrators, layered perspectives, and narrative self-consciousness invites readers to engage actively, discerning reality from fabrication. This narrative ambiguity is not merely a stylistic flourish; it is central to the novels' exploration of memory, identity, and the subjectivity inherent in storytelling. Through these innovative approaches, both novels cultivate a sense of uncertainty, prompting readers to become participants in the creation—and deconstruction—of meaning.

Use of Intertextuality and Allusions to Other Literary Works

Intertextuality, the notion that every literary work exists in dialogue with others, is fundamental to both *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* (Graham 2011:30; Barry 1995: 64). The novels are enriched by allusions, references, and echoes of other texts, situating their narratives within broader literary, cultural, and historical contexts. Intertextuality in these works is not solely decorative; it actively invites readers to make connections, interpret layered meanings, and appreciate the cultural and literary heritage that informs the novels.

Both authors make extensive use of Swahili idioms, proverbs, and sayings, grounding their texts in African cultural and linguistic traditions: “Mwendodaharihauishi” (Owuor 562), “Siri yamaishaniujasiri” (Owuor 175), “Kweliavumayebaharini papa kumbewengiwapo” (Owuor 35), “*A woman is like a rib, crooked—to straighten her would be to break her*” (Abdalla 15), “*Kindness is a debt to be repaid*” (Abdalla 107), and “*A good name illuminates itself. It glows even in the dark*” (Abdalla 262). Owuor's *Dragonfly Sea* also concludes with verses from the celebrated Swahili poem *Utendi wa Mwana Kuponu*, serving as a cultural epilogue:

Take this amulet, child, and secure it with cord and honour,

I will make you a chain of radiant pearl and coral, I will give you a clasp, fine without flaw, to wear on
your neck

Wash and perfume yourself and braid your hair; String jasmine and lay it on the counterpane

Adorn yourself in clothes like a bride and wear anklets and bracelets... Sprinkle rosewater on yourself.

Have rings on your fingers and,

Always, henna on the palms of your hands.

Dragonfly Sea's narrative also draws inspiration from historical events, such as the 2005 scholarship awarded to a Pate Island woman believed to be descended from a Ming dynasty mariner. By blending contemporary need, historical fact, and fiction, Owuor highlights the constructedness of narrative and the interplay between personal and collective memory.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

Both novels employ the technique of breaking the fourth wall, in which characters directly address the reader or acknowledge the artificiality of their narrative world (Wehling 2017:40; Brooker 1992:50). This strategy collapses the distance between text and audience, fostering a participatory relationship and inviting critical reflection on the nature of fiction. In *Dragonfly Sea*, the narrator captivates readers with interrogative statements and open-story formulas, prompting contemplation on the process and purpose of storytelling: “Later, he saw that, when exposed to du’k’s light, the parchment emitted an intimate attar that evoked sandalwood. What was it? A memory m’p’s paean to trade winds, ports, and travellers? What if the fragment was a flavoured piece from a foolish tale, one of those interminable *Alfa Lela Ulela* — *A Thousand and One Nights* gossip sheet?” (Owuor 2019:24) Owuor’s use of “Long, long ago...” situates the narrative within a tradition of oral storytelling, reinforcing its self-reflexive quality.

In *The House of Rust*, self-reflexivity is woven throughout the narrative as characters reflect on the limits and possibilities of storytelling, the reliability of fiction, and the role of the reader. Abdalla Bajaber’s novel employs magical realism and fantastical elements—speaking animals, mythic journeys, riddles, and surreal encounters—to draw attention to its own artifice, while also serving as a platform for social commentary. For example, the emotionally charged exchange between Hababa and Aisha on the topic of marriage (“Do you think it’s wrong for women to marry? Do you think you’re better than us?” (Abdalla 2021: 222) foregrounds generational and gender tensions.

A crucial thematic intersection in both novels is the empowerment of women, as seen through the protagonists’ defiance of gender norms and pursuit of autonomy—Ayaana through education and Aisha through adventure. These shared concerns further enrich the novels’ metafictional and self-reflexive dimensions, inviting readers to consider how narrative form and content together shape our understanding of identity, power, and possibility.

Self-Reflexivity in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust*

Both *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* utilise metafiction and self-reflexivity to cultivate characters who are acutely aware of their own fictional status. This self-consciousness adds a sophisticated layer to the narratives, enabling an exploration of the interplay between fiction and reality. These characters often break the fourth wall, directly addressing the reader and thereby disrupting conventional narrative boundaries. By acknowledging their own fictitiousness, they challenge the separation between tangible reality and the realm of fiction, compelling readers to examine deeper notions of truth, storytelling, and authorship. Through introspection, these characters interrogate their purpose, agency, and significance within the larger narrative, relying on narrative tropes, intertextuality, and self-aware commentary. This dimension of self-reflection enhances character complexity and invites readers to engage more thoughtfully with the unfolding story.

Characters Questioning Their Existence and Agency

In both novels, protagonists embark on profound journeys of introspection, prompting them to scrutinise their own existence, autonomy, and place within the narrative. By confronting societal norms and wrestling with internal dilemmas, Ayaana and Aisha recognise and resist the constraints imposed upon them. Metafiction and self-reflexivity become tools for examining intricate questions of identity and agency, particularly in moments of self-interrogation. Owuor (2019), for example, foregrounds the

artificiality of narrative and the complexity of representation by having Ayaana reflect on her own role as storyteller. This self-reflexive stance compels readers to analyse the text and consider their own role as interpreters, fostering a deeper understanding of the novels' thematic concerns. Ayaana's struggle with selfhood and experience models the act of inward reflection, prompting us to reconsider received truths and the representation of reality in literature. This method deepens the narrative and encourages readers' active participation in meaning-making.

The Role of Memory and Its Impact on Identity

Both Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber employ metafiction and self-reflexivity to probe the ways memory shapes perceptions of identity and reality. Their narratives illustrate that memory is not a static or objective facet of selfhood, but rather a dynamic force that continually reshapes one's understanding of the world and of the past. Self-reflexive techniques highlight the subjectivity and malleability of memory, exposing how it can be revised, manipulated, or even corrupted. In essence, both *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* offer nuanced explorations of the complex interplay between memory, identity, and the creation of personal narrative.

Comparing Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust*

While both novels are united in their use of metafictional and self-reflexive devices, their narrative strategies diverge in meaningful ways. *Dragonfly Sea* constructs an intricate, layered narrative that continually destabilises the boundaries between truth and fiction, drawing on literary allusions, embedded stories, and historical references. Owuor's approach foregrounds metafiction, enriching character and thematic development through intertextuality and narrative play. Conversely, *The House of Rust* places greater emphasis on self-reflexivity, with Aisha's journey serving as an extended meditation on identity, experience, and storytelling itself. The distinct methodologies reflect each author's aims in interrogating identity, power, and the meaning of narrative in comprehending existence.

Across both texts, the examination of art's relationship to reality is a central concern. By leveraging metafictional and self-reflexive moments, Owuor and Abdalla Bajaber blur the lines between fiction and reality, highlighting the subjectivity of truth and the constructed nature of narrative. These techniques prompt readers to question the story's authenticity and to consider the author's role as a mediator of meaning. In doing so, both works deepen our understanding of narrative complexity and the ways literature shapes our perceptions of the world.

Conclusion

The authors of *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* utilise metafiction and self-reflexivity as narrative strategies to construct an intricate framework that mirrors the multi-faceted essence of reality and questions the reader's understanding of truth. By employing intertextuality, the fusion of reality and imagination, and the dismantling of conventional narrative limitations, these novels encourage readers to scrutinise the trustworthiness of storytelling and adopt a more sophisticated comprehension of the world. The importance of metafiction and self-reflexivity in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* is quite significant. Both authors employ these literary strategies to question conventional narrative frameworks and explore intricate subjects such as memory, identity, and history. Owuor and Abdalla prompt readers to examine the essence of truth, fiction, and the author's role in shaping narratives by becoming self-aware and attentive to the act of storytelling. Furthermore, their use of metafiction and self-reflexivity is a potent

tool for scrutinising social norms and power hierarchies, offering a distinct perspective on the human condition. In general, these writings demonstrate the authors' skill in creating art and add to the current discussion about the potential and boundaries of literature. The novels *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* explore the concepts of metafiction and self-reflexivity. Both books feature elements that highlight storytelling skill, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. Owuor and Abdalla employ narrative approaches that challenge conventional ideas of representation and encourage readers to critically examine the author's authority and the production of truth.

To further examine the usage of metafiction and self-reflexivity in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust*, it is essential to explore the narrative structures employed by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and Khadija Abdalla. Both authors employ unorthodox narrative techniques that deepen the themes of their works. In *Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor skillfully utilises metafiction by incorporating multiple storylines that contain stories within stories. Ayaana's self-awareness as a narrator serves to interrogate the essence of narrative. Including historical events, such as the disclosure of the genealogy of Ming dynasty mariners, obscures the distinction between reality and imagination, highlighting the interdependence of individual stories with wider historical circumstances. The interaction between personal and collective narratives highlights the complex relationship between individual identity and global influences.

Abdalla's *The House of Rust* employs self-reflexivity to examine the inherent power relations in storytelling. Aisha's introspective journey is a figurative investigation into the storyteller's ability to act and take responsibility. Abdalla disrupts traditional storytelling conventions by incorporating imaginative elements such as talking animals and a boat made of fish bones. This prompts readers to reconsider the limits of their imagination and the distinction between fantasy and reality. The incorporation of Swahili idioms and proverbs underscores the novel's deep connection to a specific cultural milieu, accentuating the importance of storytelling as a cultural practice. Both works also feature unreliable narrators, adding an additional layer of complexity to the story. The narrators' lack of reliability prompts readers to doubt the accuracy of the events, thus emphasising the notion that memory, perception, and storytelling are inherently subjective. The implementation of nonlinear storytelling in both works heightens a sense of uncertainty, encouraging readers to actively engage with the text and establish relationships among seemingly unrelated elements.

The narrative patterns employed in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* are more than just stylistic choices. They play a crucial role in further examining identity, memory, and the socio-political concerns present in these novels. Owuor and Abdalla employ metafiction and self-reflexivity to prompt readers to negotiate the complex realm where reality and fiction intersect, encouraging them to actively create meaning. Whereas some critics might argue that metafiction and self-reflexivity might alienate readers or diminish a narrative's emotional resonance, these techniques in *Dragonfly Sea* and *The House of Rust* serve the opposite function. Rather than distancing the reader, they immerse the reader into the coherence of comprehension by recognising the construction of a story. By embracing the nature of storytelling, Owuor and Abdalla draw the reader closer to the protagonists' inner worlds and cultural reality, encouraging reflection rather than confusion.

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