

Swahili Transmodernity and the Indian Ocean:
Abdulrazak Gurnah's Ethic of Community in *By the Sea*,
Desertion, and *Gravel Heart*

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"Writing," Abdulrazak Gurnah observes in an interview, "should be about what cannot be easily said" (*Writing Across Worlds* 362). Gurnah's novels can be read as "difficult" stories, repeating modernist themes of loss, estrangement, and fragmentation. At the same time, they are characterised by surviving connections that persist across peoples, times, and oceans. Out of this tension emerges a broader reflective question that Gurnah asks in his novels: what makes it difficult to narrate some stories? Should the purpose of literature be to "rescue" stories from oblivion, or should its creative task be geared towards a re-evaluation of the conditions that make stories possible in the first place?

In my essay, I outline a new approach of interpreting Gurnah's novels. The main intervention I posit is to argue that Gurnah's works address the problem of modernity through a transmodern approach; in particular, I focus on how his novels operate through a narrative mode that privileges philosophical and political ideas of community. Turning to the idea of the Indian Ocean in order to elaborate the transmodern principle of pluriversal, inter-cultural community, Gurnah's novels articulate a radically different idea of modernity. This focus has bearings on the novel form itself, which not only functions by taking the Indian Ocean as an operating metaphor, but also organises a dynamic transmodern modality: a mode, that is, of knowing and perceiving the world through the knowledges emerging from Indian Ocean journeys and encounters.

My methodological framework is informed by Enrique Dussel's interpretation of transmodern philosophy as the critical cultivation of alternative orders of knowledge that challenge Eurocentric locations of modernity. Gurnah's novels, which emerge from the historical and cultural experiences of the East African or Western Indian Ocean coast, offer visions of a Swahili transmodernity that locates itself conceptually in what Dussel calls the "negated 'exteriority'" ("Transmodernity and Interculturality" 42, *sic*) of European modernity. "Swahili" is not understood here as a singular cultural identity but as the embodiment of a littoral, communal one characterised by cultural diversity, contradictions, and crossings. Gurnah's novels, I argue, relay an ethic of community, where community is the practice of perceiving the world relationally,

signifying a resistive gesture to the closures initiated by a violently skewed (European) modernity. Secondly, I explore the idea of “mahali” in the Swahili language, which denotes three different spatial meanings: definite place, indefinite space, and abstract location. I assess the Indian Ocean in Gurnah’s works as a simultaneous embodiment of all three aspects of *mahali*: as a definite material place of transferred knowledges; as an indefinite imagined space of cultural transaction and translation; and as the inhabitation of the time of a non-Eurocentric modernity.

Using this framework, I identify aspects in three of Gurnah’s novels—*By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Gravel Heart*— which illustrate a narrative mode informed by a transmodern sensibility and practice. I then go on to examine how these works urgently advocate a Swahili littoral ethic of community as an alternative figuration of the world in time and history.

Indian Ocean Studies: An Overview

Indian Ocean Studies has emerged as an exciting and promising field of enquiry in recent years. Pamila Gupta, who introduces an edited collection of essays on the Indian Ocean, argues that the Ocean is “a theoretical terrain, a geographical space and a historical network of human connectivities” (4). The space of the Ocean is increasingly viewed as a distinct category of analysis. As a historically traversed space, the Indian Ocean activates and records centuries of human endeavour and enterprise. At the same time, the Ocean is not simply a neutral territory marked by the perils and contestations of human history. The sea, Michael Pearson reminds us, “does have a history” (“The Idea of the Ocean” 8). Maritime histories, in other words, are concerned with how seas and oceans modulate and moderate human action and identity. The Indian Ocean, then, is an agential space which alters notions of self-identity and networks individual identities into a broader world framework.

Elsewhere, Pearson has made the claim that “littoral society,” as a category, is distinct so that “shore folk have more in common with other shore folk thousands of kilometers away on some shore of the ocean than they do with those in their immediate hinterland” (“Littoral Society” 353-354). Apart from nearness to the coast, what makes littoral society a separate analytical unit is its unique “mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences” (354). This material and conceptual permeability informs notions of the “littoral,” where conditions of *relation* between land and sea and constant interactions along the coast remain more important than mere physical *nearness* to the sea and inhabitations along the coast. This dynamic mode of interaction implies that littoral thinking can also be a relational practice. Mirroring the inherent flexibility of the littoral as an

amphibian concept, “moving easily between land and sea” (Pearson “Littoral Society” 359), littoral thought is informed by a unique duality. As a mode of thinking which encourages identities that are unmoored from strict adherence to nation and continent, littoral thought also seeks to build alternative communities across the ocean space. This communal space, then, is a non-identitarian and dynamic grid, peopled by crossings, movements, and flows across the ocean.

Perhaps the greatest promise of Indian Ocean studies is its interdisciplinary nature, which marries history with geopolitics, environmental studies, and literary texts, among others. Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s work stands as a testament to this evolving network of interests that Indian Ocean studies coheres. According to DeLoughrey, “critical ocean studies” signifies an oceanic imaginary that “reflects an important shift from a long-term concern with mobility across transoceanic surfaces to theorizing oceanic submersion, thus rendering vast oceanic space into ontological place” (32). DeLoughrey views the ocean as a submersive, ontological place where relationality is measured or understood through relations existing not only *across* the ocean, but also *within* it. Critical ocean studies therefore pays particular attention to the multispecies inhabitation of maritime space, where the ontological “being” of the ocean hosts possibilities for more-than-human collaboration. Maritime space makes evident that human histories and human time are intimately and urgently locked with ecological time where the “oceanic contours of the planet, including its submarine creatures, are no longer outside of the history of the human” (42). DeLoughrey’s work makes visible the links between culture, ecology, and history, where the survival of oceans is indispensable to the survival of the connections that oceans make possible.

For this essay, I concentrate on how oceanic thinking bears a transformative imaginative and creative potential, one that professes a historical and political vision of modernity. Oceanic modernities, which have existed for centuries, predate an order of “modernity” that is defined by the Global North. As Jeremy Prestholdt argues, the Indian Ocean space is marked by “overlapping and competing universalisms [that] shaped the imagination of the people along the Indian Ocean rim long before the modern colonial project” (444). In other words, a focus on Indian Ocean studies rejects the idea that any universal idea of history has its origins in the spiritual and material primacy of Europe in the world order. The rich and diverse history of Indian Ocean actors upends such a partial vision of world historical consciousness. The narrative of a world divided into a timeless, monolithic “premodern” Global South, and a history-making, world-making “modern” Global North is, therefore, vastly inaccurate and disproportionately skewed in favour of continuing legacies of domination by the Global North.

Indian Ocean Studies' emphasis on the "competing universalisms" of the Ocean space, moreover, specifically dismisses the idea that the Global South has a horizontal and universal experience of historical time. Instead, this view holds that critical conversations between pluriversal histories can expose alternative standards and timelines of historical knowledge. Isabel Hofmeyr, for instance, argues how "at every turn the Indian Ocean complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms" ("Universalizing" 722). According to Hofmeyr, the Indian Ocean "as method" makes "visible a range of lateral networks that fall within the Third World or Global South," and "offers a rich archive of transnational forms of imagination" ("The Complicating Sea" 584-85). This line of argument has also been forwarded by scholars such as Sugata Bose, who argues that the Indian Ocean is marked by "rich and complex interregional arenas of economic, political, and cultural relationships" (7). Bose, like Hofmeyr and Prestholdt, notes the overlaps and relational dynamics of the Ocean space. Following from Hofmeyr's interpretation of the Indian Ocean as "method," I would like to extend the analysis to read the ocean as a method of relation, and in fact, as the *condition* of relation. This has particular significance if we consider how there is a repeated emphasis not only on the competing universalisms of the Ocean but also on the imaginative potential offered by it. The Indian Ocean, in this sense, fosters conditions for relationships that would otherwise be inconceivable, relationships which, in turn, imaginatively vector the space of the Ocean with their own agential operations across it.

My analysis of Gurnah's novels as expositions of transmodern community builds on Anupama Mohan's conception of what she terms "the transmodern novel" ("Maritime Transmodernities"). As we have seen above, several scholars have theorised the broad field of Indian Ocean studies, approaching it from historical, political, and ecocritical perspectives. Mohan's compelling intervention in this regard derives its originality from how she theorises the links between Indian Ocean studies and literary form. According to Mohan, the transmodern novel both departs from as well as continues the "standard operating procedures...of the postcolonial novel" ("Maritime Transmodernities"). Whereas the postcolonial novel, as Mohan suggests, often critiques colonialist, militarist and capitalist modernity by reevaluating the historical period of European expansionism, conquest over land, and control over territory, the transmodern novel, on the other hand, broadens the historical scope and focus of this critique by destabilising the former's terracentric ethos. The transmodern maritime novel, as her essay suggests, goes beyond the politics of land-based nationalism; instead, it uncovers, reanimates, and recentres long histories of cultural continuities, overlaps, and contact in the Global South, mediated and shaped by oceanic thinking and littoral

networks. The ocean in such works is not only a thematic component of the transmodern novel and is not “merely [understood] as [a] vehicle for transmission of cultures and ideas but as the very field anchoring a whole other sensibility or ethos” (“Maritime Transmodernities”). This aspect of the transmodern novel (one among many that Mohan identifies) is my primary focus in this essay. In particular, I am interested in exploring what this “whole other sensibility or ethos” might be, and what its workings are in the literary form of the novel. I develop the idea of community as a critical orientation—an ethos of complicated relationality—that weaves together stories of exile, journeys, and reunion in Gurnah’s novels. In the following sections, I investigate how the transmodern novel and its oceanic thinking is constituted by, and materialised in, literary and physical ideas of community. The development of what can be called “transmodern community,” then, pertains both to a representation of actual intercultural, coastal communities as well as to a narrative mode that governs the axes of interpretation and forms of exposition of the literary text.

Locations of Indian Ocean Consciousness in Gurnah’s Novels

In my analysis of three of Gurnah’s novels—*By the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005), and his latest, *Gravel Heart* (2017)—I return specifically to the argument that Gurnah’s novels, essentially, are “difficult” stories that investigate the conditions of their creation. Working from this premise, I look at the relationship between forms of storytelling, transmodern philosophy, and a critical communitarian imagination in Gurnah’s works, with emphasis on how Indian Ocean consciousness expresses an alternative political and aesthetic vision of the world. I assess the conceptual traffic lines that need to be crossed before Gurnah’s writings can become hospitable to contradictions, multiplicities, and divergences. This section is divided into several parts, each of which addresses different aspects of these theoretical issues alongside offering a close textual analysis of the novels.

Gurnah and Indian Ocean Studies: Critical Overview

Against the broad ongoing conversations around the Indian Ocean, several critics have specifically commented on Gurnah’s illustration of some of the concerns stated above. Meg Samuelson, following Pearson’s concept of “littoral society,” suggests the possibility of identifying a category of “littoral literature” which corrects the overgeneralising tendencies of the category of “world literature” by encouraging us to “think quite differently

about continents and oceans and how they inter-articulate” (“Coastal Form” 16-17). Samuelson’s attention to form is particularly interesting because her analysis focuses on the “hospitality” of Gurnah’s writings which are accommodative of contradictory accounts, signifying a capacious engagement with difference, rather than similarity (22). To read Gurnah, then, is to alter *how* we think through organising categorisations. “Coastal form,” in this sense, is one of the ways in which littoral literature responds to the categorisations of “world literature” by remaining stubbornly multivalent, and by mimetically representing the amphibian crossings of land and sea.

Tina Steiner similarly notes how “Gurnah’s narratives insist on moments of relation of small voices affirming hospitality” within violent and disruptive historical contexts by focalising the “imperative to see others *in relation* to ourselves” (125-126, emphasis in the original). While Steiner’s emphasis on a narrative practice of relationality is important, I do not follow her alignment of this practice with a conscious disengagement from community. Her interpretation of community in terms of an identitarian politics of filiation that “overrides all else” (130), and her contention that Gurnah “dismantles notions of rootedness and harmony that underlie the concept of community” (131), I argue, are reductive views of community that do not recognise its active and flexible practice of being-in-relation. Moreover, community does not preclude globality and, as such, contests ideas of calcification and rootedness. It sharpens and historicises the critical lens through which the self relates to the world, and to other selves in the world. As Prestholdt argues, the “ocean is an increasingly powerful field of the imagination: a discursive anchor for new relationships, a vessel for the articulation of transnational identities and community beyond the nation” (442). In this sense, community provides a framework for theorising relational practices across the Ocean, investing the concept of relation with an ethical charge to note the “small voices” of history, even (and perhaps especially) when they are not in agreement with one another.

Thinking *through* difference outlines the broadest realisation of community, espousing “heterogeneity as a mode of being in the world” (Moorthy 74). The steady maintenance of a critical dialogism, where opposing narratives do not necessarily need to be resolved within the text, again relies on an imagination where “different smaller stories...ultimately generate a large-scale dialogic contact zone for people to meet and interact in” (Helff 157). This dialogic contact zone does not begin and end with the history of European colonial engagement with littoral societies, but also exists within littoral societies themselves, which are often fractiously and argumentatively co-existent. This is a point that situates Gurnah, in my view, as more of a transmodern novelist than a postcolonial writer. Although he does not use either of the terms to define his authorial stance,

Gurnah registers a general problem of postcolonial analyses which emphasise the commonality of erstwhile colonised cultures insofar as their common experience of having encountered European colonialism but which fail to adequately address cultural difference. This complicates “the otherwise coherent and homogeneous narrative of postcolonialism” by factoring “the competing relations within the cultural hotch-potch of colonised territories” (“Imagining the Postcolonial Writer” 85) in the analytical framework. In other words, transmodernity approaches the question of solidarity in a different way: solidarity is built on the critique of an exclusionary modernity that has made certain locations of the world unrecognisable to its structures rather than on a postcolonial “writing back” that flattens differences in order to make these locations recognisable and legible to European modernity.

I agree with Mohan that it is instructive to differentiate the “postcolonial novel” from the “transmodern novel” by identifying features of the latter that are distinctive, without claiming that interpretations of transmodern texts are wholly governed by these features. Instead, as Mohan suggests, an understanding of what “the transmodern novel” signifies is companionate with what she calls a “transmodern reading practice.” By marshalling Vilashini Cooppan's (“globalized reading”) and Françoise Lionnet's (“Creolephone”) figurations of reading practices that eschew a narrowly teleological focus and actualise a variety of hermeneutic and narratological practices while reading the (transmodern) novel, Mohan suggests that the very act of reading becomes *transformed*. Such a hermeneutic that the transmodern novel actualises is not only a way of *representing* a transmodern world; rather, as Mohan argues, the transmodern novel is actively *formative* as well as *transformative* of such a world. This shift from a representational to a formative perspective — one that puts all kinds of pressures upon the novel form itself — establishes the position that the transmodern novel radically and actively destabilises and reshapes how the world is read. By reshaping both the form of the novel and the world that is represented in the novel, the transmodern novel—in following and urging a transmodern reading practice—offers an interpretative framework that makes room for several divergences as well. This constellatory, collaborative dialogue is evident in the works of the two very different authors—Ghosh and Gurnah—that Mohan and I examine, authors who respond to the transmodern question from distinct vantage-points and use distinct narrative methods. The focus of this essay, in particular, is on transmodern narrative modes and community in Gurnah’s writings, and how these modes, in turn, urge us to formulate and deploy transmodern reading practices.

The focal point is that history takes place “elsewhere” as well, irrespective of the world framed by European discourse. Gurnah’s Swahili community is not a utopian space; it has its own hierarchies, power

struggles, and violence. In short, it has the same historical complexity that any idea of cultural modernity incorporates, and Gurnah is not anxious to resolve them into a comfortable narrative of peaceful and uninterrupted co-existence. This “irreducible multiplicity of perspectives that are linked with representations of Indian Ocean space” (Lavery, “White-washed Minarets” 125) allows Gurnah to relate intimate, personal stories with stories of the world, where the dialogism operates on multiple levels. The imaginative work of the novelist, therefore, is not to rescue one single story of the coast, but to investigate the conditions from which stories emerge. Stories which seem disparate, therefore, are exposed as being connected, and Gurnah’s novels ponder and critique the processes through which stories are *made* to seem disconnected by the arrogating and obfuscating mechanisms of European modernity.

In an interview conducted with the author, this point is reiterated and clarified. Gurnah concurs that “connections between littoral cultures” is an aspect that he “refer[s] to repeatedly in [his] writing” (*Postcolonial Text*). At the same time, he is careful to note that this mode of writing does not so much emerge from a desire to represent a particular culture as much as it does from a narrative focus that “wants to see connections” (*Postcolonial Text*, emphasis added). Transmodern narrative modes, therefore, produce a rationale for relational thinking, exemplified here by a focus on how littoral cultures intermingle or create their connective histories. This particular mode of writing finds representation in the works of other contemporary novelists as well, such as Amitav Ghosh¹ and M.G. Vassanji, who narrativise histories of travel and migration across the Indian Ocean space, as well as the intricacies of human relationships that are born out of these intersections. However, whereas novels like Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land* or Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets* map Africa within Indian Ocean relations only partially (Ghosh largely writes about India to North Africa journeys and Vassanji focuses on the experiences of Indian communities in East Africa), Gurnah is a pioneering figure in representing East African locations of Indian Ocean relations, particularly through his exploration of a hybrid Swahili coastal community. This retains a more specific Africanist focus while problematising the assumptions of “Africanist” discourse at the same time.²

Beginnings: “Difficult Stories”

In “Writing Place,” Gurnah traces the trajectory of his career as an author, which was instigated by the “overwhelming feeling of strangeness and difference” (26) he felt in England after he migrated there from Zanzibar shortly after the 1964 revolution. When he began to write, he was gripped

by a distinct kind of overwhelming feeling: that of writing about a place that became more vivid in memory. “When I began to write,” Gurnah says, “it was the lost life that I wrote about, the lost place and what I remembered of it” (26). However, the “lost life” that Gurnah talks about is not a nostalgic recreation of Zanzibar. The subject matter of his works over the years is the “condition of being from one place and living in another” (27). Again, in his interview with Nasta, Gurnah comments that he has always been “interested in exploring the idea that people remake themselves, reshape themselves” (*Writing Across Worlds* 356). The question of “identity” in Gurnah’s novels has inevitably come up, especially since his characters keep shuttling between different countries (mainly Zanzibar and England), and learn to navigate the implications of migration, exile, and disenfranchisement. The creative ability to reshape and remake one’s identity not only lends itself to an analysis of how Gurnah advocates an “amphibian” nature of identity, which mimics what critics have identified as the amphibian locations of the littoral; in fact, this flexibility of “identity” as a creative, processual endeavour also resonates with the creative potential that transmodern politics and philosophy advocates, and thus forecloses manifestations, in any sphere, of singularity, rigid identitarianism, and individual authorship. This worldview has significant bearings on Gurnah’s storytelling because it allows him to assess the often contradictory, interlinked, and multiple conditions within which stories materialise, and how they continue to disseminate through time and space.

At this juncture, it is useful to contrast Gurnah’s storytelling with Walter Benjamin’s influential essay, “The Storyteller,” which begins from the premise that the figure of the storyteller, as well as the craft of storytelling, is a thing of the past. “He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant” (83), Benjamin writes of the storyteller; consequently, the “art of storytelling is coming to an end” (83). Published in 1936, Benjamin’s essay speaks to a post-First World War world which has become bereft of communicable experience. Benjamin correlates the rise of the novel (it would perhaps be more accurate to say, the Western novel) with the decline of storytelling and the “beginning of modern times” (87). The condition that leads to the rise of the modern novel is one of difficulty: within a fractured existence where the articulation of wholeness is impossible, the novel, as an art form, can only gesture towards the incommensurable. Emerging from a condition of loss, therefore, the modern novel is born out of a representation of that loss. The representative limits of the novel are a symptom of yet another condition: the passing of community. If the “birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns” (87), it is built on the debris of the consummate wholeness of communicable

experience that the world of the story represents. While the world of the story invites several collaborative partners in its full realisation—the speaker and the listener, for example—the world of the novel can, in its penury and isolation, only offer “evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (87). The perplexed and bereaved order of modernity, as Benjamin suggests, arises from a sharp distinction between the conditions that engender the novel and the story, individualism and community. Can the novel then, at all, be a communal craft if it has to be representative of “modern times,” or alternatively, the time of modernity? Can it be representative of community?

All three of Gurnah’s novels, at first glance, appear to emerge from a similar condition of loss and bereavement. Operating through a carefully crafted difficulty of expression, Gurnah’s characters seem bereft of communicable expertise. For instance, the first chapter of *By the Sea* relates Saleh Omar’s recollection of his arrival at Gatwick airport several years ago. Omar introduces himself as an asylum-seeker: “These are not simple words, even if the habit of hearing them makes them seem so” (4). Indeed, he pretends to the immigration officer that he cannot speak English, believing it will help him avoid difficult questions and allow him to gain access into the country. An erstwhile political prisoner of the Zanzibar state, Omar flees from his hometown after his release, sensing further trouble from a member of a family he had brought to ruin in the past. The calculated silence of Omar at the immigration desk, therefore, is underwritten by the teeming excess of his narrative, of complicated and intertwined lives that are difficult to disentangle in a singular, directed way. The first chapter, which begins as a recollection, expresses this difficulty from the beginning: “It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with some assurance that first it was this and it then led to that and the other, and now here we are” (2). Again, *Desertion* opens with a similar statement: “There was a story of his first sighting. In fact, there was more than one, but elements of the stories merged into one with time and telling” (3). The “sighting” mentioned here refers to a foreigner, Martin Pearce, who washes ashore a small town near Mombasa in an unconscious state. Pearce’s appearance, like “a figure out of myth” (3), begins the narrative on an almost surreal note, difficult to grasp in non-allusive language. Pearce later goes on to develop a relationship with Rehana, sister of the shopkeeper Hassanali who finds and saves him. This relationship develops in different trajectories and has different consequences for each generation of characters in the novel. *Gravel Heart*, as well, begins from a condition of perplexity: Salim, the narrator, opens the novel by saying “[m]y father did not want me” (1). Abandoned by his father at the age of seven (seemingly inexplicably), Salim grows up with a persisting sense of guilt and detachment from his father, a feeling which continues well into his

adulthood until his mother's death gives him the occasion to reconnect with his father and discover the secret the latter has been harbouring for decades. In order to arrive at the truth, Salim's father goes through the timeline not only of his own life, but of other lives as well.

The difficulty that characterises Gurnah's works, therefore, cannot be explained only in terms of an in-between or fragmented nature of identity that speaks out of loss and disjointedness. The central idea that underlines his works is the connectedness of human lives, of connections that survive and persist through conditions that ostensibly make lived experience incommensurable with narrative, with narrated lives. A critical aspect of his storytelling, in this sense, grapples with the difficulty of conceiving the novel form in individualistic terms. Within this condition, where one lives many lives and many lives are lived in one's own, the Benjaminian framework for modernity and its relationship with the novel as an art form undergoes revision. Reading Gurnah's works involves some difficulty on the part of the reader as well, who has to cultivate a distinct conceptual paradigm for accessing the wealth of his literature. Gurnah's works, then, speak a different language of modernity, one that articulates an alternative (transmodern) possibility.

Transmodernity

As one of the leading philosophers of transmodern thought, Enrique Dussel's work on transmodernity asserts that what prevails as "Modernity" is only about two centuries old, coinciding with the period of European expansionism and global domination. This idea of a universal and universalising modernity, circulated and discursively strengthened by European philosophy, systematically excludes the rest of the world from being historical agents and actors, relegating them to the "periphery" whose conception of time, and response to history, can only be in relation to the "core" of Europe, the centre and maker of the world. Transmodernity attacks and deliberately de-positions the assumed centrality of European history and philosophy. In this sense, transmodernity is neither a negation nor an extension of modernity; it is a de-valuing of the absolute claim Europe has to ideas of modernity. A prolific writer, Dussel has written widely on transmodernity in a career spanning several decades. Here, however, I focus particularly on two of his essays, "World-System and 'Trans'-Modernity" (2002) and "Transmodernity and Interculturality" (2012), where he succinctly lays out his claims for a transmodern philosophical approach.

One persistent line of reasoning Dussel pursues is the inadequacy of the "world-system" hypothesis in challenging Eurocentrism. Purportedly shifting emphasis from a partial critique of Europe's centrality in global

politics and intellectual history to an analysis of the systemic inequalities of the “world,” the world-system approach nevertheless maintains that it was Europe whose conceptions of modernity gave rise to the idea of the “world” in the first place. The world-system approach, therefore, critiques Eurocentrism and its systemic injustices while maintaining, as its epistemic standard, the world *as created by Europe*, a world which strategically excludes other worlds from its imaginative horizons. Transmodernity, for Dussel, “in contrast, demands a whole new interpretation of modernity in order to include moments that were never incorporated into the European vision” (“World-System” 223). Instead of simply critiquing Europe’s complicity in creating a hierarchical world, transmodernity moves out of a historical determinism which holds that the future of the “rest of the world” continues to be formed by its complicated engagement with the structures and systems already set in place by Europe, and more broadly, the Global North.

These structures, Dussel shows, are historically recent, and are not representative of a universal historical time. Dussel puts into perspective the two temporal “events” of European history that organised historical understandings of “modernity” around them: the Spanish invasion of the Americas in 1492, followed by European expansionism and colonialism. The first, referring to a “period of the European ‘first modernity’—the Hispanic, humanist, pecuniary, manufacturing, and mercantile modernity” (“World-System” 228)—only initiated, instead of solidifying, Europe’s position as the “geopolitical ‘center’ of the world-system” (228). European modernity, at the time, “was still peripheral to the Hindustani and Chinese world” (228). The latter region was the greatest producer of commodities and a central player in world mercantile systems, marked by widescale movement across the China Sea, for example (227). The first wave of European “modernity,” then, did not quite manage to take the reins of the world in its hands, a world which made history from the peripheral “elsewhere.” The period of “second Eurocentrism” emerged with the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment ideology, and European military and political domination over the seas. This period, spanning just over two hundred years, saw the expansion of European control over world markets and its subsequent justification of this control through discursive strategies which deemed everything outside of Europe to be outside of history, outside of modernity. Enlightenment philosophy, with its foundational assumptions of European superiority, gave support to such strategies. What marked the “real” period of European modernity, therefore, was not just mercantile activity in the world, but also the production of narrative strategies that bolstered and justified the colonial mission. Europe, as the gatekeeper of the imaginative systems of “modernity,” carefully produced its own hegemony through material expansion, and reproduced it through racist and exclusionary discourses,

which negated the idea that the world outside of Europe could have claims to the values of modernity and civilisation.

In identifying the historical infancy of European modernity, transmodernity also provides the tools for conceptually dismantling its pernicious structures. Transmodernity approaches “something beyond the internal possibility of simple modernity” (“World-System” 234); against this “something,” it posits the creative potential of the pluriversal cultures that constitute the negated exteriority of European modernity (Dussel “Transmodernity” 42). The radical and transformative potential of transmodern thought necessitates a critical dialogue between the cultures outside of European modernity, those that “assume the challenges of Modernity ... but which respond *from another place, another location*” (“Transmodernity” 42, emphases in original). The lateral networks forged between these cultures do not “presuppose the illusion of a non-existent symmetry between cultures” (“Transmodernity” 43); intercultural dialogue, therefore, situates historical conversations within the unique cultural experiences of non-European locations while maintaining, at the same time, a differentiated space which nevertheless forges possibilities for building a collaborative, relational world.

In his more recent essay, Dussel emphasises “interculturality” as a concept over his earlier conception of a “multipolar” world, thereby replacing a term that runs the risk of repeating the same logic of polar concentrations of power with the notion of a critically collaborative dialogue between cultures. Perhaps it is urgent to read scholars like Hofmeyr, Bose, and Dussel alongside one another in order to recognise how our interpretative frameworks can be shaped by a community of scholars who consciously work against Eurocentric parameters of knowledge. Hofmeyr and Bose, in their specific focus on Indian Ocean studies, correct a potential shortcoming of Dussel’s vision: that is, the danger of falling into the same traps of universalism against which he launches an argument. In attempting to decentre the universalising claims of European modernity, Dussel himself, at times, seems to draw a generalised idea of cultural contact outside Europe in broad historical sweeps. For instance, while recognising the need for examining lateral and long histories of South-South relationships, Dussel does not systematically account for the oceanic spaces that made these relationships possible. Therefore, while his essays briefly note the general importance of the maritime histories of the China Sea and the Indian Ocean, they do not, however, structurally analyse the imaginative histories and formations of oceanic identities as an integral part of the transmodern project. On the other hand, Dussel provides a broad philosophical framework for Hofmeyr and Bose’s conceptions of competing universalisms, and interregionality, respectively. Interregional spaces also operate as spaces where pluriversal solidarities can be formed. The creative function of what can be called a

pluriversal community, then, is both a philosophical possibility as well as a historical practice of interregional dialogues, crossings, and mediations.

The narratives that emerge out of this practice and historical experience are “difficult stories,” stories that need to cross several ideological barriers before they can be formed and articulated as stories. As we have seen above, Gurnah’s authorial positionality and his stories articulate a transmodern approach to novel-writing. Thinking about Gurnah’s stories through a transmodern approach would therefore necessarily involve an accommodation of differences, of contradictions. The hospitality of Gurnah’s writings refuses organising Eurocentric categories; in contrast, it affords an opening out of vision to the creative horizons of culture. As a specifically anti-provincial understanding of community, Gurnah’s novels access locations of conflict as well as convergence, hope as well as despair, beauty as well as pain.

Swahili Transmodernity

One of the principal characters of *By the Sea* is Hussein, the seaman-trader, who enthralled Saleh Omar with his stories of the world. He is also perhaps the most pivotal character in the novel as he is the connecting link between two parallel lives: Saleh Omar’s and Latif Mahmud’s. Interestingly, Benjamin’s essay mentions the figure of the seaman as one of the “past masters of storytelling” (85). As one of the old archetypal figures of storytelling, the trading seaman journeys far and wide, bearing stories that travel along with him. One might immediately recall Joseph Conrad whose seamen-storytellers are, however, explorers more than traders. In his autobiographical writing, Conrad recalls looking at a map of Africa in his childhood, putting his “finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of the continent,” and saying to himself: “When I grow up I shall go there” (*A Personal Record* 40-41). These words are repeated almost verbatim in *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow speaks of his “passion for maps,” especially those of South America, Africa, and Australia, which offer him “all the glories of exploration” (7-8). Gurnah’s works echo the familiar Conradian narrative by maintaining some of its tropes, such as his crafting of broad, persisting themes that are investigated prismatically in each progressive novel, his diffusive style where meaning is “not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which...[brings] it out only as a glow brings out a haze” (*Heart of Darkness* 5), and his working out of intricate human relationships that illuminate spatial and socio-political specificities. At the same time, he upends these very tropes by inverting the impetus that underlies oceanic journeys: Africa is not a “blank space,” and the characters who people it are not the heroic explorers of exotic,

unknowable lands, but roguish traders who depend on their knowledge of local populations to carry out their business.

Swahili transmodernity in Gurnah's works, I argue, relays the same ethic of intercultural inhabitation that transmodern philosophy professes. The very nature of the Swahili coast mandates that there is no one dominant culture that needs to find ethical ways of co-existing with the "other." Swahili transmodernity, therefore, cannot be equated with general notions of cosmopolitanism. Issues of cultural co-existence are grappled with in the context of centuries of Swahili history whereas cosmopolitanism is articulated from a different location, operating on the basis of a different set of concerns, responding to the anxieties of other (mostly Western) societies and their problematic encounter with the negated others of the world.³ Transmodernity is a more useful way of approaching Gurnah's works which do not shy away from depicting instances of violent conflict and narrow-mindedness within littoral communities. Gurnah's works emphasise that over and above the utopian picture of a harmonious and peaceful co-existence between cultures is the idea that within coastal conceptions of identity, it is impossible to even imagine a singular, self-enclosed culture. Swahili transmodernity, as embodied in intercultural thought, is not the affirmation of a cosmopolitan society but the condition of a communal creation of identity where a composite "Swahili" culture will, out of necessity, accommodate multiple, divergent, and even contradictory cultural experiences. Gurnah is not a cultural apologist; on the contrary, his very ability to critique culture is bolstered by the innate flexibility and accommodative ethic of Swahili culture. Again, Swahili transmodernity is articulated from a specific non-European political and cultural location, grounded in a historical imagination that has been shaped by centuries of travel, contact, and dialogue between different civilisations and cultures of the Global South. As a practice of relational and interregional thinking, Swahili transmodernity historicises the interculturality of Swahili society and provides a philosophical framework within which cultural critique can be located.

Trained both in Arabic (in a Koranic school or madrassat) and English (within a colonial education system), Gurnah's mindscape as an artist was formed long before he migrated to England and even before he began to write seriously. In an essay, Gurnah outlines how his childhood in Malindi was characterised by an engagement with multiple languages and cultural experiences:

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...from other houses you could hear the sound of Kutchi or Somali, or the inflection of Kingazija. ("Learning to Read" 28).

In fact, the “cultural vision” of his works is informed by his “complex heritage” which allowed him to negotiate the “coexistence of contradictory cultural traditions” (“Learning” 29). In this sense, the false opposition between Kiswahili and English as cultural and polar contestants in a fraught political zone did not hold true for Gurnah: “what I am suggesting is that if our concern is with the contact zone between languages and ideas of culture, then my contact zone is as much migrancy as the encounter with Swahili and English that occurred in my childhood” (“Learning” 31). Even though Gurnah writes in English (albeit with frequent usage of Kiswahili words and phrases), a language which he “learnt to read and write in,” *what* he writes, he argues, “had already been given to... [him] a long time before that (“Learning” 32). Therefore, even though writing out of the lived experience of inhabiting the heterogeneous culture-scape of Malindi, Gurnah nevertheless finds an expressive freedom in using English as his medium of communication. Attributing this to a vigorous reading practice which he picked up when he moved to England in his youth, a habit that was not available to him in Zanzibar due to a scarcity of good libraries and exorbitant book prices, Gurnah acknowledges how English became a “spacious and roomy house, accommodating writing and knowledge with heedless hospitality” (“Writing” 27). Navigating this duality between a multi-lingual cultural experience which serves as his “knowledge” of the world and its expression in a particular language which makes these experiences hospitable in writing, Gurnah uses English as a register for what can be called a linguistic transmodernity where intercultural, amphibian crossings between languages can mimetically represent the dynamic and creative shaping and reshaping of places and identities. This migrancy of experience, of inhabiting two or more places at the same time (albeit in different ways), translates into the linguistic aesthetic of his novels as well.

Indian Ocean and Mahali

Perhaps it is the coastal nature of Swahili culture that makes it transmodern. Proximity to the Indian Ocean has not only facilitated transoceanic travel and trade for centuries, but has also given rise to a coastal consciousness in which the concept of interculturality is embedded both geographically and linguistically. The ancient Swahili began to practice a “maritime lifestyle...and articulate a maritime identity” as early as the eleventh century (Fleisher *et al.* 101). Fleisher and others note how the Swahili actively made changes in architectural structures such as placing “mosques at the shore’s edge or bluffs overlooking the sea, and, later, [building] new forms of domestic and port architecture that

facilitated long-distance trade and accommodation of traders” (101). The construction of a new, distinct maritime identity “was also structured by a changing worldview; the Swahili were not merely participating more in the Indian Ocean world, [but] were reimagining themselves as more connected to it...[effecting] this transformation through alterations of their material world” (Fleisher et al. 102-103). The sea-facing nature of the Swahili was, therefore, an imaginative enterprise that not only began to construct the idea of what Pearson calls a “littoral society” by distinguishing themselves from inland cultures, but also actively fashioned their identity through the connections they made across the Indian Ocean space. In fact, the word “Swahili” itself comes from “sahil,” which means “coast” in Arabic. This is perhaps not unusual considering that one of the major trade routes along the East African littoral was populated by Arab traders who sailed in their “dhows,” or trading vessels, in the direction of the trade winds. Swahili, which retained more or less the grammatical structure of the Bantu languages, borrowed a large number of words from other languages, including Arabic, showing “a complex interplay of features with other languages of the area” (Hinnebusch 88). In this sense, Swahili developed as a distinctly coastal language, incorporating elements of other languages and cultures with flexibility and porosity.

The Swahili lexicon reflects these influences and intersections. Significantly, as Marina Tolmacheva notes, early Swahili education did not have geography as a written science and therefore did not have it as part of the “coastal intellectual training” (7). One of the most important ways in which the Swahili made sense of their world was through their relationship with the coast and the sea beyond it. The Swahili word for “sea,” for instance, is “bahari” which is another Arabic loanword, showing “an awareness of the maritime world that includes not only an oceanic setting but also an international scale of oceanic routes” (Tolmacheva 18). “Bahari,” which also carries connotations of the “outside,” or the world “beyond,” again confirms the horizontal consciousness and coastal imagination embedded within the lexicon of the Swahili language. Mahali, a Swahili linguistic concept denoting “place,” is another Arabic loanword.⁴ What makes the concept of mahali particularly interesting is that it has both lexical as well as grammatical meanings. Grammatically, the noun class in the Swahili language that refers to the idea of place is called mahali. Each grammatical class in the Swahili language carries a denotative meaning: for instance, the first and second noun classes (m-wa) comprise all words related to human beings (man, woman, teacher, doctor, etc.). Lexically, mahali is a loanword from another language, showing how terms and concepts are not only carried over from other languages and superimposed on the existing one, but also become part of the structure of the language itself. The word for “place” in the Swahili language, then, itself travels.

Additionally, the word-concept “mahali” denotes three interrelated but different notions of place which is linguistically expressed by the usage of three different subject prefixes.⁵ First, the subject prefix pa- denotes the idea of a definite place: “Mahali hapa,” therefore, means “this place,” which demonstrates a fixed place. Second, the subject prefix ku- denotes the idea of indefinite place: “kule,” for instance, refers to “that place,” demonstrating the idea of a non-proximal place. Finally, the subject prefix mu- denotes the complex idea of “alongness” or “withinness,” which implies both spatial and temporal markers. For instance, “humu,” which means “inside” or “here within,” does not only refer to the actual interior of a place. It is also a *position*, an inhabitation of a particular *location*. While running the risk of foraying outside of the strict grammatical properties of mahali as a noun class in the Swahili language, I would like to argue, however, that a consciousness of how languages organise space is extremely useful in recognising how literary texts do the same. Linguistic and cultural analyses can lend themselves productively to larger philosophical arguments and vice versa. Thinking *about* the Indian Ocean can only happen when we think *through* the Indian Ocean and its harbouring of multiple meanings and traces. The Indian Ocean, in this sense, is both a geographically identifiable body of water, a fixed place on the map; an indefinite place which refers to the interminable horizons of the “beyond”; and a cultural and political position, inhabited differently at different times, by different peoples. In short, the Indian Ocean as understood through mahali offers a space of infinite creative possibilities. In making English hospitable to the consciousness of another language, Gurnah populates his literary works with multiple referential locations of thought. In hosting a community of interests and intersections, literature itself becomes a practice of thinking prismatically, refracting what appears to be singular into a host of possibilities. In envisioning the idea of creation itself as a necessarily communal activity—collaborative, overlapping, and multivalent—Gurnah’s novels promise a radical transmodern possibility: the articulation of a non-European, communal, cognitive standard of knowledge that maintains the specificities of culture while opening itself out to other horizons of analysis and collaboration.

For example, one of the things that Kevin Edelman, the immigration officer, confiscates from Omar is his casket containing ud-al-qamari, incense made from the aloe tree. The loss of his precious cargo prompts Omar to reminisce about his encounter with Hussein:

The man I obtained the ud-al-qamari from was a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, he and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. (*By the Sea* 14)

As a direct depiction of the Indian Ocean trade, Omar's historiography constructs the Indian Ocean as a definite material space of trade and contact. At the same time, it locates the practice as an age-old activity, almost poetic in its timelessness. The Indian Ocean, here, becomes an indefinite, imaginative space of the contact between civilisations. Omar then goes on to relate how the entrance of other civilisations rudely disturbed this practice: first the Portuguese, who "burst so unexpectedly and so disastrously from that unknown and impenetrable sea," wreaking "their religion-crazed havoc on islands" (15); then the Omanis, the British, the Germans, the French, and so on. These intrusions, which introduced "new maps...complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for" (15), replaced the old trading practice with a cartographic narcissism that characterised much of the early manifestations of European modernity and expansion through trade. The Indian Ocean is transformed into political territory, a strategic location for domination, through the imaginative control exercised by the maps which gave shape to a "limitless world," making it "seem like territory, like something that could be possessed" (35). This, again, is a deliberate reworking of a Conradian view of the world, in how Gurnah structures the narrative through the consciousness of historically aware African characters who critique colonial, racist practices of map-making.

Against these "modern" practices of map-making, which cohere an order of the world helmed by European powers, Omar nevertheless retains a fascination for the imaginative worlds offered by the map. The first map he remembers seeing is introduced to him by a teacher in school who tells the class a story about Christopher Columbus:

As his story developed, he began to draw a map on the blackboard with a piece of white chalk: the coast of north-west Europe, the Iberian peninsula, southern Europe, the land of Shams, Syria and Palestine, the coast of North Africa which then bulged out and tucked in and then slid down to the Cape of Good Hope. As he drew, he spoke, naming places, sometimes in full sometimes in passing. Sinuously north to the jut of the Ruvuma delta, the cusp of our stretch of coast, the Horn of Africa, then the Red Sea coast to Suez, the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, India, the Malay Peninsula and then all the way to China. (*By the Sea* 37)

In contrast to the earlier map, the openness of this transmodern map liberates imaginative boundaries in a "fabulous and unrepeatable moment" (37). By retelling the story of Columbus, not as the intrepid "discoverer" of the Americas, but as a figure representing a historical accident (Columbus intended to reach China but took the opposite route, thereby stumbling upon a different continent altogether), this map instead sketches parts of a pluriversal world with multiple civilisational centres. Columbus, then, is not the pioneer of modernity, inaugurating it with the "discovery" of the Americas; instead, he is a "dot in the North Mediterranean" (37), a speck in a vast, much-travelled world. Similarly, Hussein's story of how

he obtained the ud enthral Omar. When Hussein starts rattling off the names of the several places that he travelled to with his father, Reza, in his youth, Omar insists that he point out these places on a map. Poring over it, he identifies Bangkok, a “calm beautiful port town” where “people from all over the world congregated...Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Europeans” (29). It is in Bangkok that Reza obtained a consignment of ud from Cambodia, which for him was a profitable commodity for trade. For Omar, however, the ud signifies much more: “I thought I could catch the odour of the fantasy of those distant places in the dense body of the perfume” (30). Significantly, as Omar says, this is “only because Hussein had bound the two things together for me with his stories, and I had surrendered to both so completely” (30). Like the teacher’s story, Hussein’s words bear an intoxicating quality and seduce Omar to give him a coveted ebony table in exchange for a casket of ud. The direct link between the seductive power of narrative and the broadening of imaginative horizons melds seamlessly with oceanic crossings. As Meg Samuelson notes, “linking narration and cartography... storytelling [is posited] as a medium for tracing along the littoral and enabling passage between distant places, rendering the sea a connective tissue rather than divisive element” (“Narrative Cartographies” 79). When Edelman, the “bawab of Europe,” confiscates the “provision of [his] after-life” (31), he simultaneously performs a kind of divisive violence on the connective tissue of Omar’s known world, posing imaginative and material challenges to his future in a new country.

Transmodern Narrative Modes

Transmodern oceanic imaginary orients the way in which the narrative mode functions, informing the structural organisation of the novel. *Desertion*, for instance, reflects this orientation most clearly in its use of narrative voice. *Desertion* spans two generations living on the Swahili coast, and tells the stories of two difficult and ill-fated loves set against the backdrops of empire and independence. The first story, set in 1899, follows the entry of Martin Pearce into a small town near Mombasa, his engagements with the colonial officers of the town, and his illicit relationship with Rehana, sister of the shopkeeper Hassanali who rescues him from the shore after a disastrous hunting expedition leaves him for dead. After abandoning Rehana and the child he has with her, Pearce returns to England, marries an Englishwoman and becomes father to another daughter. The second story, beginning from the 1950s, narrates the lives of two brothers, Amin and Rashid. Amin falls in love with Jamila, the granddaughter of Pearce and Rehana, while Rashid leaves the country for England on the brink of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. Amin’s

relationship with Jamila is as short-lived as that of Rehana and Pearce's since his family members force him to cut ties, considering that Jamila is the granddaughter of a "scandalous" woman and a divorcee herself. In England, Rashid accidentally runs into Barbara Turner, Pearce's granddaughter from his other relationship, and both Barbara and Rashid start discovering their connected histories. The novel ends with Rashid contemplating return, along with Barbara who is keen to meet the members of her extended family.

What is interesting apart from the fact that Gurnah weaves these connected personal histories of the coast with the momentous histories of empire and independence is how he consciously posits, in dialogic opposition, two distinct narrative modes. Frederick Turner, the District Officer, and Burton, the manager of the estate at Bondeni where Pearce is taken to recuperate, are the exponents of a racist colonial ideology that bolsters the logic of empire. Readers of Gurnah's earlier novels will instantly recognise the irony when Turner refers to the Indian Ocean as "a pond compared to the beastly Atlantic" (44). Again, Burton refers to the history of the coast as a mere "pirate country" before the arrival of the British: "When the winds were right, the Arabs came raiding all along the coast, kidnapping and looting at will, making slaves. When the winds turned they sped back to their caves to play with their booty" (83). This again, for readers of *By the Sea*, for instance, is laughable because it shows the extent to which the rabid individualism and self-aggrandisement of empire organise narratives of modernity based on historical inaccuracy, greed, and racism. Burton's unabashed racism is again expressed when he refers to the "savage African in the interior" as a doomed creature who will "just pine and starve and die off in the encounter with civilisation" (84). Turner, who fashions himself as a "colonial idealist" according to Pearce, rebuts Burton's absolutism by arguing that the empire has "a responsibility to the natives, to keep an eye on them and guide them slowly into obedience and orderly labour" (84). Sitting in their estate, the three men debate the future of an entire continent, mulling over whether, at the turn of the century, Africa will be "cleared of its natives," like America, or will cultivate "civilised and hard-working subjects" (85). This again illustrates a Columbian logic of modernity, where the temporal beginnings of the world and the future directions it will take reside in the "centre" of the European world and follow from its expansion into "new" worlds. At the same time, Turner reluctantly admits that this "tiny dilapidated town" (90), however, has "a lot of history," trading in ivory with Egypt and Greece since ancient times, and "already a prosperous place" by the time the Portuguese arrived a few centuries ago, even though now it has become a "decaying coastal settlement" (91). In dismissively referring to the myth of a Persian prince who flees to the coast and establishes a kingdom that "founds the mongrel Swahili *civilisation*" (91,

emphasis in original), Turner further shows his ultimate inability to think inter-culturally and relationally, where his prejudice clouds his historical knowledge of the Swahili coast, which can only remain a “mongrel” civilisation in his mind. This also shows the discursive processes through which some worlds are made peripheral to an order that constructs a narrative of European supremacy. Similarly, even though Pearce is a self-admitted historian and budding orientalist who cautions against the excesses of empire and even enters into a relationship with a native woman, ultimately, he too fails to overcome his own limitations, abandoning her and their daughter forever.

Before the second story (of Amin and Rashid) begins, however, the third-person narrative voice suddenly changes to the first person. In a chapter titled “An Interruption” which comes just before the second part of the novel, we suddenly discover that there is a secondary account of Martin Pearce and Rehana’s relationship, one imagined by Rashid. Building from historical fact—that there was an Englishman named Martin Pearce who washed ashore in 1899, that he had an affair with Rehana, and that he ultimately abandoned her—Rashid weaves a narrative of how they first met, how they grew to become lovers, and how he ultimately deserted her. In other words, Rashid’s imagination, which for him, is “a kind of truth” (110), suddenly interrupts this straightforward narrative, and begins to stitch together a story of interconnected lives. His interest in retelling this story comes from his brother’s similarly ill-fated relationship with Jamila and his own failed relationship with Grace, a woman he meets in England. Writing about his failed relationship through the stories of two others, Rashid comments:

There is, as you can see, an I in this story, but it is not a story about me. It is about all of us...It is about how one story contains many and how they belong not to us but are part of the random currents of our time, and about how stories capture us and entangle us for all time. (*Desertion* 120)

Rashid’s “interruption” does something singularly important for the novel: it reorients the narrative mode roughly halfway through the novel, setting up the second half as an exploration of a new way of conceptualising the world and the story. The interruption introduces a productive difficulty into the narrative because it opens up the parameters of analysis. If one story is indeed the story of all others, then there is no one story that can be the governing interpretation of the world. This ethic of flexibility and openness is then a direct critique of the blinkered and inflated narratives of empire that we see before. What is significant about Rashid’s story is its *method*: not only does he speak about the “small lives” on the periphery, but he also structures his imaginative enterprise as communal craft where the creative fashioning of the self is never an individualistic activity but a communal one, an entanglement. The larger consciousness of relationality

that now governs the narrative mode, therefore, follows a transmodern modality, which highlights the lives of the negated others of modernity and in doing so, inaugurates a new narrative mode which relies on the metaphorical and textual weaving of stories that can only happen in communion with other consciousnesses, other stories.

This is also the case in *By the Sea*. Hussein, the merchant who gives Saleh Omar the ud, convinces him to give him a loan against the deeds of the house where he lives as a guest when he visits the coast on business. The house, which belongs to a man called Rajab Shabaan Mahmud (who offers it as security for a loan he takes from Hussein), ultimately comes into the possession of Omar when Hussein disappears without repaying his loan. Years later, Omar, who flees to London and takes refugee status under the same name of the man whose house he took, meets Rajab Shabaan's son, Latif who is called as an interpreter for a man who claims to speak no English and who bears his father's name. Again, Mahmud and Omar discover the whole truth of their lives by listening to each other's stories, in this dialogic space of encounter where the "random currents" of time organise themselves into a narrative history of the "small" lives that inhabit the coast. In *Desertion*, Rashid's migration to England on a scholarship coincides with the year of independence (1963), and through his exchange of letters with his brother, he experiences in a refracted way the dislocations caused by the Zanzibar revolution of 1964. Feeling exiled in London, the only possibility of reconciliation comes at the end when Rashid thinks of returning, across the seas, to the lives of the people he has left behind. *Desertion*, therefore, is gestational, poised on the threshold of new possibilities, even within a time of great turmoil and insecurity.

Transmodern Futures

Gravel Heart, Gurnah's latest novel, offers in a sense a fuller realisation of the possibilities accorded by return. When seven-year-old Salim's father, Masud, mysteriously abandons his family one day and takes up a small room at the back of a shop in town, his world falls apart with the realisation that he is unloved and unwanted by his father. Growing up, he ferries food from home to his father every day, like a ritual penance carried out in silence. Meanwhile, he finds no answers from his mother, Saida, either, who remarries a man called Hakim and has a daughter by her new husband. His mother's brother, Uncle Amir, a diplomat in the London embassy, takes him to London and enrolls him for Business Studies. Unable to succeed in a field that holds no interest for him, Salim switches to Literature. As a result, his Uncle disowns him and Salim learns to fend for himself in London suffering economic and emotional

hardships. When he receives news of his mother's death, Salim returns home and meets his father again, who has also returned from Kuala Lumpur where he had emigrated some years ago. Salim's father finally opens up, and relates the story of the past: years ago, Amir had been caught having a relationship with Asha, Hakim's sister. Using his position as a powerful politician, Hakim had had Amir arrested and imprisoned on charges of rape. When he and his wife, Saida, had gone begging for Amir's release, Hakim had agreed on the condition that Saida would have to submit herself to him. What is perhaps most perplexing about the novel is that it never truly makes clear why, even after Amir's release, Saida keeps going back to Hakim and ultimately marries him, tearing apart her family, and causing Salim's father to leave the house in pain and shame.

The plot of *Gravel Heart*, perhaps, out of all the three novels, emerges from the most difficult of conditions: not only does Salim live with a sense of dissembling that threatens to overpower him in his life abroad, we also do not fully understand the extent of Saida's helplessness and her emotional state before she decides to marry Hakim and settle down with him. The only indication we get is at the end when Salim explains the plot of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (the title of the novel is taken from the same play) where Angelo demands that Isabella should sleep with him to save her brother, Claudio's life. Unlike Isabella, who, though inveigled by the Duke, retains a degree of autonomy in her silence at the end when the Duke proposes, Salim's mother's silence through the years points to a different kind of helplessness. Moreover, Salim's father's sudden, absolute ruin and silence over the years only increases this sense of difficulty. Gurnah adopts an interesting choice in how he makes his characters navigate this difficulty. Instead of making the novel just an account of Salim's sense of fragmented identity as an immigrant, the method through which it operates makes Salim work out the details of his own life and identity through the details of other lives. As with his other novels, *Gravel Heart* ultimately illustrates the condition of a whole community: people learn of themselves through others who have impacted their lives; life, as it were, is in community, even if dispersed across space and time.

Salim's maternal grandfather, Ahmed Musa Ibrahim, is one such person whose life Salim sketches. Well-travelled, educated abroad, Ibrahim is a young anti-colonial national in Zanzibar. In a picture Salim discovers, he stands in "a jaunty, cheery pose in which he [is] play-acting his modernity, a cosmopolitan traveller to some of the world's great metropolises" (16). Ahmed Ibrahim's idea of modernity entails his involvement with "a group of anti-colonial intellectuals, people like him who thought themselves connected to the world" (16). Admirers of nationalist leaders like the Egyptian statesman Zaghoul Pasha, Indian anti-colonial figures like Gandhi and Nehru, Tunisian insurrectionist

Habib Bourguiba, and Yugoslavian statesman Marshal Tito, this young band of intellectuals wants “to become modern too, like the nationalists,” and wants “to be able to determine the outcome of their lives without the overbearing presence of the British” (16-17). This idea of modernity, then, involves an engagement with intellectual currents from a largely non-European world, and articulates a deliberate cultivation of cross-cultural thought that can actively resist the narratives of modernity peddled by the British. Tragically, however, soon after independence, during the Zanzibar revolution, Ibrahim is murdered “because he did all that he did for the wrong political party” (18). The revolution, which sought to wrest power from the Omani sultanate and institute a new national order, indiscriminately persecuted all people of Omani descent irrespective of their presence on the coast for generations.

Later, Salim’s father tells him of his paternal grandfather, who was also driven out during the revolution. Maalim Yahya, a teacher of the Koran, stands in contrast to Ahmed Ibrahim: “[n]ot only was he a scholar, he was of the generation whose entire understanding of the world was informed by religion and its metaphors, which is not to say that he was an ignorant man” (176). As a proponent of Islamic religious modernity, Yahya

[k]new and cared nothing, or almost nothing, about Europe’s learnings and triumphs, nor was he interested in its history of frenzied wars and conflicting nationalities, and so would not have known to turn to them for historical explanations of the world we lived in. (*Gravel Heart* 176)

As opposed to the cosmopolitan modernity of Ahmed Ibrahim, Maalim Yahya represents another “modern” possibility for Zanzibar: a critical turn to religion, an exploration of history and life through the interpretation of religious texts. Yahya, who teaches at the government school, loses his job soon after the revolution and moves to Dubai. During the turbulent years of the revolution, as Masud recollects, “the search for work and a place of safety made many people remember that they were Arabs or Indians or Iranians, and they resuscitated connections they had allowed to wither” (180) presumably because of the intercultural nature of their identities. The government, according to Masud, “did not prohibit [the] frenzy” (180) of people anxiously trying to reconnect with forgotten relatives scattered along the coast in order to claim a line of ancestry that would permit them to reside in the country in an era of ethnic cultural nationalism. Decolonisation, in other words, “could not tolerate these divided loyalties, and required commitment to nation and continent,” where the “search for connections across the ocean demonstrated the underlying foreignness of these people” (180). The revolution, then, presents both a ‘victory’ of postcolonial cultural nationalism as well as a failure of transmodern politics. Gurnah here cautions against the dangers

of cultural nationalism, which shows tendencies of repeating the same racial politics that it purportedly challenges. Gurnah critiques the revolution in how it draws inwards—by espousing a dangerous identitarianism—negating the unique inter-culturality of the Swahili coast, populated by those who can believe themselves to belong to the world without swearing adherence to the nationality of their ancestors.

Conclusion: “The Transmodern Novel”?

Premising the conditions that lead to his personal tragedy within the context of larger historical tragedies, Masud outlines the historical limits that individual actors have to operate within which have the power to shape the destinies of those who come after them as well. What is significant, however, is that the novel does not end on a note of irreversibly frustrated possibilities. The novel begins with an epigraph from *Kitab-al-Sidq* (The Book of Truthfulness) written by Abu Said Ahmad ibn Isa-al-Kharraz, whose first line is: “The beginning of love is the recollection of blessings.” This is a line that Masud keeps quoting in some form; for instance, as a piece of advice before Salim goes to England, and again at the end of the novel when Salim shows signs of despair at having experienced many failed relationships and feelings of non-belonging in London and yet decides to go back once again. This final note that begins and ends the novel contains the kernel of “truth” in all of Gurnah’s writings: compassion. Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea*, old enemies and coincidental acquaintances in a new country, build a tentative, fractious community united by shared history. Rashid, exiled and disappointed in love, anticipates a journey that can yield new relationships and beginnings. Shattered by the circumstances that life presents him, Masud nevertheless advocates a language of possibility and love.

These novels show how Gurnah’s characters are not only gifted with the ability to think historically, showing critical awareness of their subject positions in a relational world, but also how they are storytellers and creative world-makers who provoke “readers to materialise the kinds of worlds they might assemble: ones of empathy and compassion, of negotiation rather than negation” (Samuelson “Narrative Cartographies” 87). If a transmodern, oceanic form of thinking encourages a political vision of a connected, communicative world that challenges a singular location of modernity, within literature, this mode of thinking complicates the premise that the modern novel is a solitary art form. Reading Gurnah’s works, therefore, involves a conceptual remapping where the novel, as an art form, is constituted through a critical cultivation of compassion. Etymologically, compassion means to “suffer together”; this

problematizes the premise that an irreversible condition of fragmentation informs aesthetic expressions of modernity. Marrying political and philosophical transmodern thought with literary form, it is possible to say that even through narratives of violence, displacement, and fragmentation, Gurnah's works ultimately articulate a hospitality that is born out of a resistance to imaginative and narrative closures. Compassion entails survival, through suffering perhaps, but suffering in community, and in retaining the ability to reshape and remake lives creatively, to live through the lives of others. The transmodern world that can be created out of this vision would be directed towards a cultivation of creative universes that are geographically, historically, imaginatively, and materially constituted by practices of relationality. "The transmodern novel" (Mohan) may not yet be a recognised category; to recognise it, one would perhaps have to encounter a great deal of difficulty.

Notes

1. On Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, see Mohan's "Maritime Transmodernities."
2. For an in-depth comparative analysis of Indian Ocean fictions, see C. Lavery's thesis, *Writing the Indian Ocean in selected fiction by Joseph Conrad, Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Lindsey Collen*.
3. For a wider discussion on cosmopolitanism in Gurnah's writings, see Moorthy 73-102.
4. See Whiteley, especially chapters 1 and 2, for a broader historical context of the rise of the Swahili language.
5. Although the grammatical properties of "mahali" are widely discussed, for my purposes I have referred to E.O. Ashton's standard textbook for Swahili grammar.

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