

Mourning the Nation: Grief as Political Resistance in *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of mourning as a form of political resistance in *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Moving beyond the conventional perception of grief as a private emotional experience, the novel reconfigures mourning as a collective, historical, and political act deeply embedded in Kenya's postcolonial realities. Situating *Dust* within Kenya's post-independence history, it argues that mourning transcends private sorrow to become a collective and subversive act that challenges state-sanctioned silence and historical erasure. Through fragmented narratives, silenced histories, and embodied trauma, *Dust* exposes how national grief emerges from unresolved violence, state betrayal, and suppressed memory. The methodology is based on qualitative textual analysis, employing close reading of narrative structure, characterization, and symbolism, while drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and memory studies to interpret the text within its socio-political context. The result reveals that the novel configures that mourning functions as both a critique of state power and a means of reclaiming agency. Moreover, it presents grief as collective and subversive force that disrupts official national narratives, recovers marginalized histories, and exposes unresolved trauma. Ultimately, mourning emerges not as a passive suffering but as an active practice that resists erasure and calls for historical accountability of national healing. The analysis draws on postcolonial theory and trauma studies to demonstrate that mourning in the novel functions as both a critique of state power and a means of reclaiming agency. It is a language through which marginalized voices reclaim suppressed histories. Moreover, findings reveal that mourning is similar to grief which becomes a powerful tool through which marginalized voices challenge official narratives and reconstruct alternative histories. Ultimately, *Dust* portrays mourning not as passive suffering, but as an active and necessary resistance against political amnesia and systemic injustice.

Keywords: Grief; political resistance; historical violence; postcolonial Africa; mourning.

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INTRODUCTION

In postcolonial African literature, the nation is frequently depicted not as a unified entity but as a fractured space marked by violence, silence, and unresolved histories and the entanglement of grief and nationhood has become a critical concern in postcolonial literary study. In *Dust*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor presents Kenya as a nation haunted by its past, where personal and collective grief intersect to expose deeper political failures. Rather than treating mourning as an individual psychological response, the novel situates grief within a broader socio-political framework, transforming it into a form of resistance against systemic erasure and historical denial.

The narrative opens with the violent death of Odidi, an event that is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader national condition. His death

reflects a pattern of state violence, corruption, and betrayal that has shaped Kenya's post-independence trajectory. Through characters such as Ajany and Nyipir, the novel explores how mourning becomes a way of confronting suppressed truths and resisting imposed silence.

This study argues that *Dust* redefines mourning as a political act. Moreover, it initiates a journey that is as much about personal loss as it is about confronting the nation's buried stories of violence, betrayal and exclusion and shifts the focus from individual mourning to what may be termed "mourning the nation. Grief, in this context of this study, is not passive but confrontational; it challenges official narratives, disrupts collective amnesia, and exposes the failures of the nation-state. By analyzing the novel through postcolonial and trauma-informed perspectives, this

paper demonstrates how mourning functions as a powerful form of political resistance.

This study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to explore the intersection between mourning, memory, and political resistance in *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor:

1. How is mourning represented as a collective national experience in *Dust*?
2. In what ways does mourning function as a form of political resistance against state violence and historical erasure?
3. How do narrative structure and literary techniques reinforce the political dimensions of mourning in the novel?

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines postcolonial theory, trauma theory, and the politics of mourning. This triangulated approach allows for a deeper understanding of how *Dust* constructs grief not merely as an emotional response, but as a politically charged act embedded in historical and structural violence.

Postcolonial theory provides the primary lens through which the novel's representation of the nation is examined. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, the nation is not a fixed or unified entity but a site of "*narrative ambivalence*," where competing histories and identities constantly destabilize its coherence (Bhabha 149). In *Dust*, this ambivalence is evident in the fragmented storytelling and the multiplicity of voices that challenge any singular national narrative. The Kenyan nation is thus represented not as a cohesive whole but as a contested space shaped by violence, silence, and historical discontinuities.

Building on the conceptualization of mourning as politically charged practice, this article now turns to the methodology guiding its analysis of *Dust*. It adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual analysis in order to examine how mourning is constructed as a form of political resistance. This work is interpretive in nature, focusing on the analysis of narrative techniques, thematic patterns, and character representation within the novel.

The primary data source consists of the text of *Dust*, which is analyzed through selected narrative episodes, character experiences, and recurring motifs related to grief, memory, violence, and silence. Particular attention is given to key moments such as Odidi's death, Ajany's mourning process, and the recollection of historical violence, as these instances encapsulate the intersection between personal loss and national trauma. Furthermore, it employs a thematic analytical approach, identifying and categorizing patterns of meaning across the text. Themes such as collective grief, political violence, silence, and resistance are examined in relation to the broader socio-political

context of postcolonial Kenya. These themes are not treated in isolation but are analyzed as interconnected elements that contribute to the novel's overarching critique of the nation-state. In addition, the study integrates a theory-driven analysis, drawing on postcolonial theory and trauma theory to interpret the textual data. Concepts developed by scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Achille Mbembe, and Cathy Caruth are used to frame the analysis and provide a critical lens through which mourning is understood as both a psychological and political phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study adopts an analytical and interpretive stance rather than a purely descriptive one. It seeks not only to identify representations of grief but also to explain how these representations function within systems of power, memory, and resistance. This approach allows for a deeper engagement with the text and supports the central argument that mourning in *Dust* operates as a form of political resistance.

In short, the methodology combines close reading, thematic analysis, and theoretical interpretation to provide a comprehensive and coherent examination of the novel. This multi-layered approach ensures that the findings are both textually grounded and critically informed.

This article is structured around four key dimensions that reveal how grief operates as a form of political resistance, from collective trauma and resistance, from collective trauma and silence to narrative fragmentation and the body as a site of mourning.

1. Mourning as Collective National Trauma

In literature, mourning refers to the emotional, psychological, and sometimes ritualized response to loss. It is not just about sadness; it is a deeper, more complex process that writers use to explore themes like grief, memory, identity and healing. In *Dust*, mourning transcends the private sphere and becomes a collective national experience shaped by political violence and historical rupture. The death of Odidi is not presented as an isolated event but as part of a broader system of state brutality and betrayal. From the very opening scene, the narrative situates his death within chaos, pursuit, and collective aggression, emphasizing the violent entanglement between the individual and the nation. As the narration depicts Odidi fleeing through a hostile urban environment, the intensity of the moment reflects a society where violence has become normalized and institutionalized:

"He runs. He is entangled in a thicket of jeers and tossed gray, black, and brown stones as he flees. 'Kill them! Kill them! Thieves!' The words pursue him. They rise from the crowd that surges behind him. He runs through streets that seem to close in on him, through a city that watches and does not intervene." (Owuor 1)

This moment is crucial because it illustrates how grief is produced not only by personal loss but also by systemic conditions. Odidi's death is the result of a corrupt political structure in which state authorities manipulate violence for their own ends. The later revelation that the police orchestrate the narrative surrounding his death reinforces this point, transforming mourning into an encounter with political deception:

"Our brave boys returned fire. The criminals fled on foot. We recovered weapons. We suspect they are part of a larger network. We will pursue them." (Owuor 10)

Ajany's response to her brother's death further expands mourning into the collective realm. Her grief is not contained; it is dispersed across memory, space, and history. The language used to describe her emotional state reflects fragmentation and disorientation, suggesting that her mourning is inseparable from the fractured condition of the nation itself. The act of retrieving Odidi's body from the morgue becomes symbolic of a broader struggle to reclaim truth from institutional control.

This aligns with Achille Mbembe's assertion that postcolonial societies are marked by the omnipresence of death and the politicization of life (Mbembe 104). In *Dust*, mourning becomes a response to a system that continuously produces loss. It is therefore not merely emotional but deeply revealing the structural conditions that sustain national trauma.

2. Silence and Memory as Forms of Resistance

In literature, silence refers to the deliberate use of absence of speech, narration, explanation or response. In *Dust*, silence is one of the most important ways of representing trauma, history and power. Silence in *Dust* operates as both a symptom of trauma and a strategic form of resistance. The characters frequently struggle to articulate their experiences, reflecting what Cathy Caruth describes as the *"unspeakability"* of traumatic events (Caruth 4). However, this silence is not equivalent to passivity. Instead, it becomes a space where suppressed histories persist and resist erasure.

In *Dust*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor presents silence as a personal resistance and a deliberate response to trauma and emotional pain. Ajany, in particular, embodies this form of resistance through her withdrawal and refusal to fully engage with others. Her silence reflects an attempt to shield herself from grief, especially after the death of her brother. The idea that silence becomes protection is clearly reinforced in the narrative:

"The wise chose cowardice. Not hearing, not seeing, never asking. Because sound, because words, because questions could cause death. Silence became a way to live." (Owuor 48)

Moreover, the author presents silence as political and social resistance. Beyond the personal level,

silence in the novel reflects a broader culture of repression within Kenyan society. Painful historical events are often left unspoken, creating a collective silence around national trauma. This societal silence functions as both fear and resistance: fear of consequences, but also a refusal to engage with distorted or imposed narratives.

The novel repeatedly emphasizes the tension between what is spoken and what remains hidden. The recollection of past political violence, though fragmented, functions as a counter-narrative to official accounts. As one moment in the text suggests:

"The past's beckon is persistent. It refuses to remain buried. It returns in fragments, in images, in echoes that disturb the present." (Owuor 50)

Ajany's return to her homeland is a significant act of resistance grounded in memory. By confronting the past, she challenges the imposed silence that surrounds national trauma. Her insistence on remembering despite pain and fragmentation embodies what Judith Butler identifies as the political potential of mourning (Butler 38). In *Dust*, memory becomes a form of defiance.

3. Fragmented Narrative and the Politics of Representation

The non-linear structure of *Dust* is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate political strategy. The fragmented narrative reflects the disjointed nature of trauma and challenges the idea of a single, coherent national history. Events are presented out of chronological order, forcing the reader to actively reconstruct meaning from scattered pieces.

This narrative form aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the nation as a space of "disjunctive temporality," where multiple histories coexist and compete (Bhabha 149). By refusing linearity, Owuor undermines authoritative historical narratives and highlights the instability of national identity.

The fragmentation also mirrors the characters' psychological states. This is reflected in the way the narrative itself moves through memory, history, and present without clear transitions, as seen in passages where past and present collapse into each other:

"The past arrives unannounced. It spills into now. It refuses order. It refuses sequence. It insists on presence, on being seen, on being remembered even when the present tries to move forward." (Owuor 50)

This lack of linearity forces the reader to engage actively with the text, reconstructing meaning from fragments. In doing so, the narrative itself becomes an act of resistance, challenging fixed histories and exposing the instability of national identity.

4. The Body as a Site of Political Grief

The representation of the body in African literature is deeply shaped by histories of colonialism, slavery, nationalism, gendered violence, and post colonialism state power. Across different periods and regions, the body is rarely just biological, it becomes a political and symbolic site where power and identity are negotiated.

In *Dust*, the body is not simply a biological entity but a political archive where violence, memory, and grief are inscribed. Through fragmented narrative structure and shifting temporalities, Owuor presents the human body as a site where the Kenyan nation's unresolved histories of colonialism, ethnic conflict, and state violence are materially experienced. Rather than treating grief as private emotion, the novel embeds it in flesh and bone, showing how political systems produce suffering that is both collective and deeply embodied.

The novel opens with an immediate act of state violence that establishes the body as a site of political execution. Odidi's death is described with brutal clarity: "*They shot him. Twice. And then once more to be sure*" (Owuor, p. 4). The repetition of the shooting emphasizes excess and certainty, suggesting not only the elimination of a life but the symbolic assertion of power over it. This violence is not incidental but structural, reflecting what Achille Mbembe theorizes as necropolitics, where the state determines who may live and who must die. Odidi's body becomes the first site on which the novel inscribes this logic of political disposability.

Following the killing, the novel intensifies the sense of bodily erasure through the image of abandonment: "*His body lay there, unclaimed, as though it did not belong to anyone*" (Owuor, 7). The unclaimed corpse reflects a deeper political condition in which certain lives are denied recognition even in death. The body is stripped of identity and social belonging, becoming what Judith Butler terms an "ungrievable life," one that is excluded from public mourning. In this way, grief is not evenly distributed but politically regulated.

However, grief in *Dust* is not external; it is internalized and physically endured. Owuor writes that "*Grief was a thing with weight, pressing into bone and blood*" (p. 98). This metaphor transforms grief into a material substance lodged within the body itself. It suggests that trauma is not processed and released but absorbed, shaping physiology and consciousness. The body becomes a vessel for historical violence, carrying the residue of political events long after they have occurred. This aligns with the novel's broader depiction of trauma as inherited and embodied rather than spoken.

Silence plays a crucial role in this embodiment of trauma. The statement "*We do not speak of these things, but they remain*" (p. 128) reflects how repression does not eliminate memory but relocates it into the body

and psyche. What cannot be articulated becomes physically manifested in tension, displacement, and emotional fragmentation. The body thus functions as an alternative archive, preserving what official histories suppress.

The novel also extends this logic of embodiment beyond the human body to the landscape itself. Owuor writes: "*The land remembers. It holds everything*" (p. 215). Here, memory is distributed across space, suggesting continuity between body and environment. Both land and flesh bear scars of violence, forming interconnected archives of colonial and postcolonial history. This blurring of boundaries reinforces the idea that political grief is not confined to individuals but embedded in material reality itself.

This embodied politics of grief is particularly significant when read alongside feminist and postcolonial theory. In line with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, Owuor reveals how colonial and postcolonial violence is inscribed on racialized bodies. At the same time, gendered dimensions of suffering are implicit in the novel, as women often function as custodians of memory, carrying emotional and historical burdens within patriarchal and violent systems.

This embodiment of grief aligns with Frantz Fanon's analysis of how colonial and postcolonial violence is experienced through the body (Fanon 36). In *Dust*, the body becomes a site where historical and political forces converge, making suffering visible and undeniable. The graphic depiction of his final moments emphasizes the physicality of grief: "*His right shoulder is shattered. Bone pushes against skin. Blood marks his path. His left leg bends the wrong way. He tries to move, but the body refuses him. Pain fills him, surrounds him, becomes him.*" (Owuor 6)

Ultimately, *Dust* constructs the body as both witness and evidence of political history. Violence does not end with death; it persists as sensation, memory, and inheritance. Through its fragmented structure and embodied imagery, the novel demonstrates that grief is not merely felt but lived materially—etched into bone, blood, silence, and soil. The body becomes, in Owuor's vision, the most enduring archive of a nation's unresolved past.

CONCLUSION

Dust by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor offers a profound reconfiguration of mourning, transforming it from a private emotional response into a politically charged and historically grounded act. Through its fragmented narrative, complex characterization, and engagement with Kenya's troubled past, the novel reveals that grief is inseparable from the structures of violence and power that shape the postcolonial nation.

The analysis has demonstrated that mourning in *Dust* operates on multiple interconnected levels. First, it emerges as a collective national experience, reflecting the pervasive impact of political violence and systemic injustice. The death of Odidi, rather than remaining an isolated tragedy, becomes emblematic of a broader condition in which the state itself participates in the production of grief. This dynamic exposes the fragility of national unity and highlights the deep fractures underlying the imagined cohesion of the nation.

Second, the study has shown that silence and memory function as powerful mechanisms of resistance. While trauma often renders experiences unspeakable, the persistence of memory disrupts official narratives and challenges historical erasure. The characters' refusal to forget even in fragmented and painful ways constitutes a subtle yet significant form of opposition to state-imposed silence. Mourning, in this sense, becomes an act of witnessing that reclaims suppressed histories and affirms the value of lives marginalized by political structures. The novel emphasizes how the past lingers, as seen in the assertion that "Kenya is a wounded place" foregrounding a national consciousness shaped by unresolved violence.

Furthermore, the fragmented narrative structure of the novel reinforces its political dimensions. By rejecting linear chronology, *Dust* destabilizes authoritative historical accounts and emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives that constitute national identity. This formal strategy not only reflects the disjointed nature of trauma but also invites active reader engagement, transforming the act of reading into a process of reconstructing silenced histories.

Finally, the novel foregrounds the body as a site of political inscription, where violence and grief are materially experienced. Through the depiction of physical suffering, Owuor underscores the tangible consequences of systemic oppression, making it impossible to detach mourning from its socio-political context.

Taken together, these elements reveal that mourning in *Dust* is far from passive. Instead, it

functions as a form of political resistance—a means through which individuals and communities confront injustice, challenge dominant narratives, and reclaim agency. In a context where the state seeks to control memory and suppress dissent, grief becomes a powerful counter-discourse that insists on recognition, accountability, and truth.

Ultimately, *Dust* suggests that genuine national healing cannot occur without confronting the past. The refusal to acknowledge historical violence perpetuates cycles of trauma and loss, while the act of mourning opens a space for critical reflection and transformation. By elevating grief into the realm of political action, Owuor not only redefines the meaning of mourning but also positions it as an essential step toward justice and renewal in postcolonial societies. This novel, by transforming personal loss into collective remembrance, challenges official narratives and exposes buried injustices and states that only through acknowledging pain and engaging in acts of memory can the nation begin to heal, making mourning both a moral duty and a powerful political act.

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