

‘That little space’: Locating Abdulrazak Gurnah in the Global Literary Marketplace

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Abstract

The transformation of the publishing world in recent decades—which includes, among other things, the increasing significance of large retail outlets, the emergence and establishment of literary agents, and the merger of publishing houses into large media corporations—has been amply documented. Among the consequences for postcolonial literary fiction, and African English-language fiction, which is the subject here, are increasing use of the author as a public figure and marketing device, and heightened expectations on cultural representativity that link authors to particular places and cultures. With a focus on the initial and middle phases of his career, this article discusses the ways in which East African author Abdulrazak Gurnah has responded to such pressures in his novels and in essays and articles. It shows how both the form and the content of Gurnah’s writing exemplify a double effort to complicate ideas which frame authors and their texts through culture-specific identities and the seemingly opposite, generalizing notion of the postcolonial’ author which flattens history—a strategy of ‘self-authorization’ which can be seen as Gurnah’s critical resistance towards received categories used in both book marketing and postcolonial authorship. In a further twist, this resistance is in some tension with Gurnah’s choice to write in English and use an unmarked linguistic style and register since these seemingly align with marketing interests and enable easy translation which facilitates the global circulation of his books.

Keywords: East African literature; African literature; postcolonial literature; Abdulrazak Gurnah; global literary marketplace; migrant writing

In ‘Writing and place,’ an article published 2004 in *World Literature Today* (also published in *Wasafiri* the same year), Abdulrazak Gurnah tells about his entry into serious fiction and reflects on the themes that have been central to his writing over the years. It was, he explains, migration that prompted him to develop the storytelling he had always practiced into a commitment to serious writing. Having escaped the ‘hardship and anxiety, ... state terror and calculated humiliations’ in Zanzibar for the UK in 1967, it was the ‘feeling of strangeness and difference’ in the new country that demanded literary working through (Gurnah 2004: 26).

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Gurnah's story, as he acknowledges, is a familiar one: the migrant turning writer partly to come to terms with his divided life. The significance of memory in the process, and the feeling of pain and bitterness stirred by remembrance, is also a common theme: 'I realized,' Gurnah writes 'that I was writing from memory, and how vivid and overwhelming that memory was, how far from the strangely weightless experience of my first years in England' (2004: 26). Memory, as memory, is direct, uncontrollable and 'overwhelming,' but what reappears to the mind is a 'a place and a way of being lost to me forever' (Gurnah 2004: 26). In the paragraphs that follow, Gurnah develops his discussion of memory and links it to geographical and cultural distance to stress its double role. On the one hand, migration sharpens the writer's eye to the place and the society he has left and enables him or her to speak the truth uninhibited by social constraints. On the other hand, memory is fallible and laden with emotion; the writer easily 'loses a sense of balance' in representing what he or she has left behind. Further, the generalized duality of dislocation—'distance is liberating, distance is distorting'—even if it contains 'traces of truth,' does not capture the complex reality of the migrant writer (Gurnah 2004: 27). Both arguments, Gurnah contends, are simplifications, and he returns the discussion to his own biography, offering no general alternative description: 'I realize now that it is this condition of being from one place and living in another that has been my subject over the years, not as a unique experience that I have undergone, but as one of the stories of our times' (2004: 27).

Gurnah's article offers the point of departure for this article for two reasons. The first is that it presents in a nutshell the themes that Gurnah's novels elaborate on and sets out in clear terms the complexities of memory and migration that underlie these themes. The second reason is that the article exemplifies how Gurnah seeks to frame himself and his fiction through written commentary outside of the novel form. *World Literature Today* is a US-based magazine which (like *Wasafiri* in the UK) by its own description caters to students, scholars, and general readers of world fiction. It is this, ostensibly, mixed audience—who are as likely to read his novels for pleasure as to write academic papers on them—that Gurnah addresses through his autobiographically based essay.

Gurnah's extra-literary articulation is not surprising. Nor is the timing. Gurnah is Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at Kent University, has been the editor of two volumes on African writing, and is the author of a number of scholarly articles. He is on the advisory board of *Wasafiri* (a magazine which he edited for a period) and was for several years a reviewer for *Times Literary Supplement*. Besides being a writer, then, he is also involved in the arenas where literature is discussed, and where scholarship on literature is produced and circulated. Around the time of the article's publication he was also approaching the height of his career, at least if this is measured through consecration mechanisms such as literary prizes and reviews.¹ This background emphasises the point I want to make here; Gurnah's biographical essay is not only about his own experience, nor about how memory and distance relate 'in general.' Above all it is 'about' how his novels should be approached, how his identity should be described, and how he should be related to other writers. Gurnah's article that is, responds to real and felt expectations as to what kind of writer he is and what kind of books he writes.

Seen from this point of view, it is useful to further highlight three motifs in the article. The first is that Gurnah's discussion of memory and migration invokes and complicates two ideas that have guided both the production and the discussion of much postcolonial literature: on the one hand the idea that literature springs from a deep sense of belonging in a particular place and an identity formed by that place, an idea which has informed 'Black cultural nationalism from Blyden to Senghor' as Abiola Irele once put it (Irele 1992: 205); and the opposite idea that it is from a distance that a culture can be truthfully represented—an idea which finds one of its most powerful recent expressions in Edward Said's fine-tuned 'Reflections on exile' which sets exile—social, cultural, and

¹ Gurnah's first novel, *Memory of Departure*, was published in 1987. His literary breakthrough came with *Paradise* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *By the Sea*, published in 2001 was longlisted for the Booker and awarded the RFI Temoin du monde award. The following novel, *Desertion*, published in 2005 is Gurnah's most widely reviewed book, closely followed by *By the sea*, according to the Factiva database. Gurnah is still active and had his recent novel, *Gravel Heart*, published in 2017 by Bloomsbury. In terms of recognition measured in reviews globally through Factiva, the period 2000-2010 is by far Gurnah's most successful decade.

geographical—against belonging (Said 2012). The second motif is that his experience of migration hovers between the specific and the general: his story is at once highly particular and ‘one of the stories of our time.’ The third is that his background in Zanzibar has enfolded him in several political and social communities that go beyond British imperialism. Learning, he notes, for instance, did not only take place in the British colonial school but also in the mosque, in Koran school, in the streets, in the family and in ‘my own anarchic reading’ (Gurnah 2004: 27).

These motifs recur in Gurnah’s efforts to exercise control over his own persona and his position in a field of postcolonial literature. The positioning is registered on different literary and discursive levels. As I will show drawing on several texts from the initial and middle phase of his literary career, in both literary content and expressive form, Gurnah consistently complicates ideas which link an author firmly to a specific place *and* the seemingly opposite generalizing notion of the ‘postcolonial’ which flattens specific histories. The complication can be seen as Gurnah’s critical resistance towards received categories used in both book marketing and postcolonial authorship. In what amounts to a further twist in Gurnah’s strategy, this resistance is in some tension with his choice to write in English and use an unmarked linguistic style and register since these seemingly align with marketing interests and enable easy translation, all of which facilitates the global circulation of his books.

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Sarah Brouillette, in her book *Postcolonial writers in the global literary marketplace*, situates postcolonial literature within what she calls a developing ‘global literary marketplace’ characterized by corporatization and fragmentation. The publishing world has over the last decades seen unprecedented global expansion and series of mergers and acquisitions which have resulted in a few media houses—now truly global actors—controlling the lion’s share of the world’s book production. Parallel to this development has been a segmentation of the market into niches. Quality literature in the new landscape is one of the niche markets now commercially viable because of its global nature, and postcolonial fiction remains a niche within this larger segment with an audience dispersed across the globe (Brouillette 2007: 49-61). Brouillette, of course, is not

the only one to observe and describe these changes, which have been rigorously documented in John B Thompson's major study of the Euro-American publishing world (2010).

One of the effects of the corporatization of book production and the increasing power of editors and agents (and, one would venture, financing departments and advertising departments) is that the agency of the author has diminished. At the same time, the use of author biographies and author personas have become important instruments for the marketing of books. The author's subjectivity, while in practice of relatively less importance to the actual production of the book, becomes important as a sign to help selling the book by anchoring it in what appears individual experiences and intentions. Brouillette calls this a 'return' of the author which is deeply ideological and states that 'the figure of the author becomes an increasingly important marker of differentiation, a way of concealing mass production in individuation' (2007: 66).

Within the smaller field of postcolonial literature, the promotion of author biography and author subjectivity has entailed a seemingly contradictory combination of individual and collective dimensions of self. Postcolonial authors 'writing from or about the developing world, and situating their narrative within an often violent political history, are expected to act as interpreters of locations they are connected to through personal biography' (Brouillette 2007: 76)—a burden of collectivity Albert Memmi called the 'mark of the plural' several decades ago (Memmi 2003: 129). On the one hand, then, postcolonial novels are tied to individual experiences and artistic sensibilities whose sign is the individual author. On the other hand, they are marketed as representative of a larger experience and history—of a nation, a minority group, or a culture.

The erosion of actual control over the text and the use of biography and personal history in the marketing of books have generated a real crisis in authorship, and one that postcolonial authors respond to both by diagnosing their predicaments and by trying to exert some control over the circulation and reception of their texts. They do so by inserting self-reflexive commentary into their literary texts that diagnoses their predicament:

writers incorporat[e] into their aesthetic arsenal various kinds of meta-commentary: on the act of writing itself, on the status of literature

within culture at large, and on their own careers as authors, especially as they recognize themselves as ‘tributaries’ in a vast field of cultural exchanges that operates substantially outside of whatever sphere they can be said to control. (Brouillette 2007: 68)

In order to combat the attenuation of their roles while recognizing that it is no longer possible to conceive of writing and the pursuit of literary careers as independent of their underlying economic conditions, authors strive towards ‘self-authorization through awareness of the political uses or appropriation of one’s works’ (Brouillette 2007: 74). The negotiations of the conditions of literary production, importantly, are carried out both in the literary texts themselves and in neighbouring textual genres such as articles, commentary, interviews, open letters, lectures, and blogs.

The transforming structure of the publishing world affects not only the position of the author as a biographed individual; it also creates conditions for commercial success that impact on literary theme and form. Successful postcolonial literature, Brouillette writes, is ‘English-language fiction; it is relatively “sophisticated” or “complex” and often anti-realist; it is politically liberal and suspicious of nationalism; it uses a language of exile, hybridity, and “mongrel” subjectivity”’ (Brouillette 2007: 61)—an argument that is at the centre also of Neil Lazarus book on the state of postcolonial literary studies, *The postcolonial unconscious*, published a few years later. In his study, Lazarus claims that the domain in fact disregards much of what is written around the postcolonial world in its bias towards fiction that confirms its own values—and which, through academic elevation, joins the postcolonial literary canon. Intentionally provocative, Lazarus comments that ‘I am tempted to overstate the case, for purposes of illustration, and declare that there is in a strict sense only one author in the postcolonial literary canon. That author is Salman Rushdie’ (Lazarus 2011: 22).

Despite the overall validity of Brouillette’s and Lazarus’ claims, it may be noted that if adherence to radical aesthetics and foregrounding of hybrid identities seem necessary conditions for academic and commercial success, they do not automatically generate it. As Peter Kalliney has demonstrated, for East African Canadian writer Moyez Vassanji—who was born in Kenya of Indian parents, grew up in Tanzania, and is since a long time a resident in Canada—the thematization of migrant experience, the focus on hybrid and fluid

identities, the apparent rejection of nationalist ideologies and the commitment to an aesthetics of fragmentation and self-reflexivity (and, Kalliney adds, his being marketed as a Rushdie from East Africa), has not meant fame and large-scale recognition. Vassanji remains a comparably lesser-known author and, Kalliney finds, several of his books are out of print. Moreover, his multi-layered cultural identity is reduced in most scholarship, which treats him as either a Canadian writer or a writer of the South Asian diaspora. If the paradoxical value of postcolonial literature is that authors ‘can enter the cultural center—what we typically call the canon—only by staging relative subordination in a wider geopolitical context’ (Kalliney 2008: 18), the case of Vassanji shows that in both political and cultural terms the ‘geopolitical context’ remains highly uneven. Africa’s place remains on the margin of the margin.²

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I have given one example above of how *Gurnah* in a biographical-literary essay complicates the relation between place and memory to pre-empt a too-ready identification with a ‘particular struggle and history.’ His treatment of place in fiction serves the same ends. *Gurnah*’s literary geography is at once local and cosmopolitan. He consistently places his stories in ‘that little space’ of Zanzibar, as he has called it, at the same time as he lets his stories unfold transnationally and transculturally, in

² It may be asked whether, in the years between Brouillette’s and Kalliney’s stocktaking and the present moment, the global literary marketplace for postcolonial literature has fragmented further. The critical and best-seller successes of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tayeh Silasi, and Teju Cole, to take a few examples, appear to exemplify a brand of fiction less influenced by modernist experimentalism and more by realist storytelling. With the possible exception of Cole, this, indeed, is the core of Akin Adesokan’s (2012) argument on what he calls ‘new African writing.’ While his conclusions may seem somewhat premature given that highly experimental writers, ‘modernist’ or ‘postmodernist’, like Nuruddin Farah and Yvonne Vera are still, it appears, commercially viable and academically consecrated, and the international publishing of African-authored crime fiction and thrillers, for instance by Mkombe wa Ngugi and Helon Habila, seem to represent a broadening of ‘publishable’ genres, his observation captures some aspects of a recent development in global publishing of postcolonial authors.

this way demonstrating a concern with the 'larger space' that historian Sheldon Pollock (2000) has seen as characteristic of cosmopolitanism in history. To add to the complexity, Zanzibar and the East African coast do not stand in contrast to the wider world of the migrant; on the contrary, the space is itself a node in a cosmopolitan Indian Ocean world. Gurnah's 'cosmopolitanism,' consequently, has been frequently noted (e.g. Masterson 2010; Samuelson 2017). A fuller understanding of this aspect of Gurnah's fiction, however, needs to relate it to the academic postcolonial debate on the value of African cultural nationalism, on the one hand, and the less geographically specific idea of the 'postcolonial' on the other. Gurnah's discussion and literary representation of place exists in critical tension with these influential ideas in postcolonial study, and the resistance to them present another facet of the 'self-authorization' through which Gurnah positions himself on the postcolonial literary field.

The article 'An idea of the past,' published 2002, offers an example of Gurnah's critique of African nationalism. In the article, Gurnah cites with approval Derek Walcott's 1974 article 'The muse of history' and the way it identifies history as a discourse used for self-identification in the present, before he discusses what he sees as the exclusionary tendency of historical accounts in the writings of Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. These authors, Gurnah argues, in their different ways, sacrifice the complexity of history to construct what they see as useful narratives of African pasts. Soyinka's dramatic archetypes, Ayi Kwei Armah's anti-Islamism, and Achebe's and Ngugi's ostensibly exemplary representation of African life suppress transcultural urban accounts of the past, 'narratives that were necessary to my understanding of history and reality' (Gurnah 2002: 16).

The anti-nationalist view Gurnah presents in the article predominates in his literary writing as well, which consistently satirizes and ridicules the post-colonial Tanzanian nation, African nationalism and Pan-African sentiment. In *Memory of departure*, for example, the protagonist befriends a zealous nationalist who bases his beliefs on an idea of African race. His high-flown political rhetoric is eventually deflated as he is revealed to be a small-time fixer and pimp for tourists (Gurnah 1987: 122). In *Dottie*, the protagonist's sister has a boyfriend who becomes acquainted with a Ghanaian Pan-African activist. The

boyfriend's adoption of nationalism expressed in a patriarchal rhetoric of family is comically undermined by the fact that his own sense of responsibility towards his son remains unchanged through the story. In *Admiring silence* and *By the sea*, finally, the protagonists are victims of the gratuitous violence and corruption of Tanzanian post-independence governments, whose leaders, in the words of the narrator of the former novel, are 'organs of consumption and penetration, prehensile tools of self-gratification' (Gurnah 2001: 202).

Against the partial and exclusivist narratives of African cultural nationalism, Gurnah sets East African history and an experience based in the Indian Ocean world. 'An idea of the past' contains a brief history of Zanzibar to counter Soyinka's and Ngugi's visions of the past. *Admiring silence* contains a similarly complicating gesture when the narrator juxtaposes his layered Indian Ocean identity with the broad, ultimately racist, identity bestowed on him by his medical doctor. Visiting the hospital for chest pains, the narrator is addressed as an 'Afro-Caribbean': 'He didn't mean *Afro-Caribbean* ... anyway. He meant darkies, hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos, say-it-loud-I'm-black-and-I'm-proud victims of starvation and tyranny and disease and unregulated lusts and history, etc.' (Gurnah 2001: 10). The identification, apart from being unknowingly racist, is wrong: the protagonist is 'strictly an Indian Ocean lad, Muslim, orthodox Sunni by upbringing, Wahhabi by association and still unable to escape the consequences of those early constructions' (Gurnah 2001: 10). The incompatibility between the Indian Ocean world and the race-based life in the UK, Maria Olausson (2013) has argued in a reading of the novel, is the reason the protagonist fails to fully account for himself to his English family.

Gurnah has criticized the general idea of 'the postcolonial' on the same grounds as the more restricted topic of African nationalism: that it lacks specificity and flattens historical reality. In fact, he argues, the two are closely related. In 'Imagining the postcolonial writer' (1999), Gurnah develops this argument. There, he commends the generative tentativeness of postcolonial studies, and its central idea of the postcolonial writer, as the expression of a desire to move away from former supremacist approaches to non-European cultural expression marked by an 'uncertainty about how to speak of cultures constructed as less' by European imperialism (Gurnah 1999: 29). 'Postcolonial,' he notes, is also a more productive term than preceding notions of New Literatures,

Third World literature, and Commonwealth literature and is useful in its 'challenge to ideas of truth, authenticity or even a cultural identity that is located in *place*' (Gurnah 1999: 30). However, the privileging of the colonial encounter in postcolonial literary studies and its institutionalization in the Western world, characterized as it has been by insufficient historical and local knowledge, has nevertheless resulted in a homogenization of colonial and postcolonial conditions with the effect that the actual object of analysis, the colonial or postcolonial cultural expression or artefact, 'recede[s] into unimportance, into a kind of necessary detail to the larger issue' (Gurnah 1999: 30). Postcolonial literary studies are unable to see that generalized descriptions of the postcolonial author reflect the colonial homogenization of culture they are meant to challenge. In this way,

Nigerian writing says nothing of the North, except to endorse colonial tropes of semi-oriental vapidty and despotism ... [and] Ngugi's account of Kenyan history is the dispossession of the Gikuyu, and their eternal contest with the land-grabbing settler. Present in both these accounts are structures which originate in the historical accounts which were constructed by an imperial discourse, which, on the one hand, saw the Muslim North ... as an oriental despotism, and on the other hand, could only focus on the consequences of European settlement in Kenya. (Gurnah 1999: 30-31)

This failure to recognize the seductions of simplification, Gurnah concludes, is premised on a lack of interest in and knowledge of native-language writing, which would work against generalizations. 'The very detail' of such writing, were it accessible to postcolonial scholars, would complicate analysis along the 'postcolonial' lines to the point at which the category itself would appear meaningless (Gurnah 1999: 32).

Desertion, published in 2005, presents a literary rejoinder to Gurnah's argument on the 'postcolonial.' In its self-reflexive structure and its staging of a dialogue between historical reality and conceptual frameworks used to account for that reality, it explores the limits of knowledge production as it pertains to postcolonial situations. The novel is divided into three parts, the first of which is set on the East African coast in 1899. It narrates the unlikely love story between a British explorer, Martin Pearce, and a local Muslim woman, Rehana, at the height of British imperialism. The couple meet when the former abandons a hunting party he has been invited to in disgust at the killing

of animals. Wandering aimlessly, Pearce eventually collapses from exhaustion in the village where Rehana lives, and is brought to her home by her brother, Hassanali, a shopkeeper. Pearce is nursed back to health by Hassanali who, though afraid of the white and strange man, does what hospitality demands. After some time in Hassanali's household, the leader of Pearce's company, an imperialist called Frederick Turner, turns up, and brings Pearce with him. Pearce is shocked by the rude and arrogant treatment of his host by his British friend and returns to apologize. It is at this point he meets Rehana.

Some time after their first meeting, Martin and Rehana fall in love, and eventually elope together to set up a household further down the coast against all social and cultural norms. Before the narrator presents these facts to the reader, he (it is later revealed that it is a he, a grandchild to Martin and Rehana) interrupts himself to reflect on the story he is about to tell: 'I don't know how it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me. Yet I know it did happen, that Martin and Rehana became lovers. Imagination fails me and that fills me with sorrow' (Gurnah 2005: 110). It turns out that the narrative is true, but fragmentary, and the narrator, Rashid, is unable to believe in it even if he knows it to be true, and this because of the nature of East African cultural codes and British imperialist codes alike: 'This was 1899, not the age of Pocahontas when a romantic fling with a savage princess could be described as an adventure. The imperial world observed some rigidity about sexual proprieties' (Gurnah 2005: 116-17).

The section in the novel, which is called 'An Interruption,' opens a discussion with postcolonial studies about protocols for knowledge production. This discussion is continued at a later point in the narrative. Rashid, now a researcher in the field of postcolonial studies delivers a paper at a conference on 'race and sexuality in settler writing in Kenya' where, apart from some 'low-key observations on the fiction' he remarks on 'the absence of sexual encounters in this writing or their sublimation into gestures of pained patronage or rumours of tragic excess' (Gurnah 2005: 258). In the question and answer period after his presentation, Rashid narrates the love story of his grand-parents as an example of the type of story that is missing from the imperial archive. It is important here that the story is placed in the margin, as it were. True though it may be, it is too improbable to form the basis of research. It remains anecdotal evidence.

The point of the marginal, unlikely and transgressional relationships can be extended. As Tina Steiner (2010) has shown, Rehana and Pearce's love repeats the earlier, equally transgressive marriage of Hassanali and Rehana's parents: Zachariya, who is an Indian trader, and Zubeyda, who is a Swahili woman from Mombasa. That marriage ostracizes Zachariya and comes to plague Rehana who suffers the effects of her parents' breach of convention. The repetition, however, is significantly different. In a fine narrative twist, Steiner argues, the cross-cultural family background which has caused such suffering turns into a longing for Hassanali to assert his Indianness, and he therefore welcomes with enthusiasm an Indian suitor to his sister, Azad, as a means to reconnect with their Indian history. Gurnah's narrative, however, 'quickly dismantles such nostalgic longing, not least by showing that Rehana has little authority over the decisions that men take and that make her into the vehicle to bring about such restoration' (Steiner 2010: 131). As if in consequence to such dismantling, Azad never returns from India, where he has gone to collect his trading profits, to arrange the marriage, and his disappearance leaves Rehana bitter and wounded until Martin Pearce appears. Instead of a repetition of the same cross-cultural relation, then, the narrative presents a different one, revealing these marginal, anecdotal relations to be part of a larger, continuous pattern.

It is easy to see Rashid as Gurnah's double. They are not only scholars both; the paper Rashid presents closely resembles an article Gurnah has written. Although Gurnah's article deals with settler desire and settler frustration at naming the new African landscape, his academic text too, excludes love stories of Pearce and Rehana's kind. In order to unpack the significance of this doubling and the staged debate with postcolonial studies, two more features of the story need to be mentioned. First, the story's historical setting revisits that of Gurnah's earlier novel *Paradise*, a narrative whose elaboration of sexual exploitation and power in a transnational colonial context have made critics remark that it 'is not a liberationist text' (Schwerdt 1997: 92). Second, *Desertion* also includes the character of Robert Francis Burton, the British explorer to Zanzibar, who in the story is depicted as a homosexual—a 'beachcomber'—and who in the novel, contrary to historical fact, dies on the African coast.

The novel thus presents an elaborate game that involves self-reflexive commentary, a discussion of the frameworks for constructing

historical knowledge, and self-intertextual reference. Its effect is contradictory and results in ambivalence. On the one hand, the insertion into the narrative of a sceptical post-colonial researcher who disbelieves what really happened emphasises the flattening of complex reality that occurs when probability and typicality structure the knowledge of colonial reality. On the other hand, through the obvious manipulation of historical fact, and the fact that its central love story *is* historically unlikely, the narrative as a whole undermines its own status as a more accurate—if less probable—representation of the past.

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So far, I have argued that Gurnah's 'self-authorization' proceeds by resistance to simplifying labels used both in the publishing world and in the academic arenas and displays a wish to complicate matters pertaining to his background and identity. I turn now to an aspect of his writing where his fiction aligns with the desires of marketing, and accessibility is the principle. The method, however, covers a greater complexity. This aspect is Gurnah's linguistic style.

Brouillette's statement that one of the characteristics of successful postcolonial novels is their use of English may appear self-evident. English is the most-read and most-translated language in the world. In the case of Gurnah, it may look like a strategic choice—or even the only choice—to gain a more central place on the literary market. As Rebecca Walkowitz has argued, however, language, or more precisely, linguistic style, is another means through which authors position themselves on the literary market and demonstrate awareness of its differentiated possibility to enable or hamper translation and circulation.

In Walkowitz' argument, a new 'transnational genre' of literature has emerged whose novels are 'born-translated' (or, as she calls it in an earlier text, 'comparison literature'). These novels are global rather than national or local in inception, 'are difficult to assign to any one literary system' which prevents linking them to a specific locality or national culture, and are immediately circulated across the world through translation—sometimes appearing in translation before they are published in the original language (Walkowitz 2013: 47; 2015: 3). The material conditions of production and circulation are reflected in their form. 'Born translated' novels, according to Walkowitz, self-reflexively

explore their own participation on a global literary market through themes of translation, reception and dissemination as well as through formal experiments like collage, which transgress discursive boundaries (Walkowitz 2015: 1–20). Characteristically, however, these thematic and formal treatments are presented in a style that is seemingly at odds with the content, an English void of regional or local stylistic markers. The unmarked style, Walkowitz argues, creates two connected but seemingly contrastive effects. On the one hand, it facilitates translation by ridding the translator of the difficult task of finding equivalents to particular dialects, sociolects or idiomatic manners in the target language. On the other hand, because translators faced with highly marked or non-standard language tend to flatten these varieties by homogenizing regional and national language and exchanging vernacular expressions for standard ones, novelists who avoid such stylistic characteristics are more likely to carry their locally rooted themes into translation. In the case of J M Coetzee, who is one of her examples, Walkowitz further notes that the absence of stylistic markers is part of an ethics of writing. While his unmarked English enables easy translation, it also shows that he ‘does not associate the consciousness of a kind of character, where kind is identified by ethnic community or third-world experience, with specific features of language’ and he ‘creates a text in which even English readers are blocked from imagining a direct, simultaneous encounter with a language that is their own’ (Walkowitz 2009: 571–72).

Gurnah’s novels can hardly be said to belong to Walkowitz’ category in full, partly because one of the central factors for ‘born-translated’ novels is the celebrity of the author, and celebrity depends on best-selling. It is logical in this respect that Walkowitz compares the rapid spread of Coetzee’s *Childhood of Jesus*—in both same-language national editions and translations—to *Harry Potter and the half-blood prince*. Gurnah’s novels, though written in English, translated into at least ten languages, and published in different national editions, are still translated with a delay that goes against the ‘born-translated’ thesis. Gurnah’s rendering of themes of linguistic and cultural translation in a style that allows comparatively easy translation, however, has much in common with ‘comparison’ or ‘born-translated’ literature, as can be seen in the linguistic style of *By the sea*.

By the sea is a novel that constantly reminds the reader of the role and function of language. One of the first scenes presents one of the

protagonists, who is also one of the narrators, arriving at Gatwick airport as a refugee. He has been advised not to speak English by the people who have arranged his escape, and he follows this advice even if he believes his case is quite clear: the British government has recently declared that Zanzibari refugees should be granted asylum. This early scene sets up different viewpoints: it presents the scene from inside the narrator's mind and point of view through an elaborate and elegantly worded monologue; simultaneously, it allows the reader to glimpse how the refugee must look to the customs officer who faces a silent non-speaker of English. When the man says the two words he imagines a non-speaker of English could have memorized—'refugee' and 'asylum'—and the customs officer turns first angry at having been fooled and then weary at having a time-consuming case on his hands, the roles of language as door opener, as means of control and power, and as means of self-expression are all activated.

At the centre of the novel's narrative are two men, whose intertwined family histories in Zanzibar have triggered a number of disastrous consequences. In the story's present they meet in Britain, since one of them, the younger Latif Mahmud, a university lecturer of English, is brought in as interpreter to Saleh Omar, who has recently arrived as a refugee. Their common history involves two houses, both of which have passed from Mahmud's family into the hands of Omar. Latif, and his family, unsurprisingly, loathe the man they believe have maliciously taken possession of first one and then the second, of their homes. Saleh's version of events is very different. He sees himself as, first, the indifferent beneficiary and, second, the victim of a cruel scheme he failed to settle to the benefit of all parties because of the stubborn pride of Latif's father. As he later reveals he has also spent a long prison sentence as a result of the belated revenge of Latif's mother.

Over the course of the story, a tentative and fragile relationship which is laden with emotional pain, anger, and feelings of shame emerges between the protagonists who partly collaborate, and partly compete in remembering the past. The contrastive and uncertain reconstruction of a time and a place through differing, partly incompatible, memories can be seen as yet another way for Gurnah to complicate the idea of localized experience and identity. Here, however, I want to focus on the language in which their dialogue takes place. This is how their first encounter is presented:

“Salam Aleikum,” he said, smiling, playing safe, putting off the moment of recognition with this most inclusive of all greetings. I nodded and took his hand, not returning the greeting in the obligatory way. *Alaikum salam*. I saw that he noted the omission and suspected that he would now summon a little more caution. It seemed best to proceed with caution. He held on to my hand while he studied my face, my hand frail and bony and large in his, which was tremulously warm like the body of a small captive animal. “Latif Mahmud,” he said. // I nodded again, then squeezed his hand and let it go. “Welcome.” I said, and stepped aside to let him precede me. (Gurnah 2001: 142)

The text renders their greeting in Arabic and then returns to English. What language is that ‘welcome’ spoken in? At this point it is impossible to know whether the shift in the text accurately reflects their language.

At their second meeting the text makes an oblique hint that they may speak in a language other than English, possibly Kiswahili. Their meeting is presented in the following way:

Well, he was smiling when he arrived, and he shook my hand with vigour. So that was fine, he probably wasn’t here to rant at me. We then moved on to courtesies. How have you been? How was your work? How is the family? “I have no family,” he said. The way I asked this question was: “Is everyone at home well?” And his reply: “There is no one at home.” I did not say any more, and saw him notice my silence and smile. (Gurnah 2001: 206)

The reader can take the allusion to translation as retrospective knowledge: the language of the text is itself a ‘translation’ of the language used in the story.

The subtle articulation of the theme of linguistic complexity and the prevalence of cultural and linguistic translation has several effects. Most fundamentally, the novel’s ‘translation’ of the Zanzibari languages into English appears absolutely necessary for the novel to travel at all. Second, the reader is made aware of the linguistic complexity without having to struggle with it. Furthermore, in resonance with Walkowitz’ conclusion, the standardized English used to render both Kiswahili (if that is what it is), Arabic, and the various inflections of English spoken in the narrative saves the translator the trouble of finding literary equivalents in the different target languages at the same time as it avoids casting the characters as types of consciousness.

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Postcolonial literature is a niche within the larger market of quality fiction, and recent developments in the publishing industry have made this niche global. Within the transforming publishing landscape, seemingly paradoxically, author biographies and author personas have become important marketing devices which remove authors further from their texts and lessen their control over them. Authors trying to gain some control over the presentation, the reception and the interpretation of their texts have responded to these developments through 'self-authorization' in and outside of the literary texts. Self-reflexive themes on the value of art, of the role of books as objects of consumption and literary meta-comments are examples of such 'self-authorizing' strategies, but so are extra-literary interventions such as interviews, public appearances, lectures, essays, and so on.

In this article, I have discussed Gurnah's literary and non-literary output as efforts to position himself on a postcolonial literary field marked by globalization's transformations of the publishing world. The effort is a response to the uses of the biography and identity of the author, albeit differently, in book marketing and the academic world. A guiding principle of Gurnah's attempts to 'self-authorization,' I have argued, is complexity. In fiction and academic texts, Gurnah has elaborated on the many layers in his (and his characters') relation to his (and their) place of origin and resisted both African nationalism for its potentially violent exclusionism, and the idea of the 'postcolonial writer' for its privileging of the colonial encounter to the disregard of other, preceding and longer histories. The unmarked and standardized English of Gurnah's literary art, on the other hand, shares many features with what Rebecca Walkowitz has called 'comparison' or 'born-translated' literature and demonstrates commitment to an aesthetic that treats language complexity in terms of structure and theme rather than style. Although Gurnah's novels, in this article exemplified by *By the sea* and *Desertion*, repeatedly point to the fact that they are 'translated' in the sense that the English of the text is not (always) the language used in the fictional universe, that translation registers only fleetingly and obliquely on the text's surface. This aesthetic of Gurnah's, seemingly in contrast to his insistence on cultural and historical specificity, makes for more accessible and translatable works.

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