

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Euryclea's Greeting: Literary and Linguistic Palimpsests in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Oeuvre

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My encounter with Kiswahili was as a native speaker born into it in our house in Malindi. Many people in Malindi spoke a smattering of Arabic as well, and some spoke it fluently. My father was a fluent speaker. My mother could not speak a word except the words that had somehow smuggled their way into Swahili. From other houses you could hear the sound of Kutchi or Somali, or the inflection of Kingazija.

(Gurnah, "Learning" 28)

Growing up in in the 1950s and 1960s in Malindi, the part of Zanzibar Town close to the harbor, Abdulrazak Gurnah was exposed to a cosmopolitan web of cultural life. Reflecting on this later, he remarks that this created an enduring sense that "contradictory cultural traditions felt negotiable" ("Learning" 29). He began learning Arabic in Qur'an school, called *choni*, at Mzikiti Barza, which he attended from the age of five, before starting Darajani primary school, where he learned the Roman alphabet. He went on to a school known as King George VI Secondary School until it was renamed Lumumba College in January 1964 (Lodhi). Gurnah describes his encounter at school with English—at least initially—as "casual and instrumental" ("Learning" 29), remembering having to recite Shakespearean sonnets (30) and to learn passages from Dickens's *Little Dorrit* by heart (Gurnah, "Books"). Swahili literature¹—encountered formally in school and through storytelling by his mother and "grannies and aunties" at home—was as much a staple as were "complex narrative traditions in the Qur'an school, in commentaries on the Qur'an, in the Mawlid and in Qasidas" (Gurnah, "Learning" 29). Gurnah's favorite book as a child was an abridged Kiswahili translation in four volumes of *Alfu Leila u Leila (A Thousand and One Nights)*—a text that

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PMLA 138.2 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000238

resurfaces repeatedly across his oeuvre (Gurnah, “Books”). The stories of the *Nights* about places like China, Persia, and Syria did not seem distant to Gurnah but referred to familiar locations in the imaginary of Zanzibar as one of the “islands of culture along the broader archipelago, which are linked together by the sea and by mercantile connections” (Gurnah, “Abdulrazak Gurnah” 129; see also Samuelson 21). In other words, the East African Swahili coast with its long history of commerce across the Indian Ocean speaks to the everydayness of the admixture of people, stories, languages, and cultures. Such a complex interplay, Gurnah avers, made him want to write “about a world that had always been fragmented but manages still to have something approaching civic and social life” (“Abdulrazak Gurnah” 360). This also meant that the grip of the imperial vision of English literature and culture as superior was perhaps not as tight or as complete in Zanzibar as it was elsewhere in the British Empire.

The hierarchical positioning of readers from outside Europe—colonial subjects in need of civilizing—did not exert as much pressure on Gurnah during his childhood as, for example, it did on the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Ngũgĩ’s account of the effects of colonial education in the settler colony of Kenya in his classic *Decolonising the Mind* documents the devastating effects of being alienated from his cultural roots at an early age (11–12). Gurnah remarks that for him, the imperial narrative existed as one among many: “When I think back to that time as a child, it seems to me that there were many more possibilities of making narratives available” (“Learning” 30). This does not mean that the encounter with the imperial vision of the world, encoded in much of English canonical literature, did not pose a significant challenge to Gurnah when he became “an aspiring Zanzibari writer learning to read (and to write)” forced to confront “the destructive narratives of Europe and to eventually find a register of his own in English” (23; see also Gurnah, “Writing” 59). However, what made these cultural mores navigable was the accumulative, ecumenical nature of the reading material available to him from diversely abundant cultural traditions in

Arabic, Kiswahili, and English—each endowed with a rich body of literary and popular narratives. Another reason for the sense of coeval narrative worlds was the haphazard way in which some of this reading material presented itself: “I read . . . without any direction” since “our reading . . . [depended] on what was available in the school library: mostly donations from departing colonial civil servants” (Gurnah, “Nobel Lecture”; “Books”). There existed only a few “undernourished” bookshops in Zanzibar at the time, and the few libraries tended to be “meagre and dated” (Gurnah, “Writing” 59). I stress the importance of reading, because Gurnah maintains that authors “come to writing through reading and that it is out of the process of accumulation, of hearing and of creating, of echoes and repetitions that they fashion a register which enables them to write” (“Learning” 31). This tangled weave of literary and linguistic inheritances finds expression in all ten of his novels.

While written in English—“slowly English came to seem to me to be hospitable and roomy and spacious” (Gurnah, “Learning” 31)—Gurnah’s oeuvre presents readers with a palimpsest of linguistic and cultural traces of considerable intricacy. This is not to suggest that the incorporation of other language material into the anglophone text is the same kind of layering as the intertextual play between narratives, which exist as separate artifacts, but the interrelational dynamics these different kinds of threads invite are similar: readers are summoned to follow the trace, whether to translate a single word and place it in context, or to figure out what the intertexts might signify. Even a single word, according to M. M. Bakhtin, “tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (293). Drawing on Bakhtin’s conception of the social, dialogic orientation of language, Julia Kristeva explains that all writing is intertextual: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66).² Gurnah has described this dynamic as a process of “accumulation and accretion, of echoes and repetition” out of which writers fashion their register (“Writing” 59). Tracing some of the threads of this dialogic absorption contributes

significantly to the pleasure of reading Gurnah's novels.

Some of the threads in this textual weave are thick, colorful, and thus immediately obvious, whereas others are sheer, almost invisible, and require some scholarly detective work. Different readers, and the cultural and linguistic repertoires they bring to Gurnah's narratives, will reveal different patterns in the overall tapestry of his work. When I asked Gurnah about these palimpsestic traces, he identified several functions of such intertextual incorporation: namely, to offer readers the pleasure of recognition of "a shared sense of textuality," to provide "a convenient echo or resonance"—a shorthand of sorts that enriches the narrative at hand, and to suggest that there are key human stories that need to be revisited again and again, each return offering the possibility of understanding "things that we didn't understand" about the worlds we traverse and our place in them ("Conversation" 166).

The worlds of Gurnah's novels foreground the complex histories of the Swahili littoral and its transnational connections across the Indian Ocean world: the Arabic and South Asian legacy of mercantile interaction and the rule of Oman on that coast as well as European conquest—he focuses in detail on the effects of British and German colonization—and subsequent migrations to the north in the aftermath of the end of formal colonial rule and the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. The characters' migration journeys from East Africa to England allow Gurnah to present a changing canvas of social attitudes in the United Kingdom toward the arrival of strangers from the mid-twentieth century onward. Given such diverse yet interlocking historical trajectories, it is not surprising that the journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown declares that history in Gurnah's oeuvre "is a mess and a mass of convolutions, many broken lines and inescapable circles." In the brief remarks that follow I offer some thoughts on the textual incorporation of Arabic, Swahili, and English narratives.

A prominent intertext in many of Gurnah's novels is the Qur'an, which gets read by some characters who first encounter it at the madrasa, and which informs sociocultural norms that get

transmitted orally in society beyond the reading elite. The legacy of Islam that is inextricably linked to the trade enabled by the Indian Ocean monsoon patterns in the part of the world that Gurnah represents in such illuminating detail informs how the characters come to know what they do and how they make sense of their world: "What makes Islamic culture or the Indian Ocean exchange system important is that it actually forms the story of the world for people in those cultures" (Gurnah, "Conversation" 163). Arabic words, like Kiswahili words, pepper his narratives, and medieval Sufi wisdom frames *Gravel Heart* (2017) through an epigraph by Abu Said Ahmad ibn Isa-al-Kharraz from his *Kitab al Sidq*. In keeping with Gurnah's general aversion to simplification, Islam functions as a source of knowledge, as a provision of cultural norms and meaningful rituals, and as a source of reassurance and spiritual anchorage. Some characters' interpretations of Muslim piety, however, facilitate their hypocrisy and cruelty, in particular toward women and children. For example, in *By the Sea* (2001) we encounter Saleh Omar, whose prayer represents a tender moment of respite (59–60), and in *The Last Gift* (2011) we meet Othman, a miser, whose respectable spirituality rings hollow, because he runs his family with an iron fist and deflects pleas for help by his neighbors, saying, "Allah karim . . . God is generous. Ask him for a loan" (57). And there is the enigmatic figure of Hamdani, the gardener in *Paradise* (1994), who silently performs his work while "humming verses and qasidas" (36). Characters who can speak both Arabic and Kiswahili have a distinct advantage in the societies Gurnah depicts, as the scholarship on his use of Swahili intertexts also shows.

Given my own linguistic limitations, I am drawing on Fawzia Mustafa's insightful reading of Gurnah's 1994 novel *Paradise*. Told in omniscient third person, the narrative depicts the travels of Yusuf, a *rehani* (a bonded laborer akin to a slave) in the household of the Arab trader Uncle Aziz, the sayyid, who leads one of the last major Arab caravan journeys into the interior before the Germans seek control of the caravan route in the early years of the twentieth century. While Mustafa points out that

many astute readers of this novel have noted its intertextual relation to the Qur'anic-biblical story of Yusuf/ Joseph and the “playful engagement with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,”³ Gurnah’s extensive recourse to and incorporation of Swahili sources is less well documented (Mustafa 14–15). Mustafa identifies several Swahili sources that Gurnah drew on in writing *Paradise*: Selemani bin Mwenye Chande’s narrative “Safari Yangu ya Bara Afrika” (“My Journey Up-Country in Africa”); Salim bin Abakari’s “Safari Yangu ya Urusi nay a Siberia” (“My Journey to Russia and Siberia”); the autobiography by Hamed bin Mohammed, or Tippu Tip, *Maisha ya Hamid bin Muhammed el Murjebi yaani Tippu Tip: Kwa maneno yake mwenyewe (Tippoo Tib: The Story of His Career in Central Africa, Narrated from His Own Accounts)*; and Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari’s “Desturi za Waswahili” (“The Customs of the Swahili People”). These sources, Mustafa explains, all belong to “a small body of prose work by local Waswahili that was both solicited and collected by a series of German administrators in the late 19th and 20th centuries” (15–16). The most fascinating aspect of Mustafa’s article is not her identification of these sources, some of which have been mentioned by other scholars,⁴ but her description of how they function.

Mustafa suggests that Chande’s narrative is the chief source for *Paradise* and that the characters of Uncle Aziz, the Omani trader; Mohammad Abdalla, the guide and foreman of the caravan; and the assistant overseer, Simba Mwene, share characteristics with the narrator of “Safari Yangu ya Bara Afrika,” who is “presumably Chande himself” (17). Aziz, for example, “is given many of Chande’s words verbatim,” and Simba Mwene’s name is lifted from Chande, too (19–20). Apart from characterization, a number of episodes are drawn from Chande’s account, though they are deliberately transformed, as Gurnah “practises both an economy of compression along with an amplification of fictional embellishment” (18). Gurnah also transposes Chande’s “language impasses” between speakers of Kiswahili, Arabic, and local languages of the interior into his narrative (18). Gurnah indicates that the frequent

misunderstanding in *Paradise* is deliberate: “I tried to find a narrative voice which would show this kind of guesswork, moving between different registers” (qtd. in Mustafa 20). Gurnah draws on Bakari’s text to sketch the life of a *rehani* as well as caravan conventions, and Yusuf’s duties in Uncle Aziz’s household resemble those outlined by Bakari (Mustafa 22). Abakari’s travelogue is used in Gurnah’s novel in an episode in Moshi, where a guest from Mombasa tells the assembled party about his uncle’s travels to Russia (Gurnah, *Paradise* 104–06). Mustafa remarks about this episode, “[E]ncrypted is the reference to the notorious or celebrated Hermann von Wissmann, the officer brought in to brutally quash the Abushiri rebellion in 1889” (23). This allows Gurnah to register the fear inspired by the weapons of the German Schutztruppe: “the brutal reprisals of 1896 to the murder of two Lutheran missionaries in Meru (near Kilimanjaro) and the suppression of the Maji Maji rebellion in the south in 1905–7 were well known, and necessarily punctuate the novel’s endgame: of Yusuf’s ‘choice’ of colonial subjection in lieu of the possibility of either manumission, liberation or escape” (23).

I am citing this passage in full, because where *Paradise* ends—namely with Yusuf’s decision to enlist as an askari—Gurnah’s most recent novel, *Afterlives* (2020), begins. Hamza, one of the protagonists of *Afterlives*—with a childhood and youth strikingly similar to Yusuf’s—decides to join the German Schutztruppe as an askari, and we follow his life until the defeat of the Germans by the British, signaling the end of Deutsch-Ostafrika in World War I. Turning to Swahili texts allows Gurnah to bring to the surface elided perspectives of the history of the Arab caravan trade and of German colonial control that counter “the hegemony enjoyed by contemporaneous and competing Euro-American exploration, expedition and missionary narratives” (Mustafa 23).

Moreover, the similarities between Yusuf and Hamza point to another intertextual thread in Gurnah’s oeuvre: namely the playful, lightly woven connections between some of his novels. *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* are another example

of this: readers of these two novels are left to wonder whether the plot of the latter narrative might offer an explanation of an aspect of the former. The unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence* tries to fathom why his father left his mother, and *The Last Gift* tells the story of a father, Abbas, who left a young wife behind in Zanzibar unbeknownst to his family in England. The clue that suggests these might be connected stories lies in the description of the window through which the character of the father first sees the narrator's mother in the house opposite: "He has been given a tiny room which was previously a store . . . he was leaning on the wall by the little slit of his window" (*Admiring* 77–78). The same window seems to reappear in *The Last Gift*: "He had a small storeroom, a tiny cell. . . . He watched her from his little slit of a window" (230). In both novels, the window does not contain a glass pane. I do not think it is far-fetched to think about these stories nested in one novel and then fully explored in another as inspired by Scheherazade's method of storytelling in *A Thousand and One Nights*.

As mentioned earlier, Gurnah encountered the *Nights* first in a Kiswahili translation of abridged sections and in oral storytelling. He remembers that "[i]t was there that I first read the story Kamar Zaman and Princess Badoura, which has stayed with me since" ("Books"). The *Nights* is a fitting source for a writer whose works trace itinerant lives: the genesis of the text is predicated on travel and movement, since it has no one author and no one source and its stories "were told in many forms many centuries before they were written down" (Byatt xiii). Marina Warner points out that Egypt, India, and Persia supplied the "principal streams" flowing into the cycle of stories, mixing it with other sources: "the stories contain traces of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, and of Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Russian and Turkish myths floating in the ocean of the streams of story, all of which have contributed plots, motifs, tone and literary forms" (7–8). Like a palimpsest or nested Matrushka doll, "a character in a story invokes a character who tells a story about a character who has a story to tell. . . . The *Nights* is a maze, a

web, a network, a river with infinite tributaries, a series of boxes within boxes, a bottomless pool" (Byatt xiv–xv). Scheherazade, as the frame narrator, holds all the threads of the multiple stories-within-stories in her clever hands, which also hold in them her own fate and, as it turns out, that of the entire kingdom (Steiner, "Scheherazade's Achievement(s)" 132). Gurnah remarks about the transmission of the tales, "These are stories from everywhere, you have stories from Haroun al-Rashid, Iraq, Egypt, and they circulate against each other and amongst each other. . . . People would know these stories even if they're not readers, because they would be told. People still used to tell stories when I was a child" (Gurnah, "Conversation"). In Gurnah's novel *By the Sea*, Scheherazade's storytelling is pitted against the enigmatic withdrawal from sociality that ends in the death of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, the other prominent intertext in this novel. Both narrators of *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, Zanzibari migrants in the United Kingdom, are faced with the choice to opt for sociality and connection (Scheherazade's choice) or silence and withdrawal (*Bartleby's*) in the face of the turbulences and vagaries of their lives (Steiner, "Mimicry" 121–22). They are intrigued by Melville's *Bartleby* because of the inexplicability of his understated refusal—I prefer not to—which makes them wonder whether he is defeated or whether these words "are the utterings of an admired desperado" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 244). Nonetheless, they opt for storytelling in order to come to terms with their difficult entangled past:

I needed to be shriven of the burden of the events and stories which I have never been able to tell, and which by telling would fulfil the craving I feel to be listened to with understanding. He was my shriver, and I knew I would tell him what he had asked of me. Then after telling him, I would have found a good place to stop and tell him that even *Shahrazad managed to get some rest every sunrise.*

(171; emphasis added)

The other novel in which the *Nights* features prominently is Gurnah's third, *Dottie*, published in 1990. It draws on the story from the *Nights* of the Ajemi

prince Qamar Zaman and Princess Badoura of China, who must travel through an incredibly complex sequence of twists and turns to reunite with each other, while suffering misguided and cruel treatment by their parents. *Dottie* is perhaps the most atypical novel of Gurnah's oeuvre, given that it is solely set in England without any connection to East Africa—Dottie's mother is of Pathan-Lebanese parentage and the man who possibly fathered her comes from Jamaica. It tells the story of the eponymous black British protagonist, who manages to make a life for herself in the England of the 1960s despite a childhood of economic scarcity and emotional neglect and the enduring racism and sexism she faces as an adult. Christened Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour, she bears the name of the Chinese princess of the tale (Gurnah, *Dottie* 11). The squalor in which her family lived when Dottie and her siblings were growing up makes her think that "he must have laughed at the thought, the man who gave her the name" (330). However, she is pleased to learn about the origin of her name as an adult. Her boyfriend tells her the plot of the tale and the reader cannot help noticing that, at least for the time being, she has found the happiness described in the ending of the tale (331). These references to the *Nights* bookend the narrative of *Dottie* and thus diminish the importance of the other intertextual dialogues with works by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen that Dottie encounters in the local library, which becomes a space of refuge and learning.

Early on, when Dottie embarks on her reading mission, she struggles to get through Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and Gurnah explains that this is because at that early stage in the novel, she is not a member of the textual community: "so for her, despite the resonance . . . she's not aware of that and so she doesn't recognize it. But she will learn to be wiser than that" ("Conversation" 166; see also Lewis 43). There are many more intertextual references to canonical English literature—like Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which speaks to Gurnah's second novel, *Pilgrims Way* (1988)—that merit further discussion.

A last word about classical literature: in *By the Sea*, one of the narrators and protagonists,

eighteen-year-old Latif Mahmud, travels to study dentistry in Dresden, East Germany, in the late 1960s. The socialist connections between independent Tanzania and eastern bloc countries are dramatized in the plot through such travel but also through intertextual references: because of Nyerere's socialist ties, Zanzibaris "now had a chance to read Mikhail Sholokov (*Quiet Flows the Don*) and Anton Chekov (*Selected Stories*), whose work appeared for sale in cheap editions, or browse through boxed sets of Schiller in the GDR Information Institute (copies not for loan)" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 107).⁵ Latif arrives at the house of his pen pal, Jan, and Jan's mother, Elleke, with frozen feet, not having noticed the gash that cut through the flimsy soles of the canvas shoes he had brought from Zanzibar. His blood is soaking into their doormat as they greet each other. This moment of pain is transformed—through the return of a story of antiquity—into a moment of tenderness, of hospitality and human recognition that powerfully transcends boundaries of language, nationality, and race. Euryclea, a maid in the palace of Odysseus and his former wet nurse, recognizes her master after his return from his ten-year absence, despite his disguise, when she lays eyes on a childhood scar while washing his feet. Elleke washing young Latif's feet playfully invokes this scene of human recognition, even though the two characters have never met before:

"I thought I would meet you, although I didn't know it was you," [Elleke] said.

"Euryclea," Jan said at last, unhurried, and then read a sentence. "As soon as Euryclea had got the scarred limb in her hands and had well hold of it, she recognized it and dropped the foot at once."

"Exactly her," she said. "Euryclea. The old woman crouched in the shadows of Penelope's garden. Auerbach does such wonderful things with that passage? Do you know Auerbach's discussion of that incident? Oh, I will lend it to you." (127–28)

The textual echoes here are layered: readers recognize the reference to book 19 of Homer's *Odyssey*,⁶ in which the scene of recognition takes place, and then Elleke mentions the passage from Erich

Auerbach's *Mimesis* in which Auerbach describes Homer's poetics. Key here, in relation to the significance of this interlude in Gurnah's novel, is the foot washing, which according to Auerbach "is the first duty of hospitality toward a tired traveler" in all stories of antiquity (1). The duty of hospitality toward the stranger is a thread that runs through Gurnah's entire oeuvre, and Gurnah has been vocal in the media too about this duty: compassion, welcome, and the humane treatment of asylum seekers and refugees should not be the exception but the norm in Europe's engagement with those who arrive at its shores.

Tangled threads of diverse narratives, multiple languages and voices, echoes and resonances, old stories that need to be reread and retold, tales by travelers from afar—all of these find room in Gurnah's capacious narrative worlds. I hope to have shown, even if briefly, that the linguistic and cultural palimpsests of Gurnah's fiction are worth further study and that such work, which follows the intertextual threads, will lead to a fuller understanding of the richness and subtlety of the tapestry of his fictional universe.

NOTES

I would like to thank Meg Samuelson for her insightful comments on this piece.

1. Kiswahili, unlike many African languages, was a written language "before European colonialism." The earliest examples of written texts in Kiswahili date from "the late seventeenth century." However, this did not mean that the "literate mode was predominant" (Gurnah, "Writing" 58).

2. For a detailed discussion of how Kristeva draws on Bakhtin for her understanding of intertextuality, see Mowitz; Allen; Trivedi.

3. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is also mentioned at length in Gurnah's novel *Dottie* (314–15).

4. See the work on *Paradise* by Deckard; Bardolph; Nasta.

5. Schiller also features prominently in *Afterlives*, as does Heine.

6. The protagonist of *The Last Gift* (2011), Abbas, reads *The Odyssey* while convalescing at home (29).

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