

Displacement and Identity Revisited in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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By the Sea (2001) by Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-born author and emeritus professor residing in the United Kingdom, offers a nuanced examination of the conventional narratives associated with refugees and asylum seekers. This paper re-evaluates the concept of displacement and its primary consequences for individuals, including homelessness, trauma, psychological conflicts, and the quest for identity. The paper employs a postmodernist and postcolonial framework to contend that By the Sea illustrates the dynamic and contentious nature of identity, particularly through the contrasting identities of Zanzibari and British. The interplay between these distinct cultures and identities fosters a sense of difference, which may ultimately lead to a conflict between the “self” and the “other”. In this context, the paper focuses on two central protagonists of By the Sea, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, who, as refugees exiled in London, endeavour to create a sense of belonging and home for themselves.

Keywords

Abdulrazak Gurnah; *By the Sea*; displacement; identity; exile; refugees; homelessness

Introduction

Identity is a complex and often debated concept, marked by its continuous evolution, especially when analysed through the frameworks of postmodernism and postcolonialism. The nuances of identity become particularly pronounced when contrasting Zanzibari and British identities, which may lead individuals to feel estranged from their authentic selves. The interaction between these two distinct cultural identities enhances the recognition of differences, which can create tension between the ideas of the “self” and the “other”. In this context, colonisers tend to regard indigenous peoples as the Other, while those who experience colonial rule similarly perceive the colonisers as outsiders.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha explores the concepts of hybridity and ambivalence as they pertain to identity. Ambivalence encapsulates the complex interplay of attraction and repulsion inherent in the dynamics between the colonisers and the colonised. Colonisers seek to assimilate the colonised, imposing their own norms and values upon them. However, this mimicry by the subjugated individuals instils fear in the colonisers, as it threatens their identity by transforming the victim into a distorted reflection of themselves. Bhabha further examines the notion of hybridity that emerges between the two identities, which can give rise to a “third space” that fuses the coloniser’s world with that of the colonised.

The concept of liminality, originating from the fields of psychology and anthropology, started by Arnold Van Gennep – and subsequently articulated by Victor Turner – refers to transitional spaces and conditions characterised by ambiguity, where identities remain in a state of flux.¹ Homi Bhabha further developed this notion in the context of postcolonial studies, describing it as a realm in which the colonised individual strives to transcend the identity imposed by colonialism, aspiring to adopt the identity associated with the coloniser, yet has not fully attained that status. In *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*, Pramod Nayar writes: “For Bhabha the threshold or interstitial space is important because it makes the possibility of cultural hybridity for the colonized” (Nayar 99). Moreover, liminality suggests this sort of ambiguity. In this regard, Turner states that “liminality includes few or none of the attributes of the previous or future states, and that the features of liminality are ambiguous; that is, they are outside of all society’s standard classification” (Nayar 94).

In *By the Sea*, we see this kind of exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, which sometimes defines the relationship between the East and the West as ambivalent. This ambivalence is dramatised by Saleh Omar, the main character in the novel, who finds himself faced with new modes of thought in London, where his identity is negotiated on the rim of an in-between reality. In the host society, the migrant or exile goes through new experiences in which the home culture interacts with different cultural codes. This interaction, which does not necessarily lead to a clash of cultures, may result in either integration or assimilation through the process of acculturation.

Narrating Itineraries of Displacement

Mobility describes communities and entities that represent another space far from the homeland, which in the case of Abdulrazak Gurnah, is Western exile; he moves from Zanzibar, Tanzania, to Britain. In this vein, thanks to mobility, Anglophone-Arab literature rises and flourishes in the West, notably in Britain. In past decades, migration mainly took place as a consequence of colonisation. That is to say, what leads Gurnah to leave his home of origin is the ongoing struggles in Zanzibar, like the revolution of 1964. In this regard, the revolution led to the overthrow of the ruler of Zanzibar, Sultan Sir Jamshid bin Abdullah Al Said, and his mainly Arab government, by the island's majority Black African population. Hence, we can say that migration and mobility processes founded the political map of Europe and the East African region. Nonetheless, this mobility may create problems in the residential space as in Gurnah's *By the Sea* in which Latif Mahmud, the main character who faces many problems, especially in his interaction with people, which gives us the notion of racism. Nowadays, transnationalism is considered as one way of understanding this sort of interplay between home and exile. Migrants' transnational practices, ways and even spaces will be discussed by taking into consideration mobility and locality. Rainer Bauböck and his co-authors demonstrate that transnational formations have become fundamental ways of understanding migrants' transnational spaces, practices and ways of being, taking into consideration mobility and locality (51).

Abdulrazak Gurnah moved to Great Britain in the 1960s, a movement which entirely influenced his life and, arguably, his literary discourse. Gurnah describes how one may interpret his exile from his homeland as a significant turning point in modern history by drawing on his experience as a writer. He begins to understand the significance of dislocation in the literary discourse of today. In his essay "Fear and Loathing", Gurnah describes how his forced relocation is linked to the recent history of his nation:

I came from Zanzibar, a small island off Africa, which in 1964 had seen a violent uprising that led to catastrophic upheaval. Thousands were slaughtered, whole communities were expelled and many hundreds imprisoned. In the shambles and persecutions that followed, a vindictive terror ruled our lives. At 18, the year after I finished school, I escaped. (Gurnah, "Fear and Loathing" 5)

Gurnah's trajectory, his peregrination from the outskirts of the old British Empire to the heart of the metropolitan centre, resembles that made by many other writers. Thus, it is possible to look at exile in two different ways as postcolonial theorists see (those researchers who read the impact of colonialism on the colonisers and the colonised as well). Hence, it is said to be that there is an imposed exile on the cultural and ethnic groups that fuelled the march towards the West with the influence of the colonisation of their countries. In addition, there are some adventurers and travellers who try to explore colonial experiences and write about new lands, study the natures of the eastern peoples, present comparative jurisprudence of languages, and other tasks that the colonisers assigned to themselves in the colonised countries. The concept of exile is of a complex nature. It is imposed and desired, sought after and preferred to reside in, as well as vilified as a state of exclusion and alienation to which one is pushed. Therefore, in their book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* the Australian critic Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues seem to define exile as corresponding to "the idea of a separation and distancing from the motherland, or from cultural or ethnic origin" (85).

Abdulrazak Gurnah opens *By the Sea* with the following statement: "I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker" (4). For him, to be displaced and dislocated from home is an intricate situation; he postulates that "these words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so. I arrived at Gatwick Airport in the late afternoon of 23 November last year" (Gurnah 4). Exile is considered as a strange place where he garbled his ambitions. For the protagonist, Saleh Omar, this is his first journey by air, and the first arrival in a place so monumental as an airport. Moreover, Saleh affirms a particular kind of displaced identity. The novel presents the notion of homelessness not as an artistic trope but as a material condition that cultural and literary critics must attend to as much as sociologists and policy advisors.

Therefore, for the exile, home is no longer only a place but an enduring longing for a return that is ultimately impossible. According to Edward Said, exile is both a real situation caused by a particular history of displacement and a metaphor, meaning a certain method to position oneself within the cultural, social, and political spheres. Exiles are "cut off from their roots, their land, and their past" (Said 10), even if exile is an individual experience of loneliness that has its roots in the centuries-old practice of banishment. From the exilic perspective, "all things are counter, original, spare, strange" (Said 12). Exile can therefore be used as an analytical category to examine and possibly critique predetermined ideas of citizenship and geographical belonging. By

investigating the erasure of class in current critical and historical production and the bourgeoisification of some well-known individuals, such as Said, Ahmad criticises the neglect of the material side of exile. For Ahmad “exile, immigration and professional preference become synonymous and, indeed, mutually indistinguishable” (Ahmad 13) while the word “exile” has been exploited first as a metaphor and then a descriptive label in which it becomes “a condition of the soul, unrelated to facts of material lives” (Ahmad 14).

Gurnah’s unique personal experience of being uprooted from East Africa to Britain is connected to the first notion of itinerancy. Kaplan reminds us that “the difference between the way we travel, the reasons for our movements, and the terms of our participation in this dynamic must be historically and politically accounted for” (Kaplan 27), taking into account the exponential rise in travel in a period of increasing Western capitalism. By ignoring the uniqueness of each intellectual’s narrative of displacement, Kaplan criticises some of the ways in which an exile’s artistic creation has been de-historicised and universalised. The recourse to exile as a restriction and erasing of identity is among the features denoting the literature of exile, and the “motifs” that are repeated in the texts, which revolve around this complex existential experience, are part of the intricate nature of such literature.

Gurnah emphasises the idea of fluid identities and the blurring of lines between groups through the motif of borders and border crossings. As he waits for the passport official to stamp his passport and formally identify him as a refugee, Saleh Omar is able to project his personal history onto the reader while subtly asserting his British identity. Even though he was fluent in the language, Saleh had purposefully avoided using it in order to highlight how justified and urgent his situation was. The option of Saleh articulating his narrative in language, of stating “your name and your father’s name, and what good you had done in your life”, was eliminated (Gurnah 5). As a result, Saleh is aware that his suitcase is the only thing that can be used to determine his identity and, possibly, his past. He writes: “I imagine there would be pleasure too in having an assured grasp of the secret codes that reveal what people seek to hide, a hermeneutics of baggage that is like following an archaeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map” (Gurnah 7).

Saleh Omar is a refugee in Britain and he finds it hard to assimilate or rather integrate to the new culture. Edward Said deploys refugees as a political problem, outside the realm of literature and aesthetics. Saleh migrates to England as an asylum seeker and goes through the process of resettling as a refugee. On his arrival, he is told that he needs to pretend that he does

not speak English and his name in the passport is Rajab Shaaban Mahmud. Furthermore, on arrival, Saleh finds it difficult to have a valid visa as he puts it “Mr Shaaban ... So I am sorry for what I now have to do, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to refuse you entry into the United Kingdom. You don’t have a valid entry visa, you have no funds and you have no one who can offer a guarantee for you” (Gurnah 8).

Saleh’s story becomes relevant in the way it is able to reawaken the memory of the other expatriate, Latif, through the telling of his lifetime struggle and final displacement. Saleh’s story is one of loss, anguish, pain, and disillusionment, but it is also tinged with love for his homeland and his family. Latif, on the other hand, makes an effort to put the past behind him and live his life in a way that is apart from his time spent in Zanzibar. Latif’s contact with Saleh Omar awakens a painful childhood memory of Tanzania, and by remembering it, he is able to make peace with that time in his life:

I’d forgotten her. No, that can’t be possible, can it? I must have made myself forget her. She didn’t like us very much, even though she invited us to go and live with her in those last years. But, yes, I remember that night, the one you were talking about. Well, I remember now that you remind me, now that you force me to remember, now that you make me think back to it. (Gurnah 194)

Saleh is able to recall the circumstances that caused him to leave Zanzibar through narrative, while Latif is given a different perspective on his old life in Zanzibar by the asylum seeker’s narration. Latif will not reveal to Saleh (or the reader) the causes of his family’s abandonment until the very end of the novel: “I wanted nothing to do with them, and their hatreds and demands. It was a bit of luck, to be able to escape from the GDR into a kind of anonymity, even to be able to change my name, to escape from them” (Gurnah 239). They both turned to silence after arriving in England as refugees in an effort to fit into their new environments. The series of events that led up to Saleh’s escape from Zanzibar, including the destruction of the home that had once belonged to Latif’s father, and his eleven years in prison as a result of the accusations made by Latif’s family will have a significant impact on Latif’s opinion of Saleh. This experience sharing begins to form the foundation of a new kind of connection, which seems to unite Saleh and Latif and prompts the latter to exclaim: “we are in a strange land. That would more or less naturally make us related” (Gurnah 195). Latif, who had previously chosen to conceal

his past by consciously disconnecting his affiliative links and publicly saying, “I hate families” (Gurnah 195) is ultimately faced by Saleh’s eloquence and comes to see the importance of telling him his tales in order to “find relief” (Gurnah 207).

Saleh recognises that both the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” have sociopolitical connotations, which places his life’s journey within a particular vein of modern history of displacement. The spotlight is shifted in *By the Sea* to less obvious claims of citizenship and residency. The book examines the conflicted positions of certain modern characters who are suffering dislocation due to the unrest in the political system of their country of origin or the place where they had previously lived. According to James Clifford, “one of the important features of diasporic experience is – a strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well-preserved homeland” (Clifford 305), this solid connection to and craving for exacting re-visitation of the home should be taken into account while studying diaspora narratives. Home is a position of connections, holding, and a pool of aggregate recollections that expresses a feeling of yearning when the characters are scattered.

Identity Crisis

The discussion in this section mainly follows Stuart Hall’s essays “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990) and “Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life” (2007) with respect to the idea of identity crisis and cultural identity in relation to subjectivity in the homeland and diasporic host land in Gurnah’s *By the Sea*. In his article “Old and New Identities” Hall indicates that “identities are never completed, never finished, that they are always, as subjectivity itself is, in process” (Hall 69). Identity is not “a sealed or closed totality”; it can be “contradictory”, always in the “process of formation” (Hall 71). The second aspect of this definition caters to the construction of identity within power relations and elaborates that identity is embedded in “more than one discourse, as composed always across the silences of the other, as written in and through ambivalence and desire” (Hall 71). The third point by Hall, in this definition, is that individuality, like identity, is “not settled in the past but always also oriented toward the future,” moulded by “conditions of existence” (Hall 308). He argues that all subjects are “displaced” and “decentred” (Hall 308–9), and the identity of any subject is produced through the discourse that surrounds it (Hall 224).

Gurnah's novels are premised on the devastating effect of migration to a new geographical and social context on the identities of his characters or the presence of the "other" in the court of these characters, as in *Paradise*, with all its problems. For Gurnah, who, like his characters, has experienced displacement from his native Zanzibar to Britain as a teenager, identity is a matter of constant change, and what the main characters in his novels do is precisely to shift the "zone of safety" in themselves, and in the environments they migrate to. As Paul Gilroy points out – when national and ethnic identities are portrayed and presented as pure, encountering difference puts them in danger of becoming diluted and their priceless purity at risk of becoming permanently contaminated (Gilroy 19).

In Gilroy's conception of the diaspora, the black British fled their motherland or country, presumably in search of political sanctuary or stability. Through their disparities, the main characters in Gurnah's works illustrate this contamination of other people's identities. Gurnah's characters reflect on their past with a mixture of bitterness and remorse about what they left behind. Occasionally, moving to a different place entails erasing any contact with their past and former families. As Saleh Omar mentions "Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It's a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods" (Gurnah 86).

By the Sea is essentially a novel of loss, the loss of identity. Moreover, Saleh Omar negotiates his feelings towards his homeland as he establishes kinship with the past through the people with whom he interacts in Britain. In this sense, Gurnah states that "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" (Gurnah 14). Here, Saleh Omar is seized by a strong feeling of nostalgia for his past in Zanzibar. His interaction with the traders around him is meant to bestow a sense of belonging and allay the pangs of loss and nostalgia triggered off by living away from home. The narrator makes an interpretive effort to stress the meaning of the term "*ud-al-qamari*", whose scent brings back the past and all of the vivid recollections associated with it. This interpretation is part of the process of reconstructing Saleh's past. Being in exile is also meant to ward off restlessness and acquire enough strength to cope with the exigencies of life abroad.

Saleh Omar relishes a sense of belonging thanks to different male figures whom he meets. In this connection, Gurnah then brings the East and the West together to build the identity of his characters. This can be achieved by the construction of identity within “inter-groups”, social and cultural interactions which diaspora culture translates into a broader sense that goes beyond the different rules of behaviour of a certain group. Notwithstanding, in addition to that, since diasporic writing is often concerned with the notion of displacement, and the concepts of home and cultural identity, it is necessary to handle space as a crucial and significant element in the intersectionality of race and class.

In *By the Sea*, space is a crucial element to unfold or define how identity is constructed and formed in the Muslim diaspora. In the opening moments of the novel, the British authority tells Saleh Omar that “You don’t belong here, you don’t value any of the things we value, you haven’t paid for them through generations, and we don’t want you here” (Gurnah 15). Here, the statement expresses spatial awareness, which entails Omar’s sense of belonging. In other words, he experiences this feeling of discomfort in his displacement from Zanzibar to his adopted country, Britain. That is why space and displacement have a crucial role in the understanding of identity in *By the Sea*.

Latif is persuaded to believe by his parents that Saleh Omar is the person who destroyed their lives. His last encounter with Saleh Omar was when he was dispatched by his mother to request an ebony table that Hussein had given to Latif’s brother Hassan as a gift to aid in grooming him. Nevertheless, Saleh Omar rejects his demand, and Latif describes him as a “notorious lick of British arses, for whom he rifled through other people’s belongings to find trinkets for them to take home as booty of their conquests” (Gurnah 101). Because of his father’s frailty, his mother’s extramarital affairs, and the merchant Hussein’s sexual abuse of Hassan, Latif is, of course, internally aware that his family has already been destroyed. In addition to his mother having partners, his father is an alcoholic. While he considers his father to be a “shameful failure,” he is embarrassed by his mother’s affairs, which cause him to be ridiculed by classmates who tease him and by street girls who “shouted mocking innuendos” (Gurnah 80). However, Hussein mostly attributes his grievance to the sexual abuse of his brother, for he loves his brother very much.

After coming to know about all the tumultuous events of Saleh Omar’s past life, Latif soon realised that it is more than a mere recognition. The condition

of Saleh Omar as a refugee living alone in a new place and Latif as a man, living his life alone without any companion brought both of them together like lost pieces of a puzzle. Latif himself reveals his own fragmented psyche to Saleh Omar as he opens up about his anxiety and indecisiveness:

I feel worn out and raw, livid with sores. Do you know what I mean? You must know that feeling. I was thinking about that last week, how worn out I am after all these years of knowing and not knowing, of doing nothing about it and how it can't be helped. So I was looking forward to coming here, to hear you talk, for both of us to find relief. (Gurnah 207)

Latif was able to understand the pain of Saleh Omar, and Saleh Omar, in turn, could understand how Latif must have felt. The "relief" that Latif is talking about can be seen as an achievement where he found the gap he has been searching for. The lack of warmth predominantly acted as a major reason for Latif to find relief in the companionship of Saleh Omar, a man of his father's age.

In London, places like the Qur'an school and gatherings in Saleh's universe establish a sense of belonging to a certain class. In London, the Qur'an school, where he used to practice his religious rites, such as reciting the Qur'an and furniture shop contradicts his Western lifestyle that only Zanzibar once could offer. All these things evoke his nostalgia as Gurnah points out: "I [Saleh] remember how happy my father was in that month or so that Uncle Hussein stayed with us, how fulfilled he seemed in the discovery of a new friend and how he seemed more like a father then than he had seemed before" (Gurnah 90). In this regard, Gurnah deploys the shift in places, which is deliberately adopted in the narrative as a way of underlining the change in the identity formation of the characters in the course of their excessive mobility.

As already alluded to at the outset of this section, *By the Sea* is a novel about loss; seemingly, Saleh Omar seeks to atone for the loss of home and the sense of belonging; he seeks solace in identifying with some members of the Muslim community in London. Being close to them is necessary to mitigate a feeling of alienation that occasionally defines life outside the homeland. Saleh Omar's comfort emanates from religion and the company of other Muslim figures who share his belief system, especially when he was in London. He used to work as a furniture-maker in London, as he puts it "Saleh Omar, a furniture-maker who was a distant and estranged relative, and to whom the house now belonged" (Gurnah 97). Actually, the house had belonged to his father who

used to sell “*hakwa*” and is now repainted and relit to sell furniture and other beautiful things. This makes him take pride in his identity as someone who is paradoxically free and lonely, especially after the death of his parents. By entering the “circle” of the Islamic community, he establishes religious as well as cultural boundaries which make him full of guilt being in a good relationship with the merchants from the East. Saleh Omar believes that his marriage to Salha makes him happy: “in November of 1963, we married. That day was the happiest of my life” (Gurnah 147).

In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar is in-between two main places, Zanzibar and London. He also oscillates between many feelings and memories which are pervasive across a heterogeneous geography. In both cases, it can only be asserted that he lives outside the home of origin. Here Abdulrazak Gurnah provides us with an additional and extraordinary model that joins those models that we are used to finding in the work of many Arab immigrant writers, especially from Europe, and in which he discusses the issues of personalities who suffer from scattering because they bear the burden of searching for an identity.

The Returnee and the Asylum Seeker

Gurnah’s stories centre on the negotiations his characters have with the various experiences they have as immigrants or people fleeing their countries, caught up in multiple places while attempting to reconstruct their identities and negotiate their fluctuating and contradictory positions within power dynamics. Furthermore, the concept of return can be viewed as an effort to set apart a huge number of fictional works that show how migrants negotiate their identities in a dynamic and complex society. The concept of return can occasionally be either physical or fictitious. Here, we can concur with Benedict Anderson’s idea (1991) that we are living in a world of imagined communities. However, this represents a significant development in the diasporic subject’s process of forming an identity. Several authors employ the cliché of the voyage to highlight the difficulties that come with understanding the past and to provide a sharp contrast with the realities of today. In order to examine the limitations of migrants’ attempts to negotiate their identities and to make comments on particular modern socio-political formations, this tension between the present and the past is frequently employed.

The need to fit in is known as belongingness, and it refers to a human psychological drive to interact with and be respected by members of a

group. As people attempt to conform to the values and norms of the group, the need to fit in with it can also lead to changes in attitudes, views, and behaviours. Similarly, a sense of belonging encompasses more than just being comfortable around other people. It is fixated on acquiring acknowledgment, consideration, and backing from individuals, from the gathering as well as giving similar regard to different individuals. Such feeling is displayed within Saleh's character. He has been tortured by such acts and is always incapable of doing an action back because he feels the constraint that he does not have a voice, choice or visibility in the street or at home. In this regard, Saleh Omar finds it hard to integrate to the new culture at the very beginning of his stay in London as a refugee and as an asylum seeker.

In the other locations he uses after arriving in England, Saleh continues to exclude him and his stories. A case in point is the detention facility, which can be thought of as an inter-space within the host land because the refugees and asylum seekers do not yet have legal status. It is a place where Saleh Omar and many other asylum seekers like him keep their personal histories private as they wait patiently for the social workers to assist them. This space blurs the lines between things and humans in this way, treating them with the utmost indifference. Despite being distinct from Saleh's, Latif's experience and his negotiation process as a refugee from East Germany in England, and earlier as an international student there, are not devoid of hostility in many forms. Despite not being in the book, the thirty-four-year period between his arrival in England and his encounter with Saleh is told through conflicted sentiments of freedom and loss.

Despite his academic specialty and distinct status from Saleh, Latif is also a victim of racist abuse, which serves as the foundation for his account of himself. This is a sign of the challenging situations and the hostility he has faced in order to establish himself as a renowned poet and professor. Being described to as a "grinning blackamoor" on the streets of London (Gurnah 72) incites animosity and demoralises Latif due to the essentialist and stereotypical connotations associated with the terms "other", "wicked", and "beast". At such associations, he feels "suddenly weak with a kind of terror". This is the house I live in, I thought, a language which barks and scorns at me behind every corner" (Gurnah 73). This emotion necessitates a renegotiation of his subjectivity inside the harsh social structure. He makes the decision to call the social work centre and ask for Saleh's phone number after this point in the story.

Latif leaves his home and departs with his family, assuming the name Latif Mahmud but retaining his family name of Ismail Rajab Shaaban Mahmud. In order to carve himself a niche and an identity distinct from theirs, he declines the names Rajab and Shaaban, which were given to him by his father and grandfather, respectively. Furthermore, space holds an important facet in the construction of identity. Saleh travels through a variety of locations, including the airport, the detention facility, and Celia's bed and breakfast. As he is turned away from these places, he displays a sense of frantic exclusion. *By the Sea's* depiction of antagonistic interpersonal interactions is consistent with its poetics and picture of hostile natural and built environments. He describes Celia's bed and breakfast as "an old dark house in a quiet street off a main road" (Gurnah 49). As is mentioned earlier, Saleh suffers at the beginning of his peregrination to England from racist actions from other people, especially from asylum seekers like him.

Furthermore, Celia's nostalgic feeling about a past when "there weren't any foreigners then" (Gurnah 54) is a lament over the current situation that "now foreigners are everywhere, with all these terrible things happening in their countries" (Gurnah 54). While her argument may contain hospitable phrases like, "We can't send them [asylum-seekers] back to those horrible places" (Gurnah 55), it connotes her undecidedness in either offering or denying her hospitality: "I don't know what we can do [about foreigners]" (Gurnah 55). These instances depict the fact that those asylum seekers suffer in their countries of origin and their situation will worsen if they are turned back. Another instance is the social contact between Saleh and the customs officer, Europe's gatekeeper – or "bawab" as Saleh dubs him (Gurnah 31) – who, not only refuses Saleh his hospitality but also warns him of the misfortunes that will befall him if he stays. Meanwhile, Saleh finds things not comfortable at all given the fact that he wants to be alone and escape all that can disturb him "I [Saleh] wanted to get away from that oppressive room and its duplicities and dissemblings, its smells, its atmosphere of neglect and cruelty, its paltriness" (Gurnah 55).

Gurnah's story seeks to investigate the nuanced ways in which identity and home evolve and frequently let returnees down by drawing on the literary precedents of return stories. He uses the topos of return to examine a particular form of displacement and how this state both fruitfully and cruelly reworks the idea of home. The narrator is initially taken aback by how much the island of Zanzibar looks the same on board as it does in his memory. Hence, we can

refer to a number of critics such as William Safran and Robin Cohen who try to appeal to the readers that the returnees, once abroad, suffer from a variety of problems in their country of adoption.

Both narratives, of Latif and Saleh, indicate the different ways in which the two protagonists are able to translate their past experiences in an ever-changing and fluid scenario. Saleh, on the one hand, sees the past as a place where he can take inspiration and draw strength from despite the continuous persecutions he has faced throughout his life. Latif, on the other hand, buried the past upon his arrival in England. While the story of his migrant parable is progressively disclosed through his act of remembering, the instigating motif of his departure is only revealed during his last conversation with Saleh. For Latif, who had abandoned his home country when he was seventeen to go and study in East Germany, the notion of home had been shifting over the years. Thus, Latif appears to be seduced by a past that he tries desperately to forget and the present of his existence away from his country of birth, as he elucidates in this quote:

Here it's a chilly, darkening afternoon, already bright with warming street-lamps and agitated with the deep low-key rumble of traffic and unresting crowds, an unceasing buzz like the nattering and nuzzling of an insect encampment. The other place that I live in is still and murmurous, where speech is soundless and hardly anybody moves, a silence after dark. (Gurnah 86)

This movement tends to swing between locations and dislocations of different cultures wherein individuals often relive their memories. The protagonist explores the profound feelings of yearning, loss and alienation that come with leaving his homeland. In this connection, when Saleh Omar meets Latif, university lecturer, in London he tries to reactivate his memory of Zanzibar "‘I'd forgotten so much', he said, frowning, unfrowning, brightening up, trying. ‘Wilfully, I suspect. I mean that I wilfully forgot so much [...] Well, I remember now that you remind me, now that you force me to remember, now that you make me think back to it" (Gurnah 193-194).

The unfolding of the events culminates in the protagonist fleeing from Zanzibar. The loss of the house formerly belonging to Latif's father, the eleven years of imprisonment due to the accusations made by Latif's family, and his eventual release and discovery of the death of his wife and daughter

will profoundly affect Latif's perception of Saleh. This sharing of experiences starts to construct the basis of a new type of relationship, which appears to bind Saleh and Latif, and make the latter exclaim: "We are in a strange land. That would more or less naturally make us related" (Gurnah 195). Latif, who had voluntarily silenced his past by deliberately severing his affiliative ties and openly declaring "I hate families" (Gurnah 195), is eventually confronted with Saleh's eloquence and ends up by recognising his need for sharing his stories with him in order to "find relief" (Gurnah 207).

In addition to delineating these intimate relationships, in its depiction of physical spaces, *By the Sea* also illustrates and suggests that the coastal areas are more hospitable than the other places. The juxtaposition of these spaces with the inhospitable spaces mentioned above testifies to this notion: Saleh's college friends, Jamal Hussein and Sefu Ali, who were from the mainland and the coast respectively (Gurnah 175-6) – with whose families Saleh stays for a while after finishing college and before returning home – show how discrepant they are in offering their hospitality. Saleh Omar tries more or less to describe the places far from the coast through their poor qualities of hospitality. Conversely, the coast and the metaphor of the moving water create a more hospitable space. Saleh even tells Rachel that he will be "well [...]. Here by the sea. In the little flat" (Gurnah 68). In this sense, the protagonist, Saleh tries to describe his return to the coast after three years of being away for college in this way as he spells out:

Being back on the coast was like being back at home, or more than that, like recognizing that here I had a place in the scheme of things. [...] Back on the coast, I felt part of something generous and noble after all, a way of living that had a part for me and which I had been too hasty in seeing as futile raggedness. (Gurnah 175-176)

This description of the coast as a hospitable space gives Saleh a sense of belonging where he has a "part" that identifies him. Even the island detention centre near Zanzibar, where Saleh Omar was kept before being transferred to the mainland prison, was less hostile. It is depicted as a space where the detainees were allowed to walk around the island, and even their cells were not locked during the night. The fact that they can chat with the warden and the other soldiers also indicates their freedom and communication. The warden is shown to express "his welcome", which, according to Saleh, is "as

if we [the detainees] were longed-for guests that he was happy to see at last” (Gurnah 222). He even offered Saleh the chance to leave with the Omani detainees and be free (Gurnah 225).

The stability and fixity of the identities of the protagonists are just a myth given the fact that cultures and identities are always under change as a number of mobility scholars² spell out in their writings. Moreover, in his book *Mobility, Space and Culture* Peter Merriman indicates that timing and spacing are clearly important aspects of the unfolding of many events and of people’s apprehensions of the world. Hence, the identity of Gurnah’s characters is not fixed by dint of crossing borders. According to Anders H. Stefansson, “return movements across time and space³ have largely been ignored in anthropology and migration research, and despite mass dislocation and repatriation efforts of the late twentieth century the theme of homecoming still sits on the periphery of such studies” (Stefansson 3). Some theorists of diaspora and migration studies have highlighted how the possibility of return is only idealised but never fully realised by the dislocated subject. Gurnah is as an Arab British writer who escaped from hard socioeconomic conditions to get a foothold overseas and carve for himself a niche in the literary circle of the other. He managed to occupy a middle-of-the road position playing the role of cultural mediator between two different worlds.

Conclusion

This paper casts light on Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *By the Sea*; the narratives of Saleh Omar’s and Latif Mahmud’s journeys through liminality which act as a metaphor for the hyphenated identities that are achieved through the struggles and feelings that arise from being out of place in London. Therefore, these characters’ journeys are full of alienation, trauma, and detachment until they connect themselves with a place that grounds their subjectivity in a sense of belonging. The experience of displacement can give rise to nostalgia as well as fantasising about an imaginary lost land. In addition, characters negotiate their senses of identity. The narrative brilliantly depicts the emotional, cultural, and physical states of the Muslim diaspora, caught between places. The protagonists, Latif and Saleh describe modern formations of dislocation by exploring the condition of contemporary asylum seekers. While the use of charged terms such as “asylum seeker” and “refugee” allows the novel to delve into the intricacies and paradoxes inherent in the process

of identity formation characterising these subjects, it also recovers their suppressed and often forgotten stories. Gurnah's fictional works portray those individuals negatively who deviate from accepted Islamic cultural norms and precepts, such as Rajab Shaaban who acts hypocritically toward Saleh Omar. He makes an effort to display his shame in public, approaching Omar's store "with head bowed, the defeated and humiliated man of God" (Gurnah 210). Gurnah invites the reader to explore the complexity and contradictions of Zanzibari history and become entangled in the web of transnationalism and historical memory through his probing exploration of the human condition and his masterful depictions of human fragility and meanness. Finally, one of the main intricacies encountered while conducting this research is the fact that contemporary Anglophone Arab literature is a nascent and understudied field of research. Less has been written about the Arab diaspora, especially the Zanzibari experience in exile. Gurnah's novels seem to reflect a tendency among some other Arab British writers to open corridors of dialogue with other communities in Britain. Hence, his novels are highly engaging, with likeable protagonists searching for a place for themselves in London and for meaning in lives violently shattered by events beyond their control. Since Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels have been given short shrift, we hope that this humble study will contribute to the understanding of this famous writer, and there is the strong belief that more studies should be undertaken in the future to unearth different thematic topics with which Gurnah's writings are infused.

Endnotes

1. See Harry Wels, Kees van der Waal, Andrew Spiegel & Frans Kamsteeg (2011), "Victor Turner and liminality: An introduction", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 34: 1–2, 1–4.
2. In her book *For Space*, Doreen Massey suggests that space is dynamic, changing, in a state of flux, and contains a multitude of identities. Hence, her work, of course, has been enormously influential, shedding light on how space both conveys and produces social inequality as well as illuminating how this space is experienced differently depending on our identities.
3. In his book *On the Move*, Tim Cresswell brings into sharper focus the idea that movement is made up of time and space. In other words, he accentuates that movement as the displacement of an object from A to B, entails a passage of time and, simultaneously, a traversal of space.

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