Chapter 3
Non-Human, Non-Living, and Gender: Developments of African Magic Realism in Khadija Abdalla Bajaber and Sharon Dodua Otoo

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Abstract

The chapter deals with two recent novels from the field of African magic realism: Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* (2021) and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum* (2021), both dealing with gender issues through their young protagonists. It develops an analysis of the literary strategies that these two books employ in relation to time, space, animal beings and sentient objects. It is here argued that both writers make use of ecocritical and Afro-futurist elements, even though they fall into such genres only marginally. Some reflections are devoted to their similarities and differences from the writers who inaugurated anglophone African magic realism in the 1980s and 1990s. In its conclusion, the chapter relates Abdalla Bajaber's and Otoo's forms of magic realism to visions of African future(s) elaborated by some of the continent's contemporary thinkers.

Keywords

Anglophone African literature; Afro-futurism; Afro-Europe; African philosophy; ecocriticism.

Introduction: New Ways in African Magic Realism

This chapter focuses on two recent novels which display a marked — if not indeed extreme — originality in their themes and imagery. Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* (2021) and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*[1] (2021)[2] both deal with gender issues through plots revolving around (freedom of) travelling. They certainly belong to the genre of magic realism, with secondary traits of Afro-futurism and eco-fiction. However, the imageries of their magic realism are different: Abdalla Bajaber's novel is inhabited by humanized animal beings, while Otoo's plot is centered on sentient objects.

The following pages develop an analysis of the literary strategies that these two novels adopt to narrate gender issues through their protagonists. I argue that both Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo may be said to make use of ecocritical and Afro-futurist *topoi*, while not adhering to the tenets of such genres fully. Due attention will be devoted to their similarities and to differences from the so-called «third-generation African Writers» (Newell 2006: 182-191) who inaugurated anglophone African magic realism in the 1980s and 1990s — such as the Ghanaian Kojo Laing and the Nigerian Ben Okri. By way of conclusion, the chapter positions these two novels within theoretical visions of African future(s) formulated by some of the continent's contemporary thinkers.

Great as their similarities to, and differences from, those narrative genres may be, one should also consider *The House of Rust* and *Adas Raum* in their wider context. Nicoletta Vallorani (2022: 36) aptly calls attention to a recent flowering of sub-genres penned by African women writers who are still little known and who violate generic confines in order to propose radically new fictions. Although Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo are not explicitly influenced by science fiction and native cosmogonies (unlike the authors mentioned by Vallorani), they certainly belong to this general wave.

Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust*

The House of Rust, or at least its first half, is a fantastic sea-quest. Like the novel's author, Aisha lives in Mombasa with her family of Hadrami origins. As she is a girl, her life is supposed to be arranged for a future marriage: «You will make a happy household, God willing» (*HR*, 25). Against this, she pitches a determination that is experienced as a constant attitude: «On the twisting path she can imagine she is walking toward something rather than in between things» (*HR*, 3). When her beloved father, a shark-hunter, disappears at sea, she secretly

1 Original German title.

2 These two novels will be cited parenthetically within the text, with respectively *HR* and *AR* followed by page numbers.

embarks on a voyage after him against all odds, toward a mythical «undersea» (*HR*, 65) — a voyage also representing a way to escape gender oppression.

Daniela Fargione (2021: 57) presents Afro-futurism as a hybridization of different genres, including magic realism. This latter streak is certainly dominant in *The House of Rust*, which contains no sci-fi trope. All the same, it is appropriate to emphasize this novel's gender-related core because it certainly falls within the scope described by Fargione for the «aquatic turn of Afro-futurism» within the frame of «Blue Humanities», seen as intersecting feminism and feminist stories: «some Afro-futurist artists problematise feminist stories by expanding to water and oceanic forces of nonhumanness» (2021: 58).

First of all, this aquatic dimension offers Aisha (and readers) a change of perceptive experience, thus distancing itself from the dominant ocularcentrism in our approaches to the ocean, as Sidney Dobrin (2021: 175) notes: «the acoustics are all wrong on dry land […] She heard a long, echoing croon, the long whine. It was a sound she had never heard before and she was struck by its strange, nameless beauty» (*HR*, 66, 76). In line with Fargione's view, the sea is presented as a dynamic, more-than-human force, peopled by multiple subjectivities and representing an alterity which is often humanized:

> Philosophers here – or *there*, in the undersea, believe that some leviathans drag beings under water because they feel it as an act of love. They feel that the place above the water is some sort of hell and they must spring breathing things out of it. (*HR*, 65; italics in the text)

From such a peculiarly magic-realist perspective, therefore, *The House of Rust* falls within the scope of «blue ecocriticism» and of its «critical, ethical, cultural, and political positions that emerge from oceanic or aquatic frames of mind rather than traditional land-based approaches» (Dobrin 2021: i).

Bajaber's gender liberation is sought after through a non-human dimension. One of the key characters of this novel is Hamza, a magic, yellow, talking cat accompanying Aisha. Its voice is described as hummingly other-dimensional:

> his murmur feathering like palm leaves along her ear [… like during the Ramadan] You thought only in vibrations, stutter and stop and mind-numbing heaves […] a groundless elevation of the mind, which itself was a ringing dream. (*HR*, 96)

Hamza clearly plays a role akin to the folktale helper: in the realm of anglophone African magic realism, one model for this is constituted by the «folktale realism» of the Ghanaian Kojo Laing (1946-2017), who set some of his novels in an otherworldly realm which bears a resemblance to the folktale world of the Asante people (Deandrea 2002: 92-108). A similar role is played by another animal element, the skeleton boat which appears magically to transport Aisha through her outlandish ordeals, and whose ribs will become swords for her to

fight with: «The boat was a skeleton of some sort of… fish […] A half-skull jutted lower jaw, lengthy grey fangs curving up and in. Prehistoric» (*HR*, 57).

In the course of her fantastic sea-quest, and indeed throughout the novel, Aisha's gender emancipation is also expressed through a diffused lyricism, in tune with the poetical prose that constantly characterized African magical realist writers from the 1980s/1990s, whose writings were rooted in the oral background of African literatures (Deandrea and Concilio 2020: 656). Aisha's physical energy, for example, is worded through a series of euphonic consonances and assonances:

> Her fingertips tingled; beneath her skin there was a stinging sensation. A nearly painful, humming heat, like fishing thread fizzing through her fingers, plowed away by the bolting merlin. The tingling spread to her elbows, a numb ringing in her arms as though she had jarred the bone down onto a table too hard. (*HR*, 35)

Lyricism involves her identity, too: Aisha is a poet, as her mother was. Her «storycraft» will contribute to the success of her quest (Barnsley 2022: 294), even against Hamza's warning about the self-destructiveness of poetry:

> I should not wish the soul of a poet on anyone – they look for divinity and beauty and ornament for meaning, meaning for ornament. They grieve for grace, they destroy their hearts with their own hands, eat their hearts [… your mother] was crucified by it […] by a longing too great to properly name. That which pulls you, pulled her – but she was already fastened to the floor of that place by her feet. So she sang and she died. (*HR*, 77)

During her voyage, Hamza also helps Aisha in relation to a fundamental facet of her emancipation, namely her acknowledgement of her need to develop a different conception of religion. In the environment where she has been growing up, religious worldviews are so pervasive that they inhabit every nuance of language and of life — not a marginal detail, for a would-be poet: «there is no such thing as taking God's name in vain, for it is always spoken, even in afterthought, ever present. If words have a shadow, then it is He who gives it shadow and shape» (*HR*, 5). It is Hamza who pushes Aisha to envision a critical sense of her religious faith:

> Adam's folk these days read and memorize and graze beneath a roof called 'God' like bleating sheep. […] Is one a believer in inheriting the true faith like a brass pot? Do you not think for yourself how to be improved by it and to improve it? […] Are you alive if you do not question the world? (*HR*, 97-98)

Within the frame of gender liberation, what is suggested here is a non-orthodox form of faith, a conception of religion germane to the French-Tunisian psychopathologist and psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama's manifesto for progressive

Islam *Déclaration d'insoumission*: a vision of faith based on the free exercise of critical thinking, because open to «irreducible human diversity» and springboard for a «desiring existence» (Benslama 2005: 55, 37, 43; transl. mine). This call for openness follows in the wake of some fundamental hinges of blue ecocriticism, which is envisioned by Dobrin (2021: 14-15) as recognizing «the diverse cultural memories and histories that contribute to cultural imaginaries»; on a similar note, Zapkin emphasizes how «the ocean offers models for change, models for hybridity and refiguring the self» (2017: 79).

In the second half of the novel, back on dry land after she has miraculously recovered her father from the maws of the undersea, Aisha is again compelled to negotiate many terrains to safeguard her desiring existence. On her way to her final decision, and to the novel's ending, she will encounter further antagonists and helpers, human and non-human. Even though she renounces the mythical House of Rust (home to Hamza and wisdom) for her father's love, she still longs to reach that place by going back to sea. This schizophrenic state of being torn between family duties and her desire is concretized by her shadow separating from her:

> The shadow was everything Aisha wasn't – like a carnival mirror, it became whatever people wanted beheld. It said all the right things, with no voice, and yet was heard. It apologized so sweetly to her grandmother, and was proof of a girl growing into an excellent woman. (*HR*, 238)

Turning a metaphor into a factual presence in the plot is a typical stylistic trait of magic realism in literature, characterized by «a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience. This magic happens when a metaphor is made real» (Faris 1995: 176).

Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*

In terms of setting and narrative amplitude, the British-Ghanaian Sharon Dodua Otoo's work is even broader than Abdalla Bajaber's: chronologically, *Adas Raum* goes from 1459 to 2019. There are four titular Adas, who live in four different historical ages: 1) Totope, Gold Coast, March 1459, where Ada (a young Ashanti woman) is killed by a Portuguese invader for her golden bracelet with fertility beads; 2) Stratford-le-Bow, March 1848, where Ada Lovelace (Lord Byron's daughter and a pioneer of computer mathematics) is shot by her jealous husband because of her affair with Charles Dickens; 3) Kohnstein bei Nordhausen concentration camp, March 1945, where a Polish Ada is forced to live as a sexual slave for the troops; 4) Berlin 2019, where 23-year-old Black British Ada is a single pregnant woman looking for a place to live.

The stories of all these Adas from different epochs are narrated in the first person and sometimes by the voice of a single spirit, who follows the trans-historical and transcontinental meanderings of the first Ada's bracelet since 1451 and is incarnated in a different object in every age, respectively related to the four Adas: a broomstick, a lionhead-shaped door knocker, a brothel barrack, and a British passport. Only this fourth object is freely chosen by the spirit, whose preference comes instinctively: «I knew immediately. Something that brings joy, I said. Over the millennia, I had come to recognise what joyful beings look like. The condition seemed contagious» (*AR*, 124). As in Bajaber, women's freedom is associated to freedom of movement.

In between sections, the narrating spirit inhabits an other dimension where spirits mix before reincarnations and the narrator itself waits for its next incarnation, while joking with (or being mocked by) God — who, by the way, is female:

> God had taken the form of a breeze. I was honestly a bit intimidated by her ability to drift so gracefully over the landscapes – but I, too, assumed the form of a breeze and followed suit. […] God ruffled the downy feathers of a lonely pigeon, and I borrowed a toupee from an elderly gentleman and took it along with me. (*AR*, 113-114)

As Van Amelsvoort writes, Otoo's «playful rule-breaking» was also a defining aspect of her previous writings, which dealt with «ethical, political and epistemological questions» while teasing «dominant social relations and identification practices» (Van Amelsvoort 2022: 286). In *Adas Raum* this lightness of tone goes hand in hand with a marked readability. Altogether these features, coupled with the complexity of the novel's structure, have contributed to Otoo's popularity as a writer and intellectual in the context of German letters — her cultural context and writing language of adoption. Before the publication of *Adas Raum* (the original German title), she was awarded the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann prize in 2016.

The multi-layered complexity of this novel is further enhanced by other traits. First of all, the chronological phases mentioned above include shifts forwards and backwards, whereby the narrative structure progresses through coils and loops (Colvin 2022: 143). There are many intra-textual references among the four different ages, and repetitions with variations — eventually culminating when the fertility bracelet is recovered by the 2019 Ada. With regard to this, the fourth Ada finally has a baby, thus redeeming the suffering legacy of her three predecessors. In the context of African magic realism, here Otoo may be gesturing at Ben Okri's character Azaro, the spirit-child (*abiku*) of Yoruba lore who dies and is reborn from the same mother, until his determination to live gets the upper hand and sets the plot in motion (Deandrea 2002: 48-49)[3].

3 Okri's abiku saga is composed of *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), and *Infinite Riches* (1998).

With reference to Otoo's living objects, Kojo Laing's animated objects and his «cartoon realism», in his 1992 novel *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, may be mentioned (102).

Secondly, the layers of *Adas Raum* build a cross-ethnic puzzle, because the four Adas do not share the same origins. However, in the narrator's voice:

> In any case, the time had come to remind Ada that all beings – past, present and future – are connected to one another. That we always were and always will be. This message can be overwhelming, especially if a human believes they are hearing it for the first time. (*AR*, 113-114)

Thus, Otoo's magic realism goes well beyond the African pioneers of this narrative mode, whose novels were mostly centered on postcolonial national projects and preoccupations (Deandrea and Concilio 2020: 654-655).

Thirdly, from a social point of view the four Adas are not always reducible to gendered, underprivileged victims in a simplistic way. For example, Ada Byron's Irish servant Lizzie is a Chartist who ends up being unvoiced not only by her mistress, but also by Chartist men, as the following excerpt shows (with a humorous allusion to Friedrich Engels):

> And so it was that Lizzie took part late that evening in yet another interminable meeting of the Women's Charter Association – and she stayed until each of the assembled men had commented on at least one of each other's contributions; until all arguments for and against women's suffrage had been debated and exchanged; and until a grey-haired gentleman – easily identified by his heavy accent as a German refugee – had broken the mould with an indefatigable lecture on the dehumanisation of the proletariat through Great Britain's Industrial Revolution. (*AR*, 59)

Otoo's range of characters and perspectives, then, strives for an intersectionality capable of bringing to light the overlapping of various forms of oppression. As Colvin argues (2022: 156), «[e]ach of the Adas is in a different oppressed/oppressing relationship with patriarchy, racism and necropolitics that reflect the different positionalities».

Fourthly, the novel's editorial history also contributes to its layers. Written and published in German by a Black Briton of Ghanaian origins (*Adas Raum*, 2021), it was later translated into English by Jon Cho-Polizzi for one British and one US version with different titles — respectively, *Ada's Realm* and *Ada's Room* (both 2023). Possibly, two titles for the same translation[4].

Finally, the book's cross-ethnic worldview is also constructed linguistically. Readers are faced with a polyglot novel with many references to European and African languages. When the fourth Ada tells Elle «How cool it would be, […]

4 This chapter quotes the British version, while referring to the book by using its original German title.

if we had Ga as our secret language», her German half-sister replies «Don't you know anything about Germany, Ada? They've tried to kill off all the multilingual people here once before» (*AR*, 199). This quote is significant insofar as the novel's multilingualism may be viewed as displaying a richness which undermines mono-cultural power structures, and as shedding light on one of the crucial implications of this many-layered narrative. Colvin aptly identifies in *Adas Raum* a «transtemporality» where «meaning is deepened and rendered complex across time-space»: a structure that is «temporally insurrectionary» against «the petrifying force that is necropolitical and racialised time»; a strategy to reveal the impermanence of power, «to historicise and denaturalise the present, to render different paths thinkable, and to address the shape that a future order might take» (Colvin 2022: 138-139), opening «perspectives on the might-have-been and yet-to-be» (165). In 2019, Ada constructs a «community of care» (164) beyond the limits of time, blood, ethnic, social, cultural, and linguistic bonds — involving not only the people around her, but also the other three Adas from previous ages — whereas, in the narrator's words, «[a]cross the many loops and orbits, I had learned that the living often maintain a difficult relationship with their own pasts. If they maintain any relationship with it at all» (*AR*, 248).

Conclusion

Colvin's analysis of the subversive charge of *Adas Raum* may be extended, I argue, to cover *The House of Rust*, too. Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo open up perspectives that have the potential to liberate African imaginaries. In doing so, they represent fictional equivalents to contemporary African thinkers who have been developing similar projects in the field of theory, such as the Senegalese Felwine Sarr and the Cameroonian Achille Mbembe. While trying to conceptualize metaphors for alternative African futures, these writers consider fiction to be extremely inspiring (Sarr 2018: 114; Mbembe 2018: 265-267). Their formulations often resonate with the two novels examined here. Sarr conceives of an «Afrotopia» based on the balance among economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, where cultural pluralism may retain fertile elements from both autochthonous and non-indigenous worlds (2018: 16, 26, 39). Similarly, Mbembe's Afropolitanism rejects nationalist paradigms in favor of wider, more transversal ways of creating community (Mbembe 2018: 274-285). Such is the theoretical lens that may be used to frame Abdalla Bajaber and Otoo: differently from Okri and Laing, who focused on the postcolonial nation, these two authors are to be positioned in a post-national frame. This is especially true when one takes into account Otoo's rejection of monocultural and monolingual identities (Van Amelsvoort 2022: 288) and Abdalla Bajaber's celebration of the Indian Ocean and its transcultural currents — which she shares with writers such as

the Kenyan Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and the British-Zanzibarian Abdulrazak Gurnah (Bassi 2022: 253-273).

In addition, their vast geographical or historical scope, back and forth between interconnected times, cultural traditions and geographic zones, bears important generic implications: Abdalla Bajaber's marginalization of colonial dichotomies through a «focus on daily practices of the Hadrami community» (Barnsley 2022: 294) and Otoo's complex structure both point at the trans-geographical aesthetics of Afro-futurism (Fargione 2021: 59).

All these features contribute to enrich their magic-realist literary strategies participating in the debate about gender issues, since these two novels, as argued above, certainly share a focus on gender liberation through freedom of movement. Both novels also move away from "victim stereotypes": Aisha and Ada are self-realized protagonists living through significant happy endings that include an organic relation between subject and object. Not only is this aspect in tune with Sarr's philosophical reflections (2018: 94, 100), but it also resonates with the work by another contemporary African thinker, the Nigerian Bayo Akomolafe, who acknowledges the active materiality of the non-human and its importance for comprehension of the complexity of the universe (Akomolafe 2023: 155-158).

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