

## Transcending racial/cultural spaces: the power of the woman in Yusuf Dawood's *The Price of Living* and *Water Under the Bridge*

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### Abstract

This paper interrogates Yusuf Dawood's portrayal of women characters in two of his novels – *The Price of Living* (1983) and *Water Under the Bridge* (1991) against the background of the post-independence multiracial Kenya. Positing that Dawood's portrayal of women differs substantially from that of other authors, the paper engages with notions of group identity and the role of women as disturbing and subverting traditional notions of femininity, cultural and racial purity. This, then, is shown as one way in which women, traditionally viewed as culturally conservative even if by coercion, contribute to the debates on nation-formation.

### Keywords

- [women](#),
- [spaces](#),
- [group identity](#),
- [nation formation](#)

The centrality of women in all politics of group identity cannot be gainsaid; nor can one take for granted their contribution to notions of cultural purity. Thus, all attempts at controlling group identity and cultural purity essentially involve controlling women. As Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias observe:

Women are controlled not only by being encouraged or discouraged from having children who will become members of the various ethnic groups within the state. They are also controlled in terms of the 'proper' way in which they should have them – i.e. in ways, which will reproduce the boundaries of the symbolic identity of their group or that of their husbands. (1989, p. 9)

If attempts at revising and redefining the canon have informed the common agenda of the 'new literatures' in the post-colony's academy, re-placing the woman character within the wider matrix of social and cultural re-engineering has been equally important during the same period of time. The presence of women in canonical literature in Africa as in the rest of the world has been the subject of numerous studies, which coincided with, and whose findings added impetus to, the resurgent wave of feminist literary scholarship the world over. Indeed, in mainstream racial and cultural as well as in the marginal groups, women's role in literature, both as writers and as characters, has for a long time been congruent with the existing patriarchal set-up that in the guise of cultural traditions and other societal control structures valorize masculinity and male dominance as a way of perpetuating the skewed power distribution in society that remains, *de facto*, against women. Hence the many instances where issues of social dominance in matters of group relationships are projected in gendered terms, more so when championing intra- and inter-group notions of identities. To cite one example, Dan Ojwang observes, '[e]ven though the women in Vassanji's texts do not gain much from

the traditions that put restrictions on them, they are nonetheless represented in many instances as atavistic defenders of the same traditions' (1997, p. 58). It is noteworthy that Vassanji is among the most accomplished authors of any racial group from East Africa, especially among the crop of writers who emerged in the post 1990s period, and therefore his works can truly be categorized as 'canons' if we go by the serious critical attention that they, especially *The Gunny Sack* (1989), have received. Why he would choose to portray women the way he does at this point in time is outside the ambit of this paper, which seeks to demonstrate how such portrayal has elsewhere been contested and even subverted.

Apart from the women writers who have come out forcefully in assigning new roles to women characters as a way of expanding the limited spaces preserved for women in earlier writings, male writers are also revising their re-presentation of women characters as a way of acknowledging the increasingly influential roles played by women in their communal set-ups. Unlike the earlier male writers' works, which portrayed women as paragons of cultural purity and guardians of communal identities who would safeguard the core communal values to be later passed on to the younger generations, a new crop of emerging writers seem to give women new roles of advocating and adopting change in regard to the long-held communal values. All this is in line with the emerging trend in studies of the postcolony where matters that concern identities have their slippages and fluidity acknowledged.

In this paper, I examine the place and role of women in a society that is at once highly dynamic and, owing to history, in contact with disparate racial and cultural groups. Against the backdrop of politics surrounding nation-formation as a process of social engineering, I focus on two novels authored by Yusuf Dawood, a Pakistan-born Kenyan. My major argument is that, for Dawood, women are no longer passive embodiments of notions of cultural purity and identities but, rather, facilitators of change through their decisive initiation of cross-racial/cultural unions. I further argue that for the women concerned, these cross-racial/cultural unions constitute not just a challenge to the limited and limiting conditions that define their cultural heritage, but also a creation of new and wider spaces where new identities are forged and celebrated. Ultimately then, celebration of such unions becomes one of the ways in which they negotiate anew their place in the society thus making possible for the same society to ascribe new roles to them. Although he has published eight works – novels, collections of anecdotal short stories that are set in the hospitals where he works as a surgeon, and an autobiography – I limit my paper to two novels, *The Price of Living* (1983) and *Water Under the Bridge* (1991), in which women are accorded a central role not just in their development as characters but also in the way they advance the thematic concerns.

Human relations across cultural borders seem to be a feature that is common in the two novels. The most conspicuous ones occur when we see white women getting involved in marital unions with African men, as is the case between Valerie Collins and Maina Karanja in *The Price of Living* (1983), and Joan and Oloo in *Water Under the Bridge* (1991). There are also unions between white people and Asians as in the case of David Fraser and Meena Desai, as well as inter-ethnic unions such as Ndegwa and Malaika's in *Water Under the Bridge*. In some cases these unions are portrayed as long-lasting and fulfilling, while in others, there is a sneaking feeling that one or both participants put into consideration factors other than mutual love and respect in making decisions of marriage. For instance, the relationship between Maina Karanja and Valerie Collins that leads to their romance and subsequent marriage shows two people who labour consciously and extraneously to make their love kick off. Valerie accepts Karanja's children – Muhoho and Christine – and goes ahead to make friends with them. Maina Karanja also makes it easier for the children to accept his choice of a marriage partner by involving her in the family issues – as in the case of Christine's pregnancy that her father disapproves of and which must, in his view and with his financing, be terminated.

Valerie comes in as a helping hand during the period of Maina's indisposition that causes a lot of anxious moments for the whole family concerning their role in the heart attack that Maina Karanja suffers from. Eventually the marriages – between Christine and Gavin Taylor on the one hand, and the one of Maina Karanja and Valerie Collins on the other – are significant in as far as the role of women is concerned. The fact that at the end of the day it is the father who relents in his rejection of Christine's choice of a future husband, partly because of her insistence and partly because of the support she gets from Valerie, makes their presence as women in the novel more significant because they no longer look up to men for guidance, especially in matters of marriage where they are directly involved. The resolute Christine together with the supportive Valerie thus are able to occupy an important place in the narration in *The Price of Living* precisely because as women, they assume a proactive role in identifying and insisting on getting what they want.

It is also noteworthy that the two women forge new links between themselves beside the filial relationship as step-daughter and step-mother to each other, which links point to the possibility of forming a community of women to pursue their aspirations and share their experiences in matters of human relations. This indeed has been one of the ways in which women have confronted marginality elsewhere, and it proves to be equally effective here. But one must ask questions regarding the nature of the unions, especially the way in which they are crafted in the narrative. Maina Karanja and Valerie Collins have lived lives of frustrating loneliness due to unpleasant earlier experiences – the death of a partner for Maina and lack of a supportive family for Valerie. Through their marriage then, Maina Karanja and Valerie Collins have another chance to reassure themselves that they are acceptable human beings after all, something that they had been deprived of by their mutual loneliness. Ultimately though, their union fails to convince largely because of the mechanical way in which they have been relating to each other all along, and the way in which they, without much apparent thought, immerse themselves in their newly found love. David Dorsey in 'Yusuf Dawood's pastel paradise' (n.d) in fact establishes a pattern governing the white woman versus the black man relationships. He writes:

In Dawood's novels the most privileged, accomplished and refined Africans often marry the lowest class of Britisher (sic) capable of grammatical English. Each novel not only directly indicates that such a marriage is appropriate; each novel *argues* that such a marriage is appropriate. That is, these novels *argue* that between Europeans, between Asians, between Africans, and in Unions between Asians and Europeans, parity in class is important, but parity of class status is not a reasonable consideration for marriage between a European and an African. In Dawood's works every African who marries a European marries below his station in life, and all such marriages are successful and permanent.

(Dorsey n.d., p. 6)

As a word of caution, one needs to note that Dorsey's paper is largely a review of the novels that Dawood has authored and is guided more by race as a reading trope and not gender. This is different from my reading that elevates gender over class and race in reading the two novels. In spite of this, Dorsey's observation tallies with another one by Louis-T. Achille concerning the relationship between black men and white women. He writes:

Insofar as truly interracial marriage is concerned, one can legitimately wonder to what extent it may not represent for the colored spouse a kind of subjective consecration to wiping out in himself and in his own mind the color prejudice from which he has suffered so long.... Some men or some women, in effect, by choosing partners of another race, marry persons of a class or a culture inferior to their own whom they would not have chosen as spouses in their own race and whose chief asset seems to be the assurance that the partner will achieve denaturalization and (to use a loathsome word) 'deracialization'. Among certain people of color, the fact that they are marrying someone of the white race seems to have overridden

every other consideration. In this fact they find access to complete equality with that illustrious race, the master of the world, the ruler of the peoples of color....

(Achille, quoted in Fanon [1967](#), pp. 71–72)

Again, it is significant to read this quotation within the time-frame of the immediate post-independence period when notions of nationalism and Pan-Africanism were qu